

## ***The last Steer family holiday (some names have been changed to protect identities)***

**Vias, Languedoc, August 1995**

### **Sunday**

Our ferry from Poole was the *Barfleur*, built in Helsinki in 1992. The boys weren't too impressed with the designation 'Truckline Ferries' and wondered if we would be the only car among a hundred lorries. We left Poole soon after 12.30 silently praying that someone had remembered to close the bow doors. The *Barfleur* had no cinema or swimming pool but we found comfortable seats. Brittany Ferries laid on a puppet show for the kids and a live jazz band for the older generation.

We played Black Jack. Sheila had a headache for a while but it cleared up. Sea as calm as the proverbial mill pond. Picnic lunch.

As we disembarked at *Cherbourg* late in the afternoon it began to rain, though lightly and the clouds were high. We drove with the lights on for a while but then as we travelled south the skies cleared. I was happy to do all the driving throughout the journey and Sheila was just as happy to be chief navigator. Gradually the French signposting began to make sense and I recalled the system from earlier visits. We last drove in Brittany, towing a caravan in 1993, though I first drove through France in the 1960s on holiday with my parents.

We pulled off the main road for a picnic overlooking the sea at *St Pair sur Mer*, south of *Granville*, on the west coast of the *Cherbourg* peninsula. To the north-west we thought we saw the coast of Jersey. The Audi bonnet served as a picnic table. Then, as we drove along the coastal scenic route to *Avranches* (twinned with Crediton) we had a good view south across the water to *le Mont St Michel*.

### **We meet up with the Daniel Foxes**

Using a map previously sent us by Flora we found our first guest house: *La Goëletterie* at *St Malo* and rather made a hash of trying to confirm in a mixture of English and French that the Foxes were coming later. No-one at *La Goëletterie* spoke any English.

After about twenty minutes, Daniel, Flora and Kate turned up and, to our relief, ordered tea for six which we drank in the lounge. Our bedroom was elegant, large and, being built in the roof, had interesting shapes. The room was named after a painting on the door, *la Belle Angelique*. All the party, Steers and Daniel Foxes, went for a walk across a field of (I think) swedes (but it was by now dark). The ground was a little damp after some recent rain and sloped down to the estuary which separates *St Malo* from *Dinard*. And then to bed, Tom and Jacob sharing a convertible bed.

### **Monday**

I woke at about 6 and Tom said, 'Where's Jacob?' Jacob was on the floor and had either fallen out of bed or got out in his sleep in the night.

Light rain was falling on the Velux window. We enjoyed a good breakfast which included a type of roll local to *St Malo* to which the Foxes attached a crude name. We removed some of the *baguettes* in napkins and later ate them as a picnic lunch.

Having made rough arrangements in case we got separated we drove in convoy to *Nozay* (just off the E137) for elevenses. We found a picnic spot by a war memorial with neat and bright flowers. Like most French villages, they don't waste well-earned francs on tins of paint - but apparently the

interiors were often more up-market. Flora took over the driving from Daniel in the leading car after the break and the pace of travel increased somewhat.

We arrived at *Le Peux* and were warmly welcomed by, I think, Madam *Robuchon* who couldn't speak a word of English but invited us into a conservatory and entertained us with lemonade and caffeine-free coke. Flora and Kate were good at communicating in French. The rest of us struggled. But a spirit of *bon ami* between the two nations was established. Madam *Robuchon* then led us to *St Pierre le Vieux* where the Steers were to stay at her sister's house. We had a picnic lunch by a river at *Le Peux* by which time the temperature had increased and Sheila and I put on shorts.

The Steers' accommodation was delightful: *La Grange* - a converted barn. Country furniture, open plan stair-case, four-poster bed, separate rooms for the *garçons* and mama and papa, answer-phone with one message flashing, television, CDs, many books which were not for show but looking as if they were read, some antique furniture and clocks, some magnificent items, solid wood, smart bathroom and toilet but, as usual, no extractor fan. British builders could make a fortune coming to France installing fans in the loos and bathrooms.

I had a headache and lay on the bed for 40 minutes to recover. The headache went. The boys discovered how to switch the TV on and watched what I think was unspeakable trash. Flora and Daniel and Kate arrived and we drove to *Maillezais*. Here we hired a flat-bottomed punt and, amid great hilarity, rowed on algae covered mini-canals zig zagging from bank to bank but improving our technique as we went. The boat trip was important as a foretaste of the holiday to come: it suggested that the Steers and Foxes, who would see a lot of each other in the next two weeks or so, would get on well together. We didn't see a single heron. Were we supposed to or was this a rumour put about by Flora?

Then we ate a good meal of *crudités*, *jambon*, *frites* and various French words which I didn't understand followed by ice-cream washed down with wine, *Kronenburg* and coffee. Previously a slightly odd Frenchman had turned up at *La Grange* asking where 'Michelle' was, complaining to us that she should have been there and telling us he had learned his English from English and Americans in the military, with a dictionary - *très difficile* - he kept saying. He said that Michelle, our landlady whom we had not yet met, worked at *l'hôpital*. We speculated that she might be a brain surgeon. It turned out that she was a nurse. Very pleasant - apologetic that she couldn't give us a meal (*desolé*); apologetic that her English was so poor - but she had been trying for years to learn it. She made us tea and served home made cake, told us about her friend in Wellingborough, her docile Alsatian, Aggett, and the story behind her converted barn.

We struggled to communicate making some progress but conveying warmth and friendship. Sheila asked Jacob to say his one sentence in French: *J'ai envie de regarder le tele qu'est ce qu'il y a ce soir* - and the boys were presented with the TV controller as we went happily to bed in very elegant surroundings and a sense that we were welcome.

## Tuesday

Sheila and I were woken at 5.20 am because I had not reset my wrist watch alarm since we left Saxonstone on Sunday morning. We must have slept through it on Monday morning in St Malo. I didn't go back to sleep but had some useful thoughts about the book on Anglican Evangelicalism which I recorded in a notebook. I listened for an hour to the *La Grange* cockerel and thought that the morning call he kept repeating sounded more like 'cock-a-doodle-do' even than the cockerel which wakes us every morning in Saxonstone.

I must congratulate the French on their shower units - those in *St Malo* and at *La Grange* have been excellent - superb control of temperature and water flow. Michelle gave us a super breakfast with enormous bowls of coffee. She had to leave for her work at the hospital and her husband Robert and son Jean-Paul bustled around attending to our every need. They couldn't

speak two words of English between them and we wondered why Jean-Paul wasn't doing an honest day's work. During the night my French phrase-book disappeared. I thought I had left it on my bedside table but lo! in the morning it had gone. Must be something to do with the fact that the windows which we had left open were closed in the morning. Mysterious [later note: In November 1995 the phrase book was returned to us via Flora and Daniel]. *La Grange* was the sort of place to which we would like to return.

We drove into *Mallezais*, bought 100 francs worth of petrol and did some bread and food shopping. The shop assistants counted out the change *very* slowly so the Englishwoman and her husband knew what was happening. They wished us a *bonne journée*. Mileage *Mallezais* to our next stop *Bouglon* was 195. We stopped on route for a late lunch at a filling station picnic area which took Mastercard. In future, on trips like this, it occurred to us that we should have CB radio linking the two cars on the air-waves. Driver Daniel was by now known as 'Rubber Duck' and driver Roger 'Chicken Legs'. The weather was cloudy with some drizzle.

### **The strange story of *Dominique***

We arrived at *Chambre d'hotes* run by *Dominique* at *Bouglon*. *Dominique* called her establishment *Domaine de Montfleuri*, full of character, built in 1790 with panoramic views and a swimming pool. The area was known as *Lot-et-Garonne*. *Dominique* had lived in England and spoke good English. Tom, Jacob, Kate and I had a good swim in the pool which boasted a robot type vacuum cleaner for swallowing up foreign bodies. The boys beat me at table tennis. The beams of the roof of the table tennis area looked as if they dated from 1790. In the front of the house on a south-east facing slope was an orchard with trees, as someone said, dripping with apples, plums and pears many lying on the grass. There were wide stone steps unswept and somewhat overgrown. A man appeared to be needed, preferably an English gardener, although all was very French. We had many hours to wait before the meal.

Jacob and Tom played each other at table tennis; I said I'd play the winner and it was Jacob. I played him and he beat me. Then I played Tom and beat him on the first game, but he beat me on the next two. Every so often I got a stab of pain in my wrist dating back to an old injury two years ago when the pain in my wrist was so bad that I couldn't drive the car. There were some shots I was afraid to play. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

We passed the time in different ways. The sun came out and Flora stripped down to her bathing costume and sunbathed by the pool after a quick dip. Daniel went for a walk and then read a book. Sheila read with great interest a magazine Flora had acquired. Having read it avidly, including all the latest about Michael Jackson's skin condition, she dismissed the whole publication as utter rubbish. Kate pottered around and then played her mother at a geriatric game of table tennis. A beautiful fluffy kitten liked to run on the table by the net as people were playing and divert the course of the ball.

Eventually, just before we all fainted from hunger, *Dominique* called us for dinner. She had set three tables: one for the Foxes; one for the Steers; one for an ageing French couple and an English couple from Liverpool. The Frenchman looked like George Solti and had been on a fishing holiday in Scotland only to find that Scottish rivers were lined with 'No fishing' signs. Sheila said that her grandmother was a Scot, but I am not sure whether the Frenchman blamed Grandma for the fishing ban. The Liverpoolian spoke with that nasal voice which is caused by the draught coming out of the Mersey tunnel.

*Dominique* had set the tables with wine glasses for Flora, Daniel, Roger and Sheila and tumblers for Kate, Tom and Jacob. These she filled with fruit juice. Kate looked daggers at her all through the meal. Flora, Daniel, Roger and Sheila had been provided with carafes of red wine. We began with melon followed by *Dominique's pièce de résistance*: courgette flan. As I write this I

can't remember what came with the courgette flan. *Dominique* was very fond of it and it was slightly watery at the edges. It was the best courgette flan I have ever eaten, not to say the only courgette flan I have ever eaten. There were a few baskets of French bread. This was followed by another of *Dominique's* specialities: chocolate gateaux which she produced with a flourish. Tom confirmed his true stature as an incurable English food Philistine by announcing that it could have done with some custard on the top. I forgot to say that when we sat at table, *Dominique* asked whether we wanted her to 'make presentations'. We declined this and introduced ourselves.

Conversation after the meal was characterised by the sort of *non sequiturs* which normally feature on such forced occasions. For example, after I said that I hoped to watch Brian Lara play cricket on visits to Tom at the University of Warwick, the Liverpoolian said that he had been to a pub in Somerset which was full of pictures of cricketers including Ian Botham.

When we had dragged ourselves away from this riveting conversation, most of the party went for a walk in the gathering darkness, while Daniel went to his room to work on some sermons. The fluffy little kitten, who had by now grown very fond of us all, tried to come with us. Tom, who is a great cat lover, was worried that she would be hit by a 2CV and picked her up and carried her back to the *Domaine de Montfleuri*. And so we walked along the ridge with panoramic views to the north, west and south-east, as I say, in the gathering darkness. The road into the village of *Bouglon* was lined by bungalows. Nearly every one had between one and three dogs in the garden. As you walked by they rushed out to the fences and barked and growled fiercely and loudly. In our case they were particularly enraged because they couldn't understand the language we spoke. This they took as an insult. At one bungalow the gates were open and the dogs made noisy and threatening approaches to our ankles. Their owner half-heartedly called them off.

The night life at *Bouglon* was a disappointment. In fact we didn't meet a single human being. Sheila and Flora's dreams of a cup of coffee were dashed. There was however a roll of honour listing those citizens of *Bouglon* who had given their lives for France in the First World War and one who had died in 1940 had been tacked on the end of the list. A separate plaque recorded the names of a few brave men who had died during the *resistance* at the hands of 'the evil Nazis' or words to that effect.

### **Wednesday**

*Dominique* encouraged the Steers and Foxes to eat breakfast in the open air away from the other guests. Apparently she knocked on the Steers' door before breakfast and told us all to keep the noise down but we must have been making such a noise that only Jacob heard her. At any rate she was polite and friendly at breakfast which was somewhat spartan - slices of French stick and two sorts of home made jam. We indulged in some wild speculation as to why her prices were high ranging from the theory that she supported an absent husband and children to complete renovation of the *Domaine de Montfleuri*. Could the young lady in shorts be her child? Later it turned out she came to improve her English. When we got through all the slices of French stick, Kate was the brave member of the party who dared to ask for MORE. *Dominique* apparently said words to the effect that 'You only have to ask. I didn't cut more because it goes stale'.

Tom had jammed an English shaver plug into a continental socket and took half an hour to get it out. The bill was the highest so far even when you remember we had an evening meal. I reported the fact that the water wouldn't drain away from our sink. *Dominique* was kind enough to say it had happened before and that she knew how to repair it. But thanks for telling me etc etc... As she filled our three thermos flasks, she said she had been to Sidmouth and thought it one of the nicest parts of England. The young lady in the shorts reported that the weather forecast was for the return of hot weather. She had a marvellous time on the slippery kitchen floor sliding the kitten along the floor who came back again and again for more of this treatment.

And so we said our farewells to this somewhat enigmatic establishment with the pool and panoramic views. How much history it has seen since the French Revolution when it was built! We doubt if we shall return to uncover any more of the mystery of the prim *Dominique*.

### **We visit Carcassone**

We drove to the nearest *Intermarché* to shop, use the staff loo and fill up with petrol. We set off in a south-easterly direction and the temperatures rose to the highest of the holiday. We stopped for elevenses at a service station and then followed Rubber Duck to *Carcassone* in the 'Land of the Cathars'. This was our first stop in *Languedoc*, the region of France where we were to spend the next fortnight.

*Carcassone* was an amazing sight from the distance looking almost too good to be true. The town was established by the Gauls, taken over and fortified by the Romans, occupied by Visigoths from the fifth century until the eighth century, then coming under the rule of the Counts of Toulouse. It has a colourful and complicated history tied in with the Cathar wars. Actually the city was not so much well preserved as well restored. Much of what you see today was the result of reconstruction started in 1844 by *Eugène Viollet-le-Duc*. The experts say he made some fundamental errors in his rebuilding. Apparently he didn't get the shape of the turret roofs right. However it was still a pleasure to walk around a medieval city in an almost 'as new' condition.

It was swelteringly hot when we arrived and we had a picnic lunch under the shade of a tree. The place teemed with tourists and groups of live musicians and people in horse-drawn carts and performing artists advertising forthcoming performances and we listened to a lone guitarist. There was the most marvellous children's fairground roundabout with a beautifully painted roof and horses and so on with bright lights and just right music and children with entranced faces watched by beaming parents. We had time to sit quietly as a family in the church taking in the beauty of the stained glass and reflecting on the generations who had worshipped God here.

The Renault and the Audi had now reached a temperature at which it would have no doubt been illegal to transport animals. However with all windows wide open and the fan on position four we set off on the final stage of the journey to *Vias*.

But what was this? The interior light was on. All the doors were shut. The light switch was in the 'off' position. It may be that the boot was open and all our luggage was spilling out in the path of oncoming Peugeots. Tom insisted we check the boot. I flashed the head lights to Rubber Duck. Rubber Duck hesitated and reduced speed. Tom held up the cardboard STOP sign written prior to our departure for just such an emergency. There was a movement aboard Rubber Duck and the previously prepared OK sign appeared. We stopped at a service station and discovered the boot firmly closed, but the knob which controlled the light as the driver's door shuts was broken. So no major problem. Press on.

### **We arrive in Vias**

Now the land took on a more tropical appearance. Barcelona got closer on the road signs but we pressed on and Tom was the first to see *Vias* on a sign. We took the second exit from the motorway and entered the medieval town itself, negotiating narrow streets, arrived in a square and Jacob said, 'I think that's their house over there'. Far too grand, we thought. But it turned out to be true. We were driving the wrong way down a narrow one-way street and quickly began unloading the two cars.

Then both generations of the Michael Fox family arrived and there were shouts and screams of welcome and reunion. We had been expected a day earlier due to a breakdown in communications.

The house had many stories and was full of interest, built of fine quality materials with beautiful stone walls and tiled floors, kitchens and bathrooms everywhere. Sheila and I had a marvellous room high up overlooking red roof tops with kitchen and bathroom etc to hand. The boys were sharing with Peter, Kate lying in state at the very top of the house. Sixteen people were served a marvellous meal by Sylvia, Michael and family and helpers - accompanied by local red wine and a *pastis*. The whole setting was very French, the temperature tropical, the *bon ami* infectious.

It was nice to begin to catch up with Michael's news. The young people went off to the *Europark* amusement park with Jack and Lindsey and arrived back at 12.15. We phoned Clifford Gardens reporting our safe arrival and retired to our luxury suite for the night tired but happy. We thanked God for a safe journey.

### Thursday

Interesting in the night to listen to the church clock and town hall clock (the house adjoins the town hall) striking the hours at intervals of 2 or 3 minutes. Also cats, dogs, street cleaners and rubbish collectors made life more entertaining for insomniacs. In the morning, Sheila, Kate and I potted around the bustling little town of *Vias*, and bought bread and milk.

Lindsey was presented with her 21st birthday cards and presents. Then the two cars drove to the Fox favourite beach to the west of *Vias Plage*. Between us we took Rosemary, Hilda and Peter. This was caravan holiday country. Probably fortunately there was high cloud to reduce the intensity of the sun's rays. The sea was warm and Tom, Jacob, Rosemary, Hilda, Peter (and for a while Sheila) and I enjoyed playing ball games in the sea. This was to become a daily event. Also we had two games of *boules* at which Tom and I played Jacob and Peter and Rosemary and Hilda. Tom and I won both games but Peter had his moments and Rosemary and Hilda came back in the second game from an at first hopeless position. I had the impression the three Foxes thoroughly enjoyed their introduction to *boules*.

Rosemary and Hilda led the Steers on a walk which we hoped would take us to *Vias plage*, but our intention was thwarted by a volcanic rock-lined canal which separated the two beaches. So we headed inland walking through tall bamboos, leading Steer senior to recall how he was beaten three times at school.

Back at *maison de Fox*, Peter, Jacob and I set off to collect Lindsey's birthday cake which had been previously ordered and iced with a message. Lindsey was invited down to the main lounge for a cup of tea. But the whole family had gathered and on the table was a large cardboard box tied with a ribbon. Lindsey opened the box, made the first cut and then the entire company shared the cake and a cup of tea.

Jack was now in a relaxed mood. Those assembled for the cake looked at Michael seated at the table. Why was Jack standing with his arms around his uncle's shoulders? Why was he licking his uncle's head energetically? He explained that a farmer who had had his bald head licked by a cow now had a fine head of hair restored to his scalp. As the licking continued, we wonder whether Michael would come down to breakfast the following morning with a fine head of hair. But if cattle can have such a restorative effect, shouldn't one of the Steers have done the licking?

The Steers potted through the ancient streets of *Vias*. The traders had come and set out their stalls on the streets. There were knives, old books, old tools, paintings, leather work and a beautiful chess set with intricately carved wooden pieces. Every pawn was different. The King and Queen stood tall and looked magnificent. How fine the set would have looked on the wooden chest opposite the double door entrance to Bendy House! We couldn't afford the 500 francs - £66.50 - which was asked. We simply admired and moved on.

We ordered 4 pizzas and local white wine at a street restaurant. It began to rain and we were invited into the main restaurant area if we wished. We declined, but Jacob had to move to a seat

which was better protected by the large white sun shades. Now the water would stop running down his neck. It was a light warm rain and many people happily continued to wander around the streets. We reflected on how the climate effected the whole atmosphere of life in this part of Europe making it more relaxed and convivial. The pizzas came and were delicious, but the local white wine was vinegary and acidic. We didn't finish our ¾ litre caraffe.

Back at *maison de Fox*, the Michael and Daniel Foxes were finishing their meal and we were invited to join them in fruit salad and *crème fraîche*, cheese, biscuits and coffee.

The younger generation enjoy playing cards together - Black Jack, Pig and I joined them for some games. Towards the end of the evening, I read extracts from this journal beginning with the strange story of our stay with *Dominique*. They were amused and intrigued by this tale and our treatment at her hand. Daniel moved from the dining table where he had been working and revealed to a hushed audience more details of this strange woman and her murky links with faceless men who gave her husband urgent instructions. What was it in her life which sent her pale with anxiety at phone calls and furtive visits? We thought we had better open a file on the case.

As Sheila and I returned to our rooms high up in the house the windows were as usual wide open in the warm night air. We leaned out and heard from the nearby Town Square a woman singing. And then we heard a man singing Frank Sinatra's hit, 'My way'. We heard the songs, the voices and the laughter of people who had had just a little too much to drink but we saw nothing except a few revellers making their way home beneath our bedroom window. Sheila made a final cup of tea and we retired to bed.

## Friday

We had a superb night's sleep and didn't hear either the church or town hall clocks strike. We woke refreshed. There was more rain. We set off for our early morning shopping trip to buy bread and milk. The cash machine in the town hall square refused to give me any francs when I insert my Eurocheque card. It accepted my PIN number but twice told me it couldn't complete the transaction. I walked to the Post Office where there was another machine. This also accepted my PIN number. I decided not be too ambitious or greedy and asked it to give me 700 francs. The machine began to click and to clank. I wondered whether there would be money at the end of this or whether it would tell me it couldn't complete the transaction. But after literally several minutes of clicking and clanking, I was asked to take my card, always a helpful sign. And then to my delight, 7 x 100 franc notes appeared.

I rejoined Sheila who had completed the food shopping and we looked at postcards. We decided that the varieties with *Vias Plage* in the background and ladies in various states of *deshabillé* would on the whole be unsuitable for my Auntie May or Sheila's parents. We settled on a sober view of the round and arched covered market area in the shopping area of *Vias*, bought fifteen cards plus fifteen *timbres*.

## Morning in Pézenas.

Back at *maison de Fox* I wrote three cards and then ran out of inspiration. After breakfast, it was still dull with occasional showers so delicate feelers were put out to see if agreement could be reached on what to do. To my surprise, agreement was reached which seemed to please everyone that we should drive north to *Pézenas*.

Rubber Duck and Chicken Legs set off in the now familiar convoy, Peter with the Steers and Rosemary with the Daniel Foxes. Rumour had it that Hilda was unable to tear herself away from her favourite television programme. We arrived at *Pézenas* which from 1456 to 1700 was the seat of the *Estates General of Languedoc*, in other words the ruling council of the region. For that reason the town had an unusually aristocratic and prosperous character with an active social and

intellectual life. There were many elaborate mansions. The central area of the town has hardly changed since the sixteenth century.

Another attraction of the town was that *Molière*, with his theatre company, stayed in *Pézenas* several times. The *Syndicat d'Initiative* have marked a walking tour of the centre, but amongst the literature Flora procured I never actually found words which corresponded with the numbers. We didn't do the tour but visited selected sites. There were lots of up-market gift shops. Sheila bought Lindsey a bracelet for her birthday amid controversy as to whether she would like it. The shop assistant was an Australian who had first visited the area on holiday and had now returned to live and work.

Kate and Rosemary spent hours and hours in a bead shop eventually parting with money in exchange for beads. As a group of us walked down the *Rue Conti*, where *Molière* had put on plays at No. 32 (the old *Hotel Alphonse*), Tom announced that *Pézenas* was the most boring town he had ever visited in his entire life - a judgment which I hoped more mature years would cause him to reconsider.

We picnic lunched on two seats in a park adjacent to the *Avenue François Hüe*. The centre-piece of the gardens was a large statue erected in 1897 to the memory of *Molière*. The various faces and their expressions provided a talking point over lunch. Rubber Duck and Chicken Legs then set off through vineyards and roadside stalls selling everything from fruit to *frîtes* in the direction of the *Grotte de Clamouse*.

### **The Grotte de Clamouse**

We found the site of the caverns buried on the side of the *Gorges de l'Herault* - the river *Herault* eventually enters the sea just east of *Vias* plage. It was still cool and cloudy as Kate, Tom, Jacob, Rosemary and Peter entered the fantastic caves with their ancient stalagmites and stalactites while the older generation contented themselves by viewing a photographic exhibition beneath the eating area. Then, as Flora, Daniel, Sheila and I sat at a table provided by the restaurant, drinking tea from our own flasks and discussing the pros and cons of abortion and euthanasia, the skies cleared and the sun shone brightly.

The youngsters emerged from beneath the surface of the earth blinking in the brightness, grateful that the rays of the sun warmed them after the cold below. They told tales of fantastic frozen shapes displayed to the accompaniment of scary organ music.

## **Adventure on the *Lac du Salagou***

What could be better on what had turned into a hot day than to drive on mountain roads across the inland hills of *Haut Languedoc* in the direction of the *Lac du Salagou*? The crew of Chicken Legs were set the challenging task of leading the way and eventually we arrived at the blue waters of the lake shimmering in a late afternoon heat haze. Everyone quickly stripped off, except Sheila and Daniel who self-sacrificingly stayed on dry land to guard our clothes.

Flora selected a fetching pink bikini for the occasion. I hobbled painfully over the stones on the edge of the lake but gradually the buoyancy of the water eased the discomfort. You might have expected the water to be glacially cold but it was surprisingly warm. We had forgotten the towels which I had to retrieve from the car and therefore entered the water later than the youngsters.

I began to swim across a wide creek at our end of the lake and eventually met Rosemary returning from the other side. Tom and Peter had left the water temporarily.

'Where's Jacob?' I ask Rosemary.

She indicated an area beyond the end of the creek.

I had a mini-dilemma. I was way out of my depth. For all I know the lake could be half a mile deep. It would have been comforting to return to shallower water. But what if Jacob had been hit by a passing pedalo or had dived into some hidden rocks. The water was warm, the sun was hot, the setting beautiful. I decided to swim on in the direction Rosemary had indicated Jacob was last seen.

I swam on with my slow but tried and tested breast stroke. After some minutes, I heard a cry in the distance.

'Dad!'

I could make out Jacob's slim figure standing on the opposite bank of the lake. I swam slowly towards him. Then a pedalo appeared with Kate, Rosemary, Tom and Peter aboard.

I cried out for a lift, but they laughed and pedalled on towards Jacob who had located a diving board.

Eventually I arrived on the scene. The youngsters were jumping and diving off the diving board and pedalo with immense enjoyment.

Realising the task which faced them in pedalling back to the pedaloport in the few minutes left of their allotted time, I was allowed aboard the craft to provide much needed muscle power. We set off on the return journey zig-zagging as various members of the party jumped off or changed positions. We approached the pedal port. The crew had certainly exceeded the allotted time. The craft, which had been hired by Tom and Peter, now had six persons aboard. Kate, Rosemary and Jacob jumped or dived off and swam towards Flora standing on the bank. Tom, Peter and I parked the pedalo on the end of a line of similar vessels. There was no one to reprimand us, or demand extra francs. So, without loitering, we hobbled long the pebbly shore towards Flora and the group which had swum ashore. Flora took pity on me and brought my shoes allowing me to walk the final few yards in comfort.

We drove home to *Vias* abandoning the convoy routine. The Chicken Legs vehicle went to *Timy* supermarket, Sheila hoping to buy some salad dressing. But it was closed. However newspapers and magazines were for sale outside and, eager to hear how England got on on the first day of the fifth Cornhill test match against the West Indies, I paid 14 francs, nearly £2, for that

day's Daily Telegraph. It was almost worth it to read that Mike Atherton, struggling against back pain, had scored a century at Trent Bridge in temperatures in the 80s. He was not out at 113 after an opening stand of 148 with Nick Knight. To give the West Indies their due, the pitch was flat and Curtly Ambrose was unable to play due to an injury. I also enjoyed reading about public murmurings of discontent within the Labour Party over what the more left wing brothers claimed was Tony Blair's increasingly dictatorial leadership style in moving the Labour Party to the right in an all-out effort to achieve power. Our friend, Brian Mawhinney, Tory chairman, was cashing in on this welcome disarray in Labour ranks.

Back at *maison de Fox*, all the ladies were pooling resources and energy for a mammoth communal meal. Dish after dish of gastronomic delights, if I may be permitted a cliché, were eventually set before us and taken down to the *cour* to eat on a now very warm evening. The wine also was liberally poured and stories were told of Michael and Daniel's murky past. As Michael filled the glasses, the stories got earthier and Sheila was shocked and horrified.

Tomorrow was market day and I understood I needed to move the car to the Town Hall Square. I slipped out to attempt this but it was full and I returned the car to a spot opposite the church. I had forgotten to take the key Michael had had cut for me and rang the bell. *Maison de Fox* was buzzing with conversation and laughter and no-one heard - except man's faithful friend, Kafka who I could see through a pane of glass in the door wagging his tail as if to say, 'I heard. Don't worry. I'm sure someone will come in a minute!'

Then he ran off and returned with Michael who let me in. On no account could I park anywhere near the church, Michael told me. So we both drove our cars to the town Hall Square and managed to squeeze them in to a couple of tight spaces. Michael told me the story and showed me the spot where fire destroyed the family Suzuki.

We moved upstairs for cheese and coffee and the conversation went up a tone to matters educational and spiritual. Michael and Sylvia were presented with a gift from Devon's Dartington Crystal factory. Then the Steers and Michael Fox family set off for a midnight walk. As we left Sylvia was showered with water from above, we assumed from Flora who had suffered the same fate earlier in the evening. *Vias* has a bright and bustling atmosphere at night. As we walked Michael and I talked of the end of the war, the resistance, Vichy France and surviving bitternesses. We passed *Rue Huit Aout* - a reminder of VE Day half a century earlier when I was one month and four days old.

Then we came to a large roughly surfaced area, brightly lit. Although it was, if I remember, about one o'clock in the morning there were several groups of people playing *boules* - not of course with colour balls as we have done on the beach, but with the classy silver ones you see all over France. Then home and to bed.

## **Saturday**

We have both enjoyed an unbroken night's sleep. I went to the usual *boulangerie* and bought two *baguettes* and then decided to visit the market which had dared to turn our car out of its familiar parking place. This was no ordinary market. The area bristled with life, colour and atmosphere. There were black and white traders selling almost everything except cars and three piece suites: there were leather goods, meat, fruit, jeans, underwear, CDs, videos, cassettes, vegetables and even live puppies. Later I took some photos.

Back at *maison de Fox*, Sylvia provided me with a 5 litre container and I set off to buy some local red wine. On the way I met Sheila and Tom who accompanied me. They filled our container from an enormous tank through a pipe with a nozzle like the one you use to fill your car up with petrol.

The day was hot and sunny and we spent it on the beach. Most of us found it far too hot to sunbathe and we spent the time either in the sea or playing *boules*. The sand was so hot we either selected *boules* pitches which enabled us to stand with our feet in the sea or we ran at intervals into the sea to cool down. It was a happy day and the three families seemed to be getting on well.

The Daniel Foxes and Steers ate together and then joined the Michael Foxes who were entertaining a colleague of Michael's and his wife and two sons in the *cour*. Not all the cheese cake had been eaten and Sylvia cleverly suggested that people should earn forkfulls of the remainder. Then began an entertaining session when people asked one another riddles, the correct answer entitling the answerer to some cheese cake. Rarely can a hostess have more successfully ensured a more engaging session keeping adults and children absorbed for well over an hour. And so to bed.

## Sunday

### To church, French style

Another excellent night's sleep. While Daniel and Flora went to what were irreverently, and I was sure inaccurately, known by some as the 'Holy Rollers' in *Beziers*, Michael, Sylvia, Kate and the Steers went to the Catholic church a few steps from *maison de Fox*. Tom and Jacob were apparently unimpressed, but Sheila and I were struck by the fact that in what some dismiss as 'secular France' the church was virtually full of both locals and holiday makers. An overhead projector was used intermittently throughout the service giving the words of simple choruses apparently singing the praise of God and of Jesus with parts for a lady soloist and the congregation.

Readings and prayers were led by members of the congregation with women predominating. One of them wore a large hat and looked for all the world like the wife of an elder in a Brethren assembly. Not only did she do one of the readings, she also jumped up and adjusted the mike while others read. At one stage in the service, a Scots lady came forward and said a few sentences in English emphasising the oneness of God's family. The sermon, I suppose, lasted about ¼ of an hour. I understood very little of it but the priest came across as a good and kind man.

We recognised the great creeds of the church and the Lord's Prayer. Congregational responses were good and 'Amens' said loudly. The peace was celebrated without embarrassment. At the breaking of bread, the priest walked to the back of the church, a few feet away from us, and people quickly came to him to receive the mass with happy faces as the choir sung a haunting tune.

After mass, the overhead projector said, in English:

*Friends, after mass we give you a fresh drink*

Then there were the fairly lengthy notices, including a reference to something in the presbytery and something about the Bible. The others left during mass, but I stayed for my fresh drink of orange and mingled for a few moments with the happy crowd of worshippers - members of by far the world's biggest Christian denomination. The blue stained glass windows at the east end above the altar added to the beauty of the service.

Then we set off for *Roquebrun* with about a quarter of a tank full of petrol, discovering that the majority of petrol stations in France on a Sunday were either closed or unmanned (though we later discovered that the nearby Elf garage in *Vias* was open all day). At *Beziers* we got lost. Our objective was to find the D14. Instead we found crowds gathering for a bullfight, some in colourful costumes in a noisy procession. Realising that Steers should keep clear of bull fights, we pressed on, but still no sign of the D14.

'This is getting bizarre', observed Kate.

Every passenger in the car was then issued with a map and instructed to direct the driver to the D14. We knew we needed to head northwest. We could see where the sun was. Kate spotted a Frenchman, I think (though my memory may be faulty here) clipping his hedge. Being a woman of decision and action, she got out to ask him directions. We watched from the car as they both gesticulated to each other. It was obvious that solid information was being exchanged - we were in the area of fact rather than opinion.

Kate got back into the car with the expression on her face of a woman who had advanced a cause. She told us what Sheila's reading of her map was beginning to confirm: we were no more than a few hundred yards from the point where the D14 leaves *Beziers*. Our morale leapt.

The D14 turned out to be beautiful. After *Cazouls-les-Beziers* the road was edged on the Michelin map with a thick green line which meant it was *Parcours pittoresque*. The scenery was green in the foreground, bumpy and rocky in the middle distance, with the blue hills of *Haut Languedoc* in the distance.

### **Surviving the rapids on l'Orb**

*Roquebrun*, our destination, lay in the *Gorges de l'Orb*, the steep valley of the river *Orb*.

For several months we had had a picture of *Flora* in our hall with houses in the background clinging to the edge of a sundrenched hillside. Our first view of *Roquebrun* revealed that the photo had been taken from the D14 and that the background scene was *Roquebrun* itself.

All sixteen members of the party eventually arrived at *Roquebrun* and parked by the *Orb*. We picniced in a lovely spot by an arched stone bridge, the houses and a restaurant clinging to the steep side of the gorge on the opposite bank. The temperature was high, the water inviting and surprisingly warm for a mountain river. Many members of the party, including me, hobbled over the gravelly pebbles and enjoyed a marvellous swim and sunbathe on the concrete edge of a dam - this also had damp, mossy slippery patches which sent the unwary, including yours truly, crashing to the ground unceremoniously.

The time came for us to report to the canoeing authorities. We were issued with our life jackets. Mine had a whistle which I thought must be because those in charge detected leadership material. *Flora* however thought it was because I looked elderly and presumably might need to blow it to summon assistance.

*Sheila* took some photos of the party in this strange chest wear. Controversially, in the light of our later experience, helmets were not issued.

We selected our oars according to our size. *Daniel*, clearly in energetic mood, selected an oar with a paddle on both ends. Barrels were available to keep personal possessions waterproof. Lists of regulations in several languages set out the minimum qualifications required, including swimming distances, but no oral instruction was given us. After a long wait, all sixteen of us squeezed in to a hot and smelly bus packed side by side with hot and smelly foreigners. *Michael* tried desperately to open a window. The driver set off negotiating hair pin bends with the skill and somewhat unnerving technique of a man who had done this many times before. We arrived 5 kilometres up the gorge at *Ceps*.

Our canoes were unloaded from a trailer and the party grabbed those which took their fancy. No advice was offered from the authorities who had gladly relieved our party of 1300 francs. *Sheila* and I ended up with what seemed to us to be a large and unwieldy vessel with three wooden seats set high at the bow, middle and stern. We launched ourselves into the water.

It soon became clear that this was an activity at which we were unlikely to distinguish ourselves. We began to paddle, *Sheila* in the front paddling on the right, me at the back paddling on the left. We went round in circles. We testily blamed each other for this phenomenon. The rest of the party appeared to be happily canoeing down the river with carefree ease. After a few minutes we approached the first rapids. The canoe leapt forward crashing against partially submerged boulders. Earlier I had boasted facetiously about demonstrating the eskimo roll. Now it happened involuntarily: the wretched canoe rolled over. I fell out and saw that poor *Sheila* was trapped in the water with the upside-down canoe on top of her. I stood in the water and pulled furiously at the side of the canoe, managing to get it off *Sheila* after a few seconds - allowing her to come up gasping for air. Fortunately she had had the presence of mind to keep her eyes closed ensuring that she didn't lose her contact lenses.

The canoe had taken in a lot of water but we managed to climb aboard again. It would be an exaggeration to say that we were warming to the sport of canoeing. Many members of the party had by now sailed apparently blissfully down the river and, for all we knew, would soon be arriving back at *Roquebrun*. It was almost a relief to hear shrieks and shouts from a few yards away. Kate and Rosemary had also rolled over and tumbled out of their canoe and were splashing about in the water. I think we may have recovered one of their oars but I can't quite remember. We collected ourselves and rowed on, my new pair of blue trainers thoroughly soaked and submerged in several inches of water inside the canoe.

Wherever the river became tricky to negotiate, small groups of people congregated on the banks or rocks to watch the fun. And wherever there were rocks to get jammed between or branches of trees to get trapped under, Sheila and I managed to find them. Once we got our canoe thoroughly wedged between the bank of the river and the branches of a tree. Then a couple of French girls arrived in their canoe and, perhaps trying to steer clear of us, got themselves thoroughly jammed broadside wedged between two rocks. Water was flowing directly into their canoe and it was almost completely submerged.

For some reason one of the young ladies wasn't wearing a life jacket and was clad only in a skimpy blue bikini. Clearly my duty as an honourable man was to help them. I saw Flora and Daniel who had also ran aground on the opposite bank. They would obviously expect me to do my duty. So I left our canoe under Sheila's care and gallantly waded over to assist the French ladies in distress. They soon discovered that I was pretty useless but better than nothing. At least I could give them moral support. Their English was as limited as my French and in the drama of the situation with small rocks crashing against your ankles you forget every foreign word you have ever learnt. The girls gesticulated and pointed to the part of their canoe which they thought I ought to tug at. I pulled, they pushed. The canoe hardly budged. Eventually, I don't know how, we managed to pull it free and tip out most of the water. In their gratitude they indicated that they wanted to help us free our canoe. 'Oh no,' I said. 'We're fine. *C'est bien!* No problemo. We'll be away in a couple of secs.'

They looked unconvinced but climbed aboard their canoe and disappeared. I returned to our canoe, as I say, firmly wedged between bank and branches. We spent several minutes pulling and pushing, lifting, twisting. Still the darned thing wouldn't break free of the bank. If only we had a saw to cut the tree down. If only we were far away sitting in front of a fire reading a good book! How about leaving the wretched boat and walking back to *Roquebrun*. But eventually we freed the boat, tipped it over removing as much water as we could. We climbed aboard again and set off braced for the next disaster. With time, I slightly improved my technique of jamming my oar into the water so that the canoe would turn in the direction to the side the oar was in the water acting as a rudder. Every so often we came across Christian and Clare rowing round and round in circles, or Christian swimming around in the water trying to reach an oar which had been washed over board. Clare would be sitting in the canoe declaring that she didn't like canoeing at all.

A few times Tom and Jacob canoed up the river against the current to see if Mum and Dad were still alive and to tell us horrific tales of near fatal disasters. I think I saw Jacob diving off his canoe into the water. I cannot now remember exactly how many times we fell out of the canoe, or lost an oar, or got out and carried the craft across rocks through shallow water. There were a few peaceful patches when we enjoyed the beauty of the *Gorges de l'Orb*, the blue sky, the warm water and the rugged hills around us. Towards the end, when *Roquebrun* appeared in sight, Tom and Jacob took us in tow to avoid us totally missing the little dock area.

On *terra firma*, Michael, who had arrived at *Roquebrun* with Peter probably between half an hour and an hour before us, enthused about the joys of canoeing and was talking of buying a trailer and canoes as a family activity. We smiled weakly and said that this sounded as if it would be great fun.

My lips were parched and dry and I was prepared to drink anything which was vaguely wet: tea, lemonade, bottled water, the river itself. We sat around in groups exchanging tales of near fatal incidents or feats of skill and endurance. Some of the tales may have been slightly embellished in the telling. Canoeing was no doubt a fine, challenging and healthy sport bringing immense pleasure and satisfaction to thousands. Sheila and I felt it would be a week or so before we ventured out in a canoe again.

We travelled in convoy with the Michael Foxes to the beautiful riverside town of *St Chinian*. Unfortunately the premises of a well-known local firm of wine manufacturers and wholesalers were closed. The Steers had to leave so that Sheila could join her sister in preparing the evening meal for the group of sixteen. The Michael Foxes stayed on and made successful visits to a bank and a wine shop where they were invited to visit a vineyard.

The meal, featuring *couscous*, was well received and taken as usual in the *cour*. It was followed by a time of chorus singing and prayer in the ground floor music room merging into some up-market performances of Elgar and Schumann by Sylvia on the piano and Rosemary and Hilda on the viola and violin. We admired the skill of the performers and were moved and entranced by the beauty of the melodies. Tom's performance of chopsticks was a little less memorable but added to the variety of the programme.

## **Monday**

Another hot and sunny day. We lazed around in the morning, had lunch at *maison de Fox*. After lunch we followed Rubber Duck in heavy traffic in the direction of the coastal town of *Sète* experiencing some crazy French driving along the hard shoulder, U-turns, hand brake turns all accompanied by the sirens of the emergency services. We enjoyed driving down the west bank of the river *Herauld* looking across to the old, waterfront part of *Agde* which Tom thought looked like Amsterdam.

### **The dance of the lilo**

Twenty kilometres of unbroken sand connect *Agde* to the old town of *Sète* which we never got to. But we enjoyed the super sand known as the *Isthme des Onglous*. It was windswept but glorious. The day was perfect. The water a little colder than at *Vias* but beautifully clear and uncrowded. Jacob spent some of his francs on a bright yellow lilo. He took it out to sea and somehow let it out of his grip. The famous *Sète* wind caught it and it was away out into *la Méditerranée*. I think it was Daniel who noticed Jacob's predicament. I ran into the sea and swam out towards the lilo passing a disconsolate looking Jacob returning towards the shore.

By this time, the lilo was dancing defiantly on the waves being blown further away from us. But our hopes were raised as a wind surfer, far out to sea in full and colourful sail, glided towards the lilo and intercepted it. Here was obviously a man of responsibility and presence of mind. He lashed the lilo to his sail board, carefully deinflating the lilo to make this possible. He took a long zig zagging course tacking towards the shore. We gesticulated wildly from the beach where perhaps a hundred people were now watching developments with great interest. It had added a touch of drama to their day. Now the man was getting nearer the shore and Sheila and I walked rapidly in his direction still making wild hand signals which meant nothing other than, 'Excuse me, that's our lilo you have so kindly rescued'.

I broke into a run and arrived at the sail board and greeted the owner. He looked a little like Michael. I assumed he was French and said, *Merci bien, monsieur* four or five times. He said little but released the lilo from his sail board. We shook hands warmly and I returned to the beach wishing I could have presented him with a fine bottle of wine for his trouble. Jacob was relieved to be reunited with his lilo which he inflated and found apparently unharmed.

All members of the family except yours truly took it for a test drive. By now the sun was a little less hot and the breeze was delicious. Sheila, Jacob and I fell asleep on the white sand. It would be hard to imagine a more delightful afternoon in a more perfect setting. The lilo incident had added a touch of mild drama to enliven the proceedings. Traffic was nose to tail on the dual carriage-way between *Sète* and *Vias* and, as we drove home, the family persuaded me to turn off through the narrow streets of the old town of *Agde* on the east side of the *Herault*.

After the evening meal, most of the party drove to *Roucon Plage* (our usual beach west of *Vias plage*) for a fire of driftwood on the sand and a swim in the darkness for the hardiest souls.

## **Tuesday**

### ***Montpellier* lives up to its reputation**

#### **Christian and Clare fly home to England**

Today the rest of the party said farewell to Jack and Lindsey and Lindsey's sister Clare and her husband, Christian. Also Sheila and I were presented with a card to mark our 25th wedding anniversary plus an extraordinarily generous gift of money. We left Tom and Jacob with the Michael and Daniel Foxes and drove Chris and Clare along the *peage* motorway to *Montpellier's* air-conditioned airport and said our farewells to them. Then we drove into *Montpellier*, *Languedoc's* graceful and cultivated regional capital.

The town's controversial Socialist mayor, *George Frèche*, had banned cars from the city centre. As we began the search for a car park we passed the impressive *L'Antigone* building - it was massive, built in a sort of neo-neo-classical style which seemed to work. We found a cool car park underneath a shopping complex called *Le Triangle*. It was at one corner of the vast and gleaming marble-paved *Place de la Comédie*. *Montpellier*, we felt, must be the hottest city in France if not the world. There was scarcely a cloud in the sky when we were there and only the lightest breeze. We had to brace ourselves to walk across the square. At one end stands the nineteenth century theatre from which the square originally took its name. In front of the theatre, to the right, was Macdonalds.

It was a public holiday and all the shops and banks were closed but Macdonalds was of course open doing a quiet trade as were many of the street side cafés. Also a cash machine at *Credit Lyonnaise* obligingly dispensed me 800 francs without fuss.

In front of the theatre was the statue of the *Three Graces* and a parody depicting male bathers. In front of the statue a group of four brass players were playing Scott Joplin's *The Entertainer*. At the other end of the *Place de la Comédie* were some shady public gardens with a huge fountain which made you feel cooler just to look at it.

We began to explore the town which was an interesting blend of ancient and modern. Soon we didn't know where we were. It was somewhere between one and two, the sun was at its height and beating down mercilessly. I was gasping for breath, my mouth dry and I was beginning to feel ill. Sheila didn't think this area of the town was quite right to buy a drink. I remembered the words of Murray's Guide of 1873, which said of *Montpellier*, 'nothing can be more trying than... its blazing sun-shine, dust and glare'!

Eventually we worked out where we were on a pavement street map. Sheila knew where she wanted to go and dragged me through narrow streets which provided tiny bits of shade. Being a public holiday, and siesta time, there were few people about, but occasionally a house door was open with people desperately trying to go about the business of living in the blazing heat.

At the top of a gentle hill we reached the wide *Promenade de Peyrou* at the west end of the *Rue Foch*. This was an eighteenth century esplanade with peaceful benches shaded by rows of old plane trees and views of the distant *Cévennes* hills. Sheila took some photos. I was barely conscious.

We looked down the hill to the north. Tucked in at the southern end of the *Jardin des Plantes* - France's first botanic gardens - we saw a restaurant with large sunshades. We made a bee-line and flopped down in the chairs at one of the tables. We noticed that they sold *Rio* - the drink everyone was talking about, apparently a blend of orange juice and mineral water. It looked refreshing in the advert. The waiter came.

'*Un grand Rio!*' I gasped, opening my arms wide.

The waiter repeated the words and opened his arms even wider. We laughed. He could see how hot we were. Sheila ordered *un grand café-au-lait*.

As we waited for our drinks to arrive, I opened that day's *Times* which we had bought at the airport for 14 francs. England had drawn the fifth test. Hick had made a century as well as Atherton. Watkinson had done well. The series stood at 2 wins each and this drawn. Everything was set for a marvellous end to the summer's cricket with the sixth test at the Oval on our first day back in England. There were still rumblings of discontent in the Labour Party with more of the brothers pitching in with complaints about Tony Blair's leadership style. There was a photo of John and Norma Major somewhere in France looking relaxed and happy.

And then the coffee and *Rio* arrived. The *Rio* was in a tall and fat tankard with half a dozen lumps of ice floating in it. I had rarely seen a more welcome sight in my life. I took a gulp. It was as good as it was cracked up to be - not too sweet, marvellously refreshing. Surreptitiously, Sheila produced a few biscuits which we ate as unostentatiously as possible. We lingered and then settled up. 35 francs - pretty well £5. We were both feeling much better and would have paid twice as much.

We walked to the *Cathédrale de St Pierre* built in stages between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was very tall with something called an opened narthex. To Andrew Sanger, it was 'not one of the great cathedrals of France'. We could hear the organ being played inside, but the huge building was locked and we were unable on this occasion to form our own judgment on the church's merits.

We made our way through narrow medieval, renaissance and more modern streets past chic and pricey boutiques back to the *Place de la Comédie* and the car-park under *Le Triangle*. We had had neither time nor energy to visit *Montpellier's* museum apparently much-loved by *van Gogh* and housing works by *Courbet, Delacroix, Manet, Matisse, Degas* as well as the Devonian painter Joshua Reynolds. Neither did we see the town's famous university housing France's oldest medical school.

Back at the underground carpark, the car was relatively cool. The fee was 22 francs, about £3. We decided to head for *Haut Languedoc* and make our second visit to the *Lac du Salagou*. We found the N109 without difficulty. Somewhere between *St Paul* and *Gignac*, we both felt very sleepy and pulled off the road for a short nap.

**We return to *Salagou***

At about five, we ate a late picnic lunch. We drove on with delightful views west towards *Languedoc's* inland hills, through *Clermont l'Herault* and arrived at the *Lac du Salagou*, as usual shimmering in the heat at about six.

We drove down to the dam, but you cannot swim there. We found a spot a little distance from our earlier area. There was a stiff cooling breeze and wind surfers added a mass of colour to the scene. They were scudding backwards and forwards across the lake at tremendous speed. The water was warm and we both took a very welcome dip. Back on the bank I didn't use a towel to dry: the sun and breeze did the job quickly and effectively.

Sheila produced two nectarines: I don't think I have ever enjoyed eating anything more than I enjoyed that nectarine. It seemed to have been designed and produced by the Creator just for that moment. It was neither too juicy nor too dry. Its taste was delicious, the setting was perfect. For the first time in hours we felt cool. The designers of the *Salagou* reservoir - for that was what it is, an artificially created drowned valley - must have located the beach area where we were to gain the full benefit of the late afternoon sunshine. Even the cups of tea from our thermos flask tasted delicious. We didn't want the moment to pass. Sheila read, I lay back on our beach mat with my head on a folded towel and snoozed. Children were playing close at hand watched by their parents. A small boy with an intelligent face ran over to us and said something we didn't catch. Seeing our blank faces and somehow detecting instantly that we were British he asked the time in good English. I smiled at him and pointed to the time on my watch.

'Thank you, thank you,' he said and ran off.

'Good English,' Sheila shouted.

We drove home to *Vias*. Everyone had had a good day on the beach. Later in the evening, Jacob enjoyed the attentions of Rosemary, Hilda and Kate who painstakingly plaited his hair. Rarely can a team of hairdressers have had a more docile or appreciative subject to work on. I read some pages of this journal, we chatted and retired to bed to the accompaniment of late night singing from the square.

### **Wednesday**

I bought *deux baguettes* and *deux pain de campagne* and decided to check the car. I had left it outside the Post Office thinking it would be well away from Wednesday's market stalls. I was wrong and it was well that I checked it. It was surrounded by a group of rather menacing looking men, one of them with an elaborate toolbox. Traders were impatiently waiting to erect their stalls and sunshades. As I reversed away, the men switched their attentions to a nearby black Golf, also in the way. One lay on his back under the back of the car. Heaven knows what they planned to do to it or what they would have done to the Audi had I not arrived.

I found a spot to park on a wide path in a residential street.

Flora, Kate and Sheila drove to *Beziers* to shop. Sheila had emptied and cleared a faulty fridge in the kitchen. After the girls had gone, the new fridge arrived but it was not to be switched on for several hours. I adjusted the front legs to make it stable but had to leave the food piled on the kitchen table.

I enjoyed reading 'A Motley Wisdom: The Best of GK Chesterton'. Tom and I started a game of chess. We went down to the *cour* and Sheila chopped off most of my beard leaving me with what they called designer stubble. At least it was cool.

Daniel, Flora, Kate, Sheila, Tom, Jacob, Rosemary and I spent a lazy afternoon on the beach including one game of *boules* in which Rosemary and Tom beat Jacob and me. I tried repeatedly

to swim under the new lilo but failed miserably. The sun was quite bearable although there was scarcely a cloud in the sky. Tom bought and wrote two postcards.

Sylvia prepared a marvellous meal for the whole party which, as usual, we took from dishes placed on the dining room table to the *cour*. We discussed Brussels society and whether or not the French hated and despised the British. No agreement was reached.

### **The thrills of *Europark***

Then we set off in the Volvo and the Audi, Michael and Sylvia for a romantic eve of Sylvia's birthday swim in the Med, the Steers, Kate and the Michael Fox children for a visit to *Europark*. We wandered around looking at all the rides. Rosemary, Hilda and Peter bravely selected the 'Twister'. They sat in a row on a seat for three, one of perhaps 15 or 20 similar round cars. The attendant fastened their safety bar and they were away - round and round in orbit and also on their own axis higher and higher, faster and faster, lights flashing, music playing. The driver shouted teasing words across the tannoy. We hoped their brains and bodies would survive this unnatural and vicious treatment. When at last the ride was over and they returned to *terra firma* they seemed coherent and happy.

Then Tom and Jacob selected their ride. This was a huge wheel, oddly called 'Enterprise' on which hung perhaps thirty or more contraptions rather like small versions of the cable cars you see in the Alps. When Tom and Jacob climbed aboard they were hanging vertically. When enough people had taken their places to make a ride economic, the huge wheel began to revolve. As it revolved faster and faster the mini-cable cars splayed out so that they were no longer vertical but horizontal. But to add to the sheer horror of this crazy pursuit, at the top of the wheel's circuit you were upside down as well travelling at huge speed. The thing travelled so fast that I could never make out where Tom and Jacob were. I was sure the human brain couldn't survive such treatment. What if Tom and Jacob returned to us with no brain, or their brains lodged firmly at the back of their throats? Could we claim on holiday insurance? Would we notice any difference in their behaviour? Eventually they rejoined us. Jacob was actually complaining of a curious sensation in his throat but they seemed as rational as they ever are.

And now, gluttons for punishment and glad of an audience, they prepared themselves mentally for the main attraction of the whole fun fair. This was the ride which sorted out the sane from the insane. This was not a ride for the faint-hearted, for those with wooden legs or pace-makers. This was sheer terror and people *paid* to do it. It was called 'Top Gun' and constantly attracted crowds to watch in sheer amazement and admiration.

There were two rows of seats mounted on a huge revolving axle. Tom and Jacob walked along, selecting their seats. Quite amazingly, sitting next to Jacob was a plucky little French lady with white hair. She was maybe 70 years old. There were gasps of amazement as the two parts of the solid safety bar closed in on her and the other victims trapping them in for the succeeding minutes of terror and excitement.

The ride began and all the seats revolved in orbit in a large circle and also on their own axis. The controller seemed to be able to control the movement of the rows of seats. In various positions he shouted teasing remarks.

'*C'est bien?*' he shouted. '*Encore?*'

'*Oui!*' the victims shouted back.

They hung upside down staring opened mouthed at the crowds watching opened mouthed beneath them. Round and round they were hurled.

Half way through the ride, every eye was on the little old lady. She was not visibly scared or ill. But she made signs to an attendant indicating that she didn't wish to continue. The safety bar was momentarily released and the little old lady was led to safety. Applause broke out which she acknowledged with a wave of her arm. What a plucky soul!

The safety bar was secured and the machine whirled into action again, Jacob now with an empty seat beside him. Two rows of people had this curious streak in their make-up which drove them to subject their bodies to exceptional violence as they were hurled through space and suspended in a hundred abnormal positions. Everything has to end and eventually Tom and Jacob were reunited with the admiring rest of the party.

One final ride completed the evening - similar ones are available in amusement parks in England if sometimes rather more sedate. This one was known as 'Crazy River'. All the party except Tom and Peter piled into a boat. Knowing what lay ahead, the rest of the party insisted that I sat in front, Sheila second: Kate, Rosemary, Jacob and Hilda squeezed in behind. The boat set off in a narrow channel of water driven presumably by some sort of cogwheel arrangement. We climbed high into the sky, paused at the top and then nose-dived to the earth at great speed, water splashing everywhere in great waves. Sheila shrieked that she couldn't go on.

'It's too awful!' she screamed.

But there was no stopping and no turning back. We climbed even higher for the final climax. Then we rushed downwards at a crazy angle, forty, fifty perhaps sixty feet. We were drenched especially the front passenger. To her surprise Sheila had survived the experience.

And so home to *maison de Fox* for bed-time drinks, another reading of this journal, and it was time for bed. Tonight the Town Square was quiet.

## Thursday

I bought *trois baguettes*, one for Flora, and some milk. It was Sylvia's birthday. At 44 she had caught up Sheila. The whole party gathered round the breakfast table on the middle floor as she opened her many cards and presents. Rosemary's card said something like: 'Thanks for everything, I love you loads'. The final present opened was an enormous hammock which Michael would erect in the *court*. We were all treated to a birthday kiss.

Rubber Duck and Chicken Legs then drove in convoy through lovely scenery to the *Gorges d'Heric*, up the river *Orb* from *Roquebrun*. Unusually for this holiday we had to pay 11 francs in a municipal car park where we had a picnic. Then we walked up the valley for a dip in some rock pools set amidst lovely scenery. A little further down the valley, the boys and I found a deep pool with jumps possible from different heights. I did the eight foot jump, the boys did a 12 to 14 foot jump, narrowly missing ledges of rock on the way down. In the sunshine, we read, we walked and cooled off in the pools. Then Jacob yelled in pain, stung, probably by a wasp. I walked briskly back to the car some ten minutes or so away, for the *Waspeze*. By the time I got back to the little footbridge which provided access to the pools, Jacob spotted me and shouted: 'No need to run, Dad, it's not that bad'.

Nevertheless Sheila applied the powerful and effective anaesthetic. The drive home was beautiful, *Haut Languedoc's* steep, wooded and rocky hills and valleys looking lovely in the late afternoon sunshine.

At *maison de Fox*, we gathered around the dining room table for tea and a piece each of Sylvia's birthday cake, beautifully iced with a message by the *patisserie* which had provided the same service for Lindsey. Michael and Sylvia left for a secret destination, alone together for 24 hours celebrating the birthday. Tom beat me at chess.

I took the children to the beach after 6 and we spent over an hour in the water playing a simple ball game - two teams Jacob, Rosemary and Peter versus Tom, Hilda and me striving to retain the ball for as long as possible. A simple game but absorbing fun.

After separate evening meals, I beat Jacob at chess, though he would leave the game after each move and chat with others. I gave it my full attention. Jacob discovered he had lost his purse and we went to bed.

## Friday

I bought *trois (ordinaire) et une baguette (grand) et trois pain de campagne*. This morning we had to make an important phone call to Grandma and Grandpa in Crediton to discover Tom's A level grades and then perhaps to several universities to discover who will take him. Having discovered that you bought *telecartes* from tobacconists I walked to the tobacconists in the shopping square.

'*Combien un telecarte?*' I asked.

'*Une telecarte,*' said the lady with a smile, '*feminine*'.

I bought one for 40 francs 60 and returned to 25 *Rue Bossuet* for breakfast.

At 10 o'clock we braced ourselves and made the fateful prearranged call to Grandpa who had by now collected the post from Bendy House. After some confusion between levels and grades, it turned out that Tom had achieved Bs in Physics and Maths and Ds in Chemistry and General Studies. As Warwick had asked for two Bs and a C, and as Tom didn't want to go to Bath, his fallback place, we anxiously tried to phone Warwick to see whether they would exercise the flexibility they had spoken of. Not surprisingly the line was constantly engaged and we had to exercise patience.

Jacob and I visited the *frîte* café and I asked in French whether they had found his purse.

'*Non*' was the reply.

We drove in the usual convoy to *Cap d'Agde* where Tom, Jacob, Kate, Rosemary, Hilda, Peter and I spent the day in *Aqualand* at a total cost of 555 francs including a discount obtained with vouchers from the *Vias* tourist office.

Sheila spent the day phoning the almost permanently engaged Warwick admissions hot line.

*Aqualand* was bigger, more open and thrilling than the English equivalent with which we were familiar - Tower Parks in Poole. We made a collection of valuables and deposited them with the authorities for an extra ten francs, and made a base to which people were instructed to return if they got lost.

After a picnic lunch we enjoyed the hair-raising delights of the selection of flumes and water slides on offer: *Niagara* (Tom, Jacob, Kate and me), very steep and fast and inclined to be painful in unmentionable places; the *Anaconda*, not for the faint-hearted and, if I may make a factual not a sexist comment, no female member of the party attempted it. Jacob and I went down the fastest left hand flume on which you took the corners so fast you thought you would certainly fly off the edge.

Then Tom and Jacob bravely rode the same mat on the slightly slower right hand flume, their combined weight sending them racing down at lightning speed, making thumping noises on the metal framework; the *Summit d'Agde*, similar to the *Anaconda* but slightly gentler, though somehow Kate managed to cut her face on her way down; and *River Rapids* for which we queued

for ages herded like cattle between railings bust to bust with total strangers in skimpy swimwear: this was the most gentle ride and the longest lasting - you sat on rubber rings and every so often slid down little gentle waterfalls colliding with others. One ride I didn't go down was the *Black Hole* because I got out of synch with the others and couldn't get a partner. Two of you rode on a double rubber ring and screamed together in a totally enclosed pitch-black tube. I took a double exposure photo of Tom and Jacob as they emerged from the hole.

We also watched a display of humorous and dare-devil diving with one diver set on fire from a lighted torch jumping into the water from a great height apparently equivalent to a ten storey building.

We finished the visit to *Aqualand* by eating surprisingly good doughnuts.

We had arranged to meet Sheila, Flora and Daniel at 6.30. As we approached the *rendezvous* point one thing only was on my mind. Sheila was sitting on the back seat of Daniel and Flora's car her legs hanging out on the ground. Tom had walked on ahead of me. I could see Sheila smiling as she talked to him. I knew the news was good. It was. She had eventually got through to the University of Warwick. Although his grades were not quite what had been asked for, the university had confirmed their offer of a place. God willing, Tom would start at Warwick to read Physics in October.

One day he needs to learn good working disciplines. In a recent *Times* league table, Warwick came out as the top provincial university - in other words outside Oxford, Cambridge, London and Edinburgh - so he was a fortunate young man.

Tom had seemed very nonchalant but on the Friday evening he told Sheila that he had hardly slept on the Thursday night worrying about his results.

The young people prepared the evening meal amid much talking, laughter and loud music - but the result was very good. Just as we were about to eat it, Michael and Sylvia returned from Sylvia's birthday break. They had stayed a night in a hotel in the hills above the *Lac du Salagou* and had spent many hours walking in the hills of *Haut Languedoc* with glorious views drinking in the pure mountain air.

The Steers took Kafka for his late night walk and saw some of the quiet residential parts of *Vias* with neat bungalows and villas amid trim hedges and shady footpaths. We had a good view of a firework display at *Europark* - spectacular to watch but terrifying for poor Kafka. It was about 11.30 pm but the town's main *boules* pitch was alive with groups of French men and women indulging in their favourite past-time. How much healthier we thought, physically and psychologically, than sitting in front of the wretched TV.

Sheila and Tom phoned Grandpa and Grandma with the news of Warwick's acceptance of Tom and then to bed.

## **Saturday**

Every morning and evening on this holiday we had read a prayer from Desmond Tutu's 'African Prayer Book'. This morning's was called 'Trying to count the waves' by Saint Athanasius. 'The victories achieved by the Saviour through his incarnation were so great and so many that, if one wished to describe them, it would be like gazing across the opened sea and trying to count the waves'.

Many members of the party pottered around *Vias* market as I did, as well as taking some photos of the church from different angles. By this stage of the holiday, the car was covered in a layer of sandy coloured dirt. I discovered the nearby Elf garage only charged 12 francs for the bottom of

the range carwash and therefore treated the car to a rinse and brush without shampoo and blow dry.

We went to the wine-sellers opposite the *patisserie* and bought 10 plastic bottles of the *vin de pays* at 5 francs 40 a litre plus something for the bottles; also a card to thank Michael and Sylvia.

After lunch the whole party went (Flora in a very loud pair of knee length shorts) to the usual *Roucon Plage* for the now familiar team ball games, *boules*, lazing about in the water and sun-bathing. Very relaxing, indeed idyllic except that I forgot I had been around for half a century and while leaping for a ball in the water cricked my right hip which was still feeling weak as I wrote this a few hours later. I hoped it would recover after a good night's rest.

Back at *maison de Fox*, the hot water tank had burst and guests on the second floor were using our top floor bathroom. I had agreed to be last in the queue and eventually we were ready for THE MEAL OUT.

### **We invade *Le Vieux Logis***

The restaurant was only a few steps from 25 *Rue Bossuet*: it was called *Le Vieux Logis* and was apparently a former bishop's house. Michael showed Daniel and me a stone spiral staircase similar to the one in *maison de Fox* but unrestored, that is without tiles on the stonework. The walls throughout were not plastered. We sat at a long table, all 12 of us, Daniel in a corner tight up to a red curtain behind which was a TV set, opposite Sheila in an attractive sleeveless green dress; then Flora opposite Michael; Kate in a slinky black dress opposite Sylvia, all elegance and expensive tan; me opposite Tom; Peter opposite Hilda; and Jacob opposite Rosemary. The menus were brought to our table by a friendly and spirited waitress who could be nothing other than French: every ounce of her features were Gallic. We ordered bottles of red wine and rosé for the adults, coke for the younger members. The menu items were helpfully written in English and German as well as French and between us we ordered fish soup, salad and cold meat (*charcuterie*), starters; entrecote steaks and turkey escalope, a beefburger for Peter, a huge plate of vegetables and walnuts for Rosemary followed by *mousse chocolat* - the spirited French waitress insisted I said it correctly - *creme caramel*, ice cream and *gateaux*.

Conversation ranged from the serious to the giggly, from biotechnology to toilet seats, from books to diets to John Laller's personality and Sylvia's metabolism. The younger age group behaved admirably. Eventually we were nearing the time to pay. But where was my purse? I was sure I had placed glasses and purse on the table, camera on the floor. Now my purse had disappeared.

I had already crawled around under the table to find one of Kate's shoes which had become detached from her foot. Now I had to crawl under the table to see if I could find my purse. It was nowhere to be seen. Surely the same dastardly thief who removed my phrase book from my bedside at Michelle's couldn't have spirited away my purse from *Le Vieux Logis*? Had I left it at *maison de Fox*? Would the French waitress allow Sheila and me to wash the dishes in lieu of payment? How tiresome not only to have lost six or seven hundred francs, but also all my credit cards etc. However I mustn't let this incident spoil my enjoyment of the meal.

Then the purse suddenly reappeared. Flora was the culprit who had stolen it. When she grabbed it I still don't know - perhaps when I was searching for Kate's shoe. Still, a crime like this mustn't go unpunished. I twisted her arm behind her back and demanded an apology. 'I'm sorry!' she said, but rumour had it that she muttered 'I'm not really' under her breath.

I was reminded of Galileo who, when asked by the Pope to recant his outrageous belief that the sun was at the centre of our solar system, muttered under his breath 'It is though!'

It was good to have the familiar battered purse back.

We settled up and made for the area in front of the rotunda where a band was playing and couples were dancing the warm night away. Perhaps there was a dearth of men for some couples were dancing bust to bust. The French appeared to take these occasions fairly seriously. It was all very innocent and we sat for perhaps 20 minutes watching this delightful vignette of French life before returning to 25 *Rue Bossuet* to gather in the darkness in the *court* for a chat and some coffee.

Michael erected a tall wax torch in a large earthenware bowl in the centre of the *court* and lit it: it burnt with a lemon-scented flame. A scorpion four or five centimetres long was seen on the ancient wall. Tom claimed to have touched it before Sylvia fearlessly and decisively killed it with a sharp blow from Michael's sandal. It dropped to the ground lifeless and unable to inject its poisonous venom into Fox or Steer. We retired to bed with the sound of music from the rotunda square still echoing across the night air.

## Sunday

Our morning prayer was from Dinka, Sudan, and was entitled 'When God created all things'.

I made an early visit to the town and bought one of the largest sized *baguettes* and some milk. I read a little more Chesterton and had a conversation with Kate about Chesterton and George Bernard Shaw. Chesterton and Shaw enjoyed a real friendship but disagreed on many things. Chesterton, 6ft 2" and round with it, loved food and drink. Shaw was a tall, thin, erect vegetarian. One of the many quoted Chesterton/Shaw exchanges may or may not be true. Chesterton to GBS: 'To look at you Shaw, anyone would think there was a famine in the land!'

To which GBS replied,

'And to look at you Chesterton, anyone would think you were the cause of it'.

This Sunday morning I was reading one of Chesterton's Father Brown stories. Chesterton, later in life to convert to Roman Catholicism, chose Father Brown as the hero of his detective stories because a Catholic priest's knowledge of the sinful mind came from hours of listening to confessions. A Catholic priest was far more likely to understand the true and terrifying nature of sin than a priest of any other denomination.

And so we left to worship again with the denomination Chesterton chose - the Roman Catholics, *Vias* style. This Sunday the priest welcomed me at the door, shaking me warmly by the hand.

We selected three seats for Sheila, Kate and me and discovered that the view of the OHP was obscured by a large crucifix. So we moved to a better position in the front row of some side seats on the north side of the church. We discovered that we were facing two English families who were obviously Catholics, the children armed with their Missals in English. Later in the service they went forward to receive the mass. By peering at the French service book which the mother of the English families was using we were able to find the right place during the beautiful words of the liturgy which lead up the communion.

The OT lessons and epistle were read by members of the congregation, the gospel by the priest. The OT reading was from the book of Jeremiah where Jeremiah was thrown into the pit of, if I remember the AV, miry clay. In the translation provided by the church for English readers it read 'There was no water in the well, only mud, and into the mud Jeremiah sank'. The reading from Hebrews was read in a clear voice, the French words ringing across the lofty church. 'With so many witnesses,' said the English translation, 'in a great cloud on every side of us, we too, then should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started.' I think of Chesterton and Father Brown. 'Let us not lose sight of Jesus,' the French words continued to ring out, 'who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which is still in the future, he endured the cross,

disregarding the shameful of it (I catch the words *le croix* and *humilité*) and from now on has taken his place at the right of God's throne. Think of the way (the French word we heard was *médité*) he stood such opposition from sinners and then you will not give up for want of courage. In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of death'.

From a conversation afterwards I discovered that Michael and Rosemary had understood much more of the sermon than I had. I gathered the priest had told a story based on the majestic reading from Luke 12 where Jesus told his disciples, 'I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already... Did you suppose that I was here to bring peace on earth? No I tell you, but rather division...' The priest was tackling a difficult passage - how I wished the acoustics in the church, less than perfect despite the amplification used, made it easier to follow him. How I wished I had worked harder at French at school and over subsequent years!

At the Peace, the English Catholic lady wished me the peace of the Lord and I shook hands with a little old French woman who had long experience of life written in the lines of her face. And she had bright eyes.

How sad that divisions within the Christian family prevented us from taking communion with these people. We could just sit and watch as others received. Why French Catholics receive just bread, no wine (except the priest who receives both) I have no idea. But they appeared to receive the bread with joyful faces.

Everyone stayed for the 'fresh drink' in the square following the notices. Michael, Sylvia and Sheila and I met the Scots couple, the lady of whom had said the English sentences in church on our first Sunday in *Vias*. He wore a Munroe tartan but whether that meant their name was Munroe I wasn't sure. They lived near Edinburgh and spent five months in *Vias* every summer.

### **Tom is stung**

With Flora and Daniel enjoying an afternoon to themselves following their church service in *Beziers*, the Steers, Kate and the Michael Foxes spent the afternoon at *Roucon Plage*, the usual beach. The ball game in the water also involved Michael and Sylvia; as we swam ashore after a lengthy session in the sea Tom was stung on the toe by a weever fish.

He hobbled up the beach apparently in increasingly excruciating pain. I was despatched to retrieve the *Waspeze* from the car. *Waspeze* is rather like Lilly the Pink's 'medicinal compound' in the Beatles' song - 'most efficacious in every case'. Incidentally, I had to walk on sand which was burning hot, so that a couple of times, despite the emergency, I had to fall on to my bottom to protect the soles of my feet.

When I returned with the *Waspeze*, Tom was surrounded by a circle of sympathisers, ghouls and a team of windsurfers acting as unofficial beach para-medics equipped with a little suction device, attempting to suck the poison from his toe. First they tried to extract the poison from a callous. This achieved little. Then they tried a different area of toe but the acute pain continued. Several theories were now doing the rounds. One was that the application of vinegar was an effective remedy for cases of weever bite. So Rosemary set off for the café closely followed by Jacob with a thermos flask cup for transporting the vinegar.

Meanwhile Tom continued to purse his lips and indicate continuing agony. Theories as to cause, effects and remedies for weever bites were now being widely exchanged in our area of beach. As far as we knew, no one suggested foot amputation, but they may have.

Rosemary and Jacob returned from the café with various items of news and an empty cup. One, the café had no vinegar. Two, people got stung every day on this beach by the dreaded weever fish. Three, they rarely died and the latest victim would soon be as right as rain.

Sylvia was now bathing Tom's foot in another thermos cup filled with water as hot as Tom could bear it. He enjoyed the gentle touch of her soothing hand on his shoulder. He now indicated that perhaps the pain had eased a little - not a lot, but a little. My lips were parched and dry. How I would have welcomed a cup of tea! But the recovering invalid was sitting on the icebox. I made tentative enquiries as to whether moving him might prove fatal. These were ignored. Then Michael offered one of the Michael Fox family low-slung deck chairs. The patient was eased into it and tea was eventually served. The patient was now able to speak in short sentences with a measure of coherence indicating that the level of poison in the brain was falling. The ghouls were making their way back to their own parts of the beach; new friendships had been formed; the beach para-medics considered it appropriate to withdraw to a chorus of *merci beaucoup*s. Before they left, Sheila helpfully tried to remove sand from various small items of their no doubt sterilised medical equipment and dropped them in more sand.

Eventually the para-medics did leave to relax until the next victim fell prey to the deadly *Vias* weever fish.

Within half-an-hour, the final game of *boules* was played, the poison in Tom's blood stream seemed to have had a remarkable effect on his skill at the game and he now threw the ball with deadly accuracy. The blue team roared ahead bringing yet another victory to Tom and your present writer.

And then, in a remarkable end to our final afternoon on *Roucon* beach, huge black clouds gathered in the sky blocking out the previously scorching sun. A few drops of rain fell and we heard rumbles of thunder. In the distance, the sun was still shining on *Mont St Clair* lighting up the modern buildings of *Cap d'Agde*. But *Vias* was dark as we drove through still well scattered raindrops to *25 Rue Bossuet*. As I drove, and the Steers plus Kate chattered in the car, I wondered how long it would be before I swam again in the Med, indeed, with Tom off to university in a few weeks, whether the Steers would ever swim *en famille* in *la Méditerranée* again. It was a sad thought and I pushed it from my mind.

Back at *maison de Fox*, Michael and Sylvia treated us to a magnificent final evening meal featuring roast chicken and potato salad which we sat down to eat in the dining room followed by a fruit salad concocted by Sheila using *fruit de pays* served in the magnificent bowl bought with the 25th anniversary gift of money.

After the meal, the youngsters went to the top floor for noisy card games while the old fogies talked of strange almost extinct tribes known as OBs, exclusives, international Baptists, RCs, Buddhists, American education, Bob Jones University and the evangelical mind. Then the Steers and Michael Foxes took Kafka on a long walk deep into the countryside north of *Vias* during which Rosemary kept lying on her back in the middle of the road, Michael raided a fig tree and the crickets sang us their final chorus.

The storm which had threatened had not materialised and the night sky was lit up with stars and, according to some, the occasional satellite. At one point the adults spotted the silhouettes of dark figures lurking in the hedge thus preventing what might have been a frightening ambush.

Back at *25 Rue Bossuet*, Sylvia hurled a missile with impressive accuracy through Flora and Daniel's open bedroom window, the torrent of words emerging from the said couple suggesting that sleep had not yet been granted. And so to bed for our last night in *Vias*.

## **Monday**

After buying bread and a Mars Bar each for the Michael Fox children, I went to the Post Office and extracted 700 francs from the machine. I queued at the counter to enquire whether they would change two 50 franc notes left over from Brittany 93 which were now out of circulation.

'*Est-ce que vous parlez Anglais?*' I began.

'*Non, non, vous parlez tres bien Francais*' came the disorientating reply.

I was told that I would have to go to the bank - which I did, but it was closed. Michael said he was off to another bank later in the morning and offered to change the notes for me.

We loaded the car, I filled it with petrol, we drank our last cups of tea and coffee with the Michael Foxes, said fond farewells and set off on an overcast morning.

We drove 144 miles and stopped for a picnic lunch at the rest area at *Aire de Froutonais*, some way beyond on the *Autoroute des Deux Mers* (ie the toll motorway which links the Atlantic with the Med). A light rain fell as we sat down at a picnic table with umbrellas up but this soon eased off. The toilets were spotlessly clean with notices up giving the names of the last cleaner to clean them and the time of the next cleaning session.

After a break of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an hour or so, we were away again, Mrs Rubber Duck driving. The sun came out and it grew very warm. I began to fight back tiredness; Mrs Rubber Duck's speed dropped noticeably and she began to wander towards the hard shoulder. After a while, to my great relief, she pulled into another service station complaining that her eyes were rolling to the top of her head.

It was now very warm. As Flora, Kate and I dangled our legs in a large tub of water fed by four pipes, I managed reasonably successfully to block the plughole with my foot so that we could cool off our feet in several inches of water which was at least colder than the air.

The Rubber Duck driving team switched again back to Mr Rubber Duck. On and on we drove on a warm close afternoon, crossing the River *Garonne* at the south-east borders of *Bordeaux*, then crossing its magnificently flamboyant bridge with windows open and the fan on position 4 directing air at our faces, my left eye streaming, making driving difficult.

What a relief it was eventually to arrive at the *Domain de la Croix-de-Merlet* at *Cubnezais* after driving 302 miles, the longest stretch we had done on the holiday. The *Gite* was very French with the atmosphere of a farmstead. Geese pottered about the yard.

We were to be accommodated in a converted barn, the conversion of which was not quite finished. Tom and Jacob were to sleep in a huge room, perhaps as long as a cricket pitch with ancient sloping beams, country furniture, slightly faded black and white pictures on the walls, old mirrors, a log fireplace and a newly tiled floor. One of the pictures was entitled *Beethoven chez Mozart* and showed Beethoven playing a chamber pipe organ with Mozart standing talking to a group of women and a man.

An open staircase led up to two rooms where Daniel, Flora and Kate were to sleep and Sheila and me in another. What a relief to find a small swimming pool being used by a quiet and polite French family with small children who were driven out of the pool when Flora, Sheila, Kate and I either jumped in. Eventually everyone had a dip. The boys played table tennis.

The single shower cubicle was arbitrary in its treatment of users. The first trick to learn was that blue equalled hot (or not cold) and red equalled cold. Daniel and I had showers sufficiently warm that we wouldn't have wanted them warmer. The rest of the party had almost cold showers.

Rather a curious *gite*, this, with sinks unconnected at the back, plugs which didn't hold water in the basin, nails sticking out in walls, light fittings attached only by electric flex, light bulbs which couldn't be switched on. Very French, rather attractive but eccentric.

**We drown our sorrows**

At about seven, *Monsieur Pirson* came into our main living area. He sat down at the table with eight tumblers and a bottle of *Pineau* which he had brewed himself. He began to extol its qualities in French using occasional English words. I think he was saying that due to not being allowed to ferment, the drink would not cause a headache. He poured the liquid out in the tumblers, one for each of the Steers and Foxes and one for himself.

We began to drink. It certainly tasted good. There was a noticeable change of behaviour in the party. Flora got giggly, Sheila very talkative, Tom unusually pleasant and charming. As I observed, it was the sort of drink that when you drink it you felt that everything you said was exceedingly witty, although others may not have shared this assessment. *Monsieur Pirson* was glad to see that we were enjoying his *Pineau* and talked in his endearing mixture of French-for-foreigners interspersed with English words. He told us of the progress he had made with converting the barn into a *gîte*, how trade had been in recent years and where the visitors were coming from.

We were not privileged to eat with the other guests in the main establishment, but were served in the large room. *Madam Pirson* served us helped by an attractive young woman with dark hair and eyes and an intelligent retentive face. The meal was accompanied by three bottles of red wine, one of white and several bottles of mineral water. The first course consisted of tuna and tomatoes, next came a sort of beef slurry followed by fruit pie and cheese. Although we left one bottle of red wine untouched we all felt extremely carefree. I read selections from this journal. Although I had had very little red wine, the *pineau* in my blood stream made me feel that what I read was a work of high literary merit.

Somehow, too much swimming, or sitting too long in the car with the windows open and the fan on full had given me a heavy cold. I had a bad night. So did Sheila. The night was very still, close and airless. The bed was too soft for Sheila's taste, she felt she was rolling into the middle all the time and I think at 1.20 in the morning she went down the open staircase and tried the sofa in the large room where we had eaten and the boys were sleeping. This didn't work and she returned to bed. I had a sore throat, aching jaws, a runny nose and a headache. A mosquito made fast and low runs close to my ear: I slept only intermittently.

## Tuesday

I heard the cock crow, the geese wake up and a pigeon in the trees as dawn broke. I couldn't face breakfast and contented myself with a bowl of coffee (which I drank on the stairs watching the others) and two anadins. I couldn't face food.

We set off northbound and at *Cavignac* we filled up with petrol and I withdrew 700 francs from the *Credit Agricole* bank using my Eurocheque book. The smart, slim lady cashier could speak a little English. We carried on northbound on a day which seemed as hot as our days at *Vias*, perhaps hotter than some. After 98 miles we stopped for a picnic lunch close to a toll collection point south of *Niort*. My appetite had returned.

Then, after 176 miles, we arrived at *Benaston* close to *Chavagnes-en-Paillers* at a *Chambres d'Hôte* run by *Monsieur et Madame Pierre Daniel*. This was a modern complex of little buildings with patio doors, less French, perhaps more like an establishment run by an English landlady in Bournemouth. *Madam Daniel* poured us iced lemonade (most of the party) and beer for Flora and Kate. *Madam Daniel* and her husband, who reminded me of a gentleman we knew in Enfield, could speak no English but were chatty and friendly. They wheeled in a friend who could speak some English and had links with London and Worcester.

Sheila and I had a room with books by our bed including by Enid Blyton (in French - *Les filles de Malory School*), Voltaire's *Candide*, Molière's *L'Avare* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*). It had

a radio with the short wave so that we were able to listen to the BBC world service. There were pictures of English hunting scenes on the walls.

The boys had a room with a TV and ensuite shower and toilet. They watched the TV a little but preferred to play *boules* the French way in a proper pitch in the garden.

I lay on the bed and fell asleep briefly while Flora and Sheila sat in the garden in the sunshine. Daniel went for a walk in the village.

*Madam Daniel* served cold drinks in the garden and *Monsieur Daniel* produced one-third of a bottle of *Muscadet*. Both boys beat me at *boules*.

We drove between 10 and 15 kilometres and ate an evening meal at *Le Grand Turk* hotel. You could eat as much *hors d'oeuvre* as you wished, selecting it buffet style. Then for my main course I had the *plat du jour* which was roast pork. The boys had steak, Sheila and Kate had duck and Daniel and Flora, *jambon*. You could select sweets buffet-style and order various flavours of ice cream included in the 71 franc price.

Conversation was relaxed. We speculated about a group of men eating in the restaurant without female company. The theory that they were *limousin* farmers was later demolished when we discovered that they were pedal cyclists.

A cricket - the sound of a French summer - rode with us on our windscreen as we drove back, through the darkness, to the *Pierre Daniel maison* for our final night on French soil.

### **Wednesday**

A better night, with my cold having eased, but all of us suffered from aggressive low-flying mosquitoes. Sheila later discovered 17 or 18 bites on one leg alone and I think everyone in the party was bitten to some degree. I walked into the village of *Benaston* and took some photographs of the Catholic chapel which reminded me very much of the Bible Christian chapels in the Ringsash Methodist circuit. *Madame Daniel* was apparently at her daughter's and left her husband *Pierre* in charge of giving us breakfast. He was very willing, though it took a while to make him understand that you need a bowl to eat Frosties in or that Sheila wanted *chaud* water with which to fill her flasks. The *croissants* were good.

The two families loaded up our cars, the Steers for the last time, though the Daniel Foxes had one more night in France before catching an early ferry for Fairisle on Thursday morning. We drove into *Chavagnes en Pailiers* for a little food shopping and Daniel and I found time to visit the church. We discovered that it was associated with an active *Centre Spirituel* which arranged retreats, schools of prayer, studies on the beatitudes, Christ, the apostle Paul and so on. The church had recently been renovated and was large, bright and well-cared for. Daniel told me that he thought that if revival came to France it would be through the Roman Catholic church.

We then drove north for 102 miles and took coffee at an *Aire* just south of *Rennes*. We transferred all items of luggage to the correct cars, took the final photos, exchanged thanks to one another, kisses and final farewells. We had I think got on well and the driving in convoy had worked well. Daniel and Flora had always led, making life easy for the Steers and Flora had worked very hard preparing routes and booking accommodation in advance. Flora, Daniel and Kate then set off for *St Malo* for one final night in France while the Steers made for *Cherbourg* and a 7 o'clock ferry. We drove in convoy over the flamboyant bridge at *Nantes* which crosses the *Loire*.

How much we had depended on *Rubber Duck* was illustrated north of *Rennes* when we missed the road to *Avranches* leading to one of the few nasty emotional scenes between Sheila and me over the whole holiday. Tom took over navigating for a while and it was some time before we got

back on to decent roads and were able to pick up a good route to *Cherbourg*. Winding around, doubling back, retracing our steps made Jacob feel sick, also I think for the first time on the holiday. We took a late picnic lunch on a rather dirty, rough lay-by just off the main road between *Avranches* and *Cherbourg*.

Eventually we arrived at *Cherbourg* having driven 262 miles from south of the River *Loire*. We drove around the centre and dock area of *Cherbourg* until we found a place to park beside the harbour and use up our last remaining 40 or so francs on coffees and cokes. Our ferry, as on the outward journey, was the *Barfleur*, and we found almost the same seats. We ate steaks and lasagne in the restaurant, Jacob sending his steak back, with some justification, complaining it was underdone, a fault soon rectified by the French staff. A copy of *The Times*, at the welcome price of 2 francs, brought us up to date with the news. I enjoyed watching a good children's entertainer and his puppet show and also the expressions on the faces of adults who watched, either settling down for the full session or pausing as they passed. Few failed to smile and look more relaxed as this most traditional form of entertainment made the journey home to reality more bearable. Brittany Ferries also provided live entertainment in the bar area. I enjoyed walking up on deck as darkness fell, once taking the rest of the family with me. We joked about a smaller vessel that for a while accompanied us on the port side and then crossed our bows a few hundred furlongs ahead: we said it was an escort vessel and wondered what VIP we had aboard - certainly not John Major who had already returned from France to England in time for the sixth and final deciding test match.

We watched as the lights and lighthouses of England could be made out in the distance, speculating about whereabouts on the coast they were. We had driven on to the bow of the ferry which had turned before leaving *Cherbourg*. It had to turn again at Poole, reversing into the dock so that all cars and lorries then drove through and out the stern on to English soil again.

It must have been around eleven o'clock when we finally drove through passport and customs control. How Sheila and I managed to drive to Saxonstone I'm not sure. We were both incredibly tired and changed from driving to sleeping in the passenger seat several times. We could do no other than drive slowly and arrived back at Bendy House sometime between one and two. Our total mileage had been 2007 miles. We were very thankful for a safe return after a holiday we shall never forget.