

THE PRITCHETTS ON TOUR

CHRONICLES OF SALLY AND TONY PRITCHETT'S
JOURNEYS THROUGH FRANCE ABOARD SABLE

NEWSLETTERS
MARCH — OCTOBER

2008

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Cruising Again

Week 30 — March 8th - 29th (*Sally*).

Well here we are cruising again. We left Roanne on Wednesday the 19th March. We had asked for the locks to be opened for us as we both were keen to get under way again. About a dozen other boaties came down to see us off, and I think every one of them was wishing they were under-weigh. Our good neighbours Christian and Charlotte put their bikes aboard and came with us for the first 12km before leaving us and cycling back along the tow path or



should I say "The Chemin de Haulage". Yes our French is improving, albeit slower than we would wish. We did have a private tutor for a couple of lessons before we left and she has set us a series of homework and a website to peruse. A little like our very own "School of the Air." We have also programmed our TV to French and are trying to follow the latest soap operas and game shows, not that we are that interested in either but there is a lot of repetition which does help things sink into an aging brain.

Our cruising is retracing the route that we took last year, down the Roanne Canal of course as it is the only way to leave Roanne, then up the Canal Lateral a la Loire to Briare and over the top via the canal Le Loing to meet up with la Seine and sail through Paris. We are on our way to la Somme where Tony is booked to spend five days with Peter James doing an Anzac Day Tour of the Western Front. The programme they have for the tour is amazing but I know he will tell you all about that at a later date.

It has been interesting seeing the same countryside but in a different season. Last year we were admiring autumn colours and seeing the harvest coming in. This year it is all bare branches, wild flowers all along the canal banks and the smidgen of green that we saw in the beginning growing everyday as more and more trees show their first spring growth. There are so many extra chateaux and farm houses on view that last year were hidden by the trees so there are advantages in starting early. We also have had the canals to ourselves, not another boat in sight for the first week but that has changed since Easter and we now are seeing just a few other hardy souls. Hardy souls!!! Yes, did I forget to mention the snow? We woke to a white world on our third day out of port but at least it cleared reasonably quickly then on Easter Monday when we were nice and snug in Nevers we spent a very pleasant day tucked inside with our books while the snow sat all day. Since then the old saying "March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb" is proving true. We have had a lion's share of rain and cold and are now enjoying mild sunny days. Long may it continue.

Having the car is giving us a little more scope to enjoy exploring and we used it to good advantage at Sancerre. This is a beautiful village in the heart of the Pouilly-Fumée/Sancerre wine district. We drove to Sancerre which sits high above the vineyards and the Loire valley and after enjoying a scrumptious lunch decided to investigate the wine we had had with the meal. So on to Chavignol, a small village [120 people] totally surrounded by vineyards and with at least a dozen tasting cellars. Henri Bourgoise is obviously the biggest with even a vineyard in New Zealand and we had a very informative afternoon learning the difference

between the two areas around Sancerre. Needless to say the lesson we received was well rewarded as we left with a good supply of their wines. Now all we require is some visitors to help us drink them.

After Chavignol we drove to Guedelon, the very interesting building site where they are building a castle in an abandoned quarry using tools and methods from the 13th century. There is a permanent work force of 35: stone masons, carpenters, blacksmith, rope maker, potter and osier and even their tools are made on site. All very authentic but we couldn't help wondering WHY??? With the dozens of castles, chateaux etc crying out for repair, why build another one. It was started in 1996 and will take 25 years to complete and we could see why but not understand why.

From Sancerre we went on to Briare with its wonderful pont-canal over the Loire. Always a thrill to sail over that and as it was Saturday afternoon the tourists were out in numbers all with their cameras so we now feature in innumerable holiday snaps. "Sable crossing the Briare Pont du Canal." Briare is so close to the Loire Valley with all the Chateaux. Where do you start? We spent a wet Sunday driving to Albigny sur Nère, a unique Scottish village in the heart of France. Given to John Stuart in 1462 as a reward for helping France end the 100 year war it then became the refuge of Scots Royalty. Rather strange to find The Cutty Sark Inn, and Scot's tartan next door to the Boulangerie and the Charcuterie. We went on to Verriere, a Chateau built by the same Stuart with a very nice restaurant. What better way to spend a wet Sunday than in front of an open fire enjoying fine French food. So we did. Just to add to the atmosphere, the fireplace backing was a beautiful piece of iron work embossed with the shields of France and Scotland. We admired it through the lens of a glass of red wine then went home for a nanna nap. Well we are retired and one is allowed such treats occasionally. Yesterday and today we have sailed up a series of locks to reach the plateau between the Loire and the Loing and have now descended the other side. Nineteen locks in one day may be my limit, especially as some of them were 4m deep. An amazing feat of engineering that was done so many years ago and so good that it has been restored and brings so many tourists to these little French villages. Most of them have made an effort to make the boats welcome, providing good moorings with electricity and water and we repay them with visits to patisseries, charcuteries, epicerie etc. Tonight we are at Montargis, the Venice of the Gatinais with a host of small canals, cute bridges and the best chocolate shops we have ever seen anywhere. We have just visited the crème de la crème. As we entered the assistant asked if we would like to taste their specialities. So we did. Then she gave us their mail order catalogue. By this time someone was salivating. He then suggested that perhaps we should have a [large] box on board for guests!! I was surprised we escaped as lightly as we did. Mind you we are not leaving 'til tomorrow so perhaps another visit is in order.

Spring has Sprung

Week 33 — April 1st - 18th (*Tony*).

Generally, we have never been attracted to big cities, preferring the rustic charm of small towns and villages where things have remained unchanged for eons and life is less hectic. There are exceptions of course: New York, London, Barcelona, Lyon and Paris; but staying in cities such as these can be expensive and stressful. So imagine cruising right into the very centre of Paris in your boat, with all the comforts of home including



wardrobes, pantry, even slippers, as well as bikes, and mooring in a secure harbour within sight of the Colonne de Julliet in the Place de la Bastille. For a few days Paris was home and we explored the city as we have never been able to do before — on bicycle, foot and Métro — discovering, quite by accident, the posh end of town where all the brand-name shops have stunning window displays but no price tags. If you can afford to shop here the cost doesn't matter! We couldn't resist indulging in a cup of coffee and a patisserie that was to die for — at a price that would have fed an African child for a year; and some chocolates from a chocolatier's shop that was so sensational it would have been more sinful to pass it by.

Cycling around Paris is so easy, and safe. At some exorbitant expense the city granted a company the rights to set up bike stands all over the city, with hundreds of bikes too ugly to steal, where anyone can take one with the mere swipe of a credit card and drop it back to any other stand whenever and wherever one chooses. The council has established bikeways along most inner-city streets and along the river too, sometimes sharing lanes with buses and taxis. It's fabulous. London is now considering doing the same. We had our own bikes of course and I can vouch that a sore crutch is preferable to being footsore after walking the distances we covered.

Cruising down the Seine was an exhilarating, if somewhat nerve wracking experience. The Seine is a big, living river and was flushed with higher than normal water from several weeks of rain in its upper catchment so bobbing along at 13kph was no problem with the engine barely ticking over. In addition to contending with the ebb flow there are many enormous commercial barges on the river, often coupled in tandem, sometimes so laden they are barely afloat, that power past at more than 20kph both upstream and downstream. Some have telescopic wheelhouses that can be raised to enable the skipper to see over the bow. The locks on the Seine are humungous but having to share one with these big buggers is, at first, rather daunting as they're not to be messed with and have absolute right of way. It was just as well that I rang ahead and booked a berth at Port d'Arsenal in Paris as a number of small pleasure craft were finding making their way upstream a struggle against the current and had sought refuge there until the river subsided so the port was practically full to capacity. A surprising number of people live there permanently. I guess it's cheaper than renting a unit or trying to buy real estate in Paris.

After leaving Paris I was concerned that once we turned off the Seine to head up l'Oise we

might have difficulty against the current but, though still a fairly big river, its flow was nothing like the Seine's. For all that they're exciting to sail, rivers tend to be rather boring as the banks are mostly densely lined with trees that obscure any view, and as with railways, when you come to a town it is often the ugly industrial side that you see. We were relieved therefore to find that soon after the confluence with the Aisne we were once again in a canal built alongside the Oise. The Canal du Nord carries a lot of commercial traffic but it's wide, tranquil and overlooks gorgeous farmland that stretches for miles.

We arrived in Compiègne expecting a small town but were surprised to find a large city with so many spectacular things to see. The chateau, right in the town centre, is huge with vast, beautifully landscaped gardens and was a favourite of Louis XVI who used to host grand hunting events in the nearby forest; and later Napoleon. A few miles out of town, Napoleon III bought a ruined castle in the mid-eighteen hundreds which he had restored by Viollet le Duc. Obviously he had no budget to comply with as the resulting castle is one of the most stunningly beautiful we've ever seen. Talk about a fairytale castle. Walt Disney was apparently inspired by mad Ludvig's palace in Bavaria, but he would have been impressed, as we were, with Pierrefonds. They were using the castle for filming *Merlin* while we were there.

And just a few further miles down the road we came across the recreated train carriage where Marshall Foch and the allies met with German generals to sign the armistice on November 11, 1918. Hitler humiliated the French when he used the same carriage when they surrendered to Germany in 1940. The original carriage was taken back to Berlin but was destroyed by allied bombing. The restored replica is now contained within a fascinating museum full of memorabilia from both wars. Most interesting were the newspapers of the time.

We are now on the Somme, in Péronne a pretty town that was evacuated after it fell behind enemy lines early in WWI. It was blasted to smithereens by French artillery during the allied attack to drive Germany back across the Somme and to eventual defeat in late 1918. We had planned to cruise to Amiens but decided to stay here as we have already visited Amiens and will be returning for a tour of the cathedral (the biggest in France) and the ball at the finale of the *Our Other ANZAC Day Tour*. Newspapers, shops and businesses are displaying Aussie flags and welcome signs in anticipation of next week's events. We're looking forward to it.

Belgium

Week 36 — April 19th - May 9th (*Sally*).

Péronne was a great base for us as from there we were able to visit many of the WW1 sites that until now have only been names on War Memorials — Pozières, Albert, Mont St Quentin, Delville Wood, Bullecourt, Le Hamel and of course Villers Bretonneux. We knew Tony would be retracing his steps with the tour but it was a good chance to do it by ourselves and with the help of "*Walking with Anzacs*" which was only published about a year ago, we were



able to understand the sequence of the battles. Those of you who have heard Ross Bastiaan speak will be interested to know that we found one of his sculpture/maps at each Australian memorial or site of interest. They too are a huge benefit when one is trying to understand why so many lives were lost for such insignificant gains. Tony and Peter were at the Dawn Service at Villers Bretonneux on ANZAC Day. It was a bitterly cold morning but the ceremony was very moving and it is hoped it will become an annual event. (See our website for more.)

Near the little village of Flers we found the NZ Memorial and a cemetery with a wall of 1205 NZ names who fell in the space of 2 months, and they are the ones with no known graves. Then we went on to Villers Bretonneux with the 11,000 Australians' names who have no known graves. After much searching I found my Great Uncle's name among them. One of two brothers who died there. Now the battlefields are the most beautiful farmland, acres of crops as far as the eye can see and the little villages have all been rebuilt, but everywhere one looks is a cemetery. All beautifully kept with flowers planted in front of every grave.

After two days I was happy to catch a train to Paris to meet up with Margaret and Peter James and from there Margaret and I went by train to Vernon for an overnight stay, to make sure of seeing Monet's garden before the crowds arrived. We actually arrived 20 minutes before the gates opened so were first in the door and then did a hurried walk through to the water garden only to find the back gate opens at the same time so there were still people there before us. What a wonderful place it is. I had seen it once before in the autumn when it was a riot of dahlias, roses all in russet and orange colours. This time it was a spring-time garden, a palate of Impressionist shades — pale pinks, lavenders and blues. Bluebells under apple blossom, cream hyacinths and almost luminous pink tulips over blue forget-me-nots. Definitely should be on everyone's wish list to see.

From Vernon we caught a train to Rouen where we walked our feet off in the cobbled streets and the shops, [how nice it is to have someone to browse the shops with] and then moved on to Amiens where we were to meet up with the men folk again. We all attended a fabulous ball in Amiens, the wind-up event for the tour. The entertainment provided by Australian secondary school students was excellent. After four cities in four days it was good to be back to our more relaxed way of travel; ie. sitting on a boat that does 8kph.

From Péronne we resumed our northward tour up the Canal du Nord. Very industrialized as it was only built in the last 100 years to ease pressure on the St Quentin Canal but interesting for Peter as he could study the sand plants, conveyor belts, silos etc. At Lille we retrieved the

car and drove into Belgium to find the grave of my other Great Uncle who died at Passchendaele and from there we went to Ypres for a very moving ceremony at Menin Gate. A large contingent of Australians there, so a march with some old diggers, Australian flags, a young boy reading The Ode, wreath laying and, of course, The Last Post played by the local fire brigade. The Last Post has been played there every night since 1919 except for a time when Ypres was occupied by the Germans in 1940-1944. Our last day with the car we packed the guys off with a thermos to do one last day of WW1. They were away 9 hours, but did manage to visit Vimy Ridge, Fromelles, Messine Ridge, Passchendaele and Tyne Cot Cemetery and came home well satisfied that they had seen more than they ever expected.

From Lille to Kortrijk in Belgium and then on to Gent, the locks got larger and the barges even bigger, we were definitely a small fish among them and were pleased to turn into the very pretty river Lys for our last few miles. This part of the river is lined with the most expensive houses we have seen in Europe, acres of lawns and landscaped gardens. A welcome change after several days of factories and loading bays. Gent was a great place to moor. We were right in the heart of the city so could easily walk to the historic area with its cafes and restaurants and enjoy a Belgium beer plus a meal of Mussels and Frites while watching the world go by. From Gent for the princely sum of two euros each we went to Bruges for the day. What a fairy tale city that is. Cobbled streets, canals and every corner a photo opportunity. Brussels was also only a short train trip away and that too was an interesting city. We did a bus tour so saw a lot of the city including the acres of new EU buildings plus the interesting old part. Even managed a short time in the Art Museum where I was mesmerised by two rooms full of Reuben's and a huge selection of Flemish masterpieces. There was also a visiting exhibition of Flemish paintings from British Royalty but they will have to wait for another trip. Just too much to absorb in one day.

We have now left the cities of Belgium behind and are on our second day travelling south on the Dender river. A twisting stream with green pastures, overhanging trees and a million water birds around us. The countryside is so green and lush, we have even seen them making hay already, such is the growth. The temperature is in the high twenties and with all the water around it is a bit like living in a green house, one can almost hear the grass growing. The t-shirts and shorts have come out of winter storage, as has the sun block cream. Hopefully this weather will continue as we wend our way south into the Meuse valley and back into France. We are enjoying Belgium immensely, the people are extremely friendly and almost everyone speaks English, the food is good and they seem to be enjoying a very high standard of living. Bicycles everywhere but some very expensive cars as well and everyone seems to be outside celebrating the beautiful spring weather.

Belgium — Ardennes, Meuse

Week 38 — May 10th - 23rd (*Sally*).

Belgium has been a great experience for us except for the lack of internet access so apologies to all who have written and not yet received a reply. We can send through the website and receive when we get to a connection but cannot send individual emails. Strange and frustrating and has made us feel quite out of touch. Amazing how quickly one comes to depend on a service that only a few years ago was unheard of. Internet cafés are



virtually impossible to find in Belgium — everyone seems to be connected so there's no need. We continued our leisurely pace along the Dender, which Tony felt should be rechristened the Bender as it twists and turns with very little space to negotiate or even pass another boat. Thankfully, in spite of the beautiful weather the traffic was virtually non-existent and we had the whole river to ourselves. That is except for numbers of ducks with ducklings in tow, geese, grebe and moorhens to name the few we recognized. The bird life was prolific and as all the banks were overgrown they offered ample protection to raise their young. This was the first time we have not had a timetable to meet so we took a very lazy six days to do the 68km with frequent stops at the little towns along the way. Every village in Belgium has a town square, or Grot Markt, and every square has cafés that serve copious amounts of Belgium beer. We are told that Belgium produces 350 different brands of beer with various alcohol contents, the highest is 12%!!!

Our biggest adventure (indignity rather) on the Dender was becoming well and truly aground in the middle of the river. The river is a lot lower than normal and we proved that by coming to rest on a mud bank just before the last lock going up. With the help of the ever friendly lock keepers and a very big tractor we were towed off and into the lock, where we continued on our way. The authorities need to do some serious maintenance work on this section. It was a relief to reach the end and turn onto the Canal du Centre which took us to Mons.

We had arrived in time for "The Doudou", the biggest event in the calendar. It is a celebration that dates back to the 14th century, and involves 1,500 of the townspeople all dressed in mediaeval attire. On Saturday after a church ceremony the relics of Saint Waudru are entrusted to the Mayor so that on Sunday they can be carried on a procession through the streets followed by 60 groups of religious orders and Guild Corporations. After the procession reaches the church and the casket is safely back in its usual place the Dragon appears in the Grot Markt and is confronted by St George and a host of other participants. Of course St George always wins and the people of Mons are safe for another year, which they promptly celebrate by drinking another few big brown Belgium beers. Our part in the celebrations involved a lot of people watching from a ring side seat in the square on Friday and Saturday night where we saw the start of the procession to collect the relics but my highlight was just by chance finding my way into the church on Friday for the start of the dress rehearsal for the Saturday ceremony. The organ music along with a keyboard and Drums was wonderful. I

always think an organ fills a church but put a set of drums with it and you have really got a BIG sound.

From Mons we continued on to the Strepv-Thieu Boat lift. A new engineering marvel that has only been open a few years. One sails into an enormous bath tub and the whole thing is lifted 73metres vertically and one then sails out the other end. Very ingenious and has made the Canal du Centre much more commercially viable. Barges sizes have increased from 350 tons to 1,350 tons which is equivalent to 60 trucks or 40 railway wagons. It meant of course that we met more than a few of them and have become very adept at keeping out of their way. Yesterday we followed two of them into a lock that measured 200m by 25m. We took up our fraction of space then were followed by a hotel barge and then another huge barge inched up beside us. It was 100m long and displaced over 2,000 tonnes. The one in front of it had to squeeze forward to get them all in with barely a metre between them all. Interesting but will be nice to be back to scenic cruising next week.

We are now on the Meuse where the highlight for Tony was sailing through a huge steel mill at Charleroi. We had the blast furnace and foundry on both sides of the canal with conveyors and walkways over. Only a man would find that fascinating. Our other stop of interest was Namur, on the confluence of the Sambre and the Meuse. We intend to be back there next Monday to collect our next guests, Nancy and Tony Stenton and then continue down the Meuse to France. We're looking forward to sharing a very pretty part of both countries with them.

More Ardennes, Meuse

Week 40 — May 24th - June 6th (*Tony*).

For the entire month of May we meandered along some of the waterways of Belgium. And what a delightful country it is. On the one hand the countryside is predominantly flat with verdant pasture and picturesque villages; and on the other hand, especially along the big rivers and commercial canals, it displays enormous industrial plants and massive factories producing everything one could think of, from raw steel to



concrete products and pharmaceuticals. Such was the Meuse downstream from Namur for two days — to Maastricht in Holland. The valley is attractive with deeply forested slopes and rocky outcrops but every available piece of flat land adjoining the river is a site of frenzied extractive industry with huge barges being loaded or unloaded. Sometimes the volume of commercial traffic caused delays of up to two hours to get through the locks — not that we minded, there's always a lunch to be eaten at leisure, or another meal to prepare. We were told the visit to Maastricht is worth the journey; and it was. A small city but lively and full of character and charm. We sojourned there for two days and enjoyed a couple of very memorable meals as well as indulging in a few beers and a bit of shopping. The rest of Holland will have to wait for another year...

After fuelling up we turned *Sable* around and returned upstream, back to Namur. After a good shower of rain I was mystified by an orange sediment all over the boat. Apparently it was dust from the Sarah Desert whipped up into the atmosphere by a huge wind storm and caught in the precipitation of the clouds over Europe. At Namur we picked up Tony and Nancy Stenton who joined us for a week as we headed further up the Meuse, back into France through some of the prettiest scenery we have encountered. No industry here, just glorious forest and attractive towns, small locks and clean water. Most of the time we spent doing what we always do when we're together — eating fine food and drinking copious amounts of wine, along with many big brown Belgium beers. Boy, do the Belgians make great beer! No beer is less than 5% alcohol and many top 9%. And except for a couple of brews, they've all tasted fantastic. Everyone in Belgium appears to drink litres of beer, and who would blame them? But it may account for their growing obesity problem — something that hasn't been obvious at all elsewhere in Europe.

At Dinant, a beautiful town nestled beside the river under an overreaching rocky outcrop that occasionally breaks off and destroys the cathedral beneath it, we moored up alongside a restaurant and as we supped champagne we were tempted to ask the waiter to serve us Belgium's famous specialty on *Sable's* top deck, such was the ambience of the evening. However, after contemplating the likelihood of him being run over while crossing the road and the repast being spoiled, we took ourselves across to his establishment and gluttonously consumed a kilogram of mussels (mussels) and frites each. Served individually in a family-size le cruaset casserole dish, we all agreed that it was the finest feed of mussels ever! None of us managed to finish the delicious creamy soup/sauce at the bottom. An hour later, and

forsaking dessert, (imagine!), we teetered back across the road for a game of 500. Tony S's attempt to go misere resulted as it usually does, in failure. How wonderful it is to share our life afloat with good friends!

Next day we crossed the border back into France and arrived at the town of Givet where we made the unfortunate error of mooring at the only available spot, under a bridge. It took more than an hour the following morning to scrub the pigeon shit from the decks, and if that wasn't enough, in the early hours some brats had pelted our roof with half a dozen eggs! We were disappointed that there was nowhere to moor a boat at Monthermé, an intriguing looking town that spans the river at a big bend and is close to where some fierce fighting occurred in both world wars. Lots of old gun emplacements and bunkers remain visible along the banks and in the hills above the Meuse which is still a mighty river here and extends a long way further, almost to Toul, close to the start of the Moselle which flows into the Rhine.

The city of Charleville Mezieres with its magnificent central square appealed to all of us and we visited the centre several times for a beer or three and a window shopping stroll through the pedestrian ways. After an overnight stop there we continued on, past the start of the Canal des Ardennes at Pont à Bac, to Sedan which is overlooked by one of the biggest old forts in Europe. Whilst making a u-turn to face the current prior to mooring, I managed to terrify the passengers and crew when Sable was caught broadside-on to the fast flowing current and swept rapidly towards the bridge pilings. I earned more than a beer rescuing that situation and after a change of pants we all raced into town for a pacifying drink.

We all returned to Charleville next day by train to further explore the city, and for Tony and Nancy to pick up a hire car for the next stage of their trip — a week in the Loire Valley. This morning they left us to drive to Tours while we wait in pouring rain (the first real rain we've had in more than a month) for Sally's sister Fran and Lester, from NZ, to arrive. A more thorough reconnoitre of Sedan has revealed a rather pleasant town with lots of interesting places, including the impressive fort, that were missed on our first, cursory stroll into town. If the weather improves tomorrow we will turn around and head down to the Canal des Ardennes to make for Reims and the Champagne region. I am looking forward to sampling lots of their local produce.

Champagne

Week 42 — June 7th - 20th (*Sally*).

Summer has arrived in all her splendour. Who would ever think that we would complain of being too hot and be seeking shade, but it has been sunscreen and sun glasses for the last two weeks.

Fran and Lester arrived from their tour of Scotland and England and after a night at Sedan and a trip to the weekly market we set off downstream with the help of a good strong current. It was a very



short journey before we turned west to join the Canal des Ardennes which links the Meuse to the Aisne and takes one through some of the most fertile farmland we have seen. Day one was cows and grazing, which as the Pauls are dairy farmers from NZ, was of particular interest to them. We arrived on Saturday at La Chesne, a small village at the top of the plateau to learn that our next stage would be delayed as Lock 20 in a chain of 26 was broken and we could be held up for a few days. Sunday we spent in what has become a regular pattern, ie. find a restaurant and enjoy the Plat du Jour: four courses for a ridiculous sum, in this case 14.50€ and then Tony took advantage of the glorious weather to start some pre-painting preparation. This involved removing windows and getting rid of some rust spots, with a grinder. It didn't make us very popular with the neighbouring boaties who had had a much more industrious Sunday cleaning and polishing their boats. Lester and I decided to take the motor bikes and investigate the repair work which we hoped was being done so we had a pleasant 6km drive down the towpath to the trouble spot. What a hive of activity, three frogmen, and seven assistants or lookers-on plus a few interested boaties all keen to get on their way. We were told it would be fixed that day, welcome news as La Chesne is not the place one would choose to spend extended time. Tuesday we set off in convoy as by then there were eight boats waiting to proceed and dropped gently down the full twenty six locks past fields of barley, wheat and corn. It takes a bit to impress a farmer from South Canterbury but they were both struck by the quality and yield of all the crops, and we all loved the beauty and variety of the trees that line the canals. My impression of this time will be the shades of green in the trees and the birdsong from all sides.

My favourite spot in the boat is up the front where the engine noise is only a whisper and one can really appreciate the beauty all around. Unfortunately, Tony doesn't get to share this very often so it was lovely when Lester took over the wheel and he could spend time there as well. At Rethel we had time for a good meander around the town and found ourselves at the top of a hill which is now the war cemetery for 3,500 French soldiers. The Battles of the Marne and Champagne have certainly left their mark in this area as at the next stop, Berry au Bac, there was an even larger cemetery; and after we left Reims at the small town of Sillery, the cemetery there holds the bodies of 116,000 French, plus a hundred or so commonwealth soldiers. Very sobering.

At Berry au Bac we left the Canal des Ardennes and joined the Canal de l'Aisne à la Marne for a pleasant 20km run into Reims. We floated above farmland all the way with views on all

sides. Some harvesting has started with silage and hay being cut and in a few weeks the crops of barley and wheat should be ready. Reims is one of the must-see cities of France, and how fortunate we were to arrive on the major festival weekend of the year. The city was celebrating the arrival of Joan of Arc and the young King Charles for his coronation in the year 1429. The celebration lasted for three days with many dance and music groups from around the world plus a mediaeval market place in the two main squares. There were groups dancing or performing on every street corner with lots of audience participation. This with the abundance of outdoor cafés, wonderful sunshine and a very happy crowd made for a truly memorable experience in this city.

Saturday evening we were farewelling Fran and Lester at a local restaurant when the Bavarian Band that had also been dining there struck up an impromptu concert, so we had the harp, accordion, tuba and cornet playing while we ate. Just another wonderful memory in a year full of them.

Sunday, our visitors left to continue their travels and we took advantage of the lull in activity to continue the painting. That is before the sounds of the full on procession with 1,500 participants took us away from the labours. All the bands and dance groups plus many others: stilt walkers, national dress groups, mediaeval weaponry and soldiers plus of course the star of the day, Joan and Charles with their cortege of attendants. All good fun. Once the painting was started we were both keen to see it finished so Monday we moved 10km south to Sillery, where we took over a quay, spread ourselves out and removed and resealed windows, and painted all the superstructure. (We still have to do the decks.) Sable looks lovely and loved again, just in time for us to be captured by French Television that was doing a piece on sport and recreation. They were following a group of walkers when they spotted us in a lock so we were filmed sailing gracefully out. I'm sure we will never see it but it was nice that Sable looked good for them and not covered with a multitude of anti-rust spots.

We are now deep in Champagne country. Grape vines cover the hills on either side of the canal and we have sampled, and will continue to sample, some of the produce. Strange, we haven't yet come across one we haven't liked... With 327 Champagne houses producing 229 million bottles annually we will not get to them all. Well not this time anyway, but we will be back.

La Marne

Week 44 — June 21st - July 4th (Tony).

If you watched the first stage of the *Tour de France*, as we did, live, you would have noticed the gorgeous scenery along the route. Unfortunately we can't take our boat to Bretagne; nor can we get anywhere within cooeee of the *Tour* (the very year it goes through Roanne!) but hereabouts the scenery is just as picturesque, the villages similarly quaint and adorable. We are presently in slow-mode, watching paint dry, literally. The summer weather has been gloriously hot,



clear sunny skies for days, which ultimately provoked a mighty electrical storm the other night that reminded us of home. We have enjoyed stopping for several days or more at a number of places and doing a bit of painting as well as exploring the nearby towns and villages. Sable now boasts a new livery with the walkways painted blue/grey — much easier on the eyes than the stark white, and easier to keep clean too.

Rotarian friend, Pauline Armstrong, joined us at Epernay and after a three day stopover there, which of course included a mandatory tour of the House of Moët, the caves and samples of their product, we set off down the Marne through vineyards exclusively growing grapes for champagne. More attractive scenery would be difficult to find anywhere. Now in lush full growth the vines stretch row on row over thousands of hectares. Imagine the colours in early autumn as the leaves on the vines and the trees turn russet and gold. We turned about at Dormans, just at the limit of the Champagne terroir, after hiking up to the French National Memorial Chapelle built by Maréchal Foch to commemorate the two victorious Battles of the Marne (1914 and 1918). We were unable to get inside the beautiful chapel but the grounds and gardens were lovely. Another pause at Chatillon sur Marne prompted a bike ride up to the top of the hill above the town to take in the magnificent vista of the region from the imposing statue of Pope Urban II whose silly idea it was to start the Crusades. On the pretext that we would need three bikes, Sally got a new one as an early birthday present but that was about the only occasion the three of us went for a ride. However, she loves her new bike and now uses it daily, up and down the tow path and forays into villages, essentially for supplies of fresh cheese and/or patisseries. However, the cheese and pastries have taken a back seat to the fresh fruit which is literally flooding the markets. Apricots, peaches, nectarines and cherries like we used to get before supermarkets decided how and what we should eat. Still lovely punnets of strawberries and raspberries as well. Hard to choose between them all.

Bypassing Epernay on the return journey, we continued to Vraux on the Canal Lateral à la Marne to visit a very special museum. On the day after I was born an RAF Lancaster bomber crashed in a field about forty kilometres from here. The entire crew bailed out and parachuted to safety, albeit behind German lines, except the pilot who was trapped and badly injured but survived. All were sheltered by the French locals and repatriated to Britain before they could be captured by German soldiers. The navigator was an Australian and Rotarian friend, Keith Robson, then twenty one who was keen for us to see this museum and arranged the relevant introductions.

In 1939 an RAF Squadron was based at an aerodrome just north of Vraux from where they flew regular sorties over France to Belgium and German borders. Most of the airmen were billeted in the town and nearby farms. On 11 May, 1940 sixteen Blenheim bombers were neatly lined up, engines running ready for take-off when a German raid suddenly flew over and destroyed the lot. Some were replaced but a few days later the order was given to evacuate all RAF bases back to Britain. The airfield was then used by the Germans and later by the Americans so it had a varied history. After the war it reverted to farmland. A small group of aviation enthusiasts has developed a most amazing museum in Vraux full of memorabilia of all kinds, French, British, American and German including pieces of aircraft dug up in fields nearby, much of it in unrestored condition. And there is a display, with photos, story and parts from Keith's crash; and presentations made during his visit to the museum just a few years ago. It was so special to be able to visit this wonderful little museum and we were all made to feel very welcome by aviation enthusiast extraordinaire and museum custodian, Gérard Faux.

Chalons en Champagne was not only a gorgeous town but beside the mooring was a delightful area of lawn shaded under big plane trees. We spent three nights there. The girls explored the town and I took the motorbike and shopped for champagne and some outdoor carpet for the top deck. This looks great, protects the surface and makes the top deck area safer and more useable. In recent days it has been used constantly. Hey, it's summer over here!

We arrived at the tiny village of Pogny on Saturday afternoon in time to find ourselves the intrigued spectators of not one but two weddings. The first bridal party, comprising bride and five or six bridesmaids, trailing family and Mother of the Bride walked, presumably from their home outside the village, to the church — no small distance and in considerable heat. What would they have done had it rained? Farther back someone was walking a couple of donkeys, though we're not sure if they were connected to the festivity or not. The other bride rode in a black post-war Citroën, and like the car, immaculately restored. Guests were turning up to the church, many more than fifteen minutes late and desperately looking for places to park. So enamoured by Vitry le Francois were we, we stayed for four days. Another top town. Tick... In full sun I got a lot of painting done. Three canals intersect at Vitry and it took us three days to decide which direction to head next. We eventually decided to follow the Canal Marne au Rhin, at least up to Bar le Duc. From there we hope to skip across to Verdun by bus to visit the war history sites that are especially featured this July. Since leaving Vitry we have meandered oh so slowly, stopping for a night or three every few kilometres. The countryside is so pretty and tranquil, who would want to rush through it?

Haute Meuse

Week 46 — July 5th -18th (*Sally*).

The Canal de la Marne au Rhin has taken us from Vitry le Francois east, at a very slow pace. The canal itself is 138km with 98 locks so one is rising constantly with the person handling ropes getting plenty of work. It is a pleasant waterway with farmland on one side and forest on the other. More interesting is peeping over the garden fences into the locals' vegetable gardens which are works of art for the quality and the abundance. Some could be commercial plots with



the quantity that they grow. Our only complaint was the scarcity of stopping places, some villages go out of their way to provide a quay and services for little or no cost while others are content to ignore us and our contribution to their economy. We did find one well-appointed spot at Pargny sur Sauli where for the princely sum of 3€ a night we had paved quay, picnic tables, water and electricity. Very welcoming. We used our three nights there to finally finish painting before carrying on. Our first major stop was at Bar le Duc, a town we had never even heard of so were pleasantly surprised with all it had to offer. The Haute Ville is renowned for the streets of renaissance buildings all in good repair or being renovated to same. The church holds two masterpieces of a French sculptor, Ligier Richier, [some of you more educated people may have heard of him, we hadn't.] The most famous, "Transi" represents the decomposing skeleton of a local nobleman standing in triumphant pose. Quite macabre and made even more so because it is mounted on an ossary containing the bones of several more noble folk whose graves were destroyed during the revolution. Bar le Duc also has good selection of restaurants and we were able to find one in which to celebrate my birthday with a good lunch, and later an even better bottle of champagne sitting on the deck of Sable that evening. Some of our grandchildren were impressed that Mumma drove to her birthday lunch on her motorbike, some were unimpressed and others who know more about motor bikes than we ever will, think that anything described as 50cc should not be called a motor bike.

Bar le Duc is most famous for being the start of the Voie Sacree, the road that supplied Verdun during the battle. It is now a national monument, the only road in France to have no numbers and every kilometre post is a plinth bearing a soldier's helmet and a laurel wreath. In WWI the 75km stretch carried a vehicle every fourteen seconds. i.e. 6,000 vehicles a day, and was responsible for the supply of 90,000 men and 50,000 tons of material and munitions per week over the 300 days that the Battle of Verdun lasted. We took a bus from Bar le Duc to Verdun for the day, and spent a pleasant day wandering the streets and visiting the various expositions and museums. In spite of its grim memories Verdun is a very pleasant cheerful town with wide pedestrian streets and a great waterfront quay. The former bishop's palace is now a huge Peace Centre and under the original citadel there is 7km of tunnel that is now a recreation of the French Headquarters, hospital and kitchens that operated there in 1916. Very interesting to visit, especially when they provided a petite train to ride on and a

commentary in English.

Our travels continued up the Canal de la Marne au Rhin but as Bastille Day was approaching we decided to find a village with some chance of celebrating in style so made a very big day of the 12th to get us to the start of the 4.8km tunnel that links the Marne Valley to the Meuse. It is only one lane and one goes through in convoy at appointed times so if you are not there at 8.30 am it is 1.30pm before you can proceed. We managed to make the last stopping place by 6.00pm on the 12th but to do that we did 28 locks and 26km. A big, big day and not one you would want to do too often.

Bastille Day we celebrated at Void, a pretty village with a nice grassy quay that we shared with several boats. Villages in these areas compete to be rewarded with a rating as a Village Fleurie of France and Void, with just two stars, was literally dripping with window boxes and baskets full of geraniums and petunias in all shades of pink and red. Several of the streets cross various small canals and waterways with highly decorated bridges and the old wash houses which are now outdoor retreats for those lucky enough to have access to one. On Sunday night the locals provided a community meal in the covered market place for 6€ a head. I can safely say that we disproved the saying that it is impossible to get a bad meal in France. However the fireworks made up for the cooking. Great showers of stars and rockets over the river. The view from our wheelhouse was stunning!!!! A little close at times, but stunning.

At the next junction we once again had to make a decision. Do we continue to Toul and on to Nancy or turn left and come down the Meuse again? Left turn won and we have spent the last five days sailing north again. Commercy was our first stop, with its magnificent palace and town square, then a couple of nights at Verdun where we made use of the aforesaid quay. Unfortunately the city has decided to be extra generous and provide free moorings and as a result it is always full and not easy to find space for a boat as big as ours. We rafted alongside a friendly American couple and enjoyed their company so much that we all shared a taxi to the sound and light show that plays in an old disused quarry. It is called *From the Flames to the Light* and is a recreation of the battle with a good strong message of peace to end with. Completely played by volunteers from France and Germany, 300 actors, 900 costumes, lights, fireworks etc. Great show, not to be missed but now we have left Verdun and both looking forward to a lighter taste of French culture. Enough battlefields...

Our wonderful weather continues, harvest taking place all around us, and with daylight still at 10:00pm they can really take advantage of the days. We are following with interest the *Tour de France*, as I imagine is every red-blooded Australian. Bit of a scurry every night to get settled and at least watch the closing stages of the day's race. Go Cadel....

Champagne, Again!

Week 49 — July 19th - August 8th
(Tony).

No doubt about it, this is the life! But to share it with friends and family makes it even more special. So it was a thrill to have Gillian and Matt (No 7) aboard for a week as we returned to spend more time in our favourite spots in the Champagne region.

After leaving Verdun, which is one of the loveliest towns we've visited, we continued down the Meuse in search of cultural stimulation. We



found it at Mouzon, another typically gorgeous small town steeped in history, where quite by accident we found the town centre in the midst of hosting a motorbike rally. There were more bikies and motorbikes than I've ever seen since our visit (also quite by accident) to a remote small town in USA where Harley Davidsons were made and it was their 100th anniversary or something! Mouzon's town square was literally throbbing with more than a thousand motorbikes and leather-clad bikies, plus dozens of stalls selling every kind of motorbike gear imaginable, not to mention the beer tents galore. And... there was simultaneously, a line dancing contest in the adjoining street with hundreds of contesting teams, each decked out in their own version of country and western uniform complete with six-shooters that they regularly twirled and fired into the air. It was all hilarious and great fun to watch. And... before either of the above events had finished there began an organ recital in the adjacent church. Sally and I opted to attend the concert. The organist was a young professor of music (she looked to be no more than sixteen), a specialist in mediaeval organ music. The organ was absolutely splendid, and exquisitely restored, no doubt at considerable expense. It was all-in-all a unique outing. It is amazing how often our arrival at a place has coincided with their special annual event. We have seen more festivals, parades and fêtes than we ever knew existed.

We continued down the Meuse — it truly is a beautiful waterway — bypassing Sedan, and turned off once again into the Canal des Ardennes. We stopped at Pont au Bar to fuel up, draining the station's diesel tank. My guilt trip about our environmental footprint evaporated when I calculated that we are using less fuel here than we did in our cars in Australia. In five months since we left Roanne in March we have travelled more than 2,000km — and consumed less than 1l/km. Not bad for a 46 tonne home afloat!

Five weeks later the verdant countryside is just as beautiful — same scene, different scenery! Fields of wheat and barley, previously olive green, some turning brown, now harvested, the stubble a burnished gold in stark contrast to the flourishing crops of sugar beet. Meanwhile lucerne is lush green awaiting the mower and baler, while corn now high as an elephant's eye is flowering. Acres of sunflowers nod in unison towards the sun, as in a Van Gogh painting. If I had to be a farmer, let it be here! And all around the hills are spread with row upon row of heavenly vines, the bunches of grapes swelling daily as the countdown to harvest time draws ever closer. We have been fortunate to experience one of the best summers, apparently,

France has had in years.

And so, full circle, back to Champagne. We simply had to come back. Our supplies of the golden nectar were precariously low so we'll make sure that doesn't happen again. Hence we've been making quite a few stops for tastings and restocking. Some of the smaller, boutique vigneron produce Champagne at 12€ a bottle that is every bit as delicious as the top brands (30€). It's hard to resist buying a back-pack full at those prices. The other reason to return was, of course, to pick up Gillian and Matt in Reims. Now Gill can almost match her mother in downing a glass or three of Champagne so what better place to take them cruising than down the Marne past Champagne's finest vineyards, to Epernay. The motor bikes got a good workout as we took turns exploring the vineyards. There is something quite magic about getting above the canal and up into the heights. To sit surrounded by vines in every direction is very special. Matt had an interesting experience exploring an 1870's fort with his Grandmother. They decided to take the shortcut to the fort, which meant driving the motorbikes through a forest full of shell holes from the 1914-18 war. Matt, as an experienced motorcross rider made short work of it; Mumma had a few nervous moments, envisaging herself jettisoned at the bottom of one of the craters, or worse, setting off an unexploded ordinance! They have now left us to explore Paris and then Amsterdam but it was great to have them with us for a week and to let them see that we haven't entirely squandered their inheritance. I think *Sable's* value has just appreciated a teeny bit. Reluctantly we will have to start heading back to Chalons en Champagne, Vitry le Francois, again, and then down the Saone in order to get back to Roanne before mid-October in time to prepare *Sable* for the winter.

We were enthralled by the *Tour de France* even though the coverage at Roanne was rather disappointing, and that Cadel didn't win. Next year... Today, a heavy shower of rain just on lunchtime as we berthed at a comfortable quay, with electricity, at Damery seemed a perfect excuse to spend the afternoon in front of TV watching the opening of the Olympic Games. I'm looking forward to the next couple of weeks, cheering the Aussies.

Haute Marne

Week 51 — August 9th - 22nd (Sally).

Peaches in Champagne: *Take a perfectly ripe peach, peel and slice it into a wine (or brandy) glass. Sprinkle with fresh raspberries and then douse with champagne.*

Serve with fresh cream.

Delicious, and even more so when accompanied with a glass of champagne.

Finally, we have moved on from Le Champagne, the area producing plentiful supplies of la champagne, the



wine. Such is our affinity to this particular stretch of the country that it took all of eight days to travel 20km from Damery to Condé sur Marne which is the last stopping place in reach of the vineyards. We took advantage of the opportunity to stop and visit many cellar-door vendors — well about twelve or so out of three hundred and seventy — and stocked up with enough bubbly to hopefully see us back to Roanne. Next wine area is Burgundy. We've never really taken to Pinot-noir but I've a feeling we may grow to like it more in the next few weeks... We took the motor bikes again for several trips up into the countryside and wended our way from one pretty village to another, each with stunning displays of flower boxes and hanging baskets. A return to the picturesque village of Hautvillers where Dom Perignon first discovered how to "bottle stars" was obligatory. In 1999 we had the privilege of being special guests of Moët & Chandon and were given a rare entry to the museum that houses artefacts from his laboratory and abbey. This area obviously has not experienced the water shortages that have been the norm in Australia for so long. The whole of the champagne area has a designated "Route Touristique du Champagne" so by following that trail we did see just a few of the best sites but still left plenty for future trips. It was interesting to find some of the vignerons with the time and inclination to discuss their craft with us. One in particular, we were interested to find, has only five hectares of grapes which produce 60,000 bottles. Their biggest problem is finding people to pick for them, he needs 10 people for 10 days. Any volunteers? One other owner has a group of 70 that come from Belgium every year but then she has the added burden of housing and feeding them. That is all well behind us now and we are several days further south on our way back to Roanne. We stopped for three days again at Chalons en Champagne, it is such a pleasant mooring with a grassy quay and a stand of chestnut trees that just beg for a lazy afternoon with a comfy chair and a book. We had planned to revisit a special restaurant but were disappointed to find it, like so many businesses in France, closed throughout August for their annual holidays.

The lazy days have also been a good chance to follow the Olympics and the coverage has been good although we have mostly seen only the sports that France is interested in. As a result we have seen a lot of judo, greco-roman wrestling, handball, mountain biking and fencing. In fact Tony reckons there was so much fencing they could have rebuilt the Great Wall. For any (Aussie) results which we particularly wanted to follow we have used the internet.

From Chalons and Vitry we turned south and entered the Canal de la Marne à la Saône, or as it is now known: "Le Canal Entre Champagne et Bourgogne." There are 244km and 113 locks

before we reach the Sône, and it will take us through the interesting towns of St Dizier, Chaumont and Langres as well as country that was once famous for its cast and wrought iron works. The canal was built because of the large number of blast furnaces in the valley and even though most have fallen into disuse now one can see examples of the work that was so important to their economy. We had hoped to pause long enough to visit the factory where le Creuset pans and oven dishes are made but we were told by the lock-keeper that it was closed, whether permanently or just for holidays we couldn't determine. As well as the locks there are seventeen lift-bridges to operate, all made of riveted iron and several of the permanent bridges too are all iron work, plus of course numerous balconies and statues in the towns. St Dizier had several examples. We enjoyed a walk through the old cobbled streets there, then in the afternoon I took a long bike ride to the largest man-made lake in Europe, Lac de Der. The 4,800ha is a great water sports area and is renowned as a bird watching site, particularly in spring and autumn when 70,000 cranes rest here on their way to or from southern Spain. Would be a sight to see.

It is interesting to discover various regions' specialties. St Dizier, for example, is the European manufacturing centre for half-a-dozen brands of tractors. Peeping over walls alongside the canal we could see hundreds upon hundreds of shiny new tractors, excavators and machinery lined up awaiting delivery to heaven knows where.

We are now at Joinville, home of the first Duke of Guise who created in the town a spacious pleasure house and garden. His own huge chateau was destroyed during the revolution but the small chateau and the gardens have been saved and restored. Beautiful geometric gardens plus a huge "English" park surround the chateau which is undergoing some expensive looking restoration. Always a surprise to find such hidden gems as we travel along. Today we once again unloaded the motor bikes and saw some more of the countryside. Found ourselves on the historic trail that Joan of Arc took from her home village on the way to Chinon. You cannot travel far in Europe without treading in someone's footsteps.

The last few days have seen a definable change in the weather — sadly autumn is on its way and the days are becoming noticeably shorter. However, the latest forecast has predicted virtually cloud-free skies for the next seven days so perhaps I've been presumptuous. The market was selling big punnets of blackberries, new season pears and figs while on the sides of the canals apple trees are laden with fruit and the vegie gardens are displaying huge orange pumpkins. All signs of a change of season.

Haute Marne and Over the Top

Week 53 — August 23rd - Sept 5th (Tony).

Brochures describe the canal up through Haute Marne as "*the enchanting canal*". And enchanting it certainly is. A number of bargees advised us that it is an uninteresting stretch, isolated and devoid of services and places to replenish supplies. Granted, it is a little isolated, for France, in that human habitation is sparse and villages are very small and more distantly spaced than elsewhere but the scenery is so tranquil and unspoiled. We reckon it is one of the nicest



canals we have so far been on. Climbing up the Marne through seventy-five locks, all more than 3 m deep, the valley becomes narrower and more confined. Cattle graze in long, lush grass in pastures that cling to the lower slopes of the hillsides and across the valley floor while the hilltops are covered in dense forest. Trees, deciduous and conifer, line the canal and farm boundaries. The canal mostly hugs a contour part-way up the hillside, well above the river, thus giving an unimpeded view that, in our eyes, is 'heaven on a stick'.

We were particularly captivated by the ancient fortified towns of Chaumont and Langres. Both are situated on dominant promontories several kilometres away from the river so we were very thankful that we have motorbikes as they both warranted three day visits. And at both places we enjoyed clear skies and hot summer sunshine. Chaumont has a gorgeous, lively town centre and just out of town a massive viaduct built in the 1800's to carry the railway. Langres has very high ramparts which enfold the town and offer spectacular views over the surrounding region and are well worth the walk around. The old walls incorporate a gateway built by (or should I say for) the Romans in 20BC. In the town itself the houses are all incredibly old and adorably quaint. Most are in remarkable condition, though restoring such places must be a nightmare — a plumb-bob or spirit level wouldn't help much, only adding to the frustration. In order to earn a drink, I challenged Sally to join me in a climb to the top of the tower of the cathedral. As we entered the side porch beautiful organ music started up and we stepped into the nave to find ourselves onlookers to a huge wedding attended by no less than two hundred guests. As the door banged shut behind us the choir and congregation rose and burst into song for the first hymn. The lady curator standing sentinel inside the door was quite nonplussed by our intrusion and happily accepted our 2€ fee and guided us to the foot of the spiral staircase and we set off up the 220 tight winding steps, with the glorious choral symphony reverberating in our ears for at least another four or five verses. From the top we took in the marvellous views over the town and countryside before descending, again to organ accompaniment. But before we went off for our well-deserved drinkies under shady parasols at a delightful al fresco bar we joined what seemed like half the town assembled under the trees outside the cathedral to watch the newly married couple and fashionably dressed throng emerge through the 7m high front doors. An hour later, thirst sated, we wandered back by the cathedral as a horse-drawn dray bearing a very old couple pulled up outside. After I jokingly suggested they may be the bride and groom for the next wedding we looked on, aghast, as family spent ten minutes or more assisting madam down from the wagon and into a wheelchair and to the resounding trumpet of the organ belting out "*Here*

Comes the Bride" the happy couple began their cautious way up the aisle before the doors were slammed shut by a zealous verger. I ungraciously presumed they were merely making legal what they intended to do with the farm when either or both of them go off to the rest home in the sky.

It's incredulous to realize that after rising upstream to more than 340 m above sea level, almost to the (underground) source of the Marne you then drift through a 4.8 km tunnel into the valley of the Vingeanne which is a tributary of the Saône. From this point the Marne flows down to join the Seine in Paris and thence to the North Sea; the Saône empties into the Rhone and then the Mediterranean. Immediately, one is struck by the contrast for here the valley is very wide with rambling undulations. Like the Barossa, it is difficult to define the area as a 'valley.' Nonetheless the canal drops sharply down to join the River Saône near Pontailler sur Saône. But instead of continuing south we couldn't resist the temptation to journey a day's travel upstream to spend the weekend at Gray another very old historic town on the Saône. We are bound to come this way again to get to Nancy or Toul but curiosity got the better of us. We're feeling rather like recalcitrant children reluctant to return home from the playground 'cause we're having so much fun.

But, come Monday, we definitely have to turn around and head downstream back towards Roanne. And we are looking forward to a summer in Aus.

Last Tuesday kids throughout Europe went back to school to start a new year; which means most businesses are open again, buses and trains have reverted to normal timetables, and soon TV programs will resume their normal 'ratings' schedule, I hope. TV has been crap here for the past two months, apart from the Olympic Games coverage of course. Didn't Beijing do the games proud? I must look into mooring possibilities for Sable in the Thames for 2012...

The Saone

Week 55 — Sept 6th - 19th (*Sally*).

This has been an interesting two weeks as we celebrated not only the anniversary of our purchase of Sable but also a year since we started our first cruise. We remember the trepidation as we set out and the few hiccups along the way as we gained confidence and knowledge into managing our floating home. In spite of it being the first day looking and the first boat we actually inspected we are both still convinced that we have not seen a vessel that would have suited us better. In our



travels we have seen such a variety of boats, the strangest was little more than a floating raft, tent on top and powered by a single outboard motor. They chugged past us on the Meuse and we saw them again after they had completed 200km on their way north again. There have also been a variety of converted barges in various stages of renovation from the magnificent to the "How did I ever think I could do this?" Those are the ones that make us so thankful that we bought a new-built with no work required.

Our two days in Gray extended to a week as we attempted to have a repair done on our clothes dryer. The promise of a new part by Thursday extended to 'perhaps' next Tuesday so we gave up and proceeded without a working dryer. However the extended stopover was not without highlights. We were moored to a long stone quay and on Sunday were woken by the VNF guys to warn us they were opening the barrages to release water, the result of a deluge upstream. We watched most of the day as the level rose until, when it was ankle deep over our ropes, we moved across river to a higher quay. The rest of the night was spent with one eye on the weather but by morning it was all under control again. Canal cruising has many advantages over rivers.

Gray was an important river port in its day and it had a large number of merchants who built great buildings throughout the town. Unfortunately most of these are now converted to flats and although the original grandeur is there it is slowly falling away under its weight of years. The Office of Tourism in Gray had organised a two hour guided tour of the town followed by a degustation lunch of local specialities. What a bargain at 4.2€. It was interesting to get inside some of the buildings that are not normally open to the public, such as the original pharmacy of the old hospital complete with a wall of ceramic pots for herbs and potions plus the scales and tools for preparing them. Another fascinating building hosted a staircase where the top portion revolved to close off the top floor. It was renowned as the hiding place of an outlawed priest who became the champion of the people of Gray when he saved them from the plague. From Gray we travelled downstream to Auxonne. Napoleon attended the local military academy in Auxonne and they are very proud of that. The town square boasts a statue of a very young Napoleon and the large military presence is accommodated in The Bonaparte Quarter. In the tourist Office we noticed a poster advertising an Exposition of Vauban in the Arsenal. So we set out to explore and found the Arsenal but could not find an entrance or any sign of the exposition. We gave up and returned to the Tourist office where I picked up the poster and asked our friendly lady for help. She told me it would cost 2€, to which I replied

"Yes, but where is it?" The answer was, "It's 2€ for the poster, the exposition was last year!!!!" They give you maps, booklets, free mooring with electricity and water, then charge 2€ for an out of date poster...

Auxonne also turned on a host of functions for our Sunday entertainment. The local triathlon started early and all day we had extremely fit runners passing to remind us that we should do more exercise. At 11:00am there was the local band, a march of soldiers and firemen with a wreath laying ceremony at the War Memorial. Then an open day at the fire station where we watched the complete destruction of a car using "The Jaws of Life."

Monday we continued our way south but true to form diverted and started north again up the Canal Rhone au Rhin. This is the canal that eventually leads to the Rhine and up to Strasbourg but we only intended to do a couple of kilometres to look at one village. Two days later we are still heading north, drawn on by the promise of just one more stop until we reached the old town of Dole where the Canal joins the river Doubs. Dole would have to be one of the prettiest places we have been to. A fascinating town of lovely parks, narrow cobbled streets and high pitched roofs, all dominated by the magnificent Church and bell tower. Every view is postcard pretty and we were sorry to leave.

But it was time to turn south again and after a day cruising we finally made it to St Jean de Losne. It is known as the inland capital of boating and you can see why. We are moored in a huge basin, one among 200+ boats — all shapes and sizes and several shipyards where boats are being repainted, repaired or converted from commercial to live-aboards. The town itself is disappointing. With such a floating population we had expected it to be a bit more welcoming so today we have decided to have one more little diversion before we continue south. Tomorrow we head west, up the Burgundy Canal to Dijon. It's only a day or so and seems a shame to be so close and not get among the grape vines of Burgundy.

Farewell to France

Week 59 — Oct 6th - 19th (*Sally*).

This will be our final newsletter for now as we are at the end of our fabulous experience of living a year in France. It has been seven months since we set out from Roanne to make the trip to the Somme in time for Anzac Day commemorations and we have come full circle and are now moored back in Roanne at the same spot on the quay. We have caught up with old friends who are already here. Everyday another boat arrives and by the end of



October the port will be full and winter life will be resumed. About half the boats are occupied all winter so there is a lively social life when the weather allows. A sign of how acclimatised we are becoming was a comment made this morning, by the person not going for croissants, "It's twice as warm as yesterday, it's nearly 5 degrees." The thought of an Australian summer gets more appealing every day. The days though have been lovely, warm and sunny lately, back into shorts and t-shirts.

Our travels since April have taken us through 2,971km and 827 locks of stunningly beautiful countryside. On reminiscing, there is not a piece of it we would not travel again, and our minds are full of memories and highlights of each day — great cities, historical sites, magnificent buildings, quaint villages around old central squares; and history everywhere. When we look back now it is the close-to-nature mind pictures that are most precious — wild flowers on the banks in spring, ducks and geese with their flocks of young scurrying out of our way, the blue herons who try so hard to be brave and ignore us but then fly off at the last minute, a lone fisherman wrapped to the ears against the cold; and always another picturesque scene opening up as we gently cruise along. Our last two weeks have been a kaleidoscope of colour as autumn turned on a magnificent display to make sure we will come back next year. Tony has just loaded onto our website a small selection of the many many photos we took of the colours along the canal banks and of course through the vineyards of southern Burgundy.

At Chagny we decided to investigate what is reported to be one of the best restaurants in France with the thought that it would be a nice way to say goodbye to Myra whose four day stay had stretched to ten. (It is such a delight when others appreciate our way of life almost as much as we do.) The menu was posted at the door and judging by the sightseers it is probably the biggest tourist attraction in Chagny!!! The cheapest degustation menu started at 100€ each, and that was without wine. We reckoned with the AUD as it is, for the three of us plus some wine that would be \$700AU. There was a dearer menu at 150€ and on the à la carte menu, an entree at 75€. Amazing! Myra and I then called at the local boucherie and spoiled ourselves with a Poulet au Bresse. They are the crème de la crème of French chickens, complete with an AOC, (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) and a price ticket to match. You buy them with head and feet intact, it ensures you are getting the genuine thing as the feet are quite distinctive but they are also weighed in with the final price before they remove them

for you. It was quite a performance and we were given very firm instructions by the butcher on how long to cook it. The result was superb, another memorable meal at a vastly cheaper price than the restaurant. From Chagny it was a 5km cruise to Santenay where we stayed for two more nights to get our final Burgundy vineyard fix. Santenay is the southernmost village of the Cote d'Or and from there you can bike 80km through designated bikeways all the way to Dijon. We did 8km the first day and enjoyed it so much we decided to visit Beaune, 22km away, the next day. Tony was very thankful that we are now down to two bicycles as it gave him the excuse to motorbike there. That day will always shine as a special memory — acres of vines, reds, golds and russet colours on either side of the path and each little village greeting us with the aroma of the first stages of wine making — the fermentation. Eleven kilometres into the ride I suggested perhaps a taxi for the rest of the way and was answered with a very heartfelt "Yes," from big sister. Beaune deserved the extra time. The highlight of Beaune is the 15th century Hospice, built to care for the poor after the Hundred Years War and is a masterpiece of Burgundian mediaeval architecture. It still retains all the original wards, beds all made, pharmacy and kitchen but the jewel of the whole complex is The Last Judgement Polyptych by Rogier van der Weyden. It is housed in a specially lit room and is breathtakingly beautiful.

We said goodbye to Myra at Santenay, we will meet her in Jordan next week, and continued our journey climbing up and southwards to St Leger sur Dheune where we met up once again with Christian and Charlotte on *Kinette*, then on again to the topmost point of the canal at Montceau les Mines, the newest town in Burgundy, built as a mining town in the 19th century but what it lacks in history it has compensated in landscaping as all the disused mines are now beautiful parkland with even a golf course. One of the few we have seen in France. There was a music festival in town that night and a great market the next morning so we set off on our downward journey towards the Loire well stocked up. I have tried to limit my buying at markets by only taking a basket, reasoning if I can't carry it home I won't buy it but still end up with far more food than we need. But who can resist fresh strawberries, figs so ripe they are almost bursting, eight different types of tomatoes that all taste like tomatoes should and the smell of hot roasted ham hocks and roast baby potatoes. Yes we have put on weight. Well who wouldn't!!

We are now back in Charolais country, no cropping on this stretch of farmland, just picture book farms with every paddock a herd of white cows. Charolais were developed as a breed in this area, a fact they are very proud of. There is even a Charolais museum where you can do meat tasting but perhaps next time. Our next stop was Genelard, I don't think it would feature on any map it is so small but worth the stop for a new museum on the Demarcation Line. We spent an hour or so there and couldn't take it all in on one visit. So many exhibits, photos, documents, maps and stories of how the French people coped and beat the system at that time. We were the only people there but one would hope it becomes better known as it is well worth the visit. From there it was a short run through more spectacular autumn colours to Paray le Monial where we moored almost under the Basilica walls. Paray is an important pilgrimage site and the restored Basilica and adjacent cloisters is the centrepiece of the whole town. From there we took our motorbikes for one last run through the countryside to Charolles and then once again through the hills back again. Prettier farmland would be hard to find.

After Paray it was a hop-step to Digoin and a reluctant turn into the Canal Digoin to Roanne and the final leg of our trip. On our return to port we were welcomed by a blast from a ship's horn and since then it has been a time greeting old friends, meeting a few new folk and spring cleaning *Sable* in preparation for leaving her next Thursday. Australia, here we come!