

# Honfleur Outing

**Reported by Sheila Cope, Derek Leach, Jeremy Cope,  
Margarita [Maggie] Waite and Maureen Morris**

## Thursday 18th May – Sheila Cope

"Was this really such a good idea?" I asked myself as I reluctantly slipped out of bed at 5 am on the first day. However, once we had been greeted by our coach driver Alain and waved off by Patricia who was reassured that we were all present and correct, and had our passports scanned, we boarded the P&O ferry and sought coffee, feeling confident that the crossing would be calm.

After a welcome comfort stop we arrived at Fécamp in the early afternoon by which time the heavens had opened. With dripping umbrellas we were ushered into Le Palais Benedictine. Think again if the word Benedictine conjures up plainchant, monks and cloisters. This was no monastery but a French palace of late 19th century style, flamboyant and intensely decorated. Gradually the story emerged. The original elixir for the famous liquor was invented by Dom Bernado Vincello at Fécamp Abbey and was produced by the Benedictine monks for nearly 300 years until monks and elixirs were swept away by the French Revolution. Fortunately, as the story goes, the precious recipe was rediscovered by a local wine merchant, Alexandre Le Grand who in 1863 succeeded in reconstituting it. There is a large stained glass window showing him entrusting the bottle of "Benedictine" to the hand of Fame. The Palace is therefore part museum and part factory, an impressive public relations exercise on behalf of the product.

The names of the galleries, Gothic,

Renaissance, Oratory, etc give an idea of the flavour of the exhibits which have a mainly religious theme and include paintings, reliquaries, ancient seals and artefacts together with a collection of wrought iron work. Subsequently we came to a large room previously used for bottling, labelling and sealing which now shows the more recent history of the Benedictine operation including colourful posters and fraudulent imitations.

Finally, after watching a video and observing the 27 herbs and spices which are used as ingredients in the closely guarded secret recipe, we were given a guided tour of the distillery. Suffice to say that the complicated process results in 3



*Benedictine Palace © Derek Leach 2017*



*Benedictine Tasting © Derek Leach 2017*

different liqueurs: Benedictine (the liqueur of alchemy), B&B (Benedictine and French brandy) and Single Cask, drier and sold only at the Palace. We tasted one sample each. To this untutored palate the result of the remarkable alchemy tasted like flavoured honey with a kick but its history must be the judge. Our visit was well worthwhile and educational in many ways.

We motored on through the gloom of a wet afternoon, passing over the Normandy Bridge. The chance of a boat trip under it seemed an unattractive prospect at that moment but we were soon entering our warm pleasant rooms at the Antares hotel outside Honfleur. As a reminder that we were in Normandy we had been greeted by model cows outside the hotel and the menu of the excellent meal which we shared there together that evening reinforced the concept of local food ingredients. There was cheese pie followed by chicken stuffed with mushroom pate. As I watched Calvados being poured over apple sorbet from the largest bottle imaginable, the discomfort of early rising was but a distant memory.

We were very sorry that after all their planning and preparation for the trip Patricia and Patrick were unable to join us as a result of Patrick's ill health. We would like to express our thanks to Alain, our coach driver and courier from Leo's Pride who drove us there and back safely with unfailing good humour. The whole trip was most enjoyable, due in large part to Alain's efficiency. He was always on hand when we needed him and always where he said he would be. Thank you, Alain.

### **Friday 19th May - Morning Derek Leach**

The Friday morning programme comprised two visits, both of which left me baffled for completely different reasons. First our excellent driver and guide, Ian,



*Chateau de Breuil Calvados Distillery © Derek Leach 2017*



*Chateau de Breuil Calvados Distillery Barrels  
© Derek Leach 2017*

drove us to the calvados distillery of the Chateau de Breuil. Being rather naïve where alcohol is concerned, I was the only one in our group never to have tasted calvados. Apparently, I was in for a treat! Our charming French guide led us through the beautiful grounds to the magnificent Chateau built during the 16th and 17th centuries. Unfortunately, we were only allowed to view the exterior. The manufacture of calvados involves turning millions of apples each year into juice followed by natural fermentation, double distillation in copper stills and finally the ageing process. We went into the distillery where the distinctive calvados smell greeted us as we entered. After an explanation our guide took us to the Ageing Hall, formerly the servant's hall, where enormous barrels of calvados were



*Ceiling Basilica Dedicated to Saint Therese of Lisieux*  
© Derek Leach 2017

maturing. A surprise before we left the hall was a short but brilliant visual display of the whole process screened onto an end wall with its piles of casks: apple blossom, apples, distillation, ageing and bottling. The final stop was the testing room where everybody had the opportunity to taste two of the many different flavours and ages and, of course, the opportunity to purchase. So why was I baffled? After tasting, alcoholic philistine that I am, I wondered what all the fuss was about!

We moved on to the town of Lisieux to visit the basilica dedicated to St Therese. I must admit that I had no previous knowledge of its existence and was amazed to learn that, despite its medieval style exterior of bright white stone, it was built between 1929 and 1937. The interior of the basilica was stunning although not to my personal taste - every inch of the walls and ceiling were brightly painted or with mosaics depicting many different saints. The reliquary contains the bones of Therese's arm. The long crypt was also highly decorated with an abundance of wild flowers and birds as reminders of the love Therese had for the beauty of God's world. Even more surprising was that the basilica was constructed in honour of a young woman who was born in 1873 and became a

Carmelite nun at the age of 15 and died from TB at 24. Hence my second bafflement. Why had the Roman Catholic Church honoured this young woman with such a building and made her a saint in 1925? The answer is in her doctrinal writings entitled *Story of the Soul* published after her death, which spread rapidly around the world, her being such an inspiration too many as well as the miracles attributed to her. Saint Therese was also given the rare distinction of being proclaimed Doctor of the Church by the Pope in 1997. Incredibly, her parents, Saints Louis and Zélie Martin, were canonized together in 2015.

### **Friday 19th May pm, - Jeremy Cope Étretat**

From Lisieux we made our way via Honfleur to Étretat. At Lisieux it had at one point bucketed down but now we were to enjoy the best of the day with plenty of sunshine. Thence across the Pont de Normandie we soon left the main road to make our way across country to our destination. It is a neat and tidy countryside with houses and gardens to match. No sheep to speak of but plenty of cattle, white and red and all mixtures in between - the source of all that lovely Normandy cheese. You have to park at the edge of the small town and walk to the



*Beach at Étretat, Normandy, France* © Derek Leach 2017

seafront - not far and quite pleasant - a neat upmarket place with not a piece of litter in site. And there it was, the beach and cliffs painted by Monet, Boudin and Courbet. Like Dover, a town in a chalk valley with seaward cliffs and hills. On both sides the chalk cliffs extend into the sea with large needle type formations and large arches. Our stay was limited to just over an hour and whilst our party savoured the atmosphere of the beach, cliffs, hills, town (and its cafes) I decided to hike off and climb up the cliff path to look further at the chalk formations. On my way I saw a WWII concrete pillbox overlooking the beach - there's no escaping the war's relics - and began the climb. I got two thirds of the way up, looked at my watch and decided I had to be responsible and not be late for the pickup time. It was a grand walk up and I could have done with a couple or more hours extra. Back through the town and, blow me, got back with of time to spare. On the return to Honfleur through the narrow country roads we came face to face with a large lorry at a cross roads which involved our bus having to back up quite a way. One of the pleasures of these holidays is I am not driving and it was all left to Iain, our leader (thanks Iain).

### **A Boat Trip on the Seine**

For the last part of our day exploring Honfleur Iain, our guide, had organised a boat trip on the Seine, a highlight of which



*Honfleur Boat Trip © Derek Leach 2017*

was to travel under the Pont de Normandie. We gathered at the picturesque Carousel on the seafront next to the Castle (or was it the Lieutenant's House). The painful bit was the man on the stage next to the Carousel intent on drowning the traditional music with his vastly amplified "pop" racket. (I'm a square). From there we joined the queue for the boat, soon boarding. The boat then sailed the short distance to the lock gates, which on opening, allowed us onto the Seine itself and we were straight off up river towards the bridge past the port area of Honfleur. The Pont de Normandie is hugely impressive and, to my eye, quite beautiful. The bridge has two concrete upside down Y pylons, 705 ft. high, with 184 cables carrying the bridge. The bridge has a width of 77 ft. with four lanes for traffic and two lanes for pedestrians (no time to a walk across on this holiday). The structure is visible from afar but not intrusively so. Seen from our hotel dining room I imagined a giant playing a tune on the cables. We passed under the bridge far overhead, swirling back and forth so that we saw the underside four times in all with views of the pylons from very many perspectives.

It was then back down river passing Honfleur sailing towards the sea with the large port of Le Havre on our right. On the left was an attractive heavily wooded slope with a sandy beach which I guess was a popular recreation area for Honfleur. Earlier in the day Sheila and I had climbed up to the Chapelle de Notre Dame de Grace from which point one can overlook the Seine estuary. At the view point is a large crucifix, I guess a good 30ft tall and about 300ft above sea level, and this we could just make out from the boat. We then crossed towards Le Havre to gain a good view of the large port and substantial industrial installations which, if I had been fluent in French and understood the commentary,

would have allowed me to provide you with a more informed article (sorry). The boat then turned and we returned to Honfleur – this time, and I guess the tide was right, the lock gates were open.

The boat trip was really very good, apart from the enjoyment it gave, in that it helps to give a clearer view of the geography and setting of Honfleur situated as it is at the mouth of the Seine.

### **Saturday 20th May am/pm until 4pm - Marguarita [Maggie] Waite**

A most beautiful sunny morning in Honfleur; Ian took us on a walk around the town and gave us an irreverent but very informative commentary. The old harbour and St. Catherine's Promenade sparkled in the sunshine but then Ian led us into the dark cobbled streets to the grim old prison past interesting shops and artists' studios



*Le Vieux Bassin Market, Honfleur, France  
© Derek Leach 2017*

up to the Eglise St. Leonard with its flamboyant Gothic style facade, mural covered walls and interesting painted glass which was in desperate need of restoration.

Then Ian shepherded us off to the magnificent church of St. Catherine of Alexandria which was initially built after the end of the Hundred Years War when the original church was destroyed by the English (oops!). The original nave was built by shipwrights from Normandy oak and the roof resembles an upturned boat. The second nave built later is also made of wood but has a more traditional design. The C15 wooden bell tower stands separately from the main building.

We then split up: some to explore the weekly market with its wonderful aromas and arrays of fish, vegetables, sausages and cheeses. Then the rain came down in buckets! Some took refuge in the excellent tourist information centre until we were summarily ejected at lunchtime. Our small group then repaired to the Green Parrot bar to watch the somewhat soggy world go by. As soon as the rain stopped, a few of us went to the brilliant Normandy Culture Museum housed in the old prison (which was just as grim as Dover's prison) to view a fascinating collection of furniture, costumes, handwork and domestic objects from the C18 and C19; every room was a total delight for anyone interested in the history of everyday life.

### **Sunday 21st May - Maureen Morris Garden at Giverny**

Sunday and a lovely sunny start to our final day in France. We left the hotel at 9.30 with our cases on board and enjoyed a good journey through miles of delightful rolling green countryside on the way to Giverny.

Leaving the coach park we crossed the road to enter at the Water Gardens end of

Monet's estate. From there a footpath led us into the gardens and wandered along the side of the lake passing through plantations of bamboos before moving on to colourful scenes of close growing roses, foxgloves, azaleas and all the many plants which we are familiar with from Monet's paintings. We saw water lily leaves on the surface but it was too early in the year to see the beauty of the flowers above the water. We looked at the two famous turquoise Japanese bridges. And we heard a cuckoo calling, enhancing the peaceful atmosphere.

The weather was beautiful and although there were hundreds of visitors moving slowly round the route stopping to admire the views and to take photographs it didn't seem to spoil the pleasure of just being there.

After the Water Garden we walked through the Clos Normand where under metal archways climbing plants, roses, Monet's famous brilliant mauve velvet irises, poppies, peonies and fruit trees all flourished. Everything buzzed with happy bees and birds singing all around us in the warm sunshine.

### **Monet's House**

Finally we joined the queue to enter the house. It was interesting to walk round the place where Monet had spent nearly 43 years of his life and died there in 1926. It is not a large house but seemed a very comfortable one. Paintings and pictures by Monet himself and other contemporary artists, presumably mostly reproductions, were displayed in every room. The furnishings were chosen to imitate what would have been there in Monet's time. In the large kitchen one wall was completely covered with a vast collection of copper cooking pots which were possibly originals as were the large cooking range and



*Japanese Bridge at Monet's Water Garden Giverny  
© Derek Leach 2017*

antique washing up facilities.

Then it was time for us to find ourselves something to eat, after investigating the inevitable 'shop', and before joining our coach for the long journey back to Dover. The travelling was good and our driver, Ian, excellent. The sea crossing was perfectly calm and we were home in Dover before 9.30p.m. The end of a really enjoyable and



*Old Street, Honfleur, France © Derek Leach 2017*