French Impressions

Brittany

George East

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The author asserts the moral right to be identified
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For Big Al. See you in the Paradise Bar, shipmate.

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Author's Note

This is probably unlike any travel book or guide you have read.

Mostly this will be because we chose to spend a full year living in Brittany while I researched and wrote what my agent insists on calling a 'travel fusion' book. Apart from being much more comfortable than roughing it in a camper or living out of a suitcase, our excuse was that the static location would allow us to get a flavour of what it would be like for expat Brits living cheek-to-jowl with Brets.

An additional goal was to keep an eye open for a new home and business in the course of giving the reader an idea of the sort of things Brits abroad get up to. During our years in France we have bought, done up and sold a handful of properties, and always at a loss. We didn't plan it that way, but over the years developed a knack for buying at the top and selling at the bottom. Like most British expats below pension age, we also tried all sorts of ways to earn a living out of living abroad. Unfortunately, our anglo-gallic fusion pub, garlic-flavoured car deodorisers, back-to-nature weekends and metal-detecting competitions to unearth the miller's secret stash of gold were not profit-making concerns.

So apart from having an interesting year schlocking around Brittany, the aim of this book was to pass on at least an impression of the culture and history of the region, and what it might be like to own a property, live or run a business in this part of France (or other parts, come to that). For those readers with no such plans, I also wanted to give the armchair traveller a hopefully entertaining and certainly undemanding read.

Finally, we came to Brittany expecting it to be quite like the other parts of France in which we have travelled and lived. Now we know just how much it isn't. All the French regions have their own character and landscape and history and traditions, but are still, well, very French. Brittany begs to differ, and this book is a stab at trying to explain how, and possibly even why.

PS. *All the places, people and situations described in this book are real, except when they are not. In some cases, names and locations have been changed to avoid embarrassment, litigation or assault on my person.*

Acknowledgements

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Judgement Days

When editor of *Food & Drink* magazine, I took a pretty firm stance on how we handled restaurant and hotel reviews. Any critics who filed a harsh judgement were invited to return to the scene of what they thought had been the crime and give the place another try. My reasoning was that the reviewer might have caught the enterprise on a bad day for the business or himself, and it was anyway not fair to damn a place on the evidence of a single visit. I have tried to apply the same rules of engagement with the towns, villages and people mentioned in this book. So if I have been sniffy about a place, my unkind comments will usually have been based on several considered visits. Where I have been really sniffy about people, it may well have been dislike at first sight, and I have usually changed their names and locations for reasons already given. While on the subject, I must also apologise in advance for any historical and factual errors contained in these pages. There is never any real excuse for sloppy research, but digging up and passing on alleged facts from the past in foreign parts and in a foreign language can be a bit like a game of Chinese whispers, especially in a place like Brittany.

Also, it was never my intention to visit and review all the touristy towns and places in Brittany. That has been more than well done elsewhere. Nor did we set out to travel round and comment on places in any sort of geographic grouping or, as some might say, sensible order. We just wondered and wandered around the region as the mood or business took us. As my wife says, a map with one of those dotted lines following our progress would look as if a drunken insect had fallen in an inkwell, crawled out and then staggered about a bit.

Should you want to instantly check out any of the Breton, Breton-French (there is a difference) and 'Bretish' food and drink recipes, all have been made and tried by my wife or me to varying degrees of success…but always with great satisfaction.

A bit like Wales. Not.

As we travel together through these pages, I shall try to get to grips with some aspects of the complex historical, cultural and geographical factors that have combined to make the region unique. In the meantime, here's a sort of Brittany Life:

One of twenty-two* official regions of France, Brittany occupies the top left-hand corner of the country, and is often likened to Wales by British visitors and lazy travel writers like me. The comparisons are actually quite forgiveable, as both are about the same size, and at four million-ish, have a similar population.

The landscape and weather are not dissimilar, with lots of hills, trees, water and rain. Although it might not appear so from a quick look at a map, the two places are not too far apart on length of coastline. Wales has 2120 kilometres of beaches, bays and cliffs, while at 2,730 km, Brittany claims a third of the total coastline of France. An additional factoid of interest to those who like to see the sea at regular intervals and without too much hassle is that nowhere in Brittany is further than fifty miles from the coast.

Like Wales, Brittany is very Celtic, though nobody seems quite sure why. In another parallel, the Breton language and separatist culture were discouraged and even suppressed by the French government until fairly recent times, though the former is making a comeback and the latter never went away.

Another echo is that a lot of foreigners have made their homes in Brittany. Unlike in some parts of Wales, the Anglo incomers have generally been made welcome, and especially if they can claim a smidgeon of Celtic genes. British incomers are popular as they bring much-needed money to the community pot, are generally fairly well-behaved, and often seen as less foreign than the French. Also and unlike in Wales, there has been no shortage of ruins for Brits to buy and do up. As most young Bretons would not dream of starting married life in a former

* The exact boundaries, number and even names of the regions of France are often contested, and mostly by those who live in them.

cowshed with water running up as well as down the walls, there has been generally no more than a grade three shoulder shrug and a muted sigh of bemusement by the locals when confronted by what they see as a typically eccentric British penchant.

From a cultural perspective, Bretons appreciate greatly and like to practise art, particularly music. Two writers, three musicians, a sculptor and a bloke who makes life-sized blue plastic elephants just for fun live within a mile of where we were based in the mountains of Finistère. And that's with a population density not much above the most unfashionable areas of the Gobi Desert.

As further evidence of loving art for no more than its own sake, where else in France (or the rest of Europe) would hard-nosed farmers spend the time and trouble to make artistic tableaux from hay bales in their roadside fields just so that passers-by can enjoy them?

A final and, I think, significant statistic about Brittany is that the region boasts more independent (i.e. small and privately-owned) breweries than the rest of France put together. This is just one more reason we found ourselves so much at home here.

Lesmenez, April, Friday 18th.

Distant lights wink invitingly through the deepening dusk. A buttery full moon throws long shadows across the fields, forests and moorlands surrounding our new home. A sharp cry signals that a creature of the night has found or become supper. It is all splendidly bucolic as we sit by our rented lake and mull over how we came to be half-way up what passes for a mountain in Brittany.

This is the first time we have hired rather than owned (or more correctly had a huge mortgage on) a place to live in for forty years, and I am already enjoying not having to worry about maintaining this one. Earlier I noted a couple of tiles missing from the 300 year-old roof of the sprawling farmhouse, and it is good to know I won't have to replace them and cause other leaks in the process. Although the disparity is narrowing, sixty percent of French people still prefer to rent rather than buy property, and I can see their point.

Another unusual situation for us is that, having sold everything we owned in England, we now have for the first time ever what seems a huge amount of money in the bank. If it lasts, we will buy a home as a base in the land of my wife's ancestors. If not, we shall continue our wandering around the rest of France until it is time to pack it in and head for the old folk's home. We have given ourselves a deadline of a year to research and write a book about the region, and I am looking forward to finding out why so many Britons are attracted to visiting, buying homes or moving over here to live.

So far, all has gone smoothly for our small adventure. After saying a final farewell to England for the fifth time in twenty years, we and our mini-cavalcade arrived by car ferry at St-Malo in the early hours of this morning. Then it was due westward to the Finistère department, where we eventually found Lesmenez hiding behind a giant lump of rock in the midst of the otherwise desolate moors. Including ours, there are just five properties in the hamlet, and we are told by the letting agent that the average age of the residents is over eighty. This means there will probably

be low levels of noise pollution, anti-social behaviour, murder, mugging, drug-dealing and other everyday events in today's rural Britain.

Now the dramas are done, we are here and I am experiencing that familiar mix of anticipation, excitement and even a little trepidation at the prospect of getting to know another part of our second favourite country. This time I hope we will find the perfect place to live and work, and not make any terminal financial cock-ups in the process. Given our record, it is quite possible we will get it all wrong again.

We began messing around in France nearly thirty years ago, when we bought a tiny cottage in Normandy from the proceeds of a dodgy deal. We never got to appreciate The Little Jewel, as I managed to sell it unintentionally while the paint on the walls was literally still wet. Our next home was a ruined water mill which was marginally more ruined when we left it more than a decade later. Then we went mad, borrowed oceans of money and bought a grand manor house at what we thought was a bargain price. It was, but that may have been because there was a thriving and very noisy dog kennels next door. The neighbours were a nice couple called Querville, who were from the Spanish borderlands. They owned the biggest and blackest dog I have seen as well as running a boarding house for another seventy.

After a series of misadventures including me trying to run a British pub by committee, we sold the *manoir* at a loss, said goodbye to the hound of the Basque Quervilles and returned to England just in time for property prices in France to rocket.

Once upon a time, only Francophiles bought a holiday home in or moved to France. That all changed as the property boom in Britain at the start of the new century made French houses look almost risibly cheap. It was not that a lot of Britons suddenly realised that France can be a lovely place in which to own a home or live. Many just looked at the property prices and could not resist buying a house and land for the same price as a lock-up garage in the UK. In what became known as *L'invasion*, a veritable army of Brits descended on France like booze cruise shoppers, buying ruined cottages and castles as they used to buy cheap wine and cheeses.

Then many of those Brits who went the whole hog and moved over to live in France realised that the cost of property should not be the sole reason for becoming an expatriate. If that were true, downtown Mogadishu would be full of British property owners. As well as the people coming over to settle with no work or transferable occupation, the second-home owners who had stayed in Britain learned the hard way that equity is not the same as disposable income, and that mortgages - even foreign mortgages - have to be paid. Then the French complicated matters further by wanting to get into the act when they saw what a crazy *rosbif* had paid Mrs Dupont for her tatty old place down the road.

So, having caused all the trouble and then found they were not as happy to own or live here as they thought they would be, thousands of fiscally or emotionally imperilled Britons put their homes on the market. This resulted in a glut of property for sale, and a passing Martian might be forgiven for thinking *À Vendre* to be a very popular house name in France.

Nobody knows exactly how many Britons are now living in France full-time, but coming up for a third of the 240,000 foreign-owned secondary residences are owned by British nationals. Another unknown figure is how many Britons are living in France and wish they were not.

But we love it, and have arrived with the intention of starting again, and finding the best and cheapest property or business in the region. We shall also be seeking a sense and place of belonging in this part of France.

It is an initial irony that, although we have not begun our search for a perfect place to live in France, we are already technically in Paradise. The farmhouse is called 'Bihan Baradoz', which is Breton for Little Paradise, and so far the place seems to be living up to its name.

The main room downstairs is about the size of a tennis court, and everything except the curtains appears to be made of stone and slate. This is granite and slate country and the houses are naturally made of the same material as the craggy peaks thrusting through the thousands of acres of moorland around us in the Monts d'Arrée national park. Massive slabs of slate from

the Black Mountains deck the floor, and almost the whole wall at one end of the room is taken up by a majestic fireplace. We are told it grows breathtakingly cold in winter at this altitude, but I reckon the hearth would take half a tree trunk with ease.

Outside, several acres of obedient lawn surround the house, with a long tree-lined drive from the lane. There is a big pond fed by water from the mountains, a small wood of mostly Douglas fir, and a busy stream and tumbling cascade which reminds me of our former home in a Norman water mill. All in all it is a wonderful picture-postcard sort of place, but for us the real treasure of this house lies in its precise location.

From the side door, a winding track leads past the homes of our nearest two neighbours and to the moors and jagged cols of the *Landes de Cragou*. Looking at the map, it is clear we could walk all day without encountering a road, and according to the guide books, we could walk all day without encountering another traveller.

There will be time for unpacking and introducing ourselves to the neighbours and exploring beyond the area in the coming days, but already I think we have done very well in finding Little Paradise and Lesmenez. The English physicist and mathematician James Jeans is generally credited with the observation that it is often better to travel in anticipation than to arrive, but I have a feeling that we have, for a change, chosen our destination well, and that our time here may even live up to all our expectations.

*

There is an old Breton saying that the day belongs to the living, and the night to the dead. As Britain has its ASBO-ignoring mini-yobs and binge drinkers infesting the dark hours, this part of rural France is traditionally home for all manner of almost as scarey ghouls, ghosties and other-worldly beings. The grim reaper Ankou stalks the land with scythe in hand, while his *lavandières* busily prepare shrouds for his clientele. As yet we have seen no sign of him or his ghostly washerwomen, but our first night in this fey-ish land is already living up to its promise of tales of mystery and imagination.

An hour ago we heard the clatter of approaching hooves, then watched dumbly as two gloriously golden and almost iridescent horses cantered along our drive and down a grassy slope to disappear into the woods beyond the stream. Brittany overflows with stories of animal apparitions arriving to presage momentous events, and the two palominos fitted the bill perfectly. Their white-rimmed eyes flashed and their breath and bodies steamed in the chill air as pale manes and tails floated wraith-like in the twilight. On investigation, the piles of horse pooh they left in their wake seemed real enough. While my wife fetched a bucket and spade to take advantage of the windfall, I pulled on my Wellington boots and headed for the woods.

*

The mystery is solved and we have already become acquainted with one quarter of the population of Lesmenez. Our near-neighbours and unretired retired farmers are Mr Goarnisson and Madame Messager. The use of separate surnames is not because they are living in sin or that Madame is an ultra-feminist, just an old countryside tradition.

Finding the horses playing hide-and-seek in our copse, I backtracked and followed the trail of manure to a field, the entrance to which had originally been fenced off by a length of blue string. As anyone who has lived in rural France will tell you, blue baling twine is imbued with magical properties. Even for the largest farm animals, it has about the same impenetrability factor as the force field of the star ship Enterprise on maximum setting. This piece of magic string was lying on the ground, and the horses had obviously felt empowered to escape. Across the lane, a faint light glowed through a glass panel set in the door of an otherwise darkened farmhouse. People generally go to bed early in the countryside of any country, but I was sure the owners would want to know their horses had done a bunk.

My tentative knocking eventually summoned an elderly and very small lady in a big nightgown. As I began my tale, her bemused, faintly irritated and very pained look took me instantly back to the time I started trying to communicate with the French in their own language.

Having listened for as long as she could bear, the lady looked fleetingly towards a shotgun hanging in the hallway before turning and shouting at someone who, going by the language she used, was Klingon. Moments passed as I waited for Mr Worf to come lumbering down the stairs, but I was to be disappointed. The man who appeared was a trifle shorter than the lady of the house, and, together with the same pained expression, was wearing an interesting combination of striped pyjamas, countryman's cloth cap and wooden clogs.

As he joined in with the open-mouthed gurning, I realised that I was trying to make myself understood to a couple to whom French was a second language. It was not Klingon they had been speaking, but Breton.

Another echo of my early days in France came as I resorted to sign language, giving what I thought was a passable impression of a runaway horse by neighing, tossing my head and prancing up and down outside the door while slapping my backside. More silence followed as I pawed the ground and blew heavily through my lips and the lady studied the shotgun.

Eventually, the man looked across the lane at the empty field opposite, and understanding spread like dawn across his weathered features. He said something to his wife which I assumed was the equivalent of 'You forgot to put the force field on again', and she disappeared and reappeared with rubber boots and a couple of rope halters. I pointed at the pooh in the lane and at the entrance to our driveway, then beckoned, remembering not to slap my backside, whinny and prance as I led the way. There will be plenty of time for the neighbours to get to know us, and I would not want to start by giving the impression that the newest member of the community is not only foreign but thinks he is a horse.

*

The moon sails serenely on a sea of cloud, and all is calm. An owl hoots advice as my wife tends my bramble scratches with calamine lotion and we take a nightcap beside the silvery pond. Cows look curiously over the fence from the field alongside as they discuss the excitement of the past hour. From what I can

hear of their conversation, they speak with a standard French rather than Breton dialect.

The horses are back where they should be, the force field string is back in place, and I have been rewarded for my help in the round-up. As I left her at the doorstep, Madam switched to a Breton version of French, casually mentioning she had skinned a beaver that evening and enquiring if I would also like to have a crap. After I reassured her I had had a good one on the boat, her partner took over. Although having an even more impenetrable accent, he had obviously appointed himself as official translator. In the way of these things, his method was to loudly repeat exactly what his wife had said, but even more quickly. While I was thinking of the best way to respond without causing offence, the lady of the house returned from a trip to the kitchen. As I nodded like a Victorian explorer trying to look grateful for the present of a freshly dressed monkey's head, Madame handed me a bowl of wallpaper paste and a brown brick. If I had not enjoyed a crap before, she said - or I thought she said - I certainly would after eating her little present. She had also added a block of condensed beaver.

Now and as we discuss the promise of our new location, the silence of the night is rent apart by an agonized howling. People who do not live in the countryside do not understand just how noisy a place it can be; it sounds as if a local cat has fallen foul of a fox, or Madame is rendering down another beaver.

Then I realise the noise is some sort of musical instrument, and what it is producing is similar to the sound of Scottish bagpipes, only worse. My wife, who is part-Welsh and has Breton ancestors, so knows about these things, explains that someone in the hamlet above ours is playing a set of Breton pipes. The tune of the region's national anthem is apparently the same as the Welsh favourite, Land of My Fathers, but the player is having a problem hitting the notes. Or rather he is playing all the right notes but not in the right order.

I think about finding the source of the noise and hitting the player with the crap brick, but decide tomorrow is another day, and assault on a local even from another hamlet might not be a good way to start our time here. We gather up our glasses, the

wallpaper paste and brick and head for the farmhouse. It is a beautiful night, but tonight we will sleep with the window shut. If this moonlight serenade is to be a regular performance, I shall unpack my penny whistle and respond in kind with some traditional sea shanties and we will see who has the most staying power.

Saturday 19th

We have been exploring our new surroundings, and it seems we have stumbled upon hidden treasure.

Walking around the hamlet at twilight was, corny as it sounds, like passing through a time portal. A lot is written and said about isolated French rural communities where time has stood still and life is virtually unchanged, but this is invariably not true. We have visited hundreds of isolated dwelling places and no matter how old or quaint, they are inevitably of their time. Cars on the road or on bricks dominate what planners like to call the street scene, and satellite dishes, garden furniture and even childrens' toys and bikes remind you of when as well as where you are.

But our immediate neighbours have no cars, their children have long grown and gone, and Lesmenez seems to be doing its best to live in the past. The gardens grow grass and flowers and vegetables and not plastic furniture and toys. The lane past our farmhouse is unmetalled, and if you ignore the power cables and telephone lines overhead, the handful of cottages appear little different from how they would have looked a couple of centuries past.

But the most noticeable reminder of how things would have been here a hundred or more years ago is the utter silence. I have lived in the busiest of cities for the past two years, and, to my urban-trained ears, walking here is like watching a film with the sound turned off. Anywhere in England is not far from a busy highway, and a newspaper recently ran a competition to try and find a spot where there was no noise from people, cars and planes. They had to cheat by putting a limit of a few minutes on the silence, and still had a job finding somewhere completely

quiet. Every evening when the Lone Piper is not welcoming the dusk, it is almost eerily still here.

Also enhancing the quietude this evening is the lack of movement. There is not a breeze, and no human or animal activity. The birds have gone to bed, and the residents are preparing to take to theirs. Light leaks through the odd unshuttered window, but there is no other indication of habitation or life. For the first time in years, I can hear silence, and it is almost unnerving. It will take me a while to become acclimatised to our new surroundings, but I suspect I will find that no hardship.

Monday 21st

Another close shave with Ankou and becoming an entry in France's road fatality statistics.

Before we travel any further down this road, it is important to get things straight about what may appear to be my xenophobia vis-à-vis French driving standards. But I speak here of what I know, and have driven in town and countryside all over the world. Without a jot or scintilla of doubt, the great majority of French drivers are totally useless and should not be allowed on the road.

There are, of course, all sorts of bad drivers in Britain. In France, nearly all drivers are completely bad, mad and very dangerous - and in different ways. In Britain we have boy and, nowadays, girl racers; in France it is as likely to be a toothless granny whizzing by you at top revs on a blind bend or as a hump-back bridge looms.

The totally pants standard of driving and general road use in France is also not just my opinion, but a verifiable fact. And here is the incontrovertible evidence:

In a country nearly four times the size of England (so with much less congested roads) and with about the same number of cars with the same safety features and even more stringent rules of the road and penalties for disobeying them, French drivers manage to kill coming up for twice the number of people we do.

I have driven the distance to the moon and back on French roads, and count myself lucky to have lived to tell the tale. For

many years we drove a British-registered car in France and thought local drivers were harrying and generally persecuting us because we were foreigners. Now we have a Brittany-registered left-hand drive car, and realise we were actually being treated with caution by other road users when we were in our English car.

Local knowledge

As reported earlier, Brittany is about the same size as Wales or, if you want to be more continental, Belgium. According to who you believe, there are four or five departments or counties in the region. This is because, once upon a time, Nantes was the capital of the duchy of Brittany. Then Rennes took over as the seat of the supreme court, and there was all sorts of rivalry and aggro until the region was carved up during World War II, making Nantes the main town of a new pic'n'mix region to be called Pays de la Loire. Now, embittered or sentimental unificationists say that the law of the land may be based in Rennes, but the heart of the region still lies in Nantes.

For our purposes, the four departments of Brittany are Ille-et-Vilaine, Côtes d'Armor, Morbihan and Finistère. The name of the department in which we stayed means 'the end of the earth', which is how a lot of French people still regard this wild and often wet and windy place. Older Bretons recall the times of ancient and rival fiefdoms with evocative names like Léon and Cornouaille, but nowadays the region is generally divided more simply into the *Armor* (land of the sea), and the *Argoat*, (land of the woods).

On a touristic note, Brittany is the most popular French holiday destination for Britons. It is also popular with tight-fisted French holidaymakers who want to be able to enjoy the glorious landscape and coastline for free while camping or caravanning.

Brittany has been a territory or province of France since 1532, and many Bretons are still not happy about that. Arguments abound on the origins of the race, but all sides agree that Bretons are one of the six so-called Celtic Nations. Interestingly, the province was at one time allegedly called

'Lesser Britain' from where it is said that the name of Great Britain originates.

Around 300,000 Bretons are said to speak the amalgamated version of their once regionalised language, which to the untrained ear sounds like a bitter disagreement on the bridge of a Klingon battle cruiser. Breton is said by linguists to be similar in cadence and rhythm to Welsh. Some words are the same in each language. In fact, some Breton words like 'labour' (as in work) are the same as in English, which further deepens the mystery of where the Breton tongue originated. For my money, Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry either holidayed in Brittany and thought a similarly belchy language would sound suitably alien and aggressive for the warlike Klingons, or it was a spookily complex case of art imitating life. In a Chariots of the Gods sort of way, the Klingon empire could have established an outpost in Brittany in pre-historical times and taught the natives their language, and introduced them to the Klingon hobby of sticking stones in the ground for absolutely no purpose other than the *craic*. Then along came a sci-fi series producer, and the rest is televisual history.

Further connections with Wales include the fact that Brittany lies to the west of its host country, that there are lots of mountains, and that the French like to make jokes about thick or miserable Bretons ('potato heads' is one of the politer descriptions, while President Sarkozy won no friends here by allegedly using a much ruder comparison).

Interestingly, as Scotland palled up with France against England, Brittany often sided with England against France in the Middle Ages.

As mentioned earlier, Brets also love to make music and their bagpipes are even more tuneless than the Welsh or Scots versions. They are also great believers in the supernatural, and there are a number of well-subscribed pagan groups operating in the region. Some of them like to burn down chapels or deface churches as a weekend treat.

Brittany is France's premier agricultural and fishing region, but seems to have something against keeping sheep and inventing a national cheese.

Home cooking

As every non-biased observer knows, the French are - or like to appear - very fussy about their food. Unlike their liberal attitudes towards all matters sexual and things like farting and peeing in public, they are narrow-minded and even prudish about what may or may not be put in one's mouth in the food line. Some would say they are obsessed with being accepted as the arbiter, authority and even originator of all dishes worth eating. Who else but the French would name the humble cottage pie after the man they say invented it?

I find attitudes refreshingly different in this region; Bretons seem much more down to earth and modest about their cuisine. I am sure lots of people from other regions would say they have much to be modest about.

While the coastal areas are known for dishing up anything that comes from the sea and moves (and quite a lot of things which do not), inland Breton cuisine seems based mainly on bread and butter and salt. Or rather flour and butter and salt. The wallpaper paste Madame gave me for helping with her horses was in fact a standard crêpe mixture. The brown brick was *bouille d'avoine*, a regional delicacy used to make what we would call gruel.

In the old days, Breton peasants would gather round a cauldron bubbling with *yod kerc'h*, or oats and water. When it was judged ready, the head of the household would make a hole in the sludge and add a lump of butter. There would then be a free-for-all to see who could get a spoonful from the buttery bit. This slap-up treat would be washed down with *lez ribot*, a Breton variety of buttermilk, and on holy and high days a glass of cider might be added to the pot.

Nowadays, *bouille d'avoine* is sold as a luxury item in supermarkets with specially reinforced shelves. I am told Breton gourmets (which seems a bit of an oxymoron) fry it with sesame seeds, but I reckon it would be more suitable for repairing the soles of clogs.

Unlike the residents of most other regions, Bretons like their butter salted, and a number of traditional recipes recommend eye-wateringly and artery-clogging amounts. For some reason Brittany was exempted from a tax on salt right up till the Revolution, which is perhaps why Bretons have always been so liberal in its usage. Predictably, there was also a healthy trade in salt smuggling across the border.

The basic Breton crêpe is, for all the fuss some people make about it, no more than a thin pancake of buckwheat flour. These were made by literally whipping the batter by hand, then cooking both sides on a flat stone or a rimless cast-iron pan called a *bilig*.

Although crêpe is the familiar generic name, in Brittany it is generally limited to pancakes with sweet fillings, while the savoury versions are called galettes. Arguments rage about the exact type of flour mix or type to use for either variety, but I do not want to get into that angels-on-a-pinhead type of debate as life is far too short. *Galette* is also a term used for flat cakes or other confections, but that is another place I do not wish us to go. Suffice it to say that Bretons will put almost anything savoury in a galette, and the Breton version of a bacon and egg sarnie can be bought at most markets; the knack of eating one without decorating your shirt front is a skill which marks out locals from visitors.

The knack of making such an apparently simple thing as a crêpe/galette also takes a bit of acquiring. If the mixture is too thinly spread in the pan it will break up when you try to turn your nascent crêpe over or remove it from the pan; if you have put too much batter in the pan, it will be rubbery when it comes out. Do not despair if your early attempts do not work out well, as we have found that practice does make perfect; If I can make a proper-tasting and looking crêpe, anyone with two hands can.

Should you fancy trying your hand at knocking up a bunch of basic galettes/crêpes, here's a typical recipe. In Brittany it is usual to make a big batch of around 30 pancakes, so be sure to invite some friends along to try them (or adjust the measures accordingly):

Ingredients:

6 ounces of wheat flour
1lb of buckwheat flour
3 eggs
5 oz salted, melted butter
Half a bottle of dry cider (approximately a pint)
2 litres of milk (go on, use full-fat just this once)
Some cold water and fresh or packet yeast.
A teaspoonful of salt

Method

Put the flour and salt into a mixing bowl and break the eggs into a well in the centre. Start mixing the batter with a wooden spoon (or your fist if you want to be faithful to the original recipe) and gradually add the milk and cider. Finish off by adding some water (if necessary) and the yeast, but beware of making the batter too runny. Melt half the butter and add to the mixture.Find a suitable flat stone, or failing that, gently heat a small frying pan which has been greased with some cooking oil. When the pan is really hot, ladle enough batter in to cover the surface of the pan. Leave for a couple of minutes or until the surface starts to bubble, then turn over and lavish some more butter on it. (N.B. keep the mixture beaten between the making of each crêpe.) You are now ready to experiment with fillings, which should be enclosed in the galette so that the finished article resembles a deflated Cornish pasty.

Sporting note

Thankfully for the maintenance of world peace, the record for galette throwing is held by a Breton. Along with apricot stone spitting and beret tossing, new attempts on the crêpe-chucking record take place at the small town of Mahalon each July, but so far no-one has come near to equalling the tally of 7.45 metres established in 2000 by local hero Fabien Le Coz.

Dietary concerns

A common Breton recipe for long life and good health comes out as *debri mad, kousel mad, kaohad mad*. In keeping with their view of the important things in life (after art and drinking), the maxim translates as 'eating well, sleeping well, shitting well...'

Finistère Fact File

What has been most noticeable about our visits to the four departments of Brittany is how different they are, topographically speaking. Generally, it is as if the authorities drew the boundary lines based on geological rather than political considerations.

To the Romans, the bit of Brittany we stayed in was literally the end of the earth (*Finis Terrae*), while to the inhabitants it was *Penn-ar-Bed*, or Head of the World. This area was settled by Celts in the 5th century BC, conquered by Rome in 56 BC, and invaded by Anglo-Saxons from the 5th century until and including the present day.

As far west as you can go without falling into the Atlantic Ocean, Finistère is the remotest Brittany *département* (county). Being physically furthest from the rest of France may account for why it seems furthest from French influence. Whatever, it is said that more Breton is spoken here than in the other departments. As with most enclosed or remote areas, people have married mostly within their community or tribe. This is why in some small towns, one person in every five will have the same surname. Within a mile of where we live, there is LeGoff the dentist, LeGoff the plumber, LeGoff the postie, LeGoff the Pratt, and our nearest neighbour Alain LeGoff.

When last counted, the static population of Finistère was around 870,000, with an average age of 40 years, living in a land area of 6,755 sq. kilometres. This results in a population density of 131 per square kilometre. Mind you, the mountain and moors area surrounding us would probably average no more than one man and a dog.

The department of Finistère runs from the north to south of the west of the region, so boasts a varied and stunning coastline

of 1,200 km. In the north, the old pastimes of smuggling, ship robbing and even wrecking by luring ships on to the rocks off the 'coast of iron' were particularly popular, and some villages in that area are said to still be proud of their past activities. Such is the inverted status that some villages miles inland claim to have been ship-wrecking communities. Perhaps the legends of a turbulent and elemental past helps explain why, in an otherwise deeply religious region, paganism is said to flourish.

Due south by more than a hundred kilometres of Cornwall and also benefitting from the Gulf stream, Finistère has a similarly wet and warm-ish temperate and what the boffins call an 'oceanic' climate. Average temperatures in summer are 17.5 degrees C, and 5.6 degrees C in winter. Sun freaks and worshippers would probably not find Finistère sufficiently broiling in the summer, but then the winters here are correspondingly mild compared to many so-called French hotspots where Hell could freeze over in some landlocked areas. Weather snobs claim it is always raining in Brittany; the true facts are that the region averages 813mm precipitation a year compared to 824mm in sunny Nice and 850mm in baking Bordeaux. So there.

The biggest, liveliest and definitely newest-built (or rather, re-built) county town in Finistère is Brest, though the administrative centre is to be found in much posher Quimper.

MAY

Huelgoat, Le Cloître-St-Thégonnec, the lake at Brennilis, the chapel of St-Michel at Brasparts, St-Jean-Trolimon , Lake Guerlédan, Bon Repos, Les Forges des Salles, Mur-de-Bretagne, Pontivy, Loudéac

All the auguries promise a fruitful summer. Nature has obviously followed to the letter her own recipe for the mix of rain and sun at just the right times, and the verges and hedgerows are aglow with verdant colour. There are swelling seas of dandelions and oceans of buttercups yellowly lining the lanes around our new home, and the pinewood copse is carpeted with harebells mingling with the modest beauty of Solomon's-seal. Taken together with other indicators like the stiffness of our nearest neighbour's left elbow, these colourful displays are flagging up the promise of good times to come.

In the meantime, we have been taking up our indulgent landlady's invitation to make ourselves at home on her land. The deal is that we will keep an eye on the grounds, plants, streams, mini-lake and woodland and in return may make reasonable use of the terrain for our crops and animals. The distant owner of these premises is a keen gardener and animal lover, and obviously likes the idea that her land will be put to fitting purpose. A good deal is when both sides are content, so I think we have struck a very good deal indeed by choosing to rent Paradise for a year.

A vegetable garden has been dug and fenced off, and a contented quartet of chickens are sizing up their new surroundings and each other to see who is going to be at the top of the pecking order. So far my money is on the little Sussex Red. As in human societies, it is often the smallest and noisiest who emerge as leaders and sometimes dictators.

We have never lived in the countryside without keeping chickens, and do not see how we could be without their company.

I once worked out that each egg from our hens costs more than a dozen from most supermarkets, but this way we know not only when they arrived, but how. And illusory as it probably is, they taste so much better straight from the hen.

We picked the four birds up at a local market yesterday after I had made them a luxurious home in the old stables alongside the barn. Donella is fussing around the new arrivals like, well, a mother hen, and has already given them suitable names. The warlike Sussex Red is now to be known as Brunhilde, the large and placid speckled grey is Griselda, the huge white and obviously soppy bird will be known as Blanche, while we have called the black one Whitney. This is not only because of her colour, but because she is already showing signs of divadom and likes to make peculiar movements with her beak whilst squawking.

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Night comes slowly in this elevated area, and there is a luminous quality to the light as I sit beneath the ancient *calvaire* which marks the boundaries of the hamlet and the beginning of the track up to the moors and mountains.

It is unlikely there is a settlement in Brittany which did not have one of these sombre stone creations, clearly erected to remind the inhabitants that they and their behaviour were being watched. This one may have a particular significance, as a great battle between the forces of good and evil is said to have been fought on this spot a thousand years and more ago. The remaining bits of the slain good guys were taken to a holy place nearby, which is where the abbey of Le Relec got its name. Or, of course, the story might be a lot of codswallop, dreamed up by our neighbour or the Finistère Tourist Board of 1347.

Curiously, though they are decidedly Christian in intent, some of the most unfussy and even primitive-looking *calvaires* have a pagan, polytheistic feel. If not topped with minimalistic crosses, they may display complex Celtic-style stone knots or gargoyle-like faces, and I have seen one with what looks like a pair of spread buttocks mooning at passers-by. Brittany has more calvary crosses than anywhere else in France, and the oldest is

in the south Finistère town of St-Jean-Trolimon. The level of intricacy and stone filigree work on a *calvaire* normally denotes the alleged piety level of the inhabitants, and it is interesting that the one we sit beneath is almost totally devoid of frills and curlicues. The base is made of large, roughly-dressed blocks, from which rises a central column. There is some small detail at the top, but centuries of moorland weather have made it unrecognisable. The base is a good place to rest after a walk across the moors, and the blocks are comfortably indented from the wear and tear of ten thousand bottoms.

My reverie is interrupted by the pained roar of a mistreated engine, and a battered Range Rover lurches around the bend of the track leading to the neighbouring hamlet of Kernelec. It is strange how intrusive is the noise of a car in this pastoral setting, while a tractor roaring by is just an agreeable part of the rural scene.

I am particularly irked by the intrusion as the passer-by is Lady Muck. She is the daughter of the elderly couple who presented me with the brown brick on our first night here, but appears not to approve of the presence of outsiders on her territory. It says much about her view of her status that she drives a vehicle more associated with haughty county and country ladies in Britain than French hill farmers.

Lady Muck and her husband farm most of the surrounding fields, and because generations of her family have lived on and off the land here, she seems to regard the two hamlets and network of lanes and tracks as part of her private estate. This is not an uncommon attitude, and also why it is rarely a good idea to buy a spare house or barn from a farmer who is going to continue working and living nearby. Many forget about the money they got for their former property, and thus view the new owners as squatters.

Wanting us to be seen as friendly and unthreatening incomers, I tried waving and smiling when the lady of this manor first bucketed by, but that seemed to make her even more unhappy. Then my friendly wave changed to a two fingered version when she refused to acknowledge us beyond a curt nod. Now, when she passes I sweep off my hat, tug my forelock and

make an exaggerated bow, but I think the irony is lost on her. Once I contrived to be peeing into a hedge as she approached, and turned as if by accident as she passed. There was no more than a flicker of acknowledgement, and I thought I detected a look of condescending pity before remembering she owns a prize bull and keeps an awesomely-equipped Breton shire horse in her top field.

Now the coast is clear, I walk along the lane and over the hump-back bridge to leave a handful of dried dog food under a hazel bush. Since we got the chickens, I have been trying to establish a telepathic rapport with the local fox so we can come to an agreement. The basic conditions of the compact are that I will provide breakfast and dinner each day, and he or she or members of the immediate family will not eat our hens.

I know the locals would think me deranged, which is why I leave the food when there is nobody about. But I believe I can establish sympathetic contact, and so far our contract has been upheld. The fox will certainly know there are chickens in the area, as someone at Kernelec keeps a cockerel and this is the best advertisement for the presence of hens. We have not met yet, but I and my dog have felt his presence at dusk. Last week I saw a flash of grey in the woods above the lane, and have never seen Milly react so dramatically to a fox. Although the locals would consider me mad for even thinking it, it is just possible that there is a wolf living in the pine forest at the foot of the moors. Books were written as recently as 1875 about the pleasures of wolf-hunting in the Black Mountains*, and that massive ridge of slate lies directly to the south. On the other side of the moorlands and at the gateway of the Monts d'Arrée, Le Cloître St-Thégonnec has cornered the wolf fascination market. An impressive stone carving of a family of wolves sits at the heart of the village, and there is a museum devoted to the history, biology and legends surrounding the species' activity in Brittany. The reason Le Cloître feels entitled to be the authority on all things wolf-like is that the last recorded killing of one in the Arrée mountains was by villager Pierre Berrehar on the 6th of October 1884.

Whether because of its location or the nature of its localised claim to historical fame, the village certainly has a timeless feel

about it. There is a very good bakery and grocery shop, and a classic rural *bar tabac* and eating place run by a young, single and attractive woman. This may account for its popularity as a gathering place for men of all ages. A more debatable issue is why Le Cloître has one of the best-maintained and preserved churches in the area, yet like all other smaller places of worship hereabouts, it will be closed on Sunday. In a very Roman Catholic region of France, this is a puzzle, especially when one sees the church brooding sulkily and the bar across the square packed to the doors.

Thursday 1st

Today is a public holiday, or rather *the* public holiday. Curiously, only May 1st (Labour Day) is on the statute books as an official day off for all French workers. The rest are granted by what is called a collective convention, and the convention often seems to be that there are more days off than on. Few saints are forgotten when it comes to looking for an excuse to take a break from work, and a popular device is 'the bridge'. This comes into play when there is a public holiday anywhere near a weekend and it is not deemed worth going back to work for the day or two in between the official day off and the nearest Saturday or Sunday.

The total for time away from work for most French people over the course of a year takes no account of sickness (the French are demonstrably the most enthusiastic hypochondriacs in Europe) and the standard five weeks holiday in the summer. Nor do the statistics take into account all the strikes and unofficial stoppages.

Because it is not only public servants and people working for big companies who enjoy public holidays, nearly all shops and many bars and restaurants and other places of entertainment will be closed, leaving those on a day off with

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* Wolf-Hunting and Wild Sport in Lower Brittany by EWL Davies is a rollicking read and a freely available digital copy is to be found at: www.archive.org/details/wolfhuntingwilds00davirich

nothing to do away from home. This is perhaps why there is a law banning the use of mowers on public holidays, and why everyone with a garden ignores it.

Saturday 3rd

Elsewhere in France, the Monts d' Arrée would be seen as little more than hilly ground, but Bretons like to make the most of their natural assets. Anyway, the moors and craggy tors surrounding our new home have more to offer than mere height above sea level.

In keeping with the Breton love of myth, mystery and supernaturality, this is the kingdom of Ankou (literally 'Mister Death') the aforementioned reaper of souls. Also to be found here are any number of mischievous sprites and will o' the wisps, including whole tribes of vengeful trouble-making Korrigans.

Running in a north-easterly slant and punctuated by giant granite outcrops, this rugged part of the Breton landscape forms the border between the ancient areas of Léon and Cornouaille. From the top of the highest crag above Lesmenez, one can see toy-like ferry boats steaming in and out of harbour at Roscoff, and, on an especially clear day, waves crashing against the cliffs of the Pink Granite coast. From this vantage point, there is also much evidence of the diversity and sometimes breathtakingly monumental style of the Breton landscape. A couple of miles to the south is the great lake at Brennilis, surrounded by some of the oldest and biggest peat bogs in Europe. At a mile across and more than a thousand acres in surface area, Brennilis matches a fair-size Scottish loch or Cumbrian mere. The lake was once claimed (probably by a rival commune) to be the watery path to the gates to Hell. This may also be why they built the now redundant nuclear reactor on its shores.

Further afield towards the town of Brasparts is the tiny chapel of St-Michel, sitting atop what is thought to be a giant Celtic tumulus and approached from one side with a step for nearly every day of the year.

They farm high in this part of Brittany, and patchwork fields of rape and cereal share the rugged terrain with peat bogs,

scrubby gorse and pastureland. The county of Finistère is big on beef and dairy cattle, but there is a curious absence of sheep. According to our nearest neighbour, this is because they cannot survive wet and cold winter conditions.

Alain LeGoff has obviously never visited Wales, and we are told that the real reason sheep are not kept here is because there is little money in raising them. Not that I would suggest this to our neighbour, as after twenty years of close encounters I think I know how to best handle aged French countrymen, especially the unmarried variety.

Growing up in an isolated community free of television and cars and most other outside influences must obviously have an effect on the individual's character and philosophy. Certainly, it seems to me that all the older French countrymen I have met share some commonalities. While apparently innocent or at least unknowing of the ways of the modern world, they seem to compensate by developing a level of cunning which would make a particularly crafty fox jealous. Bachelors are the most extreme of the genre, and invariably rigidly fixed in their ways and views. Even when they don't, they have an unshakeable belief that they know all there is to know about the countryside, and that your originating from any town or part of Britain will guarantee you to be completely clueless about all rural matters.

Our nearest neighbour is a little over eighty, and is thus the youngest permanent resident of the hamlet. He was born in Lesmenez and lives alone in a small house behind his impressively distressed ancestral farmhouse, which has been uninhabited and uninhabitable for the best part of a century. Alain helped his father build the new house when he was ten, and the granite blocks were brought by wagon the twelve rocky miles across the mountains from the quarry at Huelgoat.

We met the day after our arrival, when I thought I had surprised an off-piste korrigan in the copse by the pond. Then the figure emerged from the undergrowth and I saw that, except for the footwear, he was wearing standard French aged countryman's outfit. Topping off a face with the texture of a well-weathered Cox's pippin was the inevitable time-shiny cloth cap which would probably take a surgical operation to remove, and

below the neckline was the usual ensemble of tightly-buttoned suit jacket over collarless shirt and extremely lived-in trousers. This being Brittany, the footwear was specific to the region, with carpet slippers sheathed in traditional wooden clogs. The only thing missing was the roll-up cigarette welded to the lower lip.

As we should have expected, our nearest neighbour seems unaware of any boundaries or town-grown taboos on dropping in unannounced and is apt to appear like a pantomime genie at any time and anywhere. So far he has not materialised in the bed or bathroom or toilet while we have been using them, but it can only be a matter of time. Though the sudden manifestations can be a little unnerving and even dangerous when I am using a chain saw or halfway up a ladder or both, we like the informality, and the open-door policy also applies to his domain.

Yesterday, Alain materialised in our kitchen as we were trying to relieve the suffering of an ailing hen. Griselda went off lay last week, and it is pitiful to hear her keening cry as she lies forlornly and eggless in the nesting box. As she grew more and more moribund and miserable, a visit to the vet confirmed she was egg-bound and we were offered three solutions. The first, said the affably honest Mr Tanguy, was to buy from him an exceptionally expensive ointment to ease the passage for the egg from inside to outside Griselda. The second would be to try the undignified but sometimes more effective ruse of holding her over a pan of boiling water so that the steam would act as a lubricant. The third and most obvious solution would be to cut our losses and eat her.

It was while I held poor Griselda above the steaming pot and Donella pulled on her rubber gloves that Alain made his entry. For a moment, we held the silent tableau, then before leaving to report the weird goings-on to the rest of the village, he cleared his throat, gave a mini-shrug and observed dryly that, in France, though people like their food as fresh as possible, it is considered normal to kill and pluck a chicken before cooking it.

Friday 9th

From his bar stool, Clint Eastwood surveys his surroundings with that trademark part-puzzled, fully angry squint. At his shoulder, a man with a purple head is arguing with himself about whose turn it is to buy the next round. From a nearby table the mad monk Rasputin is giving us the evil eye.

On the terrace, a coach-load of tourists is pretending to be entertained by a man wearing a monogrammed dressing-gown and an oversized pair of boxing gloves. He ducks and feints and shuffles adroitly as they smile weakly in a very English way. What they do not know is that the man is reprising the action on the night he claims he nearly won the area finals in the Breton boxing championships of 1976. The locals know he is a former Latin teacher, and some say he lost his reason trying to conjugate a particularly ticklish irregular verb for his bored pupils. The more cynical say he is merely a compulsive attention seeker and very mean, and that he wears the boxing gloves so as to be unable to get his hands in his pocket when it is his turn to buy a round.

From what we have learned, this is just another average night in Huelgoat. It is our first official run ashore, and we have obviously come to the right place for local colour and interesting characters. Armed with some stunning natural attributes, a few made-up legends and lots of places to take drink, Huelgoat is a very popular tourist attraction. Huelgoatians also clearly like a drink, as for a static population of only a thousand there are seventeen licensed premises which remain open all year round. As well as the facilities in the betting shop and camping gaz outlet, there are even well-appointed bars in the two bakeries in case customers become faint with thirst while waiting for their daily baguette.

Claims to fame for Huelgoat ('High woods' in Breton) include a large lake, hundreds of acres of forests ringing the town, a world-renowned arboretum and a fascinating valley trail called The Chaos. This forest and riverside walk is littered with giant rocks said to be thrown around when the giant Pantagruel stubbed his toe and lost his cool while passing through. I reckon

it more likely he was staggering home after a night on the batter in Huelgoat and felt like a bit of full-on giant-sized vandalism.

Like a hundred others around Europe and even further afield, the town also claims to be a favourite stopping-off place for King Arthur, with the alleged remains of his camp to be found high in the forest. Later and more verifiable residents of note include the ancestors of American Beat Generation poet, novelist and artist Jack Kerouac. Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin is said to have painted the lake from the attic studio above a shop just off the square, but as the premises sells painting and art materials that could be a marketing ploy. TV archeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler often dug here, and it is a much-told story that actress Jane Fonda once cooked a crêpe for her then boyfriend Roger Vadim in the kitchen of a hotel in the square.

Pagan groups are said to prance regularly around in the forest, and it is claimed by those who also claim to know about these things that Huelgoat sits on a confluence of ley lines, giving it a mystical significance and special appeal to people of a spiritual nature. This may actually be true, and I do believe there is something special about the town. It might be the force of nature, or it could just be the number and variety of bars on tap which attracts so many unusual people. Huelgoat certainly seems to have its fair share of weirdos, which is why my wife says I feel so instantly at home here.

Our guide and future gossip correspondent for this part of the region is Allan Bevan, a former naval master-at-arms in the Royal Navy who now runs a bed and breakfast establishment near the square. Or rather, his wife Ann runs the B&B, while Allan absorbs the ambience and red wine and researches the book he will one day write about his life and times in Huelgoat. As he says, if and when it is done it will have to go in the fiction department, as nobody would believe it to be about real people and circumstances.

As the evening revs up, we learn that, as usual in situations like these in rural France, all is not as it seems at first sight. Clint Eastwood is actually a local plumber who has long tried and failed to make a living as a lookalike of the rangy Hollywood star. I am puzzled by his lack of success as, unlike nearly all lookalikes

I have seen, he really is the spitting image of Eastwood during his Dirty Harry years. Then Claude/Clint climbs down from his stool, disappears from sight behind it, and his severe lack of inches explains the reason for his lack of bookings.

As Allan explains, the man with the purple head is a local artist who enjoys the company of an imaginary friend, while the mad monk is a former car sprayer and now part-time Druid who lives in a caravan in the forest with - he claims - a tribe of Breton wood elves. The reason for the baleful stare is apparently that we have not taken out the insurance cover offered to British visitors which involves buying him a drink to avoid their holiday being cursed.

As to the size of the crowd, the reason the bar is so busy is that the premises are under new management.

The locals have turned out in force to check out such important issues as the ease and level of credit rating and what the new patrons are made of, and Madame is doing her best to show them. She would be tall even without her towering stiletto heels, and is wearing a very unpractical and flimsy dress which clearly leaves very little room for underwear. What looks like Christmas tree baubles hang from her ears, but all male attention is focused on the spheres struggling to escape from the plunging neckline of her blouse. Each time she leans forward to attend to a customer, there is an appreciable stiffening in the bar and a sudden falling off of conversation. Allan says a sweepstake has already been set up to estimate the exact date and time her breasts will escape from their billet, and other side wagers include estimating their individual and combined dimensions and weight. To get some inside information, one of the local sculptors has offered to create a life-size statue of her to go in the bar window, but her husband has said he would prefer it to be a bust. Allan points to where a middle-aged man is leaning on the bar, obviously studying form. He must be favourite for winning one of the side bets, says our host, as he is the owner of the town grocery store and renowned for his ability to gauge weight without the aid of a pair of scales.

We have been enjoying a very Breton rite of spring at the hamlet which looks down on the rooftops of Lesmenez. Kernelec is a bigger and racier dwelling place than ours as there are more than a dozen residents and some are below retirement age. Lady Muck lives here, as does the sculptor whose life-sized plastic elephant guards the border between us and them.

We are venturing into rival territory because we have befriended an English couple who have a holiday home in Kernelec. Their little stone cottage is everything one would hope for in its eye-pleasingness, and made more attractive by the sorely distressed property across the lane. The man who lives in it is clearly someone who likes to start projects and not finish them. Since we arrived, his cottage seems to become ever more distressed as bits are knocked down and not replaced. Even he has realised the threat of an imminent collapse, and the plastic elephant has recently been shifted to help support the sagging gable. This rearrangement has started a promising village feud, as the lady of the cottage opposite says she resents waking each morning to look out of her window and up an elephant's arse. Tonight she will be happy, as the blue elephant has been moved to provide a static ride for local children. Our dusk piper has been performing, and still cannot get the tune of the regional anthem right. The elephant man is putting on a marionette show, and guest of honour will be an exhibition of impromptu Morris dancing, put on by the holiday home-owning Brits. They are an unusual couple, even for these parts. With a suitably Dickensian name, Morley Friend is a man of huge size and heart, and with his rumpled, baggy clothing and giant, slow moving amiable bulk, he brings to mind the elephant across the road. He is clearly a man whose depth, sensitivity and understanding of the world match his size, though he likes to pretend otherwise. His sensitivity is probably why he so often hangs his head and sighs at the ironies and perversities of life and follies of Man and the former Milk Marketing Board.

Sue Friend could come from Central Casting as an apple-cheeked farmer's wife, and is as small and straightforward as her

husband is vast and complex. The couple are dairy farmers who live in a remote part of Devon, and are in the painful process of handing the running of the farm over to their son. Upcott Farm has been in Friend hands for five generations and as retirement age approaches, it is time for Morley to step back. His health is not good, and like many vigorous and powerful men, he resents bitterly the depredations of age. Last week he let out a gale of a sigh, shook his great shaggy head and told me that if he were one of his own animals he would shoot himself.

Sunday 11th

I have misjudged Lady Muck. Far from being stuck up and xenophobic, she is just shy. She also does not like the job which occupies almost all her waking hours, which explains her preoccupied and distant air when she races by. Mary-Jo arrived at the kitchen door yesterday to see if we would like to buy a stake in one of her soon-to-be slaughtered steers. She was taking orders in advance, and would put our name on any parts not already spoken for. When I persuaded her to come in and risk an English coffee, she became quite talkative. After I had remarked how many people would envy her life, she said they might find it not as bucolically attractive as in slushy films and novels. Mary-Jo is the only child of Mr and Mrs Goarnisson, and felt she had no choice but take over the farm when her parents reached official retirement age. Contrary to what a lot of civilians think, she said, spending one's life up to the ankles in cow shit is not all it is cracked up to be. Waving as she drove off and back to a life she resents, I thought how easily we make assumptions based on our own beliefs or prejudices. When you are also communicating in a language which is foreign to one of you, it is even easier to jump to the wrong conclusions.

Monday 12th

We have been visiting the next-door department of Côtes d'Armor to view an isolated farmhouse and its almost inevitable gite 'complex' (usually code for one other building apart from the

owners' accommodation). The premises are up for sale, and the indulgence of a spare designer home which nobody lives in may well be the reason.

A major challenge for many Britons buying a wreck in France is to discover how expensively they can turn the former pig sty, cattle byre or other unsuitable ruin into a guest house which will cost more to do up than it could earn from visitors in two lifetimes. I believe the real reason most Britons spend so much on gites is not because they believe them to be a commercial proposition, but so the women can have even more bathrooms and toilets to not use. I have noticed how the number of bathrooms in their new homes seems to be of increasingly crucial importance to British owners, and it is not uncommon for them to total more than the bedroom count. The property we are looking at has four bedrooms, five bathrooms, a shower room and three separate toilets. Apart from having become a place of thanksgiving to the local plumber, the property is said to be a real bargain; this usually means it will not be, for some undisclosed reason, but for us the journey is a good excuse to take the measure of the surrounding countryside.

Finistère is often likened to Cornwall, while Côtes d'Armor's undulating hills, vales and less dramatically craggy coastline calls Devon or Dorset to mind. It is a place of rolling green sward, fenceless fields and ancient deciduous woods and forests. This glorious setting naturally makes it a favourite buying place for Brits who think they would like to live in a place which reminds them of how they think England used to look. Côtes d'Armor also has the appeal of being the cheapest department for property, for which I have been unable to discover any other reason than common-or-garden snobbery.

From what we have seen, the views and coastline and weather and other pro and con factors in this department equal if not surpass those in the other three, but just as in Britain, unfathomable fashion sets the agenda and the house prices. It is interesting how Britons take their tribal prejudices and preferences with them, even or especially when buying or moving abroad. On the boat from Portsmouth, a slightly drunk property agent told me he could always tell in which part of Brittany his

British customers would buy just by looking at the make and vintage of their cars. Those pulling up in a convertible BMW or similarly flash car would most likely choose the coastal area of Morbihan, or swisher parts of Ille-et-Vilaine. Couples from the north of Britain who arrived in battered vans would like the look of property prices in Côtes d'Armor, while those crusty Brits favouring beards, lived-in clothing and even more lived-in Volvo estates would always be taken with Finistère. When I asked him where he thought we were bound for, he said my beard and decaying body-warmer were a dead giveaway, and he bet we had a Volvo on the car deck and were heading for the furthest reaches of the end of the earth. He was spot-on, but we also like the look of Côtes d'Armor, and especially the property prices.

Whatever we think of the farmhouse which is up for sale, it seems we will be spoiled for choice across the whole region. Thousands of very expensively restored and improved properties have recently been put up for sale by Britons who have realised that living in a foreign country is not for them. Sadly it is a common and usually very costly mistake to think it would be even better to live full time in a place that you love visiting for a couple of weeks a year.

There are a number of factors causing the current Dunkirk-like retreat of so many expatriate or second home-owning Britons. Some Brits are going home for purely financial reasons, which can be fairly blamed on the current recession. Others would have committed fiscal *hara-kiri* at any time by coming over to buy a modest holiday home then borrowing shedloads of foreign money for a much bigger and more expensive place.

Then there are those who fled to France to escape the bad bits about life in Britain only to discover how much they miss the good bits. There is no shame in finding that you do not like living in a foreign land, but it has become taboo for expatriates to admit it to other people - or even themselves. Health reasons or missing friends and family are the most common excuses for retreating Brits, and I know of those who have claimed marital breakdown rather than admit they just don't like living in France or with the French.

The couples who seem most successful in adapting to and even relishing living with the old enemy are those with strong relationships, enquiring minds and a generally philosophical outlook. Most valuable of all is a sense of humour and proportion, especially when accepting how differently and sometimes even badly things are done in your host country.

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We will not be putting in an offer for the farmhouse. If the place was restored by British craftsmen, I think they must have been graduates of the Channel Crossing University of Construction. It is a standing joke that there is an office on board all ferry boats to Brittany and other French ports which offers instant certification in all building trades. Whether or not this is true, many Britons who wish to start a new working life in France board the ferry as graphic designers, car dealers, lorry drivers or aromatherapists, then disembark as allegedly expert plumbers, carpenters and general builders. I have seen some extreme examples of their work, and still have bad dreams.

Strangely, I have also seen even grosser acts of vandalism practiced by the people who own the properties than the dodgy Brit builders they might have employed. For while the instant converts to builderdom learn the ropes on other people's properties, some British home owners are happy to practice on their own. It can be traumatic for the visitor to see what horrors can be wrought by an enthusiastic amateur whose previous experience in DIY has been limited to screwing a shelf to a wall. Curiously, most of those afflicted by the compulsion to Do It Themselves Very Badly are, like the parents of ugly children, unable to see their handiwork as others do.

Apart from the appalling and often lethal standard of the work, the property we visited was not ideally located. Instantly identifiable as British-owned by its silly name, Les Deux Tournesols stands just up the road from a busy pig-rearing and slaughtering facility, though the owner assured us it is only noticeable when the wind comes from the east or the carcass lorry goes by every Thursday. Also, he felt obliged to point out that the garden behind the property belonged to someone in the

next village who had gone on record as saying he would never sell it. What the owner's wife thought of their new home and life in rural France we could not tell, as the man looked wistfully out of the window for a while before saying she was in England visiting family and friends.

Sadly, this, as we have already learned, is often expat code for 'She's left me…'

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Driving through a small town this morning I had to take to the pavement to avoid a vehicle charging out from a minor side road. It was coming from the right, so I was in the wrong. Had there been a stop sign, the driver would have been required to heave to and wait till the main road was clear before entering it. As the minor road was little more than an alleyway, had no cautionary markings and was virtually concealed by the communal Christmas tree which had been obviously kept and put there for camouflage purposes, the driver was entirely in his rights to charge out and dare me to collide with him.

This is because, in the land of Descartes, Simone de Beauvoir and a host of other big-hitting philosophers and allegedly logical thinkers, there exists an ancient yet unrepealed driving law so bizarre that even French drivers generally ignore it unless they are in a really bloody mood.

In essence, the law requires any 40-tonne Euro-lorry barrelling down a main road to give way to any vehicle emerging from any minor passageway to the right. As if the old *Priorité à Droite* code was not crazy enough, it also applies to some roundabouts. Not all, but some. In effect, that means that you have to give way to traffic joining one of these roundabouts rather than vehicles already on it. The situation is further complicated by most French drivers ignoring or not knowing the law, but others calling it into play depending on the situation, local custom and the driver's mood at that moment.

Officially, any communes exercising their right to employ the old priority-to-the-right ruling must say so in the form of a prominently displayed notice. In fact, most are carefully hidden or placed in the most obscure positions, to be seen only after the

visitor has passed through the danger zone. The advice given to foreign drivers is to be prepared to respect the current priority usage when on a main road, but not to expect others to respect it when they are coming out of a side road. In the case of this morning's incident, the attacking vehicle was an ambulance. It could be that the driver was a stickler for tradition, that the mayor of this town has decided to observe the old law on alternate weekdays, or that the ambulance was merely touting for trade.

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The jewel in the tourist crown of Côtes d'Armor, Lake Guerlédan is the largest stretch of inland water in Brittany, and looks it. Its electricity-generating powers were created in the 1930s by flooding the valley where the Nantes to Brest canal meets the Blavet river. Together with four hundred hectares of woodland, a number of houses and lock-keeper's cottages were swallowed up in the process, providing an ideal opportunity for local tourist officials and other interested parties to hint at ghostly sights and sounds emanating from beneath the waters. More credible stories surround the founding of the Cistercian abbey of Bon Repos, which sits alongside the canal at the western end of Lake Guerlédan. Here are staged regular regional events and sometimes really spectacular *son et lumière* spectacles. Close by, Les Forges des Salles is in a much better state of preservation, and was an entire village devoted to the art and practice of blacksmithery. Surrounding the lake and its miles of walks and cycle tracks is one of the biggest private forests in Brittany.

Facing the ruined abbey on the other side of the canal is what comes close in my book to being the perfect bar. Until last year it was owned by an eccentric (even for Brittany) Breton who made a unilateral declaration of independence and claimed his bar to be the official hostelry of the principality of Bon Repos. I do not think there were any tax, duty free or other advantages to the scheme, as he opened and shut exactly when he liked and seemed completely immune to infection by modern customer service principles.

We thought he would be a very hard act to follow, but the new owners are equally as eccentric in a different way. Madame restricts her self-expression mainly to purple hair and some beguiling combinations of short skirts and heavy boots, but the patron is particularly interesting. Working from a kitchen alongside and no bigger than the unisex toilet, he offers hundreds of dishes and daily specials, each with his own signature styling. He also demonstrates his artistic sensibilities by a penchant for white see-through tops and trousers, and, set free, his hair would reach his waist. He also smokes a cigarette more creatively than any Frenchman I have seen, and that is saying something. Unusually for a rural French bar, he also serves snacks. On our last visit, my wife's slice of *gâteau de fromage blanc* was garnished with a segment of tangerine, three sculpted grapes, two currants and a drizzle of raspberry sauce. Sticking in the top as the *pièce de résistance* was something like a miniature cheerleader's razzle-stick.

Although a pale imitation of British-bred cheesecake in taste, it was a rare treat, as the serving of snacks in many rural French bars is regarded by their owners as akin to dealing in class 'A' drugs. It is my wife's theory that the disinterest in coffee and cake breaks is what keeps older French women so noticeably slim, and examples of their abstinence are everywhere. There is a very traditional Breton bar and restaurant in the grounds of Le Relec, and each day of the summer dozens of coaches laden with mostly middle-aged or older ladies arrive in the car park. After walking around the abbey and grounds, the ladies push their way past the seating outside the bar and climb on board the coach. In England, there would be quite intense hand-to-hand fighting to win a place at table for the holy rite and right of huge slices of carrot and cheesecake with a cup of tea or coffee.

Recently, we were given a classic demonstration of this cultural phenomenon. Every day, the bar and restaurant at Brennilis serves hundreds of superb lunches. It was towards the end of the lunchtime session and my wife was feeling hungry, so I asked if there was any cake to go with our coffee. The owner - normally a kindly and affable man - looked as if I had asked if he would like to buy some dirty pictures of his wife, and said rather

curtly that there was no cake available. A few minutes later, a lady customer emerged from the restaurant area to pay her bill. As we left, the owner asked pointedly if Madame had enjoyed her cake. He did not add that she had eaten it for dessert in the proper place at the proper time, but what he meant was clear. Things are changing even in France *profonde*, but it is good to see some old habits dying so hard.

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With its nose-in-the-air stance, Mûr-de-Bretagne looks out of place in the most down-to-earth county of Brittany. Although solidly built there is an ineffable air of upmarketness about the town which reminds me of a twee village in the Cotswolds. Contributing to this air of comfortable middle-classness is a very good English bookshop and coffee house in the shadow of the church, where the owner is still recovering from our request for a cup of coffee of the instant variety.

There is an evening market at Mûr during the summer months, with the expected top-end comestibles on sale around the square and most of the shops staying open more than usually late. A mixture of pop and traditional Breton music comes from local bands, and the end of the season is marked by a grand *grillade* barbecue. Another suitably trendy feature of Mûr is that the tower of the church is used to teach abseiling.

Further along the edge of the great lake is the village of Caurel, where there is a very well-stocked and satisfyingly old-fashioned English grocery store. It is very popular with British expatriates, though some are said to pick their orders up under the cover of darkness. It has long puzzled and irritated me how Britons living abroad are supposed to give up their favourite foodstuffs for fear of ridicule and condemnation by the chattering classes. The same people actively encourage settlers in Britain to pursue the traditions and preferences of their home country, and would be horrified at the thought of a French person living in England developing a taste for sliced white bread and Marmite. But the idea of a British expat seeking out proper baked beans and peanut butter spread is for some reason viewed with

contempt and even horror by those who like to tell us what we should eat and drink as well as what we should think.

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Like other mid-range Breton towns, I think Pontivy would be a pleasant place to live if you were old or young. It is big enough to have all the facilities you need at each end of the age spectrum and the town has a comfortably refined but non-snotty feel about it. This is probably down to the quality and tone of the ancient buildings and modern shops ranged around the medieval walkways. A huge bonus to Pontivy's appeal is that it sits on a confluence of canal and riverways and boasts a really classy fortified *château*. As any tourist knows, there are castles and castles, but the one at Pontivy is the real deal and looks and feels as if it means business. Work started on the fortress in the 17th century at the behest of one of the great Lords of Rohan. I cannot report if the inside matches the exterior, as on the day we called it was shut for lunch. A minute before two o' clock I followed a pretty young woman through the small door beside the great gates, but found myself in the staff toilets rather than the courtyard.

Leaving Pontivy we passed through Loudéac, and, by and large, that seems to us to be the best thing to do.

For absolutely no good reason, we find this central Côtes d'Armor town depressive and oppressive. It might be that our two visits were on a bad day for the town or us, but on the first occasion we were so menaced by a group of drunken yobs that we felt we had been teleported back to Britain. The next time we got much less than a warm welcome in a bar, and saw not a single Loudéacan smile during our time there. As all restaurateurs quickly learn, one bad experience is all it takes to put a visitor off. This should not apply to a whole town and we will give Loudéac a third chance, but not in the near future. For those who want to see how wrong I have it, there are five major horseracing events each year and a considerable forest near to hand to explore. Each Easter the Palais de Congress et Culture is transformed into Jerusalem for the Passion of Loudéac, so someone obviously feels strongly positive about the town.

Wednesday 14th

There is often something about the eyes of survivors of wars or tragedies. Whether they want to or not, they still must look back and recall the horrors. This preoccupied and even haunted look is also found on the faces of some Britons who have decided to run a pub or restaurant in France. Sometimes they also wear the expression of someone who has just realised it is not a good idea to put your hand in a chip pan to see if the oil is boiling yet.

Of all strange and inexplicable compulsions, taking on a pub or eating-place abroad seems right up there with self-mutilation. Who in their right mind would come up with the idea of starting a business in which they had absolutely no experience, and in a foreign land to boot? Then there is the slight handicap of not speaking the language, and the fact that pubs and restaurants head the bankruptcy lists of French enterprises when run by French people, let alone foreigners. There is a saying amongst embittered Britons who have set up shop in France that the best way to make a small fortune in this country is to start with a large one, and nowhere is this more apt or applicable than when trying to make a go of a bar or restaurant here or in any foreign land.

My wife and I know what the true cost of running a pub on either side of the Channel can be, and Donella is under strict instructions to hit me very hard with the nearest blunt instrument if I even mention the idea of taking on another licensed business. But, as I said to her this morning while she eyed a nearby lump hammer, it does no harm to look, and we owe a duty to my readers to consider all sorts of businesses taken on by Brits in Brittany.

The pub for sale is in a village remote even by rural Brittany standards, and comes complete with spacious accommodation, a large garden, several spectacularly distressed barns, a grocery shop and the garage and service station next door. Behind the workshop is a former ballroom still equipped with mirrored glitterball, and allegedly used by the French Resistance for covert meetings during the Second World War. Another intriguing piece of information not included in the property information details but

passed on by the current owner is that a number of German officers went out of the back door of the ballroom with pretty local girls and never returned. The all-in asking price for all the properties and potential businesses is less than a hundred thousand Euros. The proprietor is a down-to-earth Scot who had run successful country pubs in England. Over a beer he told us candidly that when he took the place over he could just about get by on the twenty regular customers the bar attracted. In the last three years, several of his thirstiest punters had died, and with it his bar business. All the motorists in the village went to the local supermarket for cheap petrol, and as his wife refused to learn how to be a motor mechanic at 68, he could offer no other services at the service station.

Saturday 24th

Anglo-Info is a very popular website franchise which provides information and contacts for those Brits wishing to move to or buy property in different regions of France. The Brittany version is particularly well-run and useful, though you might not want to share a cab with many of the regular forum users. Like most on-line clubrooms, this part of the site is dominated by a sometimes breathtakingly opinionated clique. Most of them have obviously learned to type but not to think. To enter the forum on most of these sites is akin to pushing open the door of an unfamiliar village pub and hear silence descend as the debating society at the bar turn to look down their noses at you, the intruder. The irony is that as well as being contemptuous of visitors, the members of these cabals seem to dislike each other and their opinions even more.

Asking a simple question about how to register a British car in France will result in a dozen contradictory replies before the senders abandon the point of the exercise and descend into a verbal punch-up

There are, however, pearls to be found in the accounts of those expats or holiday home owners who have fallen foul of an ordnance from the make-it-up-as-we-go-along department of their local town hall. This morning I came across a corker from a

bemused Brit who related how, some years before, he and his wife had applied for permission to erect a shed in their back garden in Morbihan. The okay was duly given, and the couple got as far as laying the concrete base before being distracted by other more pressing matters. Recently, they decided to finish the job off, and anxious to go by the letter of the law, contacted the town hall to ensure all was well with their intentions. Back came the reply that the couple could not in fact put the shed on the concrete base, as their garden had been declared a nature reserve.

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We have set a first by weeding a stretch of water.

According to our landlady, the previous owner drained the big pond to claim his fish before leaving. Grass seeds had taken root before it was re-filled, and, now the growing season has begun, it looks like a neglected paddy-field.

After hearing the owner's cautionary tales about the muddy depths and finding a single Wellington boot rooted in the shallows, we tried a number of solutions. An improvised raft sank before I got aboard, and a pair of garden shears tied to a broomstick proved unsatisfactory as a long-distance pruner. After much practice, we found a garden rake with a length of rope tied to the handle did the trick. It was inevitable that our nearest neighbour would appear just as I was casting the device at a dense patch of zoysia grass by the inlet channel. After watching me haul in the line and untangle my catch from the tines of the rake, he shook his head, adjusted his cap and went off to tell the other residents of Lesmenez about the curious manner in which the English like to fish.

Monday 26th

Our village now has its own Rites of Spring celebration, and I am the unintentional creator.

I don't know who counted them or how, but impeccable sources have it that there are around a ton of earthworms for every acre of soil in Britain. Each year they pass ten tons of soil

through their bodies, though the report does not say if that is in total or each.

Aristotle described them as the intestines of the earth, and Darwin thought that few creatures had played such an important part in the history of our planet as the lowly earthworm. As well as being amazingly industrious, the earthworm can put an ant to shame for feats of strength, and can shift stones up to sixty times its own weight.

This may be so, but it would be some sort of earthworm which could take on the granite rocks lying just below the surface in this part of Brittany. I dug up at least sixty times my bodyweight to make our vegetable patch, and this may be the reason that the chicken compound seems to be a no-go area for worms. Yesterday evening I tried an old fishermen's trick by laying a sheet of plywood on the ground and jumping up and down on it. Worms, like moles, are said to be attracted by vibration and sound, so I accompanied my foot stamping with a burst of Walking the Dog on my blues harmonica.

It was of course inevitable that our nearest neighbour would arrive to see what was going on, and equally inevitable that he would show me the proper Breton way to jump up and down. Our combined efforts attracted our part-time neighbour and Parisian Mr Vitre, who despatched his wife to fetch a bottle of wine and alert the rest of the village that there was a party going on. An hour later and the home-made cider and bootleg apple brandy was flowing, we had been joined by the Breton bagpiper and Lesmenez was staging its first *Fest Noz*.

Dancing Lessons:

For those not familiar with the event, a Fest Noz ('Festival of the Night') is a sort of barn dance without the barn. And often without the dancing, come to that. The tradition dates back to at least the Middle Ages, and its origins and purpose are unclear. Mind you, given the amount of drink that is consumed at these bashes, that is not surprising. Officially, it is thought that the event was to mark and celebrate the completion of a new house. The owners would invite their neighbours to a shindig as a thank-you for their help on the building, and also to act as a sort of mass human steamroller. When everyone had drowned their inhibitions with

copious draughts of home-brew firewater, it was time for the ceremonial Fest Noz dance. This was quite literally a knees-up, with no formal steps or intentions other than jumping up and down a lot on the spot. The crafty part was that as well as being good fun, the repeated impact of several dozen pairs of clog-clad feet on the earth floor made it instantly fit for purpose.

To spur the guests on to (literally) greater heights in this ancient forerunner of punk pogo-dancing, everyone was supplied with unlimited quantities of chouchenn. What Ancient Brits probably knew as mead, this innocuous-sounding but lethal infusion is basically fermented honey and water. Sometimes the brew was livened up with cider, and often with the corpses of the bees themselves to add to the texture and taste. The result was an interesting concoction which weighed in at (at least) 14 percent alcohol by volume.

When you think that the average beer or cider would be around 4-5 percent strength, you can see how a pint or two would encourage the guests to jump about with some abandon. Having tasted the stuff, I reckon it also had another valuable function. Any leftovers could be thinned down a bit and used as glue to waterproof the roof of the new building.

Franco Files

It is not recorded how many expatriate Brits try to start a business in France, but there is a better (or worse) than 90 percent failure rate, and most fail in the first year.

More people visit France on holiday than inhabit England.

A recent academic investigation identified 43 gestures made uniquely by the French.

An Internet survey registered 3579 people who said they hated the French. The figure for those hating the English was more than 4000. Only 756 German-haters bothered to register.

Home cooking

Without wishing to sound too Little Britain-ish, I have to say that the Bretons (or the French in general, for that matter) do not seem big on the complexity or variety of their regional pastries and cakes. In England we can choose from Bakewell tarts,

Eccles cakes and Bath and Chelsea buns, and in my home county of Hampshire there's the wonderfully accurately entitled lardy cake. In Brittany, there is *Kouign-Amann*. In the practical way the Bretons like to identify things and places, this translates as cake of butter, which pretty well nails the contents. It is straightforward to make, and in taste terms very nice and… buttery, and rather like our lardy cake without the lard.

Ingredients

1lb of plain flour
A sachet of baker's yeast
12 oz softened butter
One lightly beaten egg yolk
Some sugar
Salt to taste
Some tepid water

Method

Mix flour, yeast and salt and add some tepid water to make dough. Shape into a ball, cover and leave in a warm place to rise (usually around half an hour).Using the heel of your hand, fashion the dough into a sort of pizza base circle of about a foot across. Spread half the butter on the surface, leaving an unbuttered border.Fold in the four edges to make a square and press to seal, then leave the dough in a cool place for another half an hour.Roll the dough out and spread on the remaining butter and fold again. Brush the top with the egg yolk and sprinkle on some sugar. Place on a baking sheet and cook in a preheated oven at 220°C/425°F or gas mark 7 for half an hour, when the top should be caramelized and nicely browned off. Serve warm with a nice cup of tea or shot of bootleg apple brandy.

Close-up on Côtes d'Armor

A tad larger than Finistère yet with not much more than half the inhabitants and a head count of just 79 people per square kilometre, this is the most sparsely populated department in

Brittany. A place of undulating, wooded greenery and great lakes, there are parts of Côtes d'Armor where you can drive for many a mile and see no sign of human habitation. You are also not likely to see too many pigs or chickens scratching around as they will be confined to the giant *élevages* or rearing barns which are a hallmark of the county. As the name suggests (*Armor* is old Breton for 'the sea'), the county has a long and spectacular coastline, and there are many tucked-away coves and inlets that time and tourists seem to have overlooked. The county town is St-Brieuc, an interesting mix of ancient and modern architecture which overlooks the eponymous bay. Here there is a huge nature reserve and long and leg-stretching rambling paths. The climate in Côtes d'Armor is virtually the same as in the neighbouring department of Finistère, and property is reckoned to be cheaper here than anywhere else in Brittany. This area has its own particular surnames, and in Brittany many were physically descriptive rather than occupational or geographic. A common name in Côtes d'Armor is LeMoal, which means bald. My wife's ancestors come from Guingamp and were Moals, and looking at the lack of hair on the male side of her family, you can see how genes travel through time. I recently met a Breton whose name roughly translates as Big Willy. I followed him to the toilets after a couple of beers, but have to report that the poor chap seems to have missed out on his rightful inheritance.

June

Plounéour-Ménez, Pleyber-Christ, Morlaix, Brest, Le Conquet, Plouyé

Our nearest town is Plounéour-Ménez. 'Menez' is Breton for mountain, and 'Plounéour' is Breton for Plounéour.

It is a comfortable, sturdy and unflappable place with three bars, a betting shop and tobacconist, a chemist's shop and bakery. This shows it has got its priorities right for the average Breton country dweller. For more frivolous shopping needs, locals and people in the surrounding settlements need to travel elsewhere.

Five miles across country from our hamlet and straddling the main route to Roscoff's ferry port, Pleyber-Christ is twinned with Lostwithiel in Cornwall. I have known of sleepy fishing ports in the south of France matched with sprawling coal mining towns in the midlands, and often wonder what criteria is used when the jumelage committees decide on who they wish to link with, and why. In the case of Pleyber-Christ and Lostwithiel, however, I would say the committees got it just about right comparison-wise.

Both are unremarkable and even, in places, pug-ugly towns. Both have a population of around three thousand, and both find themselves in the way of a constant stream of heavy traffic which wishes to be elsewhere.

With an almost straight face, Lostwithiel claims to be Cornwall's hidden treasure, which is the line that desperate tourist bosses come up with when they can think of absolutely nothing positive to say about a place. Pleyber-Christ has, as far as I know, no advertising slogan. If it did, it might be something like 'A Great Place To Pass Through'.

But, as with some people, if you ignore first impressions there is much of value to be found beneath an indifferent facade. With its range of shops and down-to-earth attitude to getting on with life in a rural area, I would think Pleyber a pleasant enough place in which to live or do business. The town also has a

savagely effective arrangement for gaining revenge on motorists who are passing through and not stopping to spend money.

As with so many areas of activity, there is a strange ambivalence in the French authorities' attitude towards speeding and those who practice it. Unlike the tradition in Britain, drivers in France are always warned when approaching a speed camera. This shows they have been put there to achieve their alleged function of slowing traffic down rather than acting as sneaky and huge revenue-earners. On the downside, those who make the rules of the road like to play some funny games with drivers entering a restricted speed zone.

The thousands of cars and Euro-juggernauts approaching Pleyber from the south at full breakneck speed every day find themselves suddenly presented with a 70kph sign, and ten yards beyond that a sleeping policeman almost as tall as some standing French coppers I have seen. Distracted by struggling to regain control of the vehicle and staunch the blood flow from the top of his or her head, it would be hard for any driver to spot the 50kph sign immediately beyond the hump. Spotting it is made even more unlikely as it is positioned on the other side of the road and facing the wrong way. Every other Monday, the same shapely young policewoman hides behind a poster hoarding just beyond the sign with her camera gun at the ready, and must pay for her wages a hundred times over in that single shift. There is a sort of natural justice to the arrangement, as locals know that she will be there and often exchange waves and pleasantries as they chug by. Those just passing through must pay the price of falling into the carefully constructed trap. We have already been caught out, and know that the only safe time to go over the limit here is between noon and two, when the lady and every other law enforcement officer in the area will be taking lunch.

A dramatic if ineffective attempt to get drivers to think about the consequences of bad and mad driving can be seen in the grim black silhouettes standing on the verge facing oncoming traffic. Each shape of man, woman or child represents someone killed in a road accident at that spot. These figures appear at roadsides across the nation, and are most poignant when a

whole family of cut-outs is clustered forlornly and eternally together.

Today, we are passing at a suitably slow pace through Pleyber-Christ to visit the weekly market and look at a house for sale in one of our favourite small-big towns in France.

If the ancient town of Morlaix were a woman, I think she might be a sophisticated, elderly but still game former university lecturer in fine art. Madame Morlaix would have a very developed sense of style and presence, a bit of a past, and a penchant for smoking the odd spliff.

Sitting at the end (or beginning if you think that way) of an estuary opening on to the north west coast, Morlaix has an unusual and rather twee inland port. Once upon a time, the medieval quay allowed barges to pick up and discharge their cargoes for and from Paris. Nowadays, the old tobacco factory is a trendy business centre overlooking an even trendier marina. Posh yachts pass through the lock gates when the tide is right, and make their way into the great bay named for the town. The Rade de Morlaix is dotted with islands bearing forts, very exclusive homes and what the local tourist board claims to be the tallest lighthouse in all France. The tourist board representing the lighthouse on the Île Vierge along the coast a bit would beg to differ. Along the shorelines are thriving oyster farms, a number of interesting villages with restaurants specialising unsurprisingly in food from the sea, and some belting coastal path and clifftop walks.

Back the other way, trains run over the soaring viaduct which overlooks some near-perfect examples of unspoiled *colombage* beam-and-plaster-fronted buildings around the old market square. From the town centre, cobbled lanes or *venelles* climb woozily and steeply up to the surrounding heights.

Morlaix got an early taste of booze-cruising Brits in 1522, when an English raiding party sacked the town. According to legend, the raiders gained entry by dressing the most attractive of their number as women, who talked their way through the gates and let the rest in while the guards were admiring what they thought were the comparatively hairless legs and underarms sported by English females.

Obviously already knowing a bit about the British attitude to and tolerance for strong drink, the surviving locals waited until the raiders drank themselves insensible, then killed them all. This encounter is said to be the origin of the town's motto, which is along the lines of Bite Us and we Bite Back.

Nowadays, Morlaix is more welcoming to British visitors, and obviously a town very much at ease with itself. Its artiness rating is almost off the scale and indicated by the number of older men wearing carefully cultivated apparently uncultivated beards, pony tails, voluminous overcoats and interesting hats. Many of the older women dress as artfully, but most eschew the beards. Morlaix also continues the peculiar Breton tradition of having more lookalikes to the square kilometre than any other region of France. So far today we have been served coffee by Robbie Williams, bought a newspaper from Sacha Distel and seen Jo Brand and Graham Norton indulging in some heavy petting on a bench outside the public toilets.

It is a rare interlude when there are not several concerts, exhibitions and other festivals and celebrations of the arts happening around the town, and every Saturday, Morlaix stages what is acknowledged by many to be the biggest and best market in the department. On that day there will also be a variety of artistic happenings and at least a couple of protests and demonstrations to entertain market–goers. Last week, I sat on the terrace of a café in the square as a jazz band arrived by vintage charabanc. While they were belting out a Gallicised version of Muskrat Ramble, a stunningly beautiful young woman in a bridal costume and long veil appeared at the entrance to the Town Hall. She watched the band for a moment, then threw her bouquet at a startled passer-by, picked up her skirts and ran off through the stalls. This being Morlaix and France, it could have been an artistic event or an act of pure and genuine impulse, and I am saddened that I will never know the reason for the lady's spirited sprint, or how the story ended.

While here we will be looking for bargains at market, though the opposite will apply to the majority of visitors. Of all regional markets I know, Morlaix is a classic example of how the French will pay wildly varying prices for the same thing, depending on

where they buy it. No motorist would dream of paying over the odds for a litre of fuel because the petrol station was in a trendy area, yet market shoppers happily pay through their noses for goods which would be half the price in a supermarket just down the road.

Smiling apologetically at a succession of ever-optimistic and very tall black men selling bongo drums, and short Bretons selling horrendously expensive berets, we make our way to a narrow alleyway in the least fashionable area of the town centre. Ignored by those who like to pay over-the-odds for an item, this small corner is favoured by those who, like us, delight in paying the least. It has not yet become chic to treasure-hunt for fashionable labels in charity shops here, though the melee around the line of tables heaped with clothing shows that violence amongst bargain hunters is not confined to British shoppers.

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It says something of the general uninquisitivity levels of the French and the cosmopolitan nature of this town that nobody gives a second glance at a man strolling through the market square on a warm spring day in a fully quilted, day-glo orange ski suit complete with gloves, goggles, bobble hat and Hannibal Lecter style plastic mask. Being half-Scottish and fully mean, I love a bargain and, in the opposite way to a Gallic price snob, will buy something just because it is ridiculously cheap though I neither want nor need it. I have no plans to go on any alpine activity holidays in the near future, but it gets very cold in the mountains here and a top quality winter ensemble for twenty Euros is an offer I could not possibly refuse.

As we reach the car, I see I am not alone in the high-profile clothing stakes, and nominate a passing lady for our Pussy Pelmet of the Month award. It is yet another French paradox that while the rest of the world acknowledges their country as prime leader and opinion former in all matters of style and fashion, millions of rural and provincial French women would be barred from joining the Dolly Parton Appreciation Society on the grounds of the vulgarity of their dress, hair, make-up and overall

appearance. In the same way that so many provincial French businessmen think a lime jacket, orange shirt, blue tie and persimmon slacks represent the epitome of subtle colour co-ordination and style, a lot of French women like to dress as if for a Vicars and Tarts fancy dress party.

This month's short-odds contender for the title is a lady who will not see forty again. While probably a perfectly decent woman and loving mother and perhaps grandmother, she is dressed like a rebellious teenager who wants to send her parents into cardiac arrest. The white floor-length, fur-trimmed plastic overcoat has been left open to reveal a belt masquerading as a skirt above a pair of black, thigh length shiny boots with huge platform soles. The lady is also more adorned with baubles and shiny things than an overdressed Christmas tree, though none of them is actually flashing. The number of rings on each finger makes it hard for her to hold her brace of mobile phones to her ears. Somehow she is having a conversation with two people at the same time, and possibly wants all passers-by to know that she has more than one friend.

As a visual antidote and as if to demonstrate the contradiction in terms of style that is France, a young woman passes us on her way in to a bar. She is wearing an army greatcoat over denim trousers rolled carelessly up to mid-calf above highly polished hiking boots. On her head is a blue beret worn at a coquettish angle, and the bobbled ends of a matching scarf trail in her wake. From a shoulder hangs a voluminous and obviously elderly Gladstone bag of classy leather. Her entire ensemble could have been bought for a handful of Euros from the cheap stall we have just left, but she makes it and herself look a million dollars.

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In any historic town centre in southern England, the house we are looking at today would be valued at more than half a million pounds. In some areas of London, the asking price would be a couple of million. Here in Morlaix, the going rate for a characterful four-storey, three-hundred-year-old former merchant's home is below that of a beach hut in some parts of Cornwall.

Things are changing, and *le mortgage* has become a familiar fixture for young couples, but in general the French have not become as obsessed with property as the British. The transition stage has caused some interesting inconsistencies, with the typical street a mixture of trendily done-up houses and long-neglected wrecks held upright by their neighbours.

The house we have been looking at falls between the two types, and is proof that even though they have been at it for a much shorter time, the French can be as bad at DIY as the most creatively incompetent Briton. A good example is the mouth-watering 15th-century front door with oversized hinges and studwork into which the owner has fitted a modern metal letterbox and one of those weird oriental-style hanging cowbells which were all the rage in Britain in the 1970s.

Inside, the house continues the same awkward fusion of classic architectural features embellished with more modern fittings. It also doubles as a war museum. The owner is a tall and strangely intense young man clad entirely in black, and every room of the house is filled with memorabilia of World War II, or rather memorabilia of the uniforms and weapons of one side. In the hallway is a mannequin dressed in the uniform of a German stormtrooper, and in the downstairs toilet I find myself eye to eye with the Fuhrer in life-size poster form.

As we leave I say to the owner that his door would be worth at least a thousand Euros in any antique shop in London. He raises an elegant eyebrow and offers to fetch a screwdriver and sell it to me at half that price. Laughing, I lift my arm to bid him a cheery farewell and acknowledge his joke. As if in instinctive response, he starts to raise his hand skywards with fingers rigidly extended, then looks around almost guiltily, lowers his arm and contents himself with a click of heels, a nod and the thinnest of smiles.

Tuesday 3rd

A close encounter with Farmer Grumpy and his even more disgruntled dog this morning. Guiltily avoiding eye contact with a veal calf as I walked down to the stone cross to give the fox

breakfast, I saw that all entrances to the fields alongside the lane had been sealed off with lengths of blue string. This happens when a transfer of cattle is about to take place, and the string is to make sure the half-ton creatures do not stray from the planned course. Some of the entrances and gaps in hedges were double-stringed, so there was probably going to be a particularly bad-tempered bull with the herd.

Farmer Grumpy is young, but has the fully-developed misanthropic attitudes of a much older man. Pope John XXIII is said to have said that men are like wine, with some improving with age and some becoming vinegar. Farmer Grumpy seems to have gone straight to the vinegar stage. As I found out recently, as well as suffering permanently with a bad back, he is also a bachelor. It is one of life's ironies that so many men are unhappy because they are not married and thus cannot know how much more miserable they might be if they were.

Apart from sealing off fields and keeping trousers up, another use for the magic blue twine is to hold old or damaged farm machinery and vehicles together. Yards of it have been used on Farmer Grumpy's old Renault, the most decrepit and abused car I have seen which still lives. Most farms are graveyards for dead cars, but the curious thing about this vehicle is that the author of the life-threatening injuries to the car is its owner, and I believe few of them to be accidental. If there were a law against the abuse and maltreatment of motor cars, Farmer Grumpy would now be doing a life sentence without the option. There is not an inch of the surface of the Renault which has not been kicked, beaten or otherwise damaged by being driven into a suitably immoveable object. I do not think for a moment Jean-Luc mistreats his animals, and he certainly seems to think more of his cows than the rest of humanity. I suspect that, like a Gallic Basil Fawlty, he takes out his dissatisfaction with his life in general on the car. There are also other manifestations of our neighbour's discontent with his situation and status, and what he considers the reason for it.

Alongside the road leading down to our hamlet is a very big and rusty water tank, upon which Farmer Grumpy has painted some not very complimentary comments about British beef.

When we first passed his cottage and waved, he turned his back on us. When I walked by with Milly a week later, his dog rushed out and attacked her. If anything, the cross-collie appeared more unsociable than its master, and is one of the very few dogs to have snarled at me as if he really meant it. It was not until I mentioned these incidents to Alain that I learned Jean-Luc and his dog are misanthropes rather than xenophobes. It is not that they do not like foreigners and especially British foreigners; they simply do not like anyone.

Thursday 5th

This morning I drove past a field in which a man dressed as a pirate was serenading a pile of burning leaves with an alto saxophone. I could have pulled over and asked him why, but I feared there may just have been a mundane explanation which would have spoiled the moment completely.

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We have been lost for an hour and do not have a clue where we are, so the people responsible for directional road signage in this area can feel pleased with a job well done.

An important thing to remember as a visiting driver is that the basic raison d'être of all road signs in France is to confuse rather than inform. I do not make the accusation lightly, and am allowing for the fact that all motorists complain about road signage in their own as well as other countries. Like accusing your wife of holding the road map upside down, blaming misleading or non-existent road signs is a convenient way of shifting the blame. But, in France, whoever is in charge of telling drivers where to go is either awesomely incompetent or heads a committee charged with ensuring that all signs either mislead or completely confuse.

A classic example is the Primrose Path Syndrome. This is where you are assured every fifty metres that you are on the right road to your destination, then the information is suddenly withdrawn when you get to a roundabout or the rural French equivalent of Spaghetti Junction.

Even more annoying are the signs which can't make up their mind the way they should be pointing. It must take ages to fiddle with all those millions of directional placards until they are in exactly the right position to confuse and misdirect the victim.

Another extremely irritating thing is the way that more means so much less in road sign terms here. If there is the slightest excuse to put up a superfluous sign, the French will take it, especially if they work for the Department of the Very Bleedin' Obvious. Where else would you have a sign warning drivers entering a motorway that it is illegal to do a three point turn and then drive in the opposite direction against all the oncoming traffic on your side of the crash barriers? In the same way, the authorities also think it necessary to put a similar sign up to tell those already on the motorway that it does not recommend them doing a sudden U-turn and driving up the slip road against any oncoming traffic.

Friday 6th

More evidence that it is not only the locals who are eccentric. We were invited to tea today by a Briton and his partner, who live contentedly in an even smaller hamlet than Lesmenez. What makes the former Northumbrian coal miner qualify as being a bit off-centre is that his chosen partner in domestic quietude is an alpine goat. I do not think there is anything perverse about the relationship, and our new friend says she is good company, eats anything she is offered, and is certainly more easy on the eye than his former wife. Our host has also recently adopted a Highland ram, just so that he can introduce it as Colin, the black sheep of the family...

Monday 9th

The French have a saying about an unwanted visitor turning up like a hair in the soup, and our nearest neighbour has a way of appearing just as I am doing something he will enjoy criticising. This morning I was finishing off a new bird table when Alain arrived with his poking stick poised for action. All Breton

countrymen beyond a certain age carry one, and Alain takes his hazel cane everywhere. The home-help lady who looks after him says he sleeps with it.

As an anteater uses its tongue to gauge the promise of an old tree trunk, elderly countrymen use their poking sticks to investigate anything new or unfamiliar, or of which they do not approve or think may be suspect. When I am doing some rough carpentry or running repairs to the outside of one of the buildings, our neighbour will invariably appear at my shoulder, look at my handiwork with deep distrust, then poke it with his stick. Usually he will poke it in exactly the right spot to make it collapse. Having achieved his self-fulfilling prophecy, he will sniff, look down at the ruins of my work and tell me how it should have been done. After demolishing my bird table with a single poke this morning, he asked if I would like some acorns for my window sill to keep the storm away. At least, that is what I think he said. I hope Alain has not had a stroke, but in the last week it has become increasingly difficult to understand him. He has turned the rules and usages of regional pronunciation upside down by enunciating all the letters in any word like a native of the Languedoc. When he talks about tomorrow, the usual northern French *demah* becomes *demayne*, and when he wants us to pick up a loaf of bread from town, it is not *du pah* but *du payne*.

When I looked at the sky and said the weather forecaster on TV had said nothing about a storm and I would anyway prefer a lightning conductor to a handful of nuts to protect our home, he grunted grimly and stumped away in a very you'll-be-sorry way.

Tuesday 10th

As I should have been able to predict, the officially unforecast storm arrived last night. We sat up and watched in awe as the Breton gods of the air fought a pitched battle over the mountains. The three-storey-high pines in our patch of woodland swayed and danced like whirling Dervishes but stayed upright. We have been without power all day as a surge after a giant clap of thunder has melted the fuse board. Worse, it travelled through the telephone line and has eaten most of the insides of my

computer. We had to go over to Alain's house to use his phone and call for assistance. While there, I told him I had changed my mind and would be most grateful for a handful of his acorns for our window sill.

Thursday 12th

I am making an unsteady way home, and the reason for my meandering gait is that I have been involved in a friendly neighbourly ambush. One of my favourite local bars is called the Embuscade, and it is a very suitable name for a pub which specialises in lock-ins.

Apart from Alain LeGoff and the Parisian holiday-home owner, our only other neighbours in the lane leading to the mountains and moors are retired farmer Jean-Yves Madec and his wife.

Jean-Yves has lived in Lesmenez since almost before the handful of cottages became an official hamlet. At eighty-six, he is the senior member of our community, but only by a couple of years. He has a perfectly round and friendly face with a countryman's roseate complexion, and looks as fit and sturdily built as a man thirty years younger. These attributes he puts down to a lifetime of hard work on the land, and regular infusions of good food and red wine. Nowadays, he needs a stick to get about and is profoundly deaf, but bears his handicaps with dignity and fortitude. Jean's wife is restricted to her bed, and although his children and grandchildren visit regularly, I feel he is sometimes lonely. I see him at the window when I take Milly for a walk on the moors, and I know his much-loved collie died a few years ago. His quiet fortitude is good for me, as whenever we meet and I complain of a twinge or inconvenience, he just looks at me steadily with his faded blue eyes and I am reminded of how comparatively healthy and lucky I am.

The cause of my downfall this evening has been an introduction to the Breton version of moonshine apple brandy. In Normandy, where they claim to have invented it, the legal distillation is called Calvados, and the far rougher and much, much cheaper bootleg variety is known as *calva* or simply *goût*,

as in ‘taste’. This is either a complete misnomer or an in-joke, as a few glasses of the really fresh stuff completely removes all sense of taste and feeling. Think how your jaw feels (or rather doesn’t) when the dentist has numbed your gums and you will get the idea.

I believe it is no coincidence that Normandy registers the lowest sales of toothbrushes in all France. Those who regularly augment their breakfasts with a *café-calva* or two claim that the spirit cleans the teeth better than any fancy-dan toothpaste, but I have noticed that most of the people who say this are usually very low on tooth-count. Here in Brittany, *lambig* is one of the names given to brandy made from apples, and is, allegedly, more used for cooking than drinking. It takes a full barrel of cider at 225 litres to make just twenty bottles of hooch, and I suspect most Bretons would prefer to go for quantity over head-banging strength.

Apart from doing dentists out of work, another magical quality of bootleg apple brandy is its ability to bestow upon the drinker total fluency in any known language. In the same way that science fiction films always have a magic little box which enables Venusians, Martians and Altarans to converse freely, after my first encounter with the local hooch I instantly found myself able to speak fluent Norman patois. Tonight, I discovered that the same trick works with the local moonshine. For the past three hours I have been chatting to my neighbour in not only Breton, but the local version of Breton. Or at least I think I have, as Jean-Yves made no response, and was merely nodding and smiling regularly as I told him about our past lives in Normandy and plans for the future. I did notice his hearing aid was on the hall stand as I left, but think it may have been a spare.

Saturday 14th

The mystery of Alain’s new way of speaking his own language has been solved. When I asked him if his old friend had suffered a stroke or was having problems with running-in a new set of teeth, Jean-Yves explained that Alain has actually been speaking French with an English accent to help me understand the

language. In the way that some Britons will put on a cod French accent when trying to communicate with a French person in English, our neighbour has been trying to help us out by speaking French with what he imagines is an English accent. It is fascinating to think that, though we can instantly recognise a French, German or Russian by the way they speak our language, we have no idea of what an English person speaking French sounds like to a native. Going by the look on the faces of most French people I speak to in their tongue, it cannot be a pleasant tonal experience.

Monday 16th

A pleasant afternoon in Brest, celebrating a friend's birthday at a Chinese restaurant. The new system of oriental *buffet volante* (help yourself) outlets has taken France by storm, which is another indicator of how things are changing here. My first visit to a Chinese restaurant in France was twenty years ago, and the Cantonese owners had obviously adapted their food and serving methods to suit the host culture. Each item on the menu was being served as a separate course, with long breaks for a cigarette and discussion on the quality and suitability of the chosen wine. When we asked for seven different items to be served at the same time, the place fell silent and the customers watched open-mouthed as we piled our plates high with curry and rice and noodles and sweet and sour pork and, of course, chips.

Nowadays, younger French people like the casual way of eating where you make as many visits to the buffet as you wish, but they are still very French about it. In England, any eat-as-much-as-you-like-for-a-set-price deals are often seen as a challenge. Our table was for six, and I think it would be a close run thing as to whether we made more visits than the rest of the diners combined on a busy Friday afternoon. As everyone tries to get into the game, the appearance of new Chinese *buffet volante* restaurants seem to match the closure rate of village stores. Some do not last or are run by inexperienced or even unscrupulous entrepreneurs. I recently heard of one new outlet

which had been closed down after the disappearance rate of local cats rose quite dramatically.

Finistère's biggest town reminds us of our home city of Portsmouth, where most of the ancient buildings were taken out by the Luftwaffe on their frequent awaydays in search of the naval dockyard in our localised version of The Blitz. On this side of the Channel, the Allies were responsible for the near-total destruction of Brest during the course of flushing the occupiers out, so large areas are covered with immediately post-War and depressingly unimaginative buildings and blocks of flats. Possibly because of this, Brest, like Portsmouth, has a certain air of edginess, though you are much more unlikely to be accosted, mugged or murdered here.

When we first approached the high-rise skyline, we looked across the bridge and turned back. But since crossing the bridge and getting to know the town better, we have come to like the if-you-don't-like-us-sod-off feel of Finistère's largest metropolis.

I quite often find my first impression of a town or city can be hopelessly wrong, though curiously not so much with people. This may be because I usually give a place a fair chance to prove me wrong, but arrange and interpret my observations of individuals to suit the prejudices I have already formed.

For us, the docks area of Brest is a satisfying mix of commercial and leisure activity, with rusty scows cheerfully rubbing shoulders with disdainfully sleek yachts, and an equally varied selection of bars, restaurants and scruffy shipping offices lining the quayside. The trouble with most waterside areas is that they eventually get gentrified and homogenous, and as boring as they are overpriced. Here, tattoo parlours and tough-looking dockside boozers sit at ease alongside trendy café bars where the beau monde comes for a lunch and the weekly turnover is more than the building would have fetched a couple of decades ago. A favourite local of ours is McGuigan's Bar, for once named for the real owner, who is even more unusually actually Irish. Dan McGuigan is from Belfast and specialises in offering local workers value-for-money lunchtime meals. The boss also employs some of the prettiest waitresses in the region, which does no harm to trade.

Though with a population of 140,000 it is the largest town in Finistère, the title of capital is awarded to Quimper, which is probably because it scrubs up better and appeals so much more to French snobbery. Brest arrived on the map as a major seaport in the 17th century, when the clever Cardinal Richelieu saw its potential and ordered the construction of a major harbour of wooden wharves. Großadmiral Erich Raeder also saw the value of the towns' strategic location at the start of World War II, and Brest became a major U-Boat base. The town was said to have only three buildings left standing when the Allies had finished liberating it, and the German government paid several billion Deutschmarks in compensation even though they were technically not responsible for the damage.

Nowadays, Brest earns a good living from being the nearest French port to the Americas. Though Nantes and St-Nazaire can handle bigger shipping, the great Rade or Bay of Brest offers sheltered accommodation to all sorts of vessels. Although the Battle for Brest left so little of the old town standing, there is one visitable ancient castle and tower, and modern attractions include the Oceanopolis marine centre. For bridge buffs, the Pont de Recouvrance is the largest example of its type in Europe.

Another claim to fame for the town is that Jane Birkin of the famous handbag and orgasmic groans on the breathy 1960s hit *Je T'aime... Moi Non Plus* made with her Svengali–style lover Serge Gainsbourg, is a Brestian. Now a composer, singer and campaigner, what the subject of ten million male fantasies is getting up to nowadays can be learned by visiting www.janebirkin.net

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We are as far as you can go westward on mainland Brittany. Le Conquet is a small fishing port which dubs itself The Port at the End of the World. Le Conquet was founded around the tenth century, and probably because of its strategic location not far from the *goulet* or bottleneck of Brest. All it got in the way of recognition and, as the name suggests, was to be sacked repeatedly by Norse and then English attackers. Le Conquet is one of the ports serving the pinprick island of Molène and its comparatively giant

neighbour, Ouessant. To sit on the old wall here and look out from the land is to get an inkling of just how much sea there is around our shores, and how unfriendly it can be.

Tuesday 17th

We have been looking at a home and business for sale, and there is obviously money to be made from chicken feed, or rather feeding chickens.

Brittany is big on meat production, and provides more than half the pork eaten in France. Cattle rearing supplies fifteen percent of the country's needs, and though poultry farming is the third largest agricultural activity in Brittany, it produces more than three quarters of chickens consumed by the French. Everywhere in Brittany, and particularly in Côtes d'Armor and Finistère, there are enormous farm buildings which are remarkable by their lack of windows. If they do not house pigs, inside each of these aircraft hangar-like buildings many thousands of chickens will live their short lives. Unlike the common method in Britain, the birds are not confined to a cell, but fairly free to wander around. After two months of rearing, they are taken away for killing and processing while the vast hangars are cleaned out and made ready for the next batch of fluffy chicks.

In spite of the mind-numbing numbers produced here, chickens are not cheap in Brittany. From a butcher, a free-range corn-fed bird with a more detailed and accurate provenance than many a valuable antique could set you back twenty Euros; in a supermarket the cost of a small dressed bird will be twice what you would expect to pay in Britain. This is because it will not have led such a miserable existence or suffered the final indignity of being pumped full of water postmortem. This is also why it will taste much better.

The *élevage* we looked at is licensed to rear fifty thousand chickens at a time. The system for looking after the birds is very high-tech, and the feeding and lighting and heating is all controlled automatically from one panel. The owners are a kindly couple who are retiring and the farm is in a beautiful, remote part of the department, but Donella says she would not want to go

into chicken–rearing on that scale. Not only would she find it impossible to send her charges off to meet their fate, she admitted that even she would find it very difficult to think up different names for fifty thousand chickens, let alone remember each of them.

Friday 20th

Most people who move abroad like to hang on to at least some scraps of their national identity. Some try to pretend they are still living where they came from. Spain is full of Britons who live in a world peopled by and run for their own kind.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those Brits who go native when they move abroad. Rather than integrate, they turn their back on their heritage and try to become what they can never be. For some reason, these strange hybrids are always contemptuous of all things and people from their own land, and treat any fellow countryman they encounter much in the way a vampire reacts to a shaft of sunshine.

In this part of France, the situation becomes even more bizarre, as there is the added dimension of Brittany seeing itself as apart from the rest of France. So the challenge to the expatriate who comes here and would subsume himself in his new surroundings and cut off all links with his natural past is not only to become French, but Breton-French. To get the full risibility of the proposition, imagine if a Frenchman were to move to Scotland and adopt all that country's customs, traditions and irritating prejudices. Would he start to talk in Gaelic, wear a kilt and develop a liking for haggis and chips and headbutting any passing Englishmen? I think not.

A classic example of the British-Breton runs one of my favourite pubs in Finistère, but he is Welsh so already more than qualified for victimhood.

Byn Walters has been in charge at the Ty Elise at Plouyé for more than a quarter of a century, and is in danger of becoming a regional treasure. His pub oozes character and is a customer magnet simply because the owner does not give a stuff (or appears not to give a stuff) what the people who enter his domain

think or want. He has done the place up to suit himself, and that is just how it should be.

Inside the single stone-walled bar it is satisfyingly forever twilight. An irritable-looking dragon looks down its nose from a huge Welsh flag tacked to the ceiling, and customers walk beneath it and an equally intimidating Breton flag across a gloriously uneven stone and baked mud floor and past a selection of mismatching benches, chairs and rickety tables to the bar. Behind the counter, the landlord and entry examination await.

Byn looks to be a tall man, but this is because of the sheer force of his character and presence; the impression of height is also because of the old French custom of installing a platform behind the bar so the server can look down on the served. The beer, like the conversation and the ambience, is very strictly Breton, though well-behaved and suitably deferential British customers and non-locals may be tolerated.

The first time we visited the bar I made the mistake of asking for a glass of lager, which obviously did not agree with the licensee's idea of what I should be drinking in his pub. Making polite conversation and trying to curry favour as he ignored my order and started pouring a pint of local brew, I said how we had recently discovered the glory of Breton sausages, and that it was a pity we had not seen them on sale elsewhere in France. As silence descended and our host ceased in mid-pour, several customers drank up and left, while others made for the toilets and one man hid beneath his table.

For the next half hour we were treated to a harangue on the exact composition, proper method of cooking and serving and the ubiquitous availability of the Breton sausage and its links with the development of all areas of Breton culture. We eventually repaired the damage by apologising humbly for the offence we had given and buying the owner lots of beer, and have become regular customers at the Ty Elise. There are too few pubs and landlords like Byn's left anywhere, and we shall be poorer without them.

(Shortly before going to press with this book, the Ty Elise was razed to the ground. At time of writing, no cause for the blaze

has been announced. Tributes to Byn and the bar were already flowing in from around the civilised world, with plans afoot for the Ty Elise to raise phoenix-like from the flames).

The Breton beer we had at Byn's bar was from the Lancelot brewery. Brittany has small breweries like Normandy has cheeses, and more of them than anywhere else in France. The tradition of small brew-it-yourself enterprises beginning on farms is similar to ours, but did not develop as in England. There is also a strong tradition of Celtic brewing throughout Europe, and probably the best known Breton brand is Coreff ('Korev' is old Breton for 'beer'), with the company HQ in Morlaix. Coming in light or dark varieties, it is the nearest you will get to cask-conditioned ale in France, though made from wheat and a tad sweet for some tastes. The Maison des Bières Bretonnes at Locronan boasts 75 varieties of bottled beers brewed in the region, but I have not yet tried them all.

Double standards

Being Celtic and thus enjoying healthy debate or, as some would say, a good verbal punch-up, some Bretons are still arguing over which of two versions is their rightful flag.

The simple black cross (*Kroaz Du*) on a white background has been around since at least the Middle Ages. It can be any size and is commonly displayed on Breton fishing vessels, especially when in foreign (i.e. French) waters.

The more elaborate version is known as the Gwenn ha Du, or White and Black, and shows nine black and white stripes and what is called a scattering of stylised ermines. The black stripes represent the dioceses of the eastern part of the region, and the white those of the western part. According to one of many legends about the subject, a 10th-century Breton duke was inspired to take on and defeat a raiding party of Vikings when he saw an ermine turn on a fox which was attacking it. Another common symbol of Breton-ness is the triskele (see cover), a classic Celtic three-legged spiral symbol said by some experts to represent Life, and dating back to at least the Bronze Age. Nowadays it is a popular name for Breton bars.

Speaking in Tongues

Until relatively recently, a Breton speaker from one end of the region would have little chance understanding someone from the other, as there were distinctly different versions of the mother tongue. It was decided in 1908 to unify the Breton dialects of Cornouaille, Léon and Trégor and create a true *lingua franca*, but some signs (and people) stubbornly keep to the old differences. In eastern Brittany, Breton gives way to the totally different Romance language called Gallo.

Home cooking

Dropping in to see if Alain needed anything from the shops, I found him eating what looked like cold Yorkshire pudding dotted with prunes. He told me that it was another greatly prized delicacy called *Farz Fourn*, which was old Breton for 'Flour Oven'. I tried some and found it tasted like cold Yorkshire pudding with prunes in it. To be fair, the taste was improved by the prunes having been soaked in best moonshine apple brandy for a couple of days. My assessment was also not far off the mark, as Farz started off in the 18th century as a savoury accompaniment to a meat course. Anyway, here's how Alain's twice-weekly visiting housekeeper (*femme de ménage*) makes a meal of it:

Ingredients

250 grams plain flour
150 grams caster sugar
Six eggs
A litre of milk
250 grams dried prunes (or apricots or raisins)
Some vanilla essence
A tot of dark rum
Butter for greasing the tin

Method

If using whole prunes, cut in half and remove the stones, then place on the baking dish, cut side up. For the best results, the fruit should have been marinated in the rum (or preferably home-brew apple brandy) overnight. Mix the flour, sugar and eggs, adding the eggs one by one. A food processor is handy for this, but use your hands if you really want to be traditional. Now add the vanilla essence and gradually blend in the milk. Having added the tot of rum (or hooch), pour into the dish and bake at 180 degrees C for an hour...or until the custard is set in the middle. If the mixture starts to over-colour, cover with foil. Serve hot or cold, and preferably with a glass of ice-cold cider.

Sugar, Sugar

Like most Celts, the Brets seem to have a sweet tooth. Unlike in the rest of France where expensive oils are used to anoint any salad, a traditional Breton favourite is a mix of sugar and vinegar. This ancient sweet 'n' sour combo may sound unappetizing, but try it before you condemn. A good tip is to use quality wine vinegar, which makes the contrast between sharpness and sweetness even more interesting.