

## Sunday 19 July

A longish run this day, generally making ground to the north-west and into Burgundy, without much in the way of scenery apart from farmland but with two interesting visits.

The first was to Beaune, at the eastern edge of the massive vine-growing region. Vines were first planted here in Roman times and the wine industry increased through the Middle Ages as the vineyards passed from the holdings of monks into the financial interests of the dukes. Our interest was in the Hotel-Dieu, the most famous of the Hospices of Beaune. Its founder was Nicolas Rolin, whose meteoric rise from simple origins to becoming a lawyer and finally Chancellor to Philip the Good in 1422. His rise and status brought fame, power and enormous wealth in goods and property. His pious wife was worried for his eternal soul, and thus he decided to use part of his fortune to establish a Hotel Dieu hospital for the impoverished sick. He was present, aged 75 – very old for the time – for its inauguration in 1451.



With minor exceptions, its present configuration is remarkably original and restorations have been in accordance with original drawings and interpretations. It has an impressive entrance from one of the town squares, and the main building fronting the square is the Great Hall of the Poor, with a chapel at the far end. Rolin had decreed that the number of beds should be limited to 15 each side, so that there would be a total of 60 patients with two to a bed. Apart from the bed-sharing, privacy was taken more seriously than in most hospitals of the time (or now for that matter), with curtains on the open hall side and also on the corridor side between the beds and the outer wall, from where the nun nurses operated.



The hall is mighty impressive, with a high wooden arched ceiling braced by decorated transverse and vertical timbers. Other parts of the complex, formed as a set of buildings around a courtyard, have had varying uses over the centuries, including nuns' quarters, another smaller hall for men when it was decided to separate the sexes, a room for the terminally ill, a pharmacy and kitchen. All are beautifully presented.





An extraordinary polyptych of the Last Judgement was contracted by Nicolas Rolin as an altarpiece for the chapel at the end of the great hall, and painted by Rogier van der

Weyden in the period 1443 to 1451. He was founder of the great 15<sup>th</sup> century Flemish tradition and was regarded as Europe's greatest artist after the death of van Eyck. The polyptych is now displayed by itself in a special hall, and is a truly remarkable and impressive set of paintings. The extraordinary detail of the painting and its figures is stunning, and can be studied even more closely than by the eye through a large magnifying glass that can be moved over any part of the altarpiece. The contrasting expressions of those whose merits have weighed

the scale in favour of heaven and paradise, and those on the other end who are doomed to fall into the abyss and hell, are heartbreaking and must have been terrifying to the believer at the time. It's one of the most amazing and memorable pieces of art we have ever seen.

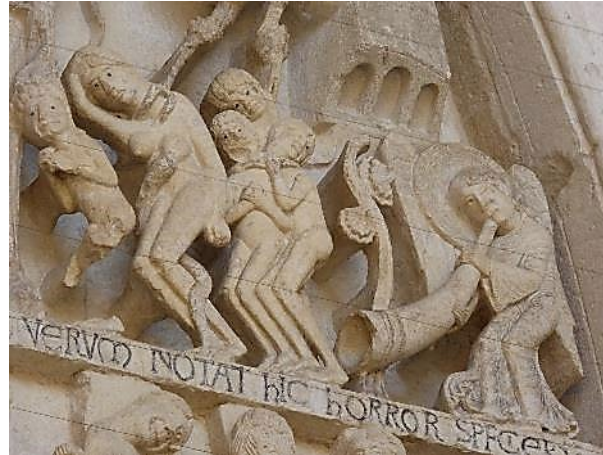
We walked on down through the attractive old town, and through the courtyards of an old winery, now a museum – shut, being lunchtime. We could walk into a barn with some interesting old wine presses, not that it was easy to work out how they operated.

The road then took us through vast expanses of Burgundian vineyards to Autun. This was originally Augustodunum, the town of Augustus, founded in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, and there are many Roman ruins in the city. But what we had stopped to see was the 12<sup>th</sup> century Cathedrale St-Lazare because of its array of carvings and sculptures. Most of these were by the artist Gislebertus, and his name is carved in the exceptional tympanum. Similar in its message to the beautiful paintings we had just seen in Beane, this is

another telling of the last judgement, in stone this time, with characters either happily going up to Paradise and others going in terror to hell. The expressions of the characters are just amazing, brutally in some cases: a woman has snakes either suckling at or eating her







breasts, and another figure's head is being grabbed by an enormous pair of claws. Gory stuff. Inside the cathedral the pillars have carved capitals, and there is a lovely spiral staircase in a corner of the transept.

Through more Burgundian countryside then, blending from wines to Charolais cattle, haymaking, and wheat fields.

After a long day we found a little aire just off the main road, simply a small field by a stream that we shared with one other van. It was still hot, and Norma dunked herself in the stream. Its other use was to supply water

for local farms, and there were several attendances by tractors filling tanks from the stream.



#### Monday 20 July

This was primarily a driving day, as we continued to traverse France, with similar country to yesterday. We got to Lamotte Beuvron and a large aire in the town. There seemed to be a lot going on as we entered the

town, and on later enquiry at the tourist office we were told that during the whole week there would be a major national equestrian event, with thousands of participants. There would be appropriate celebrations in the town. We would probably have to vacate the air by Wednesday, but as we would be moving on, this was no problem.

#### Tuesday 21 July





Having ranged far across France, we now approached the Loire. One of the very few chateaus of the Loire we had not visited was the Royal Chateau of Blois, so it was there we duly headed.

The chateau is in the middle of the town of Blois, not out in the fields like nearby Chambord. We parked by the river and walked up to the castle, which is fronted by a large open space. What makes the chateau particularly interesting is that its four distinct wings, which enclose a large courtyard, each correspond to a distinct period and style: medieval Gothic, Flamboyant, Renaissance and Classic.

The Gothic wing was once a 13<sup>th</sup> century fortress, and contains the largest and best preserved Gothic hall in France, with a beautiful panelled blue and gold barrel-vaulted ceiling. Fronting the 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance wing of Francois I is a brilliant open spiral staircase with clear Italian inspiration. We find the genealogy of the kings of France confusing – too many named Henri, Louis or Francois – but nearly all lived here at some time between 1214 and 1660. The royal apartments are well presented and decorated, including the Kings' and Queens' chambers and retiring rooms, council chambers and studies. One of the latter is supposed to be the study of Catherine of Medici, with 237 Italianate panels. Four of these have secret doors, enclosing either Renaissance treasures or Catherine's poisons, depending on which piece of literature you believe.

There are other displays in various rooms showing the illustration of manuscripts, describing architectural features and discussing the Wars of Religion, all well done and with excellent English descriptions. This was a very interesting and informative visit, although the chateau does not have the touristically attractive

flamboyance of many others in the Loire.



The drive from there to Angers and our next stop was mostly along very straight, northern-France style, straight roads, with lots of trucks and other traffic. So we were pleased to reach our destination, an aire we knew well and had visited earlier this year on our way down France in April, at Bouchemaine, on the banks of the Maine just before it meets the Loire. Plenty of room, and we settled in a place with a good view of the river.

Wednesday 22 July



After all that driving and visiting we were pleased to take a lay day at one of our favourite sites, simply taking a walk into the village and a little way along the river. The Maine was exceptionally low, and signs told us that tourist trips were being limited because of that, although we did see one of the shallow-draft vessels of the region taking a group along.

Met a British couple, Caroline and Ian; they live in the Vendee, south of here, and Ian has primary liver cancer. He has been treated at Angers hospital for two years so far, not bad going, but is obviously a bit weak. The strong one is Caroline: younger and also an ex-prison officer, she is clearly the boss person!

Booked a crossing back to England for Friday 31<sup>st</sup>, Havre-Portsmouth. Some crossings that day already full up.

#### Thursday 23 July



Driving again, not quite so far, with a Lidl and fuel stop on the way. A rotten drive, though: lots more traffic, industrial or light industrial surroundings most of the way, and nightmare through Nantes. A main road leading to the non-peage motorway was being dug up, which created havoc throughout and for us. We got out finally with the aid of Norma's navigation with an actual map.

And so into southern Brittany and an aire at Lerat that we used during our 2007 trip but which we couldn't

remember. A reasonable size but very popular, and with French vans taking as much space as they could, there wasn't much available and we took a very shady position, not our usual choice unless we're in a heatwave.

Walked down to what is called a "harbour" or even a "port", in Brittany: a wall enclosing a tiny drying inlet. But the adjacent beach and smooth rocky foreshore was very popular and crowded with families. Obviously French holidays have started!

After several days of good clear, warm weather, there was high white overcast and quite cool by late afternoon.

#### Friday 24 July



Under the trees too much shade and a bit cool first thing. Much planning, and a final decision to take a bigish jump of about 160 km today, bypassing the big towns of Vannes and Lorient by taking the motorway around them. First, however, we stopped for a quick walk around Piriac-sur-Mer, a pretty little place with lots of tourists on the march.

Rain showers, often heavy, started as we embarked on the motorway system, so we had the dreaded combination of a high-speed motorway, rain, cross-wind and many trucks! We left the motorway after Lorient and headed down country through typical Breton villages, whitewashed houses with high peaked gables. We had identified a coastal strip between Point de la Jument and Port Manech as a likely prospect for camping-car parks, and set out to find one.

We called at three, the first two being acceptable but with no view of the sea. The third was great, right on a rocky rise at the sea front with a row of parking places confined to camping-cars, at the west end of the Plage de Raguenez. There was a splendid view over a rather threatening looking sea, under grey clouds and a cool sou-westerly. The tide was low late afternoon, and with several people who had stopped with cars walked over to a headland with a house on it that will be an island during high tide.

We got the impression today that the local communes are getting round to the idea that it is better to provide lots of acceptable stopping places for camping-cars rather than have them cluttering p the place generally, and we heartily agree. We have seen many more possible and legal stopping places today than are in our several guides.



### **Saturday 25 July**

Pleasant morning with blue skies and scattered white clouds. Morning walk along coastal path to the west, overlooking some good-looking beaches with crowds of people on them. Walk in late afternoon in the opposite direction, where we had seen signs of some kind of performance being set up.





We confirmed that at the eastern end of the long Raguenez Plage there was indeed to be an event this evening, featuring music of Celtic origin, although we were a bit suspicious of the size of the amplifiers and loudspeakers. Back at the van we saw score of young people arriving in packed little cars, and walking towards the locale which – we thought and hoped – was far enough away not to disturb the comings and goings would be disturbing, but by this time it was too late to move.

*Pretty sunset*



### Sunday 26 July

We heard no loud music overnight, but there was a long firework display and people were returning to their cars in the early hours. I appeared that there was no national holiday this weekend, but Norma found in the Lonely Planet that in Brittany this time of the year is a period for celebration of Celtic culture and music, so that explained last night.

The weather changed brutally overnight, with heavy rain and strong west winds from the early hours, reminiscent of what we experienced in August 2007. Some youngsters walking back from last night's event, where they had camped in small tents, were looking very bedraggled, albeit cheerful enough.

Had to get going, though, and in heavy rain and a gusty sou-wester we headed up to Nevez, where we knew there was waste dumping facilities and that was unlikely to be busy. Sat there for a while until the rain eased, did what had to be done and had lunch watching other vans come in for the same reason.

Then away to the north-west, joining the motorway and bypassing Quimper, and then taking an easy main road up to Douarnenez. We entered an aire close to the museum, just a little car park really, and adequate although we later noticed a more attractive spot further along the waterfront.

There's not a lot in the guidebooks about this fishing town, but it has its charm and we wanted to revisit the excellent maritime museum here. At the turn of the century this was France's major fishing port, concentrating on sardines. As this industry went into decline the local fishermen went further, after lobster and tuna. There were very few fishing boats in the fishing harbour on this occasion, but what there were, were large, and we assumed that most were out.



In the sardine hey-day an island at the mouth of the river – Ile Tristan, and associated with the Tristan and Isolde legend – was taken over wholly by the industry, with more processing factories further upstream. There is now a large yacht marina where the old fishing village on the left bank stood



and is still prominent, from a distance reminiscent of the tiered terraces of Dartmouth.



The rain cleared during the day and held off while we listened to the exciting Hungarian GP and followed it on the web. It stayed dry while we walked around the town, but returned by 6:00.

### Monday 27 July

Some rain overnight and a gloomy and damp-looking morning. But only a short walk to the Port-Musee, the maritime museum that we had visited in 2007. Most of it had changed since last time, as far as we could tell, with the addition of special exhibits on “The Box”, the shipping container that changed world

commerce, and on voyaging between East Africa and India over the ages. The latter included pictures of the several scows operating out of Dubai, which are not apparent to the casual visitor to that city. There was also a special exhibition on the rise and fall of the sardine industry, with an interesting film, photographs, and exhibits on the sardine canning industry.

Unfortunately all the descriptions in these exhibitions were in French, and our English-language audioguides did not cover these areas of the museum. Frustrating, especially given the relationship between Brittany and Britain. The audioguides did work, and there were English descriptions, on exhibits in the permanent section of the museum, which we did vaguely remember. Most of it is centred on old fishing boats, including sardine, lobster and tuna, mainly under sail, but one of the most interesting vessels was a very speedy-looking recreational sailing yacht. Its racy hull was built of (what must have been very thin) steel sheeting, and its sails, of a traditional nature but built of modern materials by a Douarnenez sailmaker, were of exceptional quality, according to the critical sailmaker Norma.

Across the road are the floating ships of the museum, and these have not changed over the years. I wandered over a buoy and lightship maintenance vessel, and a Falmouth tug I remembered well. This has a massive three-cylinder steam engine, coal fired, so that most of the ship is engine and coal cellar.

There was also an unrigged Middle Eastern scow, consistent with the special exhibition inside, but it was not open for internal inspection.

It started raining during our inspection of the vessels afloat, so we got back to the van wet before lunch and then driving the short distance to Locronan. This is a two-star Michelin village and a very popular attraction for local and overseas tourists. The little town flourished in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries through the use of flax and weaving, especially in the manufacture of sailcloth that was exported through Douarnenez. All cars have to park outside, and there is a large aire that we settled in.







It is a delightful little place, with a large cobbled central square outside the attractive 15<sup>th</sup> century Eglise St-Roman, named after the Irish missionary. All the buildings in the Renaissance centre are of the dark grey granite of the region, and they house artisan in ceramics, woodcarving, painting and the like – plus the inevitable restaurants and creperies, of course.

The weather managed to stay dry in the late afternoon, and there were some blue patches among the grey clouds. Here in late July, have we done summer?

## Tuesday 28 July

A long drive today, ranging up from central west coast Brittany up to the north coast. We did touch base at the inner end of the Rade de Brest, in order to visit the ruined monastery at Landevennec of some significance; but having sat out the rain in the nearby car park without it letting up, we decided to press on. The river Aulne enters the Rade at Landevennec, and a bit further upstream we came across the interesting sight of several outdated French warships lying in a curve in the river.



We learnt that this stretch has always been a graveyard for ships – despite being very picturesque, even in the rain – and all have been cleared out except for these, while the navy decides what to do with them. A little further upstream we crossed the river high up on a very dramatic and gracefully curved suspension bridge.



A feature of Brittany is the number of lovely churches, with lace-like carving of their steeples prominent in many parts of the region. Most churches are in parish closes, Enclos Paroissiaux, built in the 15<sup>th</sup>-18 centuries and of a splendour generally outshining their humble surroundings. In addition to the church all have a triumphal arch leading into the enclosure, a cemetery and ossuary and a calvary cross. We drove through the Elorn valley, where many of the finest of these closes are to be found. We stopped at two. The first was not in the guidebooks, but had an especially grand, wide triumphal arch and a very prettily carved steeple with four smaller towers at the corners of its square base. The interior of the church is also particularly pretty, with the blue and gold barrel vaults over the four wings joining harmoniously over the crossing. It has a lovely organ, too.



The second is the best known, at Saint-Thegonnec, again with exquisite carving on every point. Here it is the calvary at which most of the tourist cameras are aimed. These are unique to Brittany, and may have been inspired by the crosses set on top of some menhirs by early Christians. The multiple characters that surround the base of the calvary's double cross tell stories, with groups and individuals carved in exquisite detail. Sufferers are tortured, to the obvious delight and enjoyment of their sadistic torturers. Inside the church there is another magnificent organ and pulpit, along with many colourful painted wooden carvings.

In the late afternoon we came to Port Plerins, on the Channel coast of Brittany, just beyond Saint-Brieuc. This has a long harbour, protected from the Channel tides by locks, in which yachts and other pleasure craft were packed from end to end. The aire was at the seaward end, and we walked out to the lighthouse that defined the start of the entrance channel. It looked like the channel was as wide as the inlet itself, until the next morning's low tide showed it to be quite narrow, with acres of mud each side – typical Brittany!



### Wednesday 29 July

We extracted ourselves with some difficulty from the little port town, defeated by some roadworks and deviations and facing the difficulty of getting up to the very viaduct that towers over the narrow valley.

We set off then on what was one of the longest runs of the trip, of some 300 km to Honfleur. On the way towards St Malo we drove round the enormous drying bays of Fresnaye and Lancieux, and after bypassing St Malo could see the



monastery of Le-Mont-St-Michel over to the north. There were lots of other pretty views of wide golden beaches and rocky little harbours. The rest of the run was mostly on motorway roads, which for some reason are actually free in Brittany, unlike every







other region in France.

The reason for the long day's run to Honfleur was that this town, which was already a favourite with a good motorhome park, was close to Le Havre, from where we would be crossing to Portsmouth in a couple of days. A day in Honfleur seemed a good idea.

The aire in Honfleur is vast, the biggest we have ever experienced. The popular town is fortunate that an expanse of what used to be dockland has been cleared and leaves room for parking the motorhomes, buses and cars used by its thousands of visitors.

#### Thursday 30 July

Having visited Honfleur before it was a pleasure once again to wander round its narrow streets and enjoy the gorgeous setting of its old town round the inner harbour basin, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Vieux Bassin. The town has always been popular with artists, and with good reason.

Honfleur lies in a valley on the final approach to the wide estuary of the River Seine as it enters the Channel. It has a well-justified reputation as a base for voyagers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries who explored Brazil, the St Lawrence River, as well as the length of Mississippi River. Thus, the French opened up vast territories in these regions, and the explorer La Salle named Louisiana in honour of his king, Louis XIV.

We walked around the old basin, admiring again the tall, narrow terrace houses which surround it. The maritime museum was disappointing, being an assembly in a deconsecrated little church of models, paintings and nautical bric-a-brac with no explanations in English at any exhibit, and the ludicrous ban on photography.



hold of an exceptionally large sailing ship.

Much more interesting and attractive was the 15<sup>th</sup> century Eglise Ste-Catherine, with its detached bell tower. The church and the tower are built almost entirely in wood, having been rebuilt after the Hundred Years War by shipwrights from the adjacent shipyards. Indeed, most of the buildings in the old quarter are primarily of wood, which is unusual in Western Europe. The church has a highly unusual interior, with two parallel naves, each with its own altar, separated by a line of wooden columns that run down the middle of the building. This feature obviously supports the twin barrel vaults that tower over the naves. Standing there, it's like being in the



Wandering past the several art galleries – with some excellent and doubtless very expensive paintings and sculptures – we returned to the inner basin and took a table for lunch at the quayside directly overlooking a restored 1926 gaff-rigged sailing vessel, the oldest in the harbour. We enjoyed a three-course seafood meal with local draft cider, as you do, at a “menu” price that was very reasonable by the standards of a popular tourist site.



Back at the van we were able to sit out in the sun for the rest of the afternoon, a restful end to our tour of Continental Europe for the year.

**Friday 31 July**

It was a short drive over a magnificent bridge to Le Havre for the ferry. We had booked the ferry a week or so earlier, being a bit worried that the problems with asylum seekers at Calais would mean that Channel crossers would favour other ports, and we were probably right. The crossing took nearly six hours and was on Brittany Ferry’s “*economie*” variant, where the ships such as our *Baie de Seine* do not feature “cruise” facilities. That suits us fine, and the crossing was smooth in very fine weather, so that we could sit out for much of the way.

## ENGLAND AGAIN

We arrived at 4:45 UK time, and after having some internet research on the way over decided to drive just out of Portsmouth to the Port Solent development, where it appeared that the large free car parks were available for overnighting. So that’s what we did, choosing a spot that overlooked a wide grassy sward popular with dog-walkers.



**Saturday 1 August**

There were indeed large car parks associated with all parts of the development, which includes residential apartments, marinas, supermarkets, restaurants and bars. We parked near a marina with many restaurants and bars and enjoyed walking around them on a fine and sunny Friday early evening, when everything was humming.







Peaceful night once all the cars had departed from the packed park, and sunny again with some high white cloud. Morning drive to Arundel along terrible A27 south coast highway, with delays at every roundabout, and Arundel absolutely packed. Just missed out on our usual parking spot at the top of King Street, and ended up at the very far end of Mill Road.

Walked up to Ann and Frank's place for lunch, long chat in afternoon, and more talking through dinner. Long walk back to van, and were going to move up a bit

to join more others, but turned out that there was one parked right behind us so stayed put.

## Sunday 2 August

Another fine morning, Norma out photographing the wild life along the stream alongside the road. Then a 300 km drive up to the north-west and Peter Wright's house on the Welsh border, stopping for lunch and a gas bottle swap on the way. Pleasant conditions and no serious delays on the way.

Staying with Peter were Dorothy's daughter Zoe, a very smart and outspoken



girl, and his son Harold, quieter and more withdrawn. Enjoyable dinner and conversations. Plugged in and settled in a flattish part of his driveway.



## Monday 3 August

A shower overnight, but clearing by 8:00. Easy drive down to Katie in Clehonger, arrived early afternoon. Having done some internet research on body shops that might repair the score on the van's side we sustained in Sicily, we called in to Hereford for a quote and arranged for Lowbake in Plough Lane to take it in tomorrow morning.

Good catch up with family news during day and evening.

## Tuesday 4 August



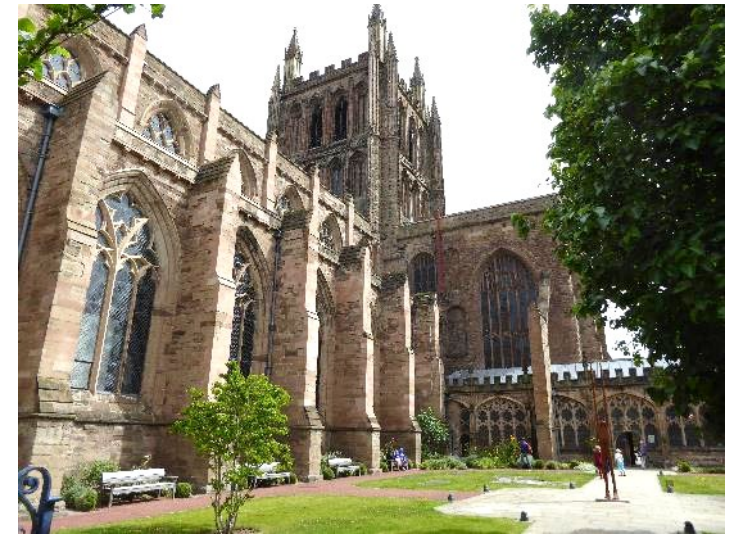


Took the van in with request to do it quickly! Quiet day, more catching up.

### Wednesday 5 August

Into Hereford for tourism visit to Hereford Cathedral and surrounds. The cathedral's massive Norman structure and columns remain as impressive as ever, and the stained glass windows were shining. There are several lovely shrines and tombs, and a wonderful old organ. The central nave was closed off because the facilities for the recently completed Three Choirs Festival, for which Katie was on the back stage this time, were being dismantled.

There were several new or refurbished presentations of features associated with the Magna Carta and the Mappa Mundi. In 1215 a Charter of Liberties was agreed between King John and the barons who were demanding fair government (for them, mostly!) and justice. This was a very long and detailed document, and it was not until 1217 that an abbreviated version was finally agreed by the king. Only four copies of the final document, with tiny writing on one sheet of vellum, survives; Hereford Cathedral holds one of them, which is on display (but not allowed to be photographed, perhaps understandably in this case).



The shrine of Thomas Cantelupe, later Bishop of Hereford and Saint Thomas, was (literally) brilliantly



decorated; he was Chancellor under King Henry III in Simon de Montfort's time, and facilitated confirmation of the Magna Carta and the rule of law by Henry and his son Edward in 1265.



The Hereford Mappa Mundi is the oldest and largest surviving medieval map of the known world, dating from about 1285. While depicted as flat, it was already known at that time that the world was spherical, but it was also held that only the known part of the world was habitable. It centres on Jerusalem, and extends to the east at the top, showing the Garden of Eden. Britain is at the north-west corner, and the Nile and the Mediterranean are also depicted. The Red Sea is painted in red.

The Mappa Mundi display stands outside the chained libraries from the



cathedral and All Saints Church, also memorable – but again, not allowed to be photographed for less obvious reasons. Many books had long been held by the cathedral, and were brought together as a library in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, chained to protect their security. The library was situated in various places thereafter until a special place was built to hold it and the Mappa Mundi, and opened by the Queen in 1996.

We then wandered around the old streets of this attractive city, noting among other things the rather weird statue of Edward Elgar leaning against his bicycle.

In the evening we went out to dinner at a nearby bistro, deserted except for ourselves on what was an apparently unusually quiet night, and enjoyed a good but not brilliant meal of mussels, lamb and the like.

#### Thursday 6 August

A relatively quiet day, some of it spent sorting out the van and storing another pile of books with Katie.

#### Friday 7 August



Fond farewell, and – via the inevitable visit to Tesco – off to South Wales and Hay-on-Wye, with its large, motorhome-friendly car park. Hay was founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a fortified town, and bits of the walls are still apparent. Its name, however, comes from Norman French which translates as “hedged enclosure”.

Very pleasant walk around the small town. Our memories were of a concentration of shops selling second-hand and old books at inflated prices, and we found it different this time. Most of the prices for ordinary second-hand books were reasonable and about what we’d expect to pay elsewhere. And there was a distinct increase in the relative number of non-book second-hand dealers, so there were more antique and junk shops than we recalled.

Perhaps the best bookshop was Hay-on-Wye Booksellers, in High Town, where we could have spent hours browsing. I did relent and buy a war history book from among an unsurpassable selection. Sunny conditions all day.

#### Saturday 8 August







In continuing pleasant weather, back to touring mode. Our drive south took us first to Tretower Court and Castle, in the Brecon Beacons region. On the way down the bare tops of the beacons rose through the brilliant green of the countryside, dotted with golden hayfields.

Tretower Court is a medieval fortified manor house. It evolved from the adjacent Tretower Castle, and because it has unusually escaped total or near destruction at any time through the ages, demonstrates the stages of this evolution. Its initial construction was in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the castle was still in use.



The building and castle were important to the forces of King Henry IV during the rebellion of Owen Glendower (Owain Glyndwr), who was driven by economic and social frustration and who had a good claim to Wales. His defeat was followed by heavy punishment for causing dissension, the barring of the Welsh from public life and the collapse of the lords of the manor and their lands. Rather ironically the castle was the meeting point for Welsh archers joining the forces of Henry V for the battle of Agincourt, as the dynasty founded by the half-Welsh Henry Tudor brought the Welsh back into public life.

In later times the property came to the Vaughan family, originally Sir Roger Vaughan, a Yorkist who was beheaded in 1471 at Chepstow Castle. It was under him that the court was developed to its present state. The kitchen and Great Hall have been beautifully presented as they probably were in those times, whereas the upper floors have only been restored to the extent needed for their long-term preservation. It is now in the care of CADW, Welsh Historic Monuments.





After wandering round this splendid building and enjoying a conversation with a local cleaner who enjoyed his work cleaning up after swallows, owls and spiders, we walked across the meadow to the castle. The castle was first built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Norman Picard family as a defensive structure that became a dwelling place, including a high tower on top of which were their private rooms. The keep was surrounded by a barricaded outer wall, connected by a bridge to the inner keep. The castle is now on farm land, with barns incorporated into the old walls of the outer bailey.

From here we had a lovely run in a sunny afternoon over the middle of the Brecon Beacons National Park. We did not stop in the town of Brecon because it was packed by people and cars, being in the middle of its obviously popular annual jazz festival. Our destination was Carreg Cennen Castle, at the western end of the park north of Swansea.



We approached with some trepidation, as the web site warned of a steep and exhausting climb to its spectacular site at the sharp top of a hill. It turned out that the walk up was not too bad, and the view, as advised, was outstanding. The ruins date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and excavations show that the hilltop was occupied in Roman times. Much of the outer walls remain, but much of the interior is in ruins following its demolition in 1462 after the War of the Roses because it was seen as a threat to the monarchy. In earlier years its holding passed through several families and lords of Norman, Welsh and English origin. Even in ruins the castle was a prize possession, and finally passed from the Earls of Cawdor to the Morris family as part of their farm in the 1960s. It is now maintained and under the preservation of CADW, and a splendid place to visit.

We guessed that for the night we might be able to stay in the car park for a castle that was free to entry, and on reaching Castle Dryslwyn we were delighted to find a lovely little picnic and parking area right across the minor road from it, and we happily settle in there for the evening and night.



## Sunday 9 August

Almost inevitably the weather changed overnight, to a gloomy misty morning. We still walked up the hill to the castle, getting only slightly wet in the on-and-off drizzle.

Dryslwyn was probably built in the 1220s by the family of Lord Rhys al Gruffyd, one of the great Welsh leaders. The family at first generally supported the warrior King Edward I in his attempt at domination of the Welsh, but in 1287 descendant sons rose in revolt. Following the castle's defeat in a siege the English retained control thereafter. The castle was demolished in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and its remains have been uncovered and stabilised in recent years. The remains of a substantial



village lie under the slopes to the west of the castle, which overlies the steep cliff to the east.

The walls enclosing the three wards, residential quarters, halls and defensive structures are all identifiable, and lovely to walk around in company with roaming sheep and with misty farmlands and hillsides in view through 360 degrees. Through the wetland plain runs the twisting River Towy, near which we were camped.

We then headed south, towards the sea



in Carmarthen Bay, bypassing the town of Carmarthen itself (not to be confused with Caernarvon, which we did for a while!). On the way we made a memorable visit to yet another castle of South Wales, Kidwelly.

This is a mighty and imposing monument to Norman power. It's also a great example of the development of castles, as its alterations over the years conformed to changes in military science. It was originally built by Roger, bishop of Salisbury, the judiciar of England, who established Norman power in the area. The castle was one of the Norman strongholds built to secure the conquests of South Wales by commanding the major rivers.

It is entered by a highly impressive gatehouse, over which lies the great hall and some accommodation. The earliest 13<sup>th</sup> century parts consist of a typical inner ward with four large round towers round a walled and gated square. The walls of an outer ward make the castle concentric, with outer and inner defences, with the outer walls straight where they back the cliff along one side. An additional free-standing hall was added between the walls later.





There's a great deal to walk round and explore, but our walking was interrupted by an excellent display of raptor flying by a young couple of conservators. They demonstrated red kites, an owl, small vultures and an eagle to a small but appreciative crowd of visitors. The offhand lady at the cash desk was untypically (for one of these sites) uncommunicative, and she said nothing of this event as we paid, so we missed a few minutes at the start.

We had established by this time that there was a dedicated motorhome parking area, with basic facilities, at the village of Burry Port. This turned out to be ideal, and we parked right on the waterfront of the wide, near-complete drying inlet of the River Lougher, as it enters Carmarthen Bay. As evening came we saw the waters retreating to leave a wide expanse of golden sand, at the end of an afternoon of fine weather.

### **Monday 10 August**

A lot of noisy wind overnight, and a wet and windy morning. Sat it out as the weather cleared, and took an afternoon walk around the little harbour and into the village for minor stores and an ATM. The harbour dries, and is only accessible for a few hours each day, but nevertheless was a coal port servicing the mines and a power station that was pulled down in 2004. The little harbour with small recreational vessels in a marina does have a sill, and an inner harbour has a lock gate that would have made it possible for small ships to dock within it.



It became fine and sunny again in the afternoon, but still rather gusty.

### **Tuesday 11 August**



Paid the harbour master for a night's stay – he was very hard to get during the day! – and away to the east, mostly along the motorway bypassing the large and industrial cities of Swansea and Cardiff. In the smaller towns that we did go through the signs of the industrial heritage of South Wales were very apparent, including the rows and rows of small and densely packed terrace houses along the roadsides and up into the hillsides.





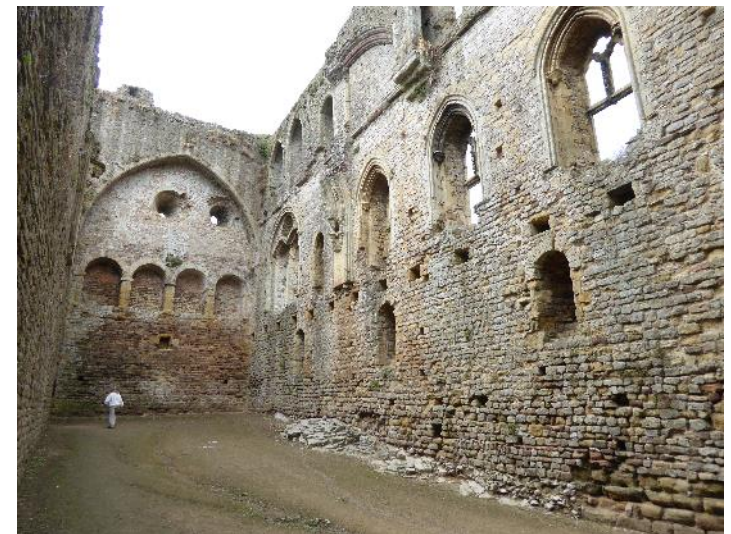
Continuing our tour of castles in South Wales we came to Caerphilly, a very pleasant little town and famous, of course, for its cheese as well as its castle. As part of the Anglo-Norman expansion into South Wales they constructed many castles and established regional lordships. Caerphilly Castle was built by Gilbert de Clare in the 13<sup>th</sup> century a part of his campaign to conquer Glamorgan, and much of its later history is associated with battles with the Welsh barons.

The castle is surrounded by extensive artificial lakes as elaborate water defences. Along with its concentric rings of walls these defences inspired the design of all later castles built by Edward I in North Wales, and was a turning point in the history of the castle in Britain.

We walked to the castle around the grassy park on the outer sides of the waters that surround it on all sides and which now support large populations of geese of all brands, swans, ducks, seagulls and other assorted seabirds. Looking into the sun the exterior of the castle appeared very dark and forbidding, and the leaning remains of the destroyed south-east tower were very clear against the clear sky. We entered through the massive eastern gate on the town side of the castle; the castle is famous for the size of its gatehouses.

Like most of the castles we have visited in Wales, little effort has been put into dolling it up, restoring and decorating the rooms; rather, the rooms, cells, towers and battlements speak for themselves. However, the splendid Great Hall has been roofed, and the northern wall that overlooks the inner bailey has been reconstructed with the large windows that denote the seniority of the owning lord. Also, parts of the fighting platforms (*hourd*) along the battlements have been nicely recreated.

Back along the motorway for a while and bypassing Newport, we came to the last castle to visit this tour, Chepstow, on the banks of the muddy lower reaches of the River Wye just before it joins the Severn and runs into the Bristol Channel. The castle is the oldest surviving post-Roman stone fortification in Britain, with its construction begun under the orders of the Norman Lord William fitzOsbern in 1067, soon to be Earl of Hereford. It was extended and further fortified over the next few hundred years.







It is built along a prominent ridge on the outer side of a curve in the river, with a cliff face down to the water and the town on the other side. It has thus an unusually long and narrow shape, with groups of buildings separated by its four baileys and walls.

Many of the huge wooden doors are completely original, showing their age but also their massive construction based on ship-building principles.

The most substantial single structure is Marten's Tower, built by Roger Bigod, Earl of Norfolk, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, originally with luxurious accommodation for any visiting king (Edward I having visited shortly before). Henry Marten was imprisoned there by Charles II, as one of the men who had signed the death warrant for his father Charles I.

Near the middle part of the long castle is the Great Tower, the oldest stone building here, unroofed now, but

showing the magnificent windows that would have provided light for the Great Hall on the first floor. There are also some remains of plater decorations within stone arches and around the windows.

From here we drove over the smaller bridge over the Severn, and downstream a little between Bristol



and its channel to Portishead, where reports we had found said that free parking was available on the sea front. That's what we found, and among several cars – which all went away at the end of the day – we parked on the quiet esplanade between parkland and the sea. Across the water we could clearly see Wales, where had just spent such a pleasant and interesting time.



This turned out to be a very popular dog-walking place, and many walkers gave us a smile. As the sun went down, there were about five other motorhomes ranged along the esplanade.

**Wednesday 12 August**

Quiet and peaceful night, and sunny and blue in the morning. The weather is forecast to change tomorrow, unfortunately.



Drive down to the farm complicated by Tomtom's choice of some ridiculous roads, but otherwise no problems down to Milton Farm early afternoon. Sunny afternoon, even at out for a while, but did a few things that needed fine weather, such as Norma's washing, because tomorrow forecast to be wet.

Did some general sorting out as high clouds appeared.

#### **Thursday 13 August**

Drizzle started in the morning, then some rain, but no ferocious storms as feared. More sorting out and cleaning. Quite a little community here, as most are in caravans, permanent or nearly so.

#### **Friday 14 August**

Mileage 103,821 kilometres, 9.9 l/100km in last 3,000 km.

