

## BLOG PART 1

### Michael and Norma's camper travels in Europe 2014

#### Friday 30 May

Met up with Norma's cousins Chris and Colin for lunch at Chinese restaurant in Southampton after routine van service.



Chris had brought some mementos of Frederick Harry Tadd, the older brother of their grandfather Len and thus their grand-uncle, who was shot in action in the Somme in April 1916, only a few weeks after arriving at the battlefield in March. They showed us the prayer book through which the bullet had passed and caused non-fatal injury. However, he died on 4 September some five months later in a casualty clearing station in the area of the village of Gezaincourt, where he now lies in a cemetery for those who died during hospital care. We resolved to visit his grave.

Frederick Tadd was serving in the 12<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, which was formed of volunteers raised by Colonel Claude Lowther, the owner of Herstmonceux Castle and an MP.

#### Sunday 1 June

Foggy crossing the Channel, oily calm. Stayed dry and calming through the day, but with a very bright white overcast that was uncomfortable on the eyes. Took a typical country drive inspired by the TomTom, which was avoiding the motorway, due south to Gezaincourt, close to Doullens and south-west of Arras. Some very pretty countryside along the way, with rolling hills and lush farmland interspersed by countless small villages.

The cemetery (the Gezaincourt Communal Cemetery Extension) was hard to find, being small and tucked away, but with Norma having remembered the photos taken by Chris when he and Colin visited she was able to locate the grave quite quickly. On it is the inscription:

1474 Private  
Frederick Harry Tadd  
Royal Sussex Regiment  
4<sup>th</sup> September 1916

As usual for all the Commonwealth War Graves Commission sites, it is immaculately kept, quiet, solemn and moving. Engraved on a stone plaque is the following:

The land on which this cemetery stands is the free gift of the French people for the perpetual resting place of those of the Allied armies who fell in the war of 1914-1918 and are honoured here

For the night, we first checked out an aire in Doullens, but it was not very inspiring and so we pressed on to the north-east for Lens, where we intended to revisit the Museum of Louvre-Lens. We arrived in the camping-car park about 5:00 pm and then thought of checking with the adjacent McDonalds whether the museum was open tomorrow – the dreaded Monday! We were assured that it was!

### Monday 2 June

Sure enough it was, and on a fine morning we moved the van to the other end of the vast car park (which is for a sports stadium), a bit closer for the walk to the museum.

We were here only nine months ago, and were hugely impressed by the marvellous selection of art from the Louvre, displayed in a great gallery that walks you through the history of painting and sculpture from ancient to modern. There are regular secondary exhibitions, and last year we viewed the paintings of Pierre Paul Rubens and his contemporaries. This year the main reason for our visit was to see the exhibition that had opened only a few days before, called “The Disasters of War 1800-2014”, and showing how artists have depicted great conflicts from Napoleonic to modern times. Again, marvellously done, with many most moving images.



There were a few that were especially memorable. There is the anguish shown on the face of the young French soldier who can take no more in the cold of the retreat from Moscow and tries to rise from the snow while being left behind by his companions: “l’Oublié” (The Forgotten), by Emile Betsellère. In another painting of the same retreat, a soldier rests in grief on his dying horse. Chaillou paints a man selling rats to besieged Parisians in the Franco-

Prussian war. Felix Nussbaum, who would die in Auschwitz-Birkenau, paints himself with his six-year-old niece, with abject terror, suffering and despair showing in their faces as they seek refuge in Amsterdam. Nick Ut’s photograph of children, including a naked little girl, fleeing from napalm bombing became world famous and helped to turn public opinion against the war in Vietnam. There

are something like 500 more images, from satire through gory death to grief, featuring artists as famous as Goya and Picasso and many less well known.

We were pleased to see many well-behaved French schoolchildren being shepherded round by attentive teachers.

## **BELGIUM**

We moved off in the afternoon and drove quickly east into and nearly all the way through Belgium to the village of Stavelot, well known as the name of the hairpin turn at the south end of the old Grand Prix circuit of Spa-Francorchamps. We checked in at a pleasant little camp site – Camping l’Eau Rouge! – in pleasant weather, and with free wi-fi.

### **Tuesday 3 June**

During the morning we drove as much of the old circuit as is now possible, the new circuit taking up the northern parts of the old road including La Source and Eau Rouge. We’ve all seen pictures and film of the greats of the sixties racing there – and in 1961 Norma was even driven round the circuit by Jimmy Clark, who pointed out where many of the serious and fatal crashes had occurred – but it is still a shock to drive through the never-ending curve at Burnenville and on down the Masta straight, with its notorious kink, and consider what it was like to do so at racing speeds on such narrow roads as the ditches, trees and buildings that are scattered along the course fly by.

We tried to get into the modern precinct, but it was not possible to get more than just a glimpse of some bits of track. In Stavelot there is a circuit museum in the cellar of what was the Abbaye, a rather gloomy place with a few interesting cars but some with doubtful provenance in my sceptical view.

## **GERMANY**

### **Wednesday 4 June**

Off into Germany, following country roads and avoiding the autobahns, through some very attractive scenery and into the Eifel mountains past the Nurburgring. This was clearly soon to be the site of a massive rock music festival, (“RAR – Rock at the Ring”) with huge numbers of people being shepherded along the roads and into the car parks by countless attendants and all the police for miles around. Nothing going on around the circuit, but we stopped for a look from the outside at the drop down to the Adenau bridge, which I remember (from the 1961 500 km race) as a challenging series of steep downhill curves before a right-hand bend takes you up the hill again.



Approaching Koblenz we went to stop at the Maria Laach Abbey, from all descriptions a masterpiece of German Romanesque architecture dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It did look most impressive from the road. However, the car park was seething with people and it was raining, making a visit unattractive, so we will save it for another day.

Just a bit further on we came into a very large stellplatz (motorhome parking place) right by the Rhine at Andernach, but there were a lot of vans there and all the spots with a view were taken.



Given the still unappealing drizzling weather, we decided to stay. Took a short walk in the evening, having a look at how the stringy-long river cruise ships dock, drifting astern with the stream and going forward into position. Young men then rush ashore with the monkey lines. This is on a bend of the river, and we walked through the nearby little fort on the apex where it once acted as a customs post.

“Customs” posts were once very common along the great rivers such as the Rhine, but they were mostly erected by local nobles and landowners who simply wanted to cream off some money from the passing vessels. It got way too complicated and expensive for the shipping, and the system withered into decline.

#### Thursday 5 June

Relaxed start in the sun, not seen for a while. Simply making tracks today, as we passed through much of central Germany where we have been before. But letting TomTom Kate simply take us along while avoiding motorways led us on one of her magical mystery tours through some very attractive countryside while avoiding the worst of the conurbations around Koblenz, Wetzlar and Marburg.

A pleasant day's drive ended at Fritzlar in northern Hesse, where a *wohnmobilstellplatz* (motorhome parking place in Germany) lies alongside the medieval walls of the pretty little town. Right by us was the tall Grauer Tower, part of the bastions in the wall, and we walked through to the market square and down to the Dom, the cathedral.



The town is justifiably famous for its exceptional half-timbered buildings, in a region where half-timbering is common. Perhaps the most impressive single building is the Hochzeitshaus (wedding house), a Renaissance building of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. But standing in the market square you are surrounded by a lovely array of colourful half-timbered facades, some of houses that look decidedly wobbly.

The Rathaus, the town hall, is down by the Dom, the ancient abbey of St Peter and now a (small) cathedral. The Rathaus dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but was narrowly predated by the abbey, where in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century the German apostle

St Boniface had the Germanic God Donar, a local, cut down a tree for the building of a chapel. This is commemorated by a sculpture outside the church, which we found to be a gloomy edifice inside and out, unlike the cheerful town.

Sunshine back in the evening.

### **Friday 6 June**

A quiet night in an attractive little stellplatz. Followed by a very scenic, meandering drive, staying off the autobahns, towards the north-east. About half way we traversed the (not very mountainous!) Harz mountain range, again with some lovely countryside – to an extent marred by encountering the recent aftermath of what must have been a serious collision at an intersection between a car and a motorcycle. We couldn't see any detail, but the presence of lots of police with cameras, an ambulance and a helicopter told the tale. We were held up for about three-quarters of an hour, while they sorted things out and the chopper departed.

Then down into the plains of Saxony-Anhalt and to the capital of the region, Magdeburg. The stellplatz is enormous, easily allowing 50 or more motorhomes, and once we found our way in (being put off by some fearsome bollards at the entry, which we thought were blocking access to the site but which could be lowered once money was paid, we parked up facing directly on to the fast-flowing River Elbe. We watched the tourist ships and a few barges coming and going, and learnt that this was a holiday week in Germany (we had already rather gathered that) and there were festivities in the town.

Chatted with a couple of Kiwis from Auckland, out for 18 months on a buy and guaranteed resell deal.

### **Saturday 7 June**

Rather a disturbed night, as a group of youngsters came down to drink and talk on some steps behind us. But then a clear, blue, warm morning – no early heater for the first time – has summer arrived?

Quiet day reading, but took an afternoon walk into the city, which is close. Like most cities in northern and central Germany it was heavily bombed in the late 40's, and the Russian influence on some of the rebuilding is apparent. It is famous for the number of its churches, and there are five within a kilometre or so of us. At the far end of the line-up we visited the main cathedral, the large



Dom St Mauritius und St Katherine, nominally one of the most important Gothic churches in Germany but still in need of a good clean-up, especially on the outside.

Wandering through the festivities throughout the town – fairs, food stall, music including Celtic, complete with Guinness! – it became clear that the local people of this region are not enjoying the full fruits of the German economic revival.

Back to the van after an ice cream, to watch more activity by the tourist boats and the countless number of “ordinary” cyclists on upright bikes with baskets and chain guards, very few helmets. To

be forced to wear them would be anathema anywhere in Europe, let alone where cycling is a customary way of simply getting about, as it is here.

### Sunday 8 June

A quiet night this time, and once again a clear sunny morning. Pleasant country drive to near Potsdam, and followed satnav directions to what was supposed to be a parking place for motorhomes – but which turned out to be the dead end of an unpaved road in the woodland leading to a few houses. There was space to park, albeit with undetermined legality, and it was obvious that a walking path around the Park Sanssouci was right the other side of some walk-through barriers.

We walked through and into this immense, 287-hectare park, which was what we had been aiming for. It is now the home of several palaces, mostly built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century under the auspices of the first Frederick the Great I, in 1701 the self-crowned King of Prussia. This is in the state of Brandenburg, ruled by the House of Hohenzollern. All land ruled by this dynasty became known as “Prussia”, the only serious rival to Hapsburg Austria.



We walked first down to the Orangerie, a large neo-Renaissance palace built not only for the rearing of plants but also for housing visiting kings and other dignitaries. On then down to the Schloss Sanssouci, Frederick 1's original summer palace and the oldest building in the complex. We did not enter the interior – thousands of visitors on this hot summer day, and a waiting list for entry groups, but did admire the terraced vineyards ranging down the hillside in front. Frederick was reportedly very keen on plants and planting, and there is a large statue along one of the walks of Pomona, the goddess of plants.

Down through the terrace and then up the length of the park (about 2 kilometres) to the Neues Palais, a later and monumental building with apparently some spectacular interiors, but it was shut for renovation. All along the walks there are views of small buildings and palaces through the trees. Overall, a lovely but very large park, as promised.

In increasing heat we struggled back up to the van, to find its interior temperature to be 40 degrees, so after a quick late lunch we pressed on into Potsdam to check out somewhere for the night. The first stellplatz we went to was simply a vast car park in a dodgy area, completely exposed to the sun, so we headed south again and eventually found what promised to be a better place on the shore of the Grosser Zemsee, one of the several lakes in the region. However, it was pretty well full up, and when we slotted in between two large German vans I heard the word “Englischer”, which did not sound encouraging.

That bit of the car park is only for motorhomes, but on a Sunday there seemed to be no problem with parking anywhere, so we came out into the general area in an attempt to find some shade (there was none in the motorhome park). We slotted into an adequate parking place with some shade from a tree and the promise of more, later, from an adjacent apartment block. Still very hot, though, and we took ourselves down to the lakeshore for a while to read, snooze and watch the ducks and coots. Temperature only down to 32 degrees by 7:00 pm. What’s happened to the Euro weather?

Later, moved into the centre of the car park to try to find some air movement, and sat out under the trees reading until dark.

Potsdam is of course where at the Schloss Cecilienhof towards the end of WW2 Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met to ratify most of the post-war political and territorial issues on which they had already agreed at Yalta – such as, yes, Russia could keep the half of Poland they had invaded and occupied, and Poland could instead take over part of Germany to the west. Unsurprisingly, the Poles were not part of this consultation, and in the end Churchill had to give way to Attlee and Truman took over from the recently deceased Roosevelt. So Stalin’s view was always going to prevail. The mass population movements resulting from – and enforced through – these and other post-war border agreements caused the deaths of millions of innocent people, mostly the aged, the women and the children.

The many lakes in this area are all called something-see, but it is the name Wannsee – closer to Berlin - that has the most ominous overtones. In a mansion by the lake a conference of senior Nazi officials was called by Reinhard Heydrich to ensure the cooperation of all in the implementation of the “final solution” of the Jewish question, initially through deportation to German-occupied Poland.

## **POLAND**

### **Monday 9 June**

Still sunny in the morning, so with the air conditioner running we set off east to the south of Berlin, staying on the autobahns for a change. The holiday period seems to be continuing, and there weren’t as many trucks as we might have expected. Then off the autobahn again and up to the Poland border crossing at Kostrzyn, where we soared through with no officials showing any interest. (No officials visible, actually.)

Quite pleasant but very flat scenery in far western Poland, with an enormous area of wetlands to our left. Now in the company of many, many trucks we headed east to Poznan, where the (only) camp

site was our planned destination. The site is set in pleasant surroundings, on the banks of the Jezioro Maltanskie (Lake Malta), part of a substantial hotel complex. Not many people there when we arrived, and we spent some time finding a shady spot – and then moving as the sun continued west. When finally settled, the clouds came over and we were beset by a violent thunderstorm, with one lightning strike that must have been terribly close.

The rain then set in and continued.

### **Tuesday 10 June**

We were planning to take the bus and tram into the city, but the rain continued and was heavy all morning. A rain radar map showed we were sitting in a small area that was the wettest in Europe! So, we stayed put and did some work on the frustratingly flaky internet. There was some sun by early afternoon, but we had already decided that Poznan was probably not of outstanding interest anyway and that we could give it a miss this time.

Weather cleared enough for a walk along the side of the big lake, which is a major water sports centre for rowing, canoeing and the like.

### **Wednesday 11 June**

This site is the most rigorously supervised by security guards we have ever stayed at. Every few minutes a guard in black or blue uniform walks or cycles past, many taking notes. If this represents anything like the risk of problem outside the camp, it's probably a good thing we are in here! Pretty good site, with (again) free wi-fi. It's getting so's you hardly need to ask these days in eastern Europe.

### **Thursday 12 June**

Cleaned and watered, paid about \$80 for three nights – the AUD buys a lot here. On the way out we saw that our neighbours outside the camp site had been a tucked-away shantytown, once probably an allotment. The security seemed justified all right.



We were headed for Torun, to the north-east, but took a small deviation further to the north to the village of Biskupin. There we made a most interesting visit to the site of a fortified Iron Age village built on a small promontory out into a lake. The timber basics were found in 1933 under layers of turf. It had been built in about 550 BC by a tribe of the Lusatian culture, one of many such tribes in central Europe at the time. The promontory was originally an island that could only be reached by a bridge and a single entrance, and was fortified by a ring of massive wooden walls. The enclosed area was packed by rows and rows of long houses, reaching from one side to the other.

The settlement had to be evacuated because of rising water level, but several centuries later the water level lowered and the island was again revealed to archeologists.

The site has been partially been reconstructed as a replica of

how it probably was, and they've done an excellent job of it. This is still a serious scientific site, but the local authorities have certainly latched on to its tourist potential. We expected to find a quiet little place in remote countryside, like a typical skansen, but what we discovered was a massive car park with scores of buses packed with schoolchildren, and lots of stalls selling tourist tat outside the main entrance. Once in, things are a little less frenetic, because the site is very large, not only encompassing the promontory but also an expanse of land carrying a reconstructed village of cottages of indeterminate but ancient era (signage is mostly Polish) and other structures housing animals.

There is also a good museum with some nice models and displays, which does have explanations in English, giving a history of the settlement and its later discovery and archaeological explorations. The earliest artefacts are dated back to 4,000 BC.

Then on to Torun, along with endless lines of trucks, a situation where more patience is required than possessed by many Polish drivers. We called successfully at a Lidl in the outskirts for some substantial stores, then on final approach to the camp site on the south side of town we found the road was blocked by a no entry sign – and with absolutely no indication there or anywhere else how we were going to have to deal with it. After two circles of the suburbs we finally dived under a low railway bridge and arrived at Camping #33 Tramp, a suitably Soviet appellation.

A rather unkempt place, part of a small hotel complex, but perfectly acceptable (and no choice). Free, fast internet throughout. Road and railway noise, but the masses of trees around the site ameliorate this.

Quite warm on arrival, and awning and chairs out, but soon in again as rain clouds developed.

### **Friday 13 June**

Reasonably fine early. So, before leaving to walk into Torun, some debate on the matter of clothing. Norma was sorry she didn't bring a light spray jacket. Compromised on light sweaters and one umbrella – inadequate, as it was to turn out.

From the camp site Torun is reached by the only direct road bridge over the big River Vistula, which runs from the Carpathians way to the south to the sea at Gdansk. It is obviously in a strategically important position, and in the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Teutonic Knights placed one of its walled settlements and a castle here. Trade grew rapidly, the town expanded and in the 1280s it joined the influential Hanseatic League. But there was ongoing conflict between Poland and the Teutonic Order, and after the Thirteen Years War and the Treaty of Torun in 1466, Poland regained a large swathe of land between Torun and Gdansk.



The bridge is long and exposed, we were already wishing for warmer clothes as the wind whipped across it down the river. Torun has a reputation as one of the most magnificent historic towns in Poland, and indeed on this trip across the country, which is mainly just a transit run, we had made special plans to visit. We would see. You get a view of the entire old city from the bridge, and then

walk down to the waterfront on the north side of the river. Several plaques mark alarming flood levels dating back several centuries. All the old buildings are of red brick, as has been customary in these northern European regions for ever. There's not much in the way of building rock underground, but there is lots of clay.



Our starting point was the Old Town Square, where the massive 14<sup>th</sup> century Gothic Old Town Hall is plonked in the middle and surrounded by streets. On a corner is a good statue of Copernicus, who was born here in 1473 in a posh Gothic house in a street now named after him. He left for studies in 1491 and did his pioneering work elsewhere, and we have previously visited his burial place in Fromborg Cathedral and seen the museum there. Although he was only in Torun as a young man, his name pops up everywhere!

The old town square is ringed by some quite attractive old buildings, mostly with restaurants and cafes at their front. The huge and austere St Mary's Franciscan Church is at one corner, and has a lovely, lofty whitewashed interior. Taking away older layers of whitewash has revealed some frescoes of its early days. Unusually, the organ is placed on the side wall.

The biggest and theoretically the most impressive church is the Cathedral of Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. This is a prime target for tourists, including the usual hordes of Polish schoolchildren on outings. That may be the reason why the very ornate interior cannot be entered, but only viewed through bars at the western end of the nave. It is possible to see the very high peaks of the nave and aisles, and there is some lovely flower decorative painting way up there.

We walked further along to the east to the "new" town square, where there is an attractively undecorated Protestant church. This has a lovely medium-size organ, colours picked out in gold and blue.

Lunchtime, and we quickly chose a restaurant that looked well presented and expensive – things are so cheap for us here that you can't get stung. It was an excellent light lunch: for me, Polish veal meat balls (patties really) on a mash with cucumber and cream cheese cubes; and for Norma, what she said was a truly outstanding gnocchi with duck. All was professionally presented, and we had a couple of local beers.

Meanwhile, the rain had come and the temperature dropped, so we scurried back over the long bridge and back to the van. We have always said never to underestimate the weather when touring European cities.

### **Saturday 14 June**

A driving day again, and in parts not a particularly enjoyable one. Dry first thing after some overnight rain. Back over the Meccano-like bridge again, and up generally to the north-east along two-lane trunk roads heavily favoured by trucks. Again, the best strategy was to go with the flow until a rare

safe overtaking opportunity was offered. The scenery was nothing special, flat agricultural for the most part. But we soon left the major road for a more minor route, and encountered mile after mile of road works, all one way, and periodically interrupted by traffic lights with a five-minute cycle. This became very tedious.

Finally we came to a roundabout in a town which we could not exit on the road we wanted, so we cut north to try find a different and better route. This we did, but then in a town we were guided by the Tomtom to a minor route that took us into the deep and dark Masurian forest. The road surface was appalling, and I broke a wine glass by going too fast and bouncing over an (unused) level crossing. Checking the map showed this was a ridiculous route and that we should have stayed on the main road, to which we returned and finally got to our camp site just north of Ruciane Nida, on a waterway leading to the large Masurian lake of Jesioro Sniardwy.

This is a pleasant enough place, but the van can't go near the water because it's too boggy. Norma recognised the waterway as being one we took from Mikolajki on the lake a couple of years ago, going down to Ruciane Nida for lunch. On a lot better day than this one – we had the cabin heater on as soon as we got settled, under a grey overcast, with drizzle and scattered showers.

### Sunday 15 June

The countryside as we ran north-east towards Lithuania was unsurprisingly very similar all the way, with lots of pine plantation forests, open grazing land and wheat fields – recently planted. We came across another motorcycle accident that had just occurred, with a girl pillion rider being helped off the road by others in the bikie group. She'd obviously given her right knee a heavy bang. A local couple who were first on the scene said that the rider had lost it on the curve and fallen, and nearly hit their car coming the other way. I said she should see a doctor for an x-ray, but no-one was very interested so we made out excuses and left. Soon after we saw a police car with a siren in its way.

We stopped for lunch at a nice stop overlooking a lake, just before the border with Lithuania. Having nearly finished, we heard an English voice from behind us saying that he had noticed our number plates and came to say hullo. This was Luke, perhaps the most idiosyncratic traveller we've ever met. He had a small back pack, and I assumed he was hitchhiking into Poland. "No, I'm walking to Greece from Estonia", he replied. He has hitch-hiked in Europe for years previously, but in his world view this was somehow cheating, so it's pure walking for him now.



Also cheating under his self-made "rules" are the following:

- Maps. He used to have maps, he said, but was always getting lost, and prefers general personal directions. "I am never lost now".
  - Electronics. No phone, tablet or any other means of electronic communication or navigation. He writes a diary and occasionally sends off a blog to his family from a public library computer.
  - Money. We offered him our last Polish money (about \$5), but he explained he had no need of it and didn't carry any. Understand that this was no hobo, but a well set-up young Englishman in clean and tidy walking attire.
  - No hitch-hiking or accepting lifts.

This all needed further and better particulars, so we invited him in for some Ryvita, cheese and salami, and a drink. He is completely self-sufficient. He sleeps in churches and barns, always with permission, and commonly finds that people invite him into their homes, sometimes to stay and sometimes to eat. In recompense he offers his voluntary labour and has done all kinds of jobs along the way. At a village he simply asks, often at a church, where he might stay, and usually ends up with an offer. He said he sometimes feels sorry for homeless people he meets, because he thinks that labour is something that they could trade and do not make the best of their situation..

I don't know whether he is simply bumming his way over Europe, manipulating the goodwill of simple people or not, but his stories are of happy and mutually satisfying relationships. He has no camera, but asks people for pictures they may have taken and gives them his email. He says they almost always follow up. So I don't think he is ripping off anyone. He initially refused our offer of lunch (he had none of his own), but only accepted when it was clear to him that we were interested in his story and wanted to talk about it. That was his "trade". We were grateful for the encounter.

We entered Lithuania a kilometre or so down the road.

More to come.