

SUMMER 2012 (2)

We spent two nights in the Arsenal and visited the usual tourist haunts. The good thing about this mooring is that it is fairly central and the Metro is only a short walking distance. The facilities are good, as you would expect, with toilets, showers, washing machines and Wi-Fi. We left at about mid-day and headed towards our next river - The Marne. This involved locks and tunnels, the tunnels being a totally new experience for me. By the middle of the afternoon we had arrived at Nougent-Sur-Marne where the Fluvicarte had promised a modern marina with fuel. We found fuel ok but initially no mooring. It was only when we spoke to the Capitainere that he agreed to let us moor against a barge end to end. In the immediate vicinity was a fitness centre, swimming pool and a quaint town. We had to move off the next morning and found the commercial traffic was a lot less on the Marne and it was just as beautiful as the Seine. Instead of high chalk cliffs we had rolling fields, tree lined rivers and an idyllic setting. We worked through locks and another tunnel into the afternoon and found wonderful moorings at a town called Meaux where we stayed for three nights. The moorings were supervised by the local tourist office on a 48 hour basis with electricity for 4.50 Euros a night (a real bargain.) The town, as we found, has a turbulent history and on Saturday night we went to a Festival of History called a Spectacular which was played out by 500 of the town's inhabitants in the grounds of the Cathedral. This involved the burning of protestants at the stake, a visit by Napoleon Bonaparte, cannons, horses, the revolution and both World Wars (incidentally during WW1 the retreating British forces blew the bridge over the Marne at Meaux , drew a line in the sand and halted the German advance, stopping them from entering Paris). There was an all day market (for Lynn) and a short bike ride took us to a local beauty spot where a section of the river was cordoned off with a beach and lots of families. A band was knocking out heavy rock and families were enjoying the sunshine on a Sunday afternoon. On Monday we pushed off again to a small village called Le-Ferte-Sous-Jouarre where moorings with water and electricity were provided free of charge (British Waterways take note). A peaceful evening ensued then we were off the following morning to our first automatic lock. We had been given remote control devices the previous day at the last lock, and on the first two occasions we used them everything went perfectly. On approaching the lock you press the blue button if you are travelling upstream. The lock works automatically to set itself for you, when you are in and secure you operate a blue lever and the lock then operates for you eventually sending you on your way. As I said, the first two locks worked fine then we had a problem. We had to call on the help of a lock operator (done remotely at the lock with the red lever). After a short time he arrived, reset everything and we were away. We were now into the Champagne districts and rolling slopes filled with vines were everywhere. We moored for two nights at Chateau Thierry where a huge monument to American servicemen overlooks the village. With warm temperatures another B.B.Q. was the order of the day, an idyllic way to spend an evening. After our second night we moved on, a picture postcard view seemed to come into view around every corner. Our next overnight stop was at Rueil. Again it was a free mooring with free water and electricity. As we arrived we found several artists with easels set up painting views across the river. We found that the village had homes belonging to local champagne grape producers who then sell on the grapes to co-operatives. Although it was a great mooring the village had no shops and during the day we had rain which eventually set in for the rest of the day. The following morning John set off first as we were now encountering locks with sloping sides! We set off 10 minutes behind him and negotiated the first lock O.K. At the second lock John called me up and said that he was through but two Dutch boats were entering the lock one towing the other. We arrived to find

the lock against us and so it remained for the next hour as a comedy of errors ensued. The second boat with no power ended up across the lock as they had not tied it up. Then they handballed it out of the bottom gates where it was caught up by the current of the weir and pushed against the river bank. The smaller cruiser breasted up but couldn't manoeuvre and only when a larger cruiser who had been on the mooring behind us the previous night turned up did they manage to move it. In amongst all this a trip boat turned up drove straight through the melee and went through before us. Eventually we passed through, handed back our remote and made our way to moorings at the S.N.E in Epernay. In with the price we got a free entry to the Champagne house of Castellane where we enjoyed their tour which included a free glass of champagne at the end. In the underground cellars we saw thousands of bottles on their second fermentation and passed through the bottling plant. We were told the staff had a day off because the Tour de France was passing through the village that day, and we hadn't even realised. We explored further and found the Avenue de Champagne where all of the famous champagne houses are situated and where tours are organised. Our next stop was Mareuil-sur-Ay on well organised moorings. The following morning we moved to Conde-sur-Marne where the Fluvicarte had promised moorings. Unfortunately we found them to be residential moorings in a small marina. Eventually we tied up downstream of the first, of an eight locks series and stayed for two nights. During the first day we cycled to Bouzy, (yes I know very apt!) a local village where most of the homes were those of local grape growers. During the evening we barbequed and just about the time when the Mozzi's were donning their dinner jackets, a white van rolled up at the mooring of the local oracle (a guy from Doncaster) who came skipping down the track from his visit to a barge which had just tied up. As he passed he said have you bought your champagne yet? At this point Lynn, closely followed by Karen, jumped up and skipped down the track behind him. It worked out that this chap was a local small producer turning out about 30,000 bottles a year. His prices were about 25% cheaper than we had seen and our oracle told us that this was exceptionally good, so we parted with our money and bought half a dozen bottles. Up to this point John had thought we had found a cheap mooring, just shows you how wrong you can be. We were now finding less commercial movements and more pleasure boats. Incredibly I would guess that more than half we encountered were either Australian or New Zealand! In fact on our bike ride the day before we passed a cyclist going the opposite way who looked for the world like a Tour-de-France fanatic and as he passed he sat upright waved his arms and shouted "Gudday mate" The other thing I'd like to know is how the hell did he know we were British? During the evening a tourist vessel came down the cut after locking time, with nowhere to moor. As he passed he asked us what time we were locking through the following morning and John did the British thing and told him 8 a.m. He then managed to slip a bottle to somebody who locked him through and he tied up above the lock. This was the first of a series of 8 locks all interconnected and automatically operated by radar. The following morning we did the Yorkshire thing and left at 7 a.m. got the jump on him and made the locks to the tunnel at Mont-de-Billy some 2,302 metres long. As we entered, the tunnel lit up with a series of fluorescent lights and ventilation fans kicked in. After this we were on top of the plateau, then we descended three locks and found moorings at Sillery. Here we found an old member of the club who some of you may remember. Peter Scott on his Ocean 42 came over last season to spend time cruising around France. He seemed well and had his old cruising companion Bill Telfer moored nearby. As Bastille day was approaching we decided to stay here for four nights and as we had Wi-Fi we could contact family to make sure all was well. The following day we took the bus into Reims, some 10km away. The city, largely destroyed during the First World War was of crucial importance during both world wars and was the place where the Germans signed the peace

treaty in a railway carriage at the end of the first war. Hitler, using the same carriage at the same place made the French sign the surrender on their invasion at the start of the second world war. It was also here where Eisenhower made the Germans sign the unconditional surrender of the German army at the end of the war in Europe in May 1945. We enjoyed the city which had a nice feel about it and took a "petite train" ride around to check out the sights. The following day we moved the boat to the Port -de-Plaisance in Reims, and visited the little school house where the signatures took place. It turned out that Eisenhower did not attend the signing as there was no German officer of the same rank as him, available to attend. We enjoyed a meal in the evening, followed by a spectacular light display which lit up the front of the cathedral. After a noisy night alongside a major road we moved to Berry-au-Bac and moored alongside a field in the middle of nowhere, what a difference. We moved again the following day and picked up another "remote" for the locks and arrived at Bourg-au Comin at around lunchtime. We ventured into the village for a look around and found a small village shop. On entering it the oldish couple who ran it came from the back room, she tutting and he mumbling. They then proceeded to turn off the lights and park themselves at the checkout. We realised we had committed the unholy sin of shopping at lunch time, as it was ten past one, and hurried round buying only essentials. We left the fruit as it looked like it was either sprouting or disintegrating into mulch, and paid with apologies as we left them to shut up shop. The following day we moved again and found a mooring at Pinon, not at the accredited stop but alongside a field which, with the weather the way it was looked ideal for a B.B.Q. A Carrefour shop was a short walk across the bridge and after five minutes shopping we were told again that they were shutting up for the lunchtime break. Again we hurried round but decided to return after lunch to finish our shopping. During the evening we had a bbq and at around six o'clock a hoard of youngsters on bicycles turned up and encamped themselves on the opposite bank where the official mooring was. This group was closely followed by three youths in a Renault Clio who also set up camp. Their car miraculously turned into a music centre with the beat box booming out, the suspension failing miserably to keep up with the bass beat. It must have put miles onto the poor thing. Boys and girls from the first group stripped off to bathers and bikini's and proceeded to enter the water en masse, the boys off the bridge and the girls like a flock of sheep timidly finding the best bathing spot. Then unbelievably they started washing. First the shower gel appeared, followed by the hair shampoo then conditioner. A couple of the lads had swum down to investigate us and it was clear that they were Dutch from the conversation they were having. The three French youths in the car, not to be outdone, then started to dance with each other. Obviously throwing down the gauntlet to show how cool they were. One individual I'm sure, must have been to our dinner dance last year and copied some of the moves he'd seen there. Indispersed with this we had the compulsory visit of the youths on mopeds thrashing over the bridge, sounding like a squadron of mosquito's, the throttle wide open and the bikes seemingly squealing for mercy. The girls stayed cool and ignored the three youths which left them let's say somewhat perplexed. Amazingly at eight o'clock the Dutch camp broke, the girls in the lead with their hair flowing behind them drying in the breeze followed closely by the boys. The three in the Clio packed up, did a do-nut round a tree and within minutes the whole area was deserted and peace reigned once again. This showed the stark difference in cultures, the Dutch brought up with water all around find it a natural environment to be in, and the French seem to want to follow the example of their Anglo counterparts across the channel. The following morning we had a look around the village then moved the boats to a mooring at Guny where a couple on a barge had told us of a 2km walk to a fortified castle near Courcey-le Chateau. FOUR MILES later we dragged ourselves up the final hill and had a look around. It was very interesting and as we found

out had stood from around 900AD until the German army blew up the keep and the four towers in 1917. A long trek back found us weary, but we had managed to avoid the Japanese sniper that afternoon, who generally visited anywhere between 12 and 2 and picked us off one at a time with an afternoon nap, which was a habit we seemed to have fallen into. John we found was best at disguising the attack by pretending to read his book, the game being given away when his chin eventually settled on his chest. I on the other hand was the most conspicuous, even waking myself up with the odd rattling snore- ah bliss. At one point I had taken the opportunity to photograph John in a classic pose in his chair, book on lap, head down and away, only to find on his waking and my lapse into unconsciousness he had the same idea and caught me in a classic pose across the bench seat with one arm over my forehead in a woe is me pose, driving the cows home. The following day we moved to Chauncy into a facility with power, washing machine and the internet - usually referred to as civilisation. We stayed two nights to use the washing machine and catch up with family at home. We had had mixed weather over the past few days but now we found the barometer rising as high pressure moved in and the jet stream moved north (bringing welcome relief to those back in the U.K.) temperatures soared as we moved to a quiet backwater at Seracourt-le-Grand. We waited till late in the day to have a look around and found a British war grave cemetery where we paid our respects. En-route we had to cross the river Somme which was just like a mountain stream, the crystal clear waters showing dancing weeds of vivid green in a trance inducing dance. The following morning saw temperatures soaring into 30's again and we moved the short distance to Saint-Quentin where we renewed our licences. While we were in the offices Lynn and I decided we both needed a comfort break and headed through the door which was marked for both men and women. What we didn't expect to find was one room with two traps, one conventional, and one a hole in the ground with footprints to mark your starting position. A short tussle ensued but with arms and elbows flailing and a little squeal (which nearly meant she didn't need the toilet after all) Lynn won the day. I summed up the courage and stepped into position. With my head tilted slightly and one eye closed I took aim, this was going to be a long shot. A short time later, feeling pleased with myself for a job well done I pulled the chain and the cistern systematically emptied its contents down the pipe and all over my right foot before finding its way down the hole. I felt as though I was doing a walk of shame as I entered the reception area with my right foot giving a distinctive "shlop" as I walked in. I'm sure the lady serving us had a smile on her face as she turned to her colleague and spoke. It will have gone along the lines of "I think we got another one". An interesting point about the license system in France is that you only need a licence while you are moving. We found another Lidl and stocked up with vittels but found we had to return to the shop for the essentials we couldn't carry the first time around. These included beer, waste bin sacks, washing powder andsnow boots! You have to grab these bargains whilst they are on the shelf. We moved the following day and headed towards the infamous tunnel at Riqueval. We had planned to go on the 07.30 tow the following morning but decided when we arrived that we would go that afternoon. You are towed in convoy through the tunnel by a vessel which pulls itself through on a chain. The largest vessels are at the front, followed in size down to the smallest vessels at the back. You need two 30 metre ropes which are attached between the vessels, yours going from your bow cleats to the vessel in front on their stern cleats, and they have to be crossed. We had heard all kinds of horror stories about this transit and I must say they all turned out to be true. I can honestly say that if the health and safety executive did a risk assessment on this operation the whole shooting match would be closed down immediately. We had no instruction on how the operation would happen, and there was no procedure for emergency situations. On our convoy we had a barge at the front followed by 5

pleasure craft, three of them steel, then us, then John at the back. We managed to get the ropes attached without fouling propellers and we found that we could run engines till we got into the tunnel to manoeuvre. For the next 5,670 metres or two hours we were pulled from one side of the tunnel to the other, constantly fending off with brushes which were the only thing to hand. I realised shortly after setting off that over head we had live power cables which the towing vessel was using to power itself, and warned Lynn not to touch them with the aluminium brush she was holding. Ahead of us the poor couple could not fend off and horrible scraping sounds came as they bounced off either wall. Further ahead another vessel who was quite wide was regularly scraping along, which added to the stress. As we approached the end of the tunnel it was all hell and no notion as lines were cast adrift and engines powered up. I found myself in the wrong place at the wrong time and headed towards the bank with no one on the helm. Fortunately no damage was done, which is not what could be said for others. Back on the canal where at the second lock we were given another remote (the last one being handed in at the tunnel). Eventually we found a mooring below a lock and I turned in at about 9.30pm aching from the effort. The following morning I found that temperatures in the engine room had been so high that the sound proofing on my engine covers had peeled off. We moved on, and en-route at Crevecoeur lock we were asked to produce "ships papers" by the lock keeper. This was the first time we had been formally stopped and after checking us on his computer we were allowed to move on (they could have also checked our movements through Lidl where we had found a cheeky little bottle of red for under £2 and proceeded to relieve them of their stock at every opportunity). We found mooring at Masnieres in a lovely bankside situation and practiced our skills at Barbequeing again. On a trip like this there are essentials that you need to have with you and one of these is good company. Our tightly knit unit worked well together in the familiar situation of boat handling, the locks became easier as we worked out the best way to handle them, but ashore we were now finding new rolls to fill. Lynn became the interpreter, being shoved through any door first. Karen with map in hand became the pathfinder, regularly finding her way around cities and towns with ease. John became the wine taster, there isn't much you can tell John about emptying a glass, and I was practising my skills as a burger flipper just in case this retirement thing doesn't work out. We moved on to Cambrai and eventually found moorings in a basin where half of it was reserved for fishing, which seemed remarkably unfair. Again this town had a long history which we explored over the two days we were there. They were setting up for a festival which was to happen over the weekend. Fairground rides were set up on street corners in a haphazard way and on the Friday night we heard a kids marching band approaching from the centre of town. Two old guys in fluorescent jackets with security on the back were leading them through but the only people they had to keep back were the parents of the children. The following morning we left, and at the end of the next series of locks we deposited our remote in the bin provided and found moorings at the junction with the Canal -du-Nord at Arleux. This was barge city with moorings filled as far as the eye could see. Things had returned to a more commercial outlook with blocks of flats floating past us on a regular basis. The following morning we moved the short distance to Corbehem and moored off the main canal in the entrance to the canal which ran up to Arras. We cycled along the towpath to Douai and explored another deserted town centre, visiting the Cathedral, which was a moving experience for all of us. Piped music gave the place an aura of calm but it was unfortunate to see that the roof was leaking in several areas causing damage to paintings and the plaster of the interior. The following day (Monday) we planned to get the bus to Arras but we were foiled by a bus timetable. We were finding a pattern forming which basically went along the lines as follows- France was mostly shut on a Monday, mostly shut on a lunch-time, and for the

whole of August. We managed to get a bus later in the day, finding that the four of us were the only passengers the driver had. We arrived in Arras and had a look around. Again this city was heavily damaged during WW1 and was quite literally on the front line. A ten minute walk from the centre took us to the Wellington quarry memorial. Here we were taken 20 metres underground into chalk quarries dug originally in the middle ages and mostly forgotten about. During 1916 New Zealand tunneller's dug out connecting galleries between these quarries and connected several kilometres of underground workings. For a whole week 24,000 British Tommies lived in these workings and at 05.30 on the morning of 9th April 1917 they broke out only metres from the German lines and took them completely by surprise. Over the next two days they advanced 12 kilometres into enemy territory and on the third day they rested. This proved to be a mistake, as the German forces had time to reinforce, and the stalemate was restored. The following morning we moved on to the city of Lille. The run up was uninspiring – reminding me of the river Tees with all of the heavy industry. Moorings were short to come by but we landed on our feet when we explored a lay- by which led to a disused lock. We were virtually in the city centre next to a park on both sides of the canal. After a brief exploration of the area we ate in a Greek restaurant right next to the boat and connected to their internet for the duration of our stay. Lille is the fourth biggest city in France and the capital of the area. The following day we walked around the citadel (an ancient star shaped fortification) and in the afternoon took a guided bus tour. Altogether a very impressive place to see. We moved the following day but the Fluvicarte gave us a bum steer in our chosen overnight stop, the river becoming too shallow to navigate. We pushed on and at the next lock waited for it to be turned round for us. We had a green light but a block of flats in the shape of a gas barge was moving up behind us. We called the lock keeper who informed us we had arrived first and could come in. We moved to the front of the pen and the block of flats followed us in. Barely moving as he edged up to us we had about ten foot clearance, but the keeper was very good and dropped us very slowly. Again moorings were of short supply at Bethune our next stop, but we managed to find a spot and double moored. After tea we explored and had to walk for about twenty minutes to find the centre, but what a little gem we found when we arrived. The centre opened out into an open square with a bell tower standing in the centre. The Hotel-de Ville (town hall) was a chocolate box picture post card and a Cathedral built of brick was close by. The cafe culture abounded as people ate around the square with an air of relaxed cohabitation. We moved to our next overnight at Aire-sur-la-lys and walked into the town. The size of the last two villages we had visited had only been relatively small, but they both boasted huge cathedral's, this one even had flying buttresses. After a night next to a Malt factory we moved the following day. During this short journey we encountered the Fonntinette lock with a drop of 13.3 metres, built to replace the boat lift nearby. We stopped at Arques and cycled back to look at the boat lift built in 1887, which worked for 80 years and only stopped operations in 1967. Designed by Edwin Clark who built the Anderton boat lift, it worked by operating two huge pistons, which in turn lifted two caissons which could hold a barge in each. They operated in tandem against each other, one going up as the other descended, and took approx 80 minutes for the cycle. We moved again the following day to Watten where again we explored a small village with a huge cathedral. The church certainly had money to spare in those days. We were now within shouting distance of the coast and the following day moved to Dunkerque where we were eventually moored in the outer harbour ready for departure. During the evening John experienced first- hand what it's like to get old as a young lady stood and offered her seat when we all boarded a bus. He got his own back on me the following day as he assisted me across the road by my elbow as we encountered some heavy traffic. We had been away for over two months in France, during that

time I had grown enough hair for a fairly decent comb-over as I did not want to have a “bouffant” in a “coiffure”, and we had all enjoyed an experience that I can recommend. We had covered 579 nautical miles and been through 125 locks since Le Harve. Most of the canals and rivers had been tree lined and I can honestly say that I could count the number of trees on one hand that we saw in the water. The French we found were in general very friendly and helpful people, walkers and cyclist’s on tow paths always waved, commercials usually waved, and one lady on the phone rushed out of her house to wave at Lynn. We found the information in the Fluvicarte to be poor with information generally out of date, but as with all things, going and doing it yourself brings a wealth of knowledge and information. It was a trip not to be missed –if you get an opportunity do it!

Dave and Lynn, Karen and John.