

DIEPPE TRIP 08

Here is a whistle-stop description of the school trip (year 5) to Dieppe in May 08....it is not a work of art (the writer not being as literate as the children)....it contains few WOW words and would struggle to pass a VCOP test. (For the uninitiated the children can explain this!)

However....it is intended to let parents and carers (who paid for their children!!) know, briefly, what your children did in France. In the past when I have tried to get such detail from my own children, the usual answer is usually a grunt, snort or the all-embracing noun "stuff", or a combination of all three.

It is as true as I can make it but with one huge fib somewhere near the beginning!!

Here goes, anyway.

Friday

As you all know, we met at school at an unearthly hour....we loaded up surprisingly fast, said our goodbyes and sped off into the night with our genial driver, Mark (who was to be a real asset to us throughout our stay....cheers Mark!)

Contrary to expectations, the children did not want to sleep or even snooze....but mercifully raucus chanting did not occur (see later days!!).Nibbling of goodies occurred and for obvious reasons the aroma of fresh lavender wafted through the coach after one or two slight "accidents".

After a breakfast stop at Newport Pagnell on the M1, before we knew it we had whizzed round the M25 down to Ashford to the Eurotunnel Terminus where we queued up and good old Mark squeezed our bus through a worryingly narrow gap onto the train which was to take us under the channel.

It was quite hot as we made the crossing but we were allowed to wander round our sealed unit (now we know what zoo animals feel like!). The crossing took around 40 mins and behold, we were in France. What joy!! Quelle joie!!

A short drive along the coast brought us to our first stop and I vaguely recall that we munched our packed lunches (travel seems to whet the appetite) Our first venue was the Nauticaa Aquarium in Boulogne. Mark was able to park quite close so our first episode started without any fuss.

The aquarium was a series of tanks, large and small containing many of the wonders of the ocean from tiny jellyfish to (wait for it!!) sharks. We worked our way, in our three small groups, through the various rooms and even had time for a little sit down near the sea lions. Stroking some of the rays was allowed and other small sea fish.

and a half exploring the vibrant street market alongside the dominant cathedral...the boys keen to find sweets, sunglasses, shirts etc , the girls veering off towards clothes and jewellery (t'was ever thus).My group stopped off in a superb fish shop....crabs, lobsters etc all wiggling...fascinating.

It was all very French and the takings must have been boosted by the cash which was clearly burning a big hole in the children's pockets. The sweet shop did particularly well. We then reconvened and walked back around the harbour admiring the shop signs and hearing of the history of this old fishing port.

We took lunch on the beach (warm dry pebbles)...sandwiches, crisps, cake, fruit and juice. This was followed by quiet reflection by some and an impromptu game of football between the boys versus a scratch(y?) side of teachers and girls. As the joint referees were Messrs Dale and Ferguson, the match ended as a 2:2 draw, around 13 goals by the boys being disallowed for sundry offences. (Football, of course, is all about taking part, not winning!)

The highlight of the game was a diving header by Jack Sedman who hovered like a hen harrier before nonchalantly placing the ball away from the clutches of the (female) goalie....well done Jack!

Mid afternoon, then, we drove the 15 miles to the next venue, namely a local cheese producer on a small farm on the outskirts of Neufchatel-en-Braye. On arrival we were ushered into a miniature schoolroom where we, children and adults, were "treated" (I use the word very loosely) to a talk on the method of making the heart shaped Neufchatel cheese.

It should be explained here that the presenter was a stout, middle aged lady, of brusque demeanour and an acid tongue, who talked us through the cheese making process, painstakingly from beginning to end. She may have had a PhD in Cheesemaking.. She almost lost her composure, however, when it was suggested by one of us that milk for the cheese could be obtained from chickens (a novel thought) ...this was followed by a hasty recapping of the vocab we'd picked up and a sort of mental maths working out hypothetical amounts of milk and cheese.

During this episode the staff kept a very low profile and maintained fixed smiles for fear of offending aforementioned farm owner. On reflection I believe she may be a distant relative of Wackford Squeers (of Dotheboys Hall in Dickens)...definitely not to be trifled with. She made no mention of any of her own children!

Having escaped from this Scary Cheese Lady (SCL), we had the chance to feed some of the stabled cows (some of the 80 on the farm)...this was just great as we all had a go and the cows were mostly docile. Not surprisingly they all drew back a few paces when the SCL came in.

Onto the coach with the admirable and patient Mark, and back to the chateau...a few raucous songs, prompted I understand by the noble Gerry D. Dinner was a starter of fishy pate followed by a beef stew with tagliatelle, then summer fruit pudding. Appetites remained mostly active.

The evening's activities started with a rap competition (Beaver Road children are no stranger to this song form) and followed by a Scrap Heap challenge...support staff were excused and took coffee in the separate staff room. Bed was at 9.30 with lights out at 10.

Mercifully there was no rowdiness (as if...)...but one could hear the occasional voice whispering secret messages on both corridors. "Youth" must have its day.

We had not, of course, seen so much as a raindrop and the weather was balmy. How apposite.

Sunday

Up at 7.30 with continental breakfast as before at 8.30. Mr How looked to be in fine fester after his early morning legstretch.

Our morning was spent on the sports field under the watchful eyes of our red-coats...games of petanque (boules) and at the other end of the field the age-old art of fencing.

All the children were given instruction in the basic terminology and had to don body protection and face mask. It was exciting to see how quickly our youngsters took to this sport and the thrusting and parrying was truly impressive. This was helped by a willingness on their part to listen...in some quarters a dying skill!

Around noon we drove to the small pebbled beach at Criel sur Mer for our packed lunches...similar to previous day. Our picnic on the beach was helped by absence of wind and blessed with a warm sun. And well done the children for leaving the beach litter free.

We now drove east via Arras along relatively traffic free roads (just like the UK?) to our afternoon destination, namely Vimy Ridge.

In brief this is the site of a fierce battle in WW1 when many thousands (over 200,000 to be precise) of lives were lost in an offensive to gain the high ground above the town of Vimy. The heaviest casualties were taken by the Canadians...and such was the gratitude of the French for this sacrifice that the land on Vimy Ridge was given to the Canadian nation in perpetuity.

We parked and were given a quiet, well thought out presentation by our youthful guides...we were able to walk along actual preserved trenches and experience in a small way the reality of the dreadful life the soldier had to face. I hasten to add that that was

sensitively managed for obvious reasons. I am sure though that our children would have been impressed by the depths of the (cordoned off) hollows between the enemy lines, so close together.

From there to the visitors centre where there was a brief resume of what we had seen and heard. Thence by coach a short drive up the road to the monumental memorial in Dalmatian white stone . It took eight years to build and looks across the vast plains of northern France. Carved onto the base are the individual names of the 11,000 + soldiers unaccounted for.

Throughout this visit your children behaved with perfect behaviour. They went hatless, as a mark of respect, spoke quietly and walked slowly keeping to the gravel paths. We adults were very proud of each and every one of them.

On the return journey (2 hours) back to the chateau, singing gradually broke out....including the girls!! And guess what, the boys took this to be some sort of competition...Beaver Road Got Talent!!

Back at the chateau we were just in time for dinner. With enthusiasm we rushed into the canteen to start our meal with.....snails and frogs' legs. Plenty of garlic and cooked to a turn. Most children partook but the challenge was a bridge too far for a couple. After that it was a beef steak cooked in cabbage, haricot beans and rice. Followed by yoghourt.

Suitably replete, the children wandered back to their rooms to start their packing and prepare for the DISCO!! I don't know what the girls' corridor was like but there was a buzz of anticipation around the boys. One could see the lads practicing their fancy footwork and disco manoeuvres, the air heavy with Lynx. .Where once there had been neat combed hair now appeared random spikes....and even a few medallions appeared. Perhaps it's in the genes!

The disco was a roaring success and aching limbs (I'm referring to the adults) were pushed to the limit, ending with YMCA. The children, of course, were far more adept at all this and applauded politely.

Before we knew it it was 10pm, and off to bed after a quick drink. We knew we'd have to be up with the skylark with much to do tomorrow.

Monday

And so to the last day. Up a little earlier than usual for breakfast at eight.....all the cases had to be packed and stowed ready for a prompt departure and the first leg of our home-bound trip. Plentiful lost property (undies, socks, stones, bags etc) was also stowed and the wonderful, patient Mark signalled our departure. A quick cheerio from the redcoats then away.....

First town we passed was Eu, a regional market town...apart from the impressive church high on the hillside (St Lawrence O'Toole...I jest not...check it out) there was also a Shell garage. So Mark gingerly drove into an extremely narrow gap to fill up. The garage was on a roundabout and the coach's rear end was poking out half way across the carriageway. As it was early, the traffic was very light and the French circumvented the challenge, with panache.

Instead of racing straight to Calais and the Eurotunnel terminal, we did a slight detour up to Le Touquet. Apart from the famous mini airport there, there is also a long dry sandy beach with a convenient ice cream stand. The takings must have been boosted by the never ending line of eager children, tongues hanging out. As if by magic there was enough money to go round and all were satisfied.

Before you could say ZUT we were off again and queueing up at Calais. Onto the train and across to England, where we gave an almighty cheer. Negotiating customs/passport control was "interesting" and a good challenge for a time-and-motion expert. No matter..

I will not dwell on the final leg. Broadly this involved a brief stop about 30 minutes along the motorway, then a straight, smooth drive around the M25 (how many people can say that?), up the M25 then home via the M6.

You know the rest....

So, finally, who should we thank? Well...

The Kingswood staff for trying hard to keep us occupied and in the picture

The teachers, teaching assistants and Mr How for keeping the children safe

Mark the driver for his patience, good grace and humour

The children (all 45 of them....they were a privilege to spend time with)

And last but not least

All the parents and carers who entrusted your children to the school and found the money to make it happen.

All in all, a wonderful experience!!

I know I have missed out plenty but this quick early description will hopefully give you a flavour of what happened and in what order.