

Waverley Singers: Normandy Tour June 2024

Day 1: Do not be late!

These words had been marked indelibly on our brains as we all set two, if not three, alarms at various points in the house to wake us at the ungodly hour of 3am on the day of the Grand Tour. You know how it is when you know you have to get up in the middle of the night. Sleep is fitful and shallow, until about 2am that is, when you fall into a deep slumber that you are mercilessly pulled from by twittering birds (Steve's) or an incessant buzzer (mine). "The coach will leave Farnham station promptly at 5am. DO NOT BE LATE! "rings in our ears!

As the coach monitor, hereinafter referred to as the "Coach Clippie" due to my being in possession of the coach clipboard with all the names of the half-asleep souls written in tiny print, it was more than my life's worth to be late. Even the Hubbards swung into our driveway on the dot of 4am to leave for Farnham. So far so good.

Parking is a cinch at that time in the morning as you can pick any space near the entrance to Farnham Station car park. This is useful as it's a bit of a hike to the pay machine to grapple with Ringo. (Now there's an easy money-making venture if ever I saw one.) Many of the sleep deprived were already waiting in an orderly group by the station entrance, shivering somewhat in the unseasonally chilly June morning. Philippa's words were obviously being heeded. Good choristers. No sign of the coach yet but it wasn't quite 4.30am. Then it was 4.40am. So much for the coach leaving promptly at 5am with the luggage of 49 people to stow and get on board. Mmm.. better give the coach company a ring. I know there is a Farnham in Dorset...



'Hello. Is that Rob?'

'Yes'

'Are you on your way to pick up the Waverley Singers?'

'No. I'm not picking anyone up this morning. That was all changed on Tuesday.'

Gulp! I could feel panic rising.

'I'm sorry to have woken you up at 4.45 in the morning but do you know who is picking us up?'

'No, I don't.'

Aargh!!!!

To my huge relief a large coach drove into view over to my right. 'It's ok', I said: 'We appear to have a driver now.'



The coach driver had overshot the turning into the station and was now reversing back down the road towards the traffic lights. We couldn't look. Out he popped and introduced himself as..... Rob. Rob? He looked at the number Club Europe had given me and said 'No, that's not my mobile number. We do have a lot of Robs in the company though.' Helpful? Not really.

Everyone was soon ticked off my checklist, had climbed the equivalent of Everest base camp to a seat, luggage was stowed, and we were off, not long after 5am.



Our Rob was working off two different sat navs and Dave Patey so, we took a rather interesting route to Portsmouth ferry terminal where we missed the turning again. We had to go to the next roundabout and double back! Double back could also be used to describe the somersault that Alan Thompson demonstrated as Rob slammed on the brakes, having also missed the turning for the coach park. Thankfully he survived his dabble with gymnastics. I should mention that the coach company that Club Europe uses operates out of Cambridge and Rob lives in Suffolk, so he was completely unfamiliar with this neck of the woods or Portsmouth ferry port. But hurrah, we were there, much to the delight of the group of people who had been waiting to join us since 5.45am at the ferry terminal as they were also told "DO NOT BE LATE"

Now we all had to alight from the coach and form a queue at passport check in. This was to be the first of many a trip off and on the coach. Philippa and Mark were driving over in their own car so popped across to say hello and check that none of us had been LATE. Back on the coach and into the queue to get on the ferry. That took some time. I think we were almost last on. Then all off the coach again to be led crocodile style up the stairs to lounge number 3 for a briefing (Location of restaurant, duty free shop, bar, free sofas to sleep on – all the important stuff) and when to re-convene in Lounge number 3 to disembark.

Upon arrival in Caen the disembarkation process was not explained to us, but we were instructed to follow a high-vis-vested lady who took us to the foot passenger exit. We were to board a shuttle bus to the terminal and passport control. However, some of us headed for the lift down to the car deck, didn't we? Whilst we were all crammed into the foot of a stairwell, I realised that the lift people were not with us. Instead, they were going up and down in the lift trying to find us. Thankfully a swift franglais conversation managed to get them picked up from the car deck and delivered to the terminal where we passed through passport control without mishap.



Out into the hot sunshine to climb back onto our coach - or so we thought. We found our Rob stuck behind a barrier with a young French port chappie holding him back until the coaches in front had moved. The trouble with ferries and school parties is that inevitably some of the children get lost. This means that their coaches don't move off until they are all accounted for. Fair enough. Their trusting parents wouldn't like that, and I wouldn't like to lose a Waverley. It took quite a while for Rob to move forward but we eventually managed to troop back on. This of course was going to make us late for our scheduled rehearsal *dans la Basilique avec l'autre chœur*. *Zut alors!* Oh no, please! Don't let us be late!

I love being in France. The countryside, the space, the lack of potholes and after a lovely drive we arrived in Lisieux à *L'Hermitage* around 5pm. It's a lovely building, very peaceful, and Sainte Thérèse is everywhere, including on the cell walls. I say cells because the bedrooms were very cell like. Little 2'6" beds, no carpets, teeny bars of soap and one towel each. And Sainte Thérèse looking down upon you, lest you should try to sneak in a beer and pizza after Compline. As if. But we were told to expect hostel-like accommodation and quite frankly we would have slept on any available washing line given our 3am wake up.





Still. No time to unpack because we were, as previously mentioned, due to rehearse with the French choir at 5.30pm in the Basilica, which is up the hill from *L'hermitage*. We were late with no time to walk and with a driver who had "run out of hours" (we heard this a lot). Plan B was put into action: a keyboard and a rehearsal in the hermitage chapel instead.

Our organist, Fanny Cousseau, who looked about 12 but was very accomplished, was collected and she bashed out Fauré's *Requiem* as well as the instrument would allow. A bit like playing it on Sparky's magic piano (remember him?!)



At last, "*à table!*" (French for "dinner's ready") Time for much needed food. Aha, but you have to have a little song first and, to be fair, the warmest of welcomes from the Nuns' lead singer (with handy translation from Catherine Hadfield). French quiche and salad, the classic meal, was offered and very nice it was too. The apple compote seemed to have undergone a miracle and become the French version of a cornetto or a fruit mivvi, but we weren't complaining. We were hungry. Sam Coulter tried to perform another miracle by getting his wine carafe filled up but to no avail. It seems the Lord doesn't move that mysteriously.

Bedtime? *Mais non!* There was a town with bars to explore! Off we toddled and found a lively bar with a "Blues Brothers" duo performing. Another group even managed to procure blankets from their hostelry. I'm surprised they didn't find them still there snuggled up the next morning.



Finally, bed called and having made them up ourselves in true youth hostel style, we all found our own special way of sleeping on a knife edge. We were exhausted. We slept. *Bonne nuit!*

Day 2: Honfleur and the Wooden Church

A more leisurely start to the day as we had a free morning to explore Lisieux after breakfast. Ah yes. *Le petit déjeuner*. Not only did we have the bed of a nun but also the breakfast. There were slices of *baguette*. That was it. OK, there were pats of butter and those little sachets of *confiture* but nothing else, apart from tea or coffee, both served with hot milk. The French don't really do protein for breakfast do they? Anxious to find something for the next day's breakfast in the lively market in Lisieux we set off to explore. Now, the French do know what a market should be. It was bursting with local produce, cheeses, vegetables and fruit of every sort including a 20-metre table laden only with strawberries, all looking luscious. A selection was purchased before heading for the obligatory coffee at a pavement cafe in the sunshine. Marvellous.



Then it was time to count us all on to the coach and head for Honfleur having first run back for my personal first aid kit (I didn't bring the Waverley first aid kit and here at last someone needed an out-of-date plaster. Typical!) Dave and Carolyn Patey between them had managed to slice Dave's finger open with a penknife and it wouldn't stop bleeding. I think some fruit might have been involved. A coach clipper needs many skills.

Honfleur is a very lively and popular tourist town. Its name has nothing to do with flowers but is Viking for the shelter (fleur) of a Norse Settler (Hon). Our first concern was to find lunch as we had *tellement faim*, which we did on the harbour front and luckily under an awning as, soon after we were seated, the heavens decided to open. The speed in which the sides were attached and rolled down was testament to how used they are to doing this. It didn't dampen our appetites for the *moules* and *frîtes* and *galettes* with a glass of something. *Bien sûr!*



Then it was time for our chosen optional excursions. Why do I always choose the boat trips? Why didn't we just wander round Honfleur exploring its quaint streets and shops and eat chocolates? It was grey, cold and about to rain again as we got on board. We really should have given this more thought as it was a bit like sailing past the oil refinery at Fawley, except we had a view of a heap of recycling, a lock with its weed-covered slimy sides and the underside of the Pont de Normandie. No Blue Danube scenic trip here. We were offered a small cup of the local cider at the end which, to be frank, was the highlight of the whole trip.

Our venue, the church of Sainte Catherine, is the oldest surviving wooden church in France. It's very lovely but essentially a very large *armoie en bois* when it comes to singing. The acoustic is so dry that one errant candle could send it up in smoke dans une jiffy. Richard did a valiant job of getting the best out of us and the building and the reasonably- sized audience were very appreciative, especially of the 12-year-old chorister, Lilou Antoine, who sang the Pie Jesu solo sweetly. Alarmingly, the 7pm bell rang loudly from the famous bell tower opposite for rather a long time whilst we were singing and it looked like we would have to have a little interlude before her solo but luckily it stopped in time.



We rounded off the day at a local restaurant, *Les Deux Ponts*. Here I had the first of many chicken *fricassées* and the *Île flottante* for dessert dwarfed the *Île de France*. The wine flowed and *naturellement* there was a lot of jollity. Mark wore Norman the seagull on his head during this meal (was this a quiz? Was he the roving Joker again?! Would we get double desserts?)



Then Rob and his trusty coach were duly summoned and off we trotted back to Lisieux before his hours ran out! Sweet slumber followed under the watchful gaze of Sainte Thérèse.

Day 3: Breakfast Improves

Oh, the joy! Sainte Thérèse had worked her magic! Croissants for breakfast and proper ones. Not those soggy mass-produced apologies you get at hotel buffets. We were literally in breakfast heaven. We decided they must be a Sunday treat. These transformed the sachets of French butter and jam into a new realm. We were only allowed one each, but Steve sneaked two. No doubt Sainte Thérèse will have been watching him, but he claims there was no notice restricting quantities at the far end of the refectory.

And so, Sunday morning meant a quiet couple of hours in *L'Hermitage* for some to recuperate from the hectic schedule while others boarded the bus for a scenic trip into the French countryside to a beautiful little village called *Beuvron-en-Auge*. Not only is it beautiful and quiet but David Hockney lives there now. *Bonne choix*.



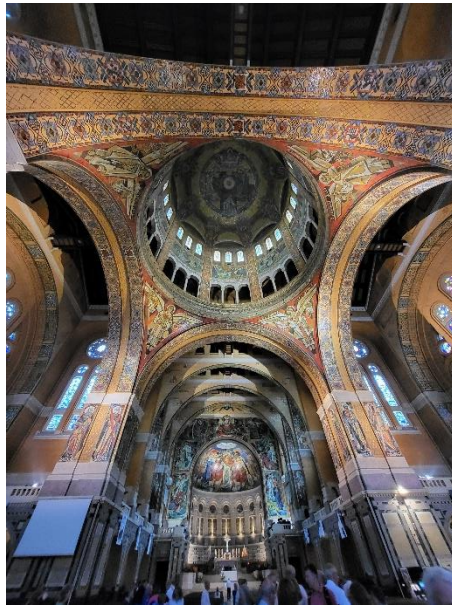
We enjoyed a lovely *tasse de café* in the sunshine then it was time for a spot of shopping. French shops always seem to sell delightful things that you would love to buy but don't have the farmhouse to go with them. However, not to be beaten, there was a lovely shop called the Blue Donkey (no, *je ne sais pas* either) that sold hats and linen scarves. Apparently, this region of France is famous for its linen and, unable to choose which scarf to buy, I bought 4. You will be able to spot one at rehearsals in the autumn. Mike Aaronson's wife and daughter also benefitted from our impeccable taste and Mike's brownie points will surely have rocketed when he got home (*they did, ed.*)

After lunch at *L'Hermitage* (chicken *fricassée* again, which I was rapidly beginning to suspect has become the national dish of northern France) Rob drove us to our main event in the crypt of the Basilica with the *Ensemble Gabriel Fauré*. Mmm... considering their name it was quite a surprise to find that they had never sung Fauré's most well-known piece before. We could sing it probably without the music by now. Anyway, the acoustic was marvellous, and we gave a good performance. Unfortunately, one of their men decided to lose his footing on the steps during the rehearsal and managed to pull Sally Wooding over! She said she was shaken, not stirred, like a good cocktail, but we were a tad concerned all the same. Two down, 59 to go!



Now have I mentioned that David Patey sometimes uses a wheelchair for convenience due to his cracked femur? Well, it's a miracle Richard didn't crack his as he walked backwards down the aisle during rehearsals for a sound check and straight into Dave. Fortunately, he managed to right himself, but I really think he needs to stop walking in reverse. Either that or we fit him with rear view mirrors and a warning beeper. That made three down.

For us all the most sublime moment came when we made our way up to the main basilica and sang Gibbons' ["Drop, Drop Slow Tears"](#) under its magnificent dome.



We were all dropping tears by the end of it. It was just one of those moments when you realise why we all sing in a choir. There was a 9 second echo (counted by Richard) and I tell you, that sound made us all shiver with emotion.

A cider and cake reception followed as we chatted to the French choir members and they all said we were "*trés bon*" Actually, we were.



Dinner was a case of finding a restaurant open on a Sunday or for others, finding a pizza take-away establishment and a *magasin* selling wine and scoffing it in true dormitory style under the watchful eye of Sainte T. (you know who you are... !!!)

Day 4: Our Hymn to the Fallen

We were up early for more sliced *baguette* (by now I was craving anything involving fruit or protein) and then to strip our beds ready for a 9am departure to The British Normandy memorial at Ver sur Mer. We were sad it was the last day of our tour, but we had this special trip to look forward to and a final lunch together.

As was becoming the norm, getting there involved a few wrong turnings and instructions to “make a U turn as soon as possible”. However, we finally found the entrance to the British War memorial. Luckily, I had been there in April so could direct Rob up the unlikely looking road to get to it. One cannot fail to be deeply moved by this place particularly as the art installation “Standing with Giants” is currently there. 1475 black metal silhouettes represent the number of fatalities under British command on 6 June 1944. Some of us have relatives who fell here, and it was an opportunity to pay a very personal tribute to their memory.



As in the Basilica, we gathered to sing “Drop, drop slow tears” one more time, a most appropriate choice, after which we silently made our way to stand in front of the place where wreaths had been laid by many visitors. I laid one on behalf of the Alton Royal British Legion and Phillipa laid a wreath for the Waverley Singers. A few laid personal wooden crosses for family members. It was an emotional and poignant moment for us all as we stood as one group of friends acknowledging the sacrifice another group of friends had made for our freedoms.



Getting to Ouistreham for our lunch was another adventure into the French road system, avoiding road weight limits in our massive coach, but we eventually arrived at the *L'Accostage* brasserie. It was generally agreed that this was our best meal of the trip. Chicken and chips French style was a cut way above KFC and the pork fillet equally tasty. I also firmly believe that '*Café Gourmand*' for dessert should be available in all British restaurants.

Back on the coach to cross the road to the ferry terminal and another vague set of French instructions.

"Wait over zayre by ze gate and someone will come" Which Gate? That one up ahead or by this fence? No sign of anyone so we sit there for a while, wondering, but then a *femme* (always a *femme*) in a high viz vest (and heels- French women just have a certain style) appears and we are instructed to disembark into the terminal building. This time passports are checked "en bloc". Mike and I have the greatest fun giving them back having had a quick shufti at everyone's real names and photo-fit piccies. There followed another long wait of about an hour before we were eventually led into customs control, airport style this time with body and luggage scanners. What were they looking for? Cheese?

Through the security scanners and another shuttle bus to the ferry. Mademoiselle hi-vis led us to Lounge 3 once more, told us the same information as before, which gave us just enough time to hang over the rail on the afterdeck to wave goodbye to Phillipa and Mark and Norman who were standing on the shoreline staying on in France. The relief on their faces and enthusiastic waving was palpable! We were on board and heading for the bar and home. Mission accomplished, Phillipa!

A glorious evening crossing followed, and we sailed over to Portsmouth harbour. Sue Hubbard even used the 20 minutes free Wi-Fi to place a Waitrose order There's forward thinking! Naturally, a final *boisson* was in order (I avoided the *plat du jour* which was... yes, you've guessed it, chicken *fricassée*. Suspicion confirmed!)



On arrival in Portsmouth, we went through the customs barrier with instructions to "just pull over there please" Oh no. Not again! This time we were greeted by the customs police, who, upon opening the coach door, were blasted with the unmistakable pong of *Le Livarot* and *Pont-l'Évêque* cheeses. Oh no, I thought! We've been caught smuggling illegal dairy produce into Britain! (By the way, did anyone else think that *Le Livarot* tasted of farmyard? I really couldn't eat it.)

Anyway, it meant everyone off the bus and into passport control. Again!!! I mean, where is Sainte Thérèse when you need her, and her divine intervention, to undo blasted Brexit! As it turned out it wasn't the cheese but stowaways they were looking for, who couldn't have ponged nearly as badly, so we were cleared for take-off, finally, and set out for Farnham and home. I

think our Rob had just enough driving hours left to get back to Fleet services and hopefully our generous driver collection would offset any fines or expenses he incurred.

A very tired but happy group of Waverleys found their bags and headed for home, their duty-free wines and *Calvados* clinking in the darkness and their cheeses lifting their own special incense to the stars! *Et le voyage, c'est terminé! C'était merveilleux!*

Thank you, Richard, for agreeing to take us to France *en tour* and showcasing just how good the choral tradition is in the UK and the Waverley Singers in particular! We are certain the French singers were mightily impressed with the standard of our singing (and our French!) and in particular your excellent musical direction in getting the best out of a choir. We are very fortunate to have you at our helm.



I should finally conclude with huge thanks to Philippa and Mark. Without their tenacity to find a tour company that actually worked for us, constant emailing, endless photocopying, a year of often sleepless nights, French sorties with Richard to find suitable venues and the eating of *frites* in the name of getting the best fish supper for all of us, this trip wouldn't have happened. The value of choir trips such as these are immeasurable when it comes to camaraderie and getting to know members in sections other than your own. We had immense fun and hardly stopped laughing for 4 days, apart from Philippa who almost cried herself to sleep every night at the thought of how the following day's arrangements would actually unfold! You should have seen our text messages *en route!*



However, it was all just *formidable* and I'm sure I can speak for all of us when I say to them both: "*Merci Beaucoup pour tout! Une autre fois, peut-être?*"

Elaine Cook – August 2024. With thanks to Mike Aaronson and Martin Richards for the images.