

The Côte d'Opale – July 1996

JOYCE MOLYNEUX

ON AN OVERCAST MORNING on Saturday, 27th July thirty-eight members of the Society embarked on the *Pride of Dover* en route for the Opal Coast and an anticipated afternoon in Le Touquet. Leaving harbour we sailed past the Norway Crown cruise liner *Star Odyssey* and after the calmest of crossings arrived in Calais just before ten o'clock. Here we were joined by members of the Association France-Grande Bretagne who stayed with us for the rest of the day.

Our guide for the day, Sue Hyatt, talked us through a Calais en fête for the summer holidays, past the thirteenth century Guet(?) Tower and the Town Hall, past Rodin's famous statue of the Burghers of Calais and out on to the familiar N43. Those of us who have hurried along this road to more exotic destinations have probably viewed the area as one of the least interesting in France. Imagine our surprise and pleasure, therefore, to turn off

at Pont d'Ardres and find ourselves in pretty, wooded countryside where three delightful lakes have been created to provide leisure pursuits – fishing, boating and lovely picnic spots – much enjoyed by local people.

From here our route took us through the unspoilt medieval village of Ardres with its fourteenth century church and lovely old houses, each trying to outdo the others in the splendour and magnificence of its windowboxes. The beautiful summer flowers and the attractively designed floral round-a-bouts remain, indeed one of my chief memories of the day. Passing close to the Field of Cloth of Gold where, in 1520, Francis I and Henry VIII vied to outclass each other in the sumptuousness of their retinues, we drove on through flat agricultural land, to a brief stop in St. Omer, where most of us spent our time browsing among the market stalls.

RESTAURANT "LE THOME DE GAMOND" overlooking the Channel at Cap Gris Nez.





WHEN THE SUN CAME OUT! Members relaxing on a viewing platform near the restaurant

Despite still leaden skies and gathering mist we continued through pleasantly undulating countryside, in places thickly wooded, in others giving way to vast open arable fields. Beyond the huge quarries from which the renowned marquise marble is hewn – the altar of St. Paul's Cathedral is made from it – we reached Escalles, famous – or infamous – as the site from which V2 rockets were launched in World War II. A steep ascent through moorland terrain, deeply pitted with wartime bomb craters, brought a by now hungry party to Cap Blanc Nez – and lunch!

The gourmet restaurant of "Le Thomé de Gramond", our excursion leaflet told us, commands "marvellous panoramic views". According to the restaurant's own information "from your table you can view the sea and Cap Blanc Nez and, in clear weather, the English coast". We stared disconsolately through the cliff-top windows at the swirling mist and decided to concentrate on our excellent lunch! We need not have been downcast, by the time our main course arrived the wind had freshened, the mist lifted and the sun appeared – a quite miraculous transformation. A fourth member of the Anglo-French Association had joined us for lunch; in the brief speeches from and from

others we learnt that he had perfected his English in Dover and had been employed for most of his working life by Townsend-Thoresen. He also told us about Thomé de Gramond, the man who proved that the clay bed under the Channel did indeed stretch from Dover to France and that the building of a tunnel was thus a feasible proposition.

After lunch – in a stiffening wind and brilliant sunshine – we really were able to see the English cliffs as well as spectacular views across bleached sand bays to Cap Gris Nez and beyond. Some of us went to examine the Dover Patrol Memorial, sister to that at St. Margaret's, presented by the people of Calais after the first World War. Returning to our coach we completed our journey along the "forgotten" Opal Coast along the pretty cliff-top road meandering among trees and farmland. The coast is full of war-time memories – the huge Todt Batteries, gun emplacements of the Second World War, used, we heard, in the making of "The Guns of Navarone"; Vauban's fort dating from the time of Louis XIV, but also used by Napoleon I to scan the Channel for English ships; the great column to Napoleon's Grand Army as one nears Boulogne. Between these sombre reminders nestle little fishing

16 villages like Wissant and Ambleteuse with their fortified churches and magnificent sand dunes and the developing resort of Wimereux. And so to Boulogne, France's major fishing port as well as a ferry terminal, where we spent our last hour or

so before returning to Calais and setting sail again for home.

Perhaps Le Touquet next year?

Many thanks are due to our tour guide, Sue, our driver, Brian and to Joan, as always, for the day's excellent organisation

LOOKING ACROSS THE CHANNEL FROM CAP GRIS NEZ TO ENGLAND. (Can you see it?)



DEADLINE FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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The Editor welcomes contributions and interesting drawings or photographs.

"Paper copy" should be typed at double spacing – if it must be handwritten please write clearly and at wide line spacing. Copy on computer discs is most welcome – almost all types can be handled – but a prior phone call to 01304 208008 would be helpful..

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