

BRIQUEBEC OUR FRENCH CONNECTION

by

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"A land of milk and honey" may be a metaphorical description when one considers Normandy, but substitute cream for milk and calvados for honey, and this is literally true.

This verdant country of picturesque, historical and gastronomic delight, not necessarily to be described in that order, is today very easily reached, and for a modest fare, thanks to the competition between cross-channel ferry operators. Furthermore, having made the effort, both food and accommodation are extremely good value.

It was last November that my wife and I decided to take advantage of this situation and we had been thoroughly recommended to visit Briquebec, a small town about twelve miles south of Cherbourg. we drove off the Thoresen ferry in the late winter's afternoon, threaded our way through the Cherbourg traffic and turning off the main coast road we headed inland.

The often straight but undulating road soon affords good views of the Chateau of Martinvast with its splendid avenue of trees set in the surrounding lightly wooded countryside - a good location for the next Martini advert ... However, within minutes we had passed through Breville, Rauville La Bigot and Ouettstot, and turned left into a tree-lined avenue into Briquebec, this part of the town bearing a certain resemblance to Alresford's Broad Street.

Ahead we could see the Keep or Donjon of the original Norman chateau dominating the town. We drove up the main street round the fortifications to enter the courtyard on the east side.

The Hotel du Vieux Chateau is aptly named, occupying what used to be the Knight's Hall, where lived and feasted these particular individuals, doubtless of impressive appetite and thirst, not that the modern tourist doesn't possess either or both of these characteristics: A faded 'V' painted on the stonework to the left of the main door proclaims the visit of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1857. These two worthy individuals, having long since returned home after a holiday which included a guided tour past a hastily covered statue of Napoleon pointing determinedly but erroneously as it turned out, towards England, we were shown to their half-acre room with its en-suite bathroom. This amazing accommodation, all for the price of 120 Francs - or slightly less than twelve pounds, can at first cause considerable suspicion in the English tourist's mind - such as the possibility of a nearby Anthrax laboratory. Such is the unfortunate effect of comparable British hotel prices.

That evening we ate in the impressive dining room with its enormous stone pillars and glowing log fire, spoiling ourselves with sea-food and excellent Muscadet Sur-Lie. Afterwards we were very kindly invited to join the proprietor and his wife, M. and Madame Hardy [a name with a Dorset association, although he is in fact French] and partake of a splendid Calvados with our coffee.

As well as being a most pleasant way to round off an evening this also proved to be most informative, we learned that the chateau foundations probably date from the 10th century and are in fact attributed to it's first Baron' Ansleck, great nephew of Rollon, Duke of Normandy. A later Bertrand, namely Robert, accompanied William I to Hastings and in 1416 it was captured by the English under Guillaume de la Polle, Count of Suffolk. Today the castle belongs to the town, and it is possible to visit the keep where there are some antiquities on display. There is also a considerable amount of reconstruction work taking place, mainly at the eastern end. where the partly excavated crypt presents an interesting spectacle, with many of its columns in very good state of preservation.

You can leave the courtyard at this point to go into the town, incidentally, it was through here that Rommell passed, having attended a meeting at the chateau. Shortly afterwards, his car was shot up by a British fighter aircraft and he was injured. Ahead is the large and rather impressive church, whilst to the left a vast town square. the other half of which carries on across one of the main roads to Valognes. Here again, the houses opposite, on a slight slope, and being of a similar period bear a resemblance to those of Broad Street.

On Monday mornings, the same square is a sight not to be missed. Market day is heralded by the early arrival of horse-boxes, trucks tractors and other heavy farm machinery. This is soon accompanied by the grunting and squeaking of pigs and bellowing of cattle as unloading commences. This having been completed and the animals penned, there seems to be a general consensus among those responsible to repair to one of several bars facing the square to sample a calvados or two to determine whether it has deteriorated since their similar actions a week previously; Ruddy complexions become ruddier, conversations with Gallic gesticulations more animated

Somewhere music begins and the smoke of a barbecue drifts across the square. This stall does particularly brisk business serving large steaks surrounded by a roll of french bread.

The size of this market is quite surprising, it carries on through the main streets, for sale are trees, shrubs, flowers, knives, rope, electric saws. toys. clothes and shoes. There are large displays of excellent French cheeses, huge blocks of light coloured butter, stalls of vegetables and meat. and in part of the other permanent market area, fish, including oysters, the perennial mussels, lobsters

Perhaps the most amazing thing about the market is the fact that by early afternoon, 1 p.m. to 2 p.m., it has packed up and gone.

Ostensibly, Briquebec appears to be about the same size as Alresford however its population is approximately 3,500 - about half It has a large school similar in size and function to Perin's. It has a group medical practice and. I believe, one dental surgeon. One important difference between the towns is the fact that Briquebec has a mayor, Monsieur Phillips.

Places of historical and generally cultural interest are within easy reach of Briquebec. Those that spring to mind are Caen, Bayeux and in the south. St. Lo and Mont St. Michel. Indeed the Cotentin Peninsular has much to offer and with this in mind we asked our good hosts Monsieur and Madame Hardy if their town was twinned with any- where in Great Britain. The answer was 'no' but should they find somewhere suitable they were very keen to do so.

The seed had been sown and we returned home. People whom we thought might be interested were contacted in Alresford and a meeting arranged which I was unfortunately unable to attend, nevertheless the general feeling was favourable. There was news from France also - an official committee of sixteen members had quickly been set up with Monsieur Hardy as president. Photographs showing these gatherings accompanied the French newspaper cuttings. Meanwhile, over here, the Hampshire Chronicle mentioned the idea, then gave a more detailed report later on.

We returned to France, this time accompanied by Canon Beechey who met his opposite number in Briquebec, both gentlemen showing considerable enthusiasm for the scheme and by the time this appears in print our own official committee will have been set up with Hugh Brown as president and Canon Beechey as vice-president. Furthermore, a delegation from Alresford has attended a reception given in Briquebec for the first visit of our president and this has been followed by a return visit from the French who found us "wet but hospitable".

Alresford may be late in becoming twinned with a town in France but I feel there is tremendous potential for mutual good from the scheme and am very heartened by the enthusiasm that has been shown. I also feel that we have chosen a town that is eminently suitable on all accounts.

I know that the Mayor of Briquebec is particularly interested in the benefits that will be available to the schools of each town but by bringing the two together in this way there will be great advantages for people of all ages. The many and varied societies of Alresford will find new and greater horizons and I look forward to the main twinning ceremonies which, hopefully, could take place next summer.



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