

VISIT TO NIMES -FERIA DE VENDANGES 12- 16 SEPTEMBER 2007

The group which took part in this private visit comprised Ruth Archer, Lady Milena Grenfell- Baines , Joan Whittle, Derek Smith, Mike Dignan and Barbara and Brian Manning'

WEDNESDAY 12 SEPTEMBER

We left Preston at 6.00 a.m. in a mini-bus kindly arranged by Milena. We were accompanied by Charlotte Thompson a student for whom Jurgen had arrange a spell of work experience in the Nimes Tourism Office. We arrived in Nimes via Ryanair from Liverpool at 12 noon after an uneventful flight.

Our base was the ** Hotel Acanthe du Temple handily situated in the centre of the town.

After a light lunch we visited the new offices of the Twinning Service to meet with Katy and Patricia who have been our main contacts in Nimes for many years.

Katy gave Brian the details of two project proposals ; one for a proposed school exchange and the other one for an arts project. These will be dealt with as soon as possible.

A visit to the Tourism Office followed to supplement information already provided to us by K & P.

A walkabout of the central medieval area and the main boulevards was followed by dinner and a relatively early night

THURSDAY 13 SEPTEMBER Weather - hot and sunny

A visit to Avignon ahd been planned and we arrived there by train at 10.0a.m. Individual visits were made to various sites , attractions and included the Tourism Office, famous bridge featured in the song " Sur le Pont D/Avignon " , the Palace of the Popes, the Petit Palais Museum , the Argadon Museum and the Festival Office.

Lunch had been arranged for us by Robin Boxall at a local restaurant. Robin joined us there. He is Secretary / Organiser of BRITSNIMES which he set up principally for English people living in the area. Membership is now open to all nationalities. Activities involve eating, drinking, cycling, walking, sports and informal gatherings.

Dinner in Nimes had been arranged at the restaurant Le Chapon Fin. We had issued official invitations to Monsieur De Nays Candau ,Deputy Mayor responsible for Twinning and his wife; Katy and Patricia from the Twinning Office; and Robin Boxall and his wife. Journalist Anthony Peregrine had also

been invited but unfortunately he was away on business. Anthony had written an article extolling the virtues of Nimes which appeared in a recent edition of the Daily Telegraph. He has also written an article for the same newspaper about twinning between Nimes and Preston which is yet to appear.

Laurence Boxall is the publisher of the Languedoc Sun an English language magazine which is distributed free throughout the region. Laurence asked Brian to send her information about an English bullfighter who had appeared many times in Spain but she believed was now retired. Laurence also asked him to send to her information about the re-action to the bullfight of the members of the group who would be seeing one for the first time on Saturday. (This has been done).

The Feria was due to start on Friday but a walkabout confirmed that in the eyes of many people it had already started as the many extended bars and restaurants in the main boulevard and in other areas were already doing good business! Music abounded particularly from the enormous main stage in the centre adjacent to the Carre D/ Art.

FRIDAY 14 SEPTEMBER Weather - hot and sunny

The group enjoyed separate walkabouts to see the various attractions of Nimes, not least Les Halles, the central covered food market and the beautiful Jardins de la Fontaine and Diana's Temple.

Lunch had been arranged for us at the Catering Section of the College of Commerce at Marguerites, a short drive from Nimes and a part of the Chamber of Commerce College based in Nimes. This had been arranged by Dimitri Descy, the Head of one of the main Sections there. Some were able to renew acquaintance with Dimitri, Veronique Forlan, the Head of the College, Helene Portant(?) the Head of the Hotel and Catering Section and Sophie Dusseron the International Officer at the College of Commerce.

Dimitri has visited Preston several times not only with student exchanges with Preston College but also with their patisserie Chef Trainer Freddie to the well remembered International Festival in Preston 4 years ago when they joined chefs from our twin towns and Prague to exhibit their culinary skills.

The lunch was prepared and served by first year students and by common consent was superb. The best meal we had during our time in Nimes by a country mile.

Later we were able to visit the Tourism Office to see(?) the mother of Sarah, a young French student, whom Derek had employed on work experience in Preston recently. She was effusive in her thanks to Derek for giving Sarah this opportunity. Brian was able to meet two people working there who he has known for many years so this whole visit was very pleasant.

Dinner at Le Mezurier restaurant comprised small mountains of moules and frites for most of the group followed by a stroll through the boulevards. One

interesting aspect of the various provisions for entertainment during the Feria was that provided in a slightly quieter part of the city centre in a large marquee in the Place de Placette. A large marquee housed a music group, DJ and singers providing entertainment and dancing for the older age groups. Not only that but on the opening evening there were free aperitifs for all and on the Saturday evening plentiful supplies of sangria between 11p.m. and 1.00a.m. for those who wanted it. Reportedly none of these freebies were abused by any one.

(The Preston Mayor , Councillor Christine Abram, her Consort, husband Norman and Carol Forrest the Mayors Secretary along with the Mayor of Prague 1, his Deputy and wives arrived today as official guests of the Nimes City Council.)

The early part of the evening was spent enjoying the Feria. Some met up with people from the College we had visited at lunch time and later enjoyed extended sessions at the Bodegas (Outdoor music / night clubs) in the gardens of the Costieres de Nimes and the first class Hotel Imperator. Dimitri with his wife, Helene with her husband and Freddie were all in good form. Freddie does extra work at the Imperator during the Feria but when the clock strikes 12 he has finished his work and along with some of his colleagues working there joined us for quite a party at the Bodega. This went on until the later / early hours of the next day and was hugely enjoyed by all!! Bodegas are held all over town during the Feria and when you mix the atmosphere created by the hyper activity in the whole place, huge crowds with music everywhere; touring bands; band/groups on stages, people of all ages eating, drinking dressed for the occasion and hardly any serious trouble it all makes for a heady brew when the first lesson of Feria begins to be appreciated ---- you must pace yourself !!!

SATURDAY - 15 SEPTEMBER -- Weather -- very hot and sunny

This started with a DIY morning. Derek met a teacher from a local primary school who wants to set up a link with a primary school in Preston. Derek, Milena and Joan(?) met the widow of Serge(?) at whose restaurant they had provided a week of English cooking 20 years ago! Brian and Barbara went to see Bruno Ferrier, his wife Anna and their 3 children. Anna's mother is English and she met her husband Pierre when he went to Preston to teach English at the old Grammar School for a year many years ago! Bruno was formerly Deputy Mayor responsible for Twinning for several years. He has visited Preston several times. He never forgets the experience of attending an official civic dinner at the old Crest Hotel. He and his wife were given one glass of wine and informed that if they wanted any more they would have to pay for it!!!!!!

Our group had been invited to have lunch with the civic guests from Preston and Prague 1 along with the Monsiuer De Nays Candau, his wife and Katy and Patricia. This was at the Café Carre in the open air immediately next to the Carre D/ Art and the main stage in the square. It was enjoyed by all and it was pleasant to be able to meet up with the civic guests. Milena was pleased

to be able to speak with the civic guests from Prague.

Five of our group attended the bullfight in the ancient Roman arena at 5:00pm. Free tickets had been provided by the Chief of Cabinet via M. De Nays Candau and the Twinning Office. This was a first for Mike, Milena and Joan and whilst they enjoyed the initial spectacle they did not enjoy what followed.

Bullfighting is a very integral part of the Feria. There are 2 fights every day involving 3 matadors and 6 bulls on each occasion. It has a long history in this part of France where the influence of Spanish culture is very evident.

A light evening dinner at Pizza Papa was enjoyed by all. Some retired early. Others went to exchange pleasantries with the civic parties and official guests who were having dinner at Le Lisita restaurant in the shadow of the Arena (Katy had specifically requested this)

After enjoying a stroll through crowds of thousands to the main square some enjoyed the performance of the Flamenco Oriental group of dancers. Wending the way home also incorporated nightcaps at the Bar Irlandais where a small group of young students from northern France were met. They were in Nimes to work in the vineyards to work on the first picking of the grapes. And so to bed -----

SUNDAY 16 SEPTEMBER Weather hot and sunny (again !)

We had invitations to attend the special mass for the Feria at the nearby Cathedral. This is known as Messe en Longo Nostro and is said in the local language of Languedoc. It was attended by a whole range of "groupes folkloriques" dressed in traditional clothes and playing medieval music. Also present was the Mayor of Nimes, Monsieur Fournier, the Consul General for the region, senior members of the Council and the civic guests from Preston and Prague. (M. Fournier was recently given the French Legion D'Honneur by Prime Minister Nicholas Sarkozy for services to Nimes and the wider community). Mass was followed by speeches and music from the folk groups, Aperitifs were provided free by the Council for those who wanted them but we did not participate !! We were able to say goodbyes and final thanks to Katy and Patricia and to the Civic guests from Preston. They were having an afternoon visit to Aigues Morte in the Camargue and the seaside town of Le Grand Roi. They were leaving Nimes the following day.

An alfresco lunch was followed (for some) with the experience of the final Abrivado of the Feria. This comprises the running of young bulls at a rapid pace shepherded by horsemen from the Camargue along a 500 yard length of one of the main boulevards. Barriers are provided but these are ignored by many of the large crowd. The bulls take part in several runs up and down the boulevard. First 2 then 3 then 1 then 3 with a varying number of horsemen using all their skill to keep the bulls running as straight as they can from one bull wagon to another. The challenge to many young boys and men is to try to hold on to the bulls tail or even it head as they speed along the boulevard!

Many tried but few succeeded-- a dangerous occupation at best ! Health and Safety has no presence whatsoever at this event !!!

Taxis to the Airport and a further hassle free flight by Ryanair saw us back in Liverpool and then on to Preston in the mini bus by 7-7.30. A tired but happy group.

SOME THINGS WE EXPERIENCED

- 1 First rule of Feria --- pace yourself !
2. Nimes Council invest a substantial amount of money in the Feria but see it as a wise investment when they see the amount of spending by visitors in hotels, restaurants etc and in the income they receive from the many concessions which are let.
3. The Feria de Pentecote in May (Whitsun) attracts 1 million visitors in 5 days and is now the biggest free festival in Europe !
4. The sense of awe engendered by the sheer enthusiasm of the people attending the Feria and the enormous rang of events which are staged. (Some of the group have been to the Feria de Pentecote in previous years and confirmed all that was said about it).
5. If anyone want to experience a Feria in Nimes book your accommodation as early as you can. You will also benefit from lower air fares.
6. The variety and standard of food available varies in standard but the quality of wine from the Costieres de Nimes does not vary (now on sale at Booths!). There are a wide variety of sweets available on every menu, especially certain types of tarts. We now know that whilst Mike Dignan may enjoy one later in the day he will certainly not have one soon after breakfast!