

# *"You're the Guy with Parkinson's"*

POEMS, PROSE AND PONDERINGS  
ON THE 'NORTHERN FRENCH CAMINO'



**WITH WILL & CORRIE BOAG**

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## Day 1 - Walthamstow to Canterbury

The three-beat sound of the pigeons was accompanied by the seagull cry as we woke in our private loft, three stories up in our London friends' busy home. We were treated like celebrities as we were indulged with sweets, soup and stories, catching up on things missed out on. After a bevy of games with their young boy, and the recent sounds of one younger ever-smiling lad, we were escorted by their mum to St Pancras Cross station.

Off to Canterbury with tales yet to come, more like tales from Canterbury. Chaucer welcomed us to town by attaching his famous name to everything including our lodgings, from where Canterbury Cathedral filled our window. A stroll around this curious place led us to its famous landmark where our Via Francigena passport was presented.

We left early searching for tales to tell that can only be told post walking. Getting lost is now an expectation, especially when the cobwebs are still holding firm. From recent experience we stopped and waited for a body to appear. And soon one did, in the form of a young African Englishwoman heading off just after sunrise to start her working day. She pointed to a road that she hoped was the right one, then caught her bus.

Gingerly walking along streets not in our guide book was a familiar experience to be missed if possible. A young man soon to be married in Cypress, said: "follow me" as he told us of closed-down mines where he was to follow his dad into guaranteed lifelong work. Not now, for this jolly bricklayer was building lasting monuments on top of the ground rather than hundreds of meters below.

Chaucer himself, wrote one of those monuments. His was a great literary testament. His famous Canterbury Tales are there to shine a critical light on English society of the time, especially the church, using a wide range of societal classes to make his point.

It was primarily a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together from London to Canterbury where they will visit the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. On this journey they would devise stories as they walk both ways and these would be retold on their return either in verse or prose. Two stories were to be written to their destination and two more on their return journey. The winner would receive a free meal at the Tabard Inn at Southwark.

Chaucer writes the tales focussed mainly on the stories being told and not on the pilgrimage itself. He pays little attention to the progress of the trip or certain locations along the way. While the 'pilgrims' are on a spiritual quest, they seem to be much more focussed on worldly things, which is one of the ironies being identified in these tales.

We'll have tales to tell and our focus will also be on worldly things as our story is more about our daily experiences and to highlight Pd (Parkinsons disease).

You are your life's story, make it a passionate one



## Farewell

We thought of how we'd missed our English friends  
As we struggled through their hottest April day,  
The thousand miles ahead, there seemed no end  
But we had promised to complete the way.  
Journeys we had walked were in our mind  
As well as those who'd trod with us before,  
When we'd got lost, the path we could not find  
And those we stopped were just to make quite sure.  
Our brains were busy now with things ahead  
And could we do the daily miles we'd planned,  
Was there accommodation - a good bed  
What challenges await in this vast land.  
Our Canterbury tale lies incomplete  
Return to London? No, won't be our feet.

## Day 2 - Canterbury to Dover

Friendly older locals with their over joyous dogs confirmed our path as our book had not yet caught up with our poor earlier directions. Welcome shade had now deserted us as glaring green fields challenged our resolve. This April, one of the hottest on record, had also provided the hottest April day ever, so our wish to start our journey before it got hot was sadly thwarted.

A local village ignored our need for sanctuary as an older local informed us of their lack of such amenities. A shady spot here and there allowed me a chance to sit, unsure whether I could stand later, was in slight contrast to Corrie who was certain that if she sat, it was there she would remain.

Slight differences in interpretation put us at odds with our persistent guide book, but like any relationship, it hopefully gets better with more understanding.

A final meeting with a walker from Canterbury (that resulted in chats about his past mountain climbing adventures), had us walking through a field of horses, who were more interested in lunch than us.

We were exhausted and sore, my bursa was stubbornly continuing to complain, the only accommodation was out of town, Dover was nearly in sight, so we took a ten minute train ride to those famous white cliffs.

It was still a long climb to our bed at Bleriots. An early French pilot, Bleriot flew across the channel and crashed very close to where we also crashed for the night, and both of us survived.

Someone else that thought they had crashed in Dover was Gloucester, King Lear's loyal nobleman. After he was blinded, he wanted to kill himself, and let his loyal son (who he thought was a homeless person) lead him to the 'white cliffs of Dover' so he could jump to his death. His son fooled him however by making him think he had jumped, then told his father the Gods had saved him, so that he would not attempt this act again.

Gloucester, like Lear, had been fooled by their other disloyal children in thinking that their only really loyal child was disloyal. They believed their deceptive progeny because they would massage their egos by telling them how wonderful they were, when it was simply because they wanted power. Gloucester's near demise at Dover was because he paid too much attention to outer appearances and social position, which blinded him in another way - from seeing what really matters.

Shakespeare, via King Lear, also talks of plant gatherers, potentially doing self harm by hanging from ropes to collect the edible 'rock samphire'. Other wildflowers included rare orchids and ox-tongue broomrape. This is just part of the wonderful ecology of the 'white cliffs'. The 'chalk' grassland also provides an excellent environment for many species of flowers, butterflies and birds. Exmoor ponies are there to clear invasive species from harming the native plants, so rare birds such as the ravens, jackdaws, skylark and peregrine falcon have now returned.



Sight is useless without perception



### Real Passion

Lodge Bleriot was where we stayed that night  
This name, the famous french aviator,  
Not one to sit and fly a gentle kite  
The monoplane, he was its creator.  
Two passengers he took, also the first  
He often crashed but no harm did he do,  
His car headlight it could not quench his thirst  
A passionate man in life he fairly flew.  
Not one to be a passenger also  
“I took control, the crash did I prevent,  
My head, tho’ light, had not a word for ‘no’  
Our life had changed we had to reinvent”.  
To save his life, he sat on his plane’s tail  
To save my life, I told a plane old tale.

### Day 3 - Dover to Calais

A short walk to the ferry today so a chance to gaze out at the rows of similar English cottages from our comfortable bed. So comfortable I forgot to take a photo from our second roof top tower, worth every step to get there.

Leaving Bleriot's crash site (I have a photo, mind back on the job), it was a three kilometre walk to the ferry station. We simply bought a ticket, showed our passport, waited for a bus which took us to the next ferry, half an hour until departure. These English ferries are about the size of ten Sydney ferries, but much less crowded and very comfortable in the very personalised cushioned chairs and tables, even too relaxed, no photos again.... and white cliffs. Time now to look at those white cliffs again and see where they lie in Britain's history and how they touched France a little, especially in past world wars.

The peregrine falcon (from yesterday) flies in the face of other stories about Vera Lynn's bluebird song. There are no bluebirds in Britain so it seems references are made to the blue underside of allied aircraft and the RAF. But this falcon could be the bluebird, which was seen to be on the enemy's side, because it would kill the messenger (the pigeons) who were used by spies to send secret intelligence back to Britain during WW1. A bit of a stretch maybe because the song saw the bluebird as a good thing - maybe they were the pigeons!

The white cliffs served as a type of barrier and symbolised hope, which allowed the allied spirits to soar. The white chalk was a symbol of home as well as war time defence. When leaving, or returning to Britain, they are the last or the very first sight you see, so they also create strong feelings of sadness associated with thoughts such as - 'how will I be able to cope away from my beloved home'? Then there are feelings of elation, mixed with thoughts like - 'I will now be reunited with my wonderful family'.

There were also those who would never see their families again as they were left behind in France to be captured by the Germans, the white cliffs unable to save them. Their constant yearning for this sacred rock would never come to fruition, close enough to see, so tantalising a sight, not too far by boat, but too far in the tiny window of opportunity. Many French would also suffer similar fate as many of them were also left behind to die.

If these cliffs could talk, they would have a lot to say, but more than likely they would take a bit of 'chalk' to teach and educate those who wish to see the 'fault' lines of this magnificent piece of nature, and also those who also want to learn from the pigeons that made it. We also made it, but to Calais in ninety minutes and another three kilometre walk into town. The tourist office rang around for us and we soon found accommodation on the side of a large canal. We now begin the French section and recognising more French words and phrases, so a chance to put some of our classes to use.

No-one can take hope and freedom from your mind



### My Wife

“I’m no athlete”, or so she says, my wife  
Would rather shop but just for special deals,  
Got one myself, with her I spend my life  
And walk, we simply have no time for wheels.  
This ‘no athlete’, at thirty took to skiing  
Travelled the world in search of better snow,  
‘Not exercise’, but just a way of freeing  
As only one with skis would really know.  
Later in life she took a different tack  
And came to walk with me across the world,  
She’s now defined herself with her own track  
Now this athlete - finally unfurled.  
And there amongst the soils of desperation  
She’s found her own green patch of inspiration.

## Day 4 - Calais to Guines

Calais, I am sure, has lots to offer, but a pilgrim's way is often taken up with basic needs - minutia, the unkind might say. Looking for a bed did not take long, looking for our path out tomorrow took a bit longer. There are bonuses with these little walks around our newly discovered villages: Corrie gets to have a well deserved rest, along with my pack, and little pieces of gold appear unannounced by the tourist office.

On this occasion the gold was in the form of an Hotel de Ville (town hall) with its adjoining belfry tower. This magnificent early 20th century neo-Flemish structural delight, can be seen from other villages some distance away, but you have to 'be' there to sense and see, the stunning profusion of tulips with their intricate shapes, all over the foreground.

The intricacies of signs mean we are having trouble working out where our Camino path is. There are signs to our next village on our beautiful canal walk but they are not the 'Camino ones', so one eye is looking for them, while the other is on the other. This 'other' is full of casual cyclers in ones and twos, and the more serious in fours or more, with many walkers (having well left their teens) walking steadily and earnestly. There is a lot of 'bonjour swapping' on the canal walls, with even joggers putting aside spare breaths for compulsory greetings. But no such greetings from the tourist office for there is no tourist information available on this weekly 'church day' so we begin to implement plan 'b'.

Cafes have gone to pray but not so the beer sellers who also sell coffee. Having formed a friendly relationship with the owner despite our French lessons not producing much in terms of conversation, I left Corrie in her care. The last of the church goers were walking or driving home but knew nothing of the pilgrim trail. A local who was returning home for a visit offered to drive us to an hotel out of town but I sadly could not, because my wife was still in care. I had wandered around quite a bit and was lost, so luckily I had Corrie's respite address.

In reality it will most likely be me that has a carer and left in respite. I remember when I was diagnosed back in 2010, my 'meant well' neurologist told me that in ten years I will be in a wheelchair, that is, next year, while Corrie has never received such a prediction. This is a major reason why I put so much effort into keeping well, both physically and cognitively, so I don't have to be cared for, but if I do, I will not want, or expect, my wife to do this.

I imagine making decisions like this is probably the worst thing about the disease or any disease, that takes away the most normal way of functioning. So what to do? Continue with my strategy of exercise, primarily interval training and fast walking for the physical side, and prose and poetry writing for the cognitive. In the mean time, as these exercises continue, I will continue to maintain a large interest in life, while I remain happy and fulfilled.

Finding your path can be difficult but once you have found it, it can give you sustained meaning



### The Belltower

The bell tower stands tall in northern France  
In Calais, it's a landmark on its own,  
The sound of bells - it seems the tulips dance  
Familiar rings reminds them of their home.  
Began - their rings, in four hundred AD  
In Europe now these bells are everywhere,  
Recognised in France more recently  
As symbols of great power in cities fair.  
The bells are rung on high for all to hear  
A single bell or many tuned to one,  
The ringers often make it their career  
A million bells in life they will have rung.  
The bell towers job is not to simply chime  
So watch it, if you haven't got the time.

## Day 5 - Guines to Licques

Our moated home was enough incentive to have a bath. The idea to be surrounded by water twice in the one night was appealing. And because we couldn't direct the water from the bath to the shower without busting something, made it doubly so. From heatwave to quite cold was such a pleasant shock and a reason to show the extra gear in our pack was not just superfluous filling. It also allows for breath-taking breaks as walking of course makes you hot, and clothing changes are needed.

Our book took us up an intermittent grade for most of our walk, a good change, as the long continuous flat can often be more arduous, even though yesterday took us through pleasant grazing paddocks. Today it is more farming but so lush, with clouds all day showing us glimpses of warmth which we are now enjoying. Tall evergreen forests give another contrast with carpets of bluebells escaping the wind, while the stunning blue takes our minds off our tired limbs. When a break is needed it is a matter of finding a mound of something to lean against, in the sun and out of the wind, not easy, but achievable.

The presence of bluebells signify an ancient woodland, dating back to the sixteenth century and, it seems, that bluebell forests or more aptly, bluebell woodlands, are found mainly in Great Britain. We are not far from those shores here in Guines so it's probably more than a coincidence that we have stumbled across one in France, although they do appear all over this continent. So how fortunate are we, and to find one away from home makes it all the more special. So why is it that they appear so prolifically in the woods?

The way it happens is like this. They are only found under a canopy of leaves and the thicker the canopy, the denser the bluebell field. As the canopy thickens, the less light is allowed in resulting in less ground cover. The diminishing plants are not there to steal the bluebells food, thus leaving the bluebells the freedom to proliferate from the remaining banquet. It is a magical spectacle, and it is hard to leave this profusion of fresh French fairy flowers.

Through a few housed-streets and into our unknown village. Our search for a rest house with drinks was helped by friendly locals. The timing was perfect for us, for, as we were ordering, a car hit another on the footpath outside. It stirred the locals into action as one of the drivers was injured. First to arrive was the 'victims' unit, then the fire brigade, finally the police. In the meantime Corrie's 'au lait coffee' had no lait, my chocolate was left off my saucer, and I couldn't go searching for a bed because the whole village was blocking the door. But I did see the injured man taken to the 'victims' van, and he looked okay.

Another couple of kilometres and we're ensconced in a camping site 'Chalet'. It's holidays in France, but fortunately for us, the French are finding it tough, so their bed became ours.

The bluebells remind us that our spirit lives forever



### Bluebells

The bluebell, like a sky on forest floors  
So brilliant though, its stars the trees above,  
We walked in through its fully open door  
And there's the milky way, a single dove.  
The sun, it sought a gap between the trees  
Its light reflected off those bright blue bells,  
Swaying oh so slightly in the breeze  
There's heaven everywhere this story tells.  
The bluest time for bluebell plants is spring  
A sign of ancient forests is this flower,  
Close your eyes and you may hear them ring  
Especially after an April shower.  
It droops, and nods, this stunning flower stalk  
And we nod back, while pausing on our walk.

## Day 6 - Licques to Tournehem-sur-la-Hem

Beds are becoming hard to find so we are taking a big step and booking ahead. Ominous clouds are gathered early to wish me well for another year (my birthday), as we exit our night room where the bed touches all walls bar the door entrance. Getting out was an exercise that I have never experienced before and being on the inside, Corrie's was even a greater gymnastic feat. But the best shower in the world was worth it all.

No cars but lots of cows coming down the road, and my book said turn right. We're on a roll early and wanting to get some quick kilometres behind us, and as I spotted the turn, the cows had seen it also. There was a slight chance of jumping the cow queue but when I noticed more than methane was escaping, I quickly changed my mind.

After getting the cows sorted it was up into the hills which we love so much, looking down on the gorgeous farming patterns below, the golden canola, the green grains and the small humps of trees. Looking for a chair or even something that acts like one wasn't working, and then I saw at the village end there was a bus stop - unlike normal folk we don't go to bus stops to catch a bus, so we just sat for a little. The guide book said there was a village round the corner so a decision was made to check it out. It was however yet another cafe-free village, but never ever church-free, so what to do?

A fresh soil paddock had an embankment of sorts and it was 'strong-wind free' with sun. The ploughed soil was barely noticed when walking, but when having this vista for 'dejeuner' it was another thing. The shades of soils were so varied, the lighter ones had white stones, while the darker ones may have been the result of having thousands of them removed. A fast train joined us for lunch for twenty seconds, the only sound other than the wind.

A long paddock-path near the river Hem was our town entrance. No better welcome than a gurgling river beneath an ancient bridge or so we thought, as we hungrily spied the one cafe in town. The gorgeous happy owner welcomed us, laughed, joked, and helped us with our French. She produced a visitors book and there we saw two Aussie walkers, friends of ours who had been there on this exact date last year, so an even better welcome and two wonderfully unexpected special birthday presents.

It's not as though I'm avoiding birthday celebrations, it's simply the best time for us to go overseas to walk. Europe is getting hotter earlier, the heat is more intense, and it lasts longer, so summer is out! We therefore generally start our walks in April which is my birth month and don't return until those that care have forgotten about it. But really I do have a special birthday experience because I'm in Europe doing what I love most in life. I am walking, I am writing, I am making new friends and I am doing all of this with my very best friend - Corrie.



It is great to be able to get up and deliver every day



### A Cow of a Birthday

It's yet another birthday far from home  
I never really know what to expect,  
Today, it could be this, my little poem  
But unsure what may happen on a trek.  
In Spain it was a tiny shiny thong  
A Frenchman and his cart were there in France,  
The next two were at home with haughty song  
Today it was the famous moo-moo dance.  
Cows have become a feature of our walk  
We see them nearly every single day,  
They run to us and with my wife they'll talk  
It's really very hard to get away.  
So with a local farmer and our sticks  
We moved them on, we know their little tricks.

## Day 7 - Tournehem-sur-la-Hem to Wisques

Another huge breakfast allowed us to also make lunch again for there will be no shops on the next stretch of the way. It makes sense that the words for breakfast include both breakfast and lunch so we will take every opportunity to be loyal to this new insight we have.

It certainly takes away another decision, because we are prepared for 'no-food villages' although we could do without the extra weight. Our walk seems to be more well known as we get further into France as villages become more intimate and walkers more noticeable. This also makes it easier to get directions not only for our walk, but to certain shops and sleeps.

The endless overhead torch seems to slip in and out of its fast flowing grey/white cover aided by that huge gusty breath. Early on it was very helpful as it pushed us along, saving our legs for some predicted rises. Later it whipped across our faces and pushed us from side to side. Then it stopped us like a wall as we altered direction. The people-high canola oil plants, like a flood of sunshine, swayed gracefully with the wind as they contrasted to the lower grain plants and the newly ploughed earth. Small pockets of forest dotted the countryside and gave us reprieve from nature's very cold breath.

Passing through peaceful villages in between mostly farmland we saw few people, the walkers disappearing once again, as I can't remember seeing even one. A meditative track if ever I saw one. A couple of tractors were the only life out there besides clumps of friesian cows, a collie dog, some hidden barkers, a hare and a nearly dead road-daring duck.

A gorgeous path-hugging hedge led us into Wisques and our huge new home, 'Abbaye Notre Dame', a breathtaking establishment. Sister Lucie was a gust of fresh air with her joyfulness and pleasure of meeting us as she moved so quickly and gracefully taking us on a tour of our 'rooms'. We met our neighbours, three lovely university students who occupy the upstairs while the ground floor is all ours. She then showed us the dinner place, a two minute jog to our quarters (a huge bedroom and lounge chairs, a kitchen with everything and breakfast, an upstairs bathroom that we share with the students, a lounge area that we share with a library, and a tulip garden surrounded by exotic trees and tantalising views). It is so delightful.

Now there are so many choices, a difficult thing for me, as I usually make a single choice work for me. It's as though I don't want to make a 'wrong' choice, thinking that I may have forgone some benefits. In a strange sort of way having Parkinsons was something I didn't have a choice about. So now I've got it, many decisions around what I do with it seem obvious to me.

We finally leave the sun and the wind outside to do us a big favour, to prepare our newly washed clothes for tomorrow's journey - hardly a decision.

Be like the wind with its many roles, and use them when the time arrives



### A Wind

I see the maples flutter in the breeze  
The lavender, it nods its purple head,  
The clouds move slowly way above the trees  
The birds won't tire, but use the wind instead.  
I hear it in the poplars as they rustle  
And when it's strong I hear it whistle by,  
It makes a gentle creek, hustle and bustle  
And makes a fire roar, this wind ain't shy.  
I feel it as I walk, it makes me cold  
And when it's very hot, it cools my crown,  
It helps when I am tired because I'm old  
But when it comes in front it slows me down.  
It's in my breath, it stirs my very soul  
It's part of who I am, it makes me whole.

## Day 8 - Wisques to Therouanne

Dinner was basic but their seemingly lack of fastidious etiquette for how they eat impresses me. Maybe the rich and famous are a little more critical, not sure. Depending on the food, it can be knifed and forked together, forked only, or hand eaten. No bread plates are used, but the demeanour of the table cloth is such that you can do what you like with the bread on the cloth or your dinner plate. In between mouthfuls, your cutlery mostly sits splayed out from the plate to the table cloth (the plate is for food), but if room, it can rest on the plate. When finished, cutlery is mostly together, parallel to you or perpendicular, or on the cloth beside your plate. At the end, after utensils are removed, the table cloth stains are dabbed then the cloth is shaken and replaced. I love it.

At the table was a middle aged Frenchman, a Frenchwoman of Asian appearance, two medical students, a student studying Russian, an older walker, and us. The students, all girls (this is the 'abbaye' for the nuns - girls home), while the other huge 'abbaye' estate is for the monks - the boys home. The students say they are studying here because it is quiet - not sure what's happening at home. They mostly comfortably ignored us as we only speak words here and there, but when we spoke a combination of English-French-Spanish, the Russian speaking French girl would translate.

We said goodbyes the next day and the huge breath was there to meet us, pushing, pulling, earlier freezing us, later cooling, with the light finding us through rushing cloud-holes. Aches and pains are slowly withering, or just becoming part of a new walking-feel. Mostly walking on a main road, finding it rather easy these days, not yet tiring of the canola plants, or the lush green, and certainly not the fresh air, being used wisely by the nearby wind farms, so we do not see it as an ill wind any longer.

Walking past an information centre a young woman rushed out and offered us accommodation just down the road. She gave us the entry code as she could see we were pilgrims - large pack, poles, weary and looking lost. We entered a lovely clean home and rested a little. Not sure which room to take because the owner was not there, so the information-woman settled us in until the owner arrived fifteen minutes later.

A lovely man, who is doing this in retirement. He turned on the heaters, showed us where things were, especially the kitchen and bits of food we could cook. Unusually, in this town, there is a supermarket but nowhere to eat. This accommodation is gold because it is a real pilgrim hostel. The price is low, it is self-contained, meaning every thing you need is on site, with the owner at your disposal (whose knowledge of the pilgrim track is up to date), it is spotlessly clean, you are treated as though you are the most important person on earth, and all your needs will be met. What a society can be, if we could all do this!

When you can, go outside before the sun, and listen, before the tractors wake



### A Manner of Eating

I love to eat in France, they do it true  
Use knife and fork, or fork, it's all okay,  
Then rest them on the plate and table too  
At end they lie together any way.  
The bread goes on the cloth not on a plate  
You tear it up and in the soup it goes,  
And when you eat it's often close to eight  
Then not too much to drink, their figure shows.  
Your elbows on the table are not rude  
And stacking plates also acceptable,  
And making mess is never seen as crude  
The cloth you dab and shake, then to the table,  
Then after dinner you do then prepare  
The table, set for 'petite dejeuner'.

## Day 9 - Therouanne to Amettes

We returned to see Silvia because she had the only wifi in town. She also had the only violin, that she played in the local symphony orchestra. As we looked around her office I had a request, so she played Puccini's Gloria which added a delightful background. This area of France contains archeological digs from the fifteenth century, much of which was on display here in the violinist's office. This town was under siege at the time it was being fought over by the Dutch and the English amongst others. It was thought that the English, in losing that challenge, threw a tantrum as well as salt, over the area to ensure that everyone would be prevented from farming.

This passionate French woman also was the only person in town very interested in helping to revive this much neglected pilgrimage walk. She asked us for suggestions which we gave in abundance, and will take her extensive notes of our conversation, to a large conference (about the Via Francigena - French route) in two weeks, to use as her input. Concerned at never having walked this journey prior to her attendance, she now feels confident in her newfound knowledge. After a cup of tea with a violin handle, Silvia and Puccini bade us farewell, with the knowledge that she may be contributing to a refreshed pilgrimage way.

The house was all ours and with goodies from Alain and the local store across the road, we cooked our first meal: tuna, tomato and rocket pasta, accompanied by a glass of wine. The 'goodies place' also helped us with tomorrow's lunch, while the 'boulangerie', almost next door, supplied us with freshly baked baguettes and croissants at 0700.

Off again, with aches and pains mostly a memory now, our bodies hopefully recalling their own muscle memories of their previous capabilities. No major roads today, mostly small farming ones where these huge modern tractors use more than even the roads width, so it's a choice for us between newly planted seeds on one side or established crops on the other.

Walking along a high embankment a few kilometres from home, I was wondering what this dam-like wall was, as there is no irrigation in this part of France. My book, which I usually criticise for lack of detail, informs me that it is an old disused rail line, not much unlike French rail today, which I am told is in chaos with rolling strikes becoming the norm.

No light from above today, but still the cool breeze, which tried to stop us in our long, last push for home. When eventually we arrived home, our wonderful host, who looked after us like his own children, oops, I mean parents, rang ahead to make a booking for us. It was an enormous farmhouse dating back to the 1600s... but tastefully renovated to this century. Yes, we're back in our favoured loft accommodation. Lovely people welcomed us with the local Arras beer, and they're going to cook us dinner as well.

When a part of us becomes redundant, find another way of resurrecting it



### A Train No More

In France are many disused railway lines  
We walked on some, an interesting way,  
Relaxed somewhat as little need for signs  
And well defined, so fast with no delay.  
High banks defined so many of these tracks  
While tunnels left you with no cause for doubt,  
That trains were here and not all that long back  
Their passengers now walkers, fit and stout.  
It's quieter these days, with no pollution  
'Bonjour only', from other exercisers,  
From train to training, perfect solution  
It's one of Frances wonderful surprises.  
The choice is train and get to Paris fast  
Or walk, and have the memories that last.

## Day 10 - Amettes to Bruay-la-Buissiere

Our 'chambre d'hôte' within a beautiful courtyard was just what we wanted, as we were entertained by Lulu the poodle who performed a few steps for us on her back paws, as we searched deep for our few French words so we could chat a little with Collette, the owner. On our previous French walk along the 'Chemin du Puy' (a more popular route) we were often lodging with about four couples, which gave a different feel to the walk. Our interaction in that case was mostly with the other walkers, so the conversation was about them and their life and interests. Here in the north we have so far been the only residents, so it is a more personal relationship with the owners.

Dinner at the 'dancing dog' with the farmer and his wife was fun and informative. Jean Baptiste spoke English so it was a chance to educate ourselves a little more on the local scene. In a photo I posted below you will see very neat rows of soil, and being a farmer he was very au fait with this method of farming. These are for potatoes so they can be easily scooped up by the tractor - saves searching and digging for them. They also don't need to be watered. On our walks in most European countries we have seen lots of irrigation, but not here. The farmer told us it always rains, but there is plenty of sunshine as well - perfect weather, perfect soil and perfect crops.

So the dinner was had in their beautiful dining room in this unusual house with stairways leading everywhere. Through the little kitchen and out a tiny door to quite a limited space, two steps up to a small landing, a Lulu leg to the right and through another tiny door, another dog leg to the right again, and up curved stairs to a low door through which was a bedroom, then to the right and into our ensuite with a lovely view of the extensive garden courtyard.

Back to dinner where we had white wine with cheese, biscuits and red wine with pigs' cheeks. Having avoided this French delicacy for years now, I was caught unawares because they looked like scrumptious portions of lamb and also tasted that way. A gorgeous sauce, his potatoes, her special peas, all helped me remove the image of those cheeks from my turmoiled mind.

After 'memory' photos and a final dance with Lulu, it was off again with our ponchos at the ready. The sky was telling us to wear them, but the farmer said there was no need and farmers seem to know these things. A small shower brought them out, so I lost a little faith, but that was it, and all the poncho did was make us wet on the inside. Faith restored.

We passed through a few quiet villages today so a change from the perfect farms for a while and a chance to look at their homes. Lots of prefabs, nearly always with lofts, thus no wasted roof space. Lots of development, new homes, but rarely a shop or cafe/bar to service them. Like most places, small shops aren't economically viable as locals travel to ever-burgeoning supermarkets.



Personal experience can sometimes be a burden



### The Dog

A dog shows us the best that we could be  
They're there for you no matter what you do,  
And loyal to a fault, they only see  
The good in us, no matter false or true.  
Affectionate, the best companion ever  
They'll play with you when given half a chance,  
And laugh a lot, they're never cranky - never  
Just recently we saw a doggy dance.  
If we could be just half the dog they are  
And use these qualities towards each other,  
The world we know would not be so bizarre  
And all of us would be sister and brother.  
I hear them say that 'dog is mans best friend'  
We need to be that dog, so we can mend.

## Day 11 - Bruay-le-Buissierre to Ablain-Saint-Nazaire

A real people day today, as we began on our now familiar unused rail track high above the surrounding fields, exquisite in its appearance and offering shade if needed. So far it hasn't been necessary, as the shade high above is coming in a different, ever-changing form.

A mob of mostly male joggers first came into sight as I held my imminent photo of Corrie in abeyance in order to capture them as well. Seeing what was happening, I heard a shout (as you would in the Sistine Chapel): "no photo". I thought I would test this challenge out and called back 'yes, photo', a few times, until they started laughing and shouting. So amid the apparent frivolities I clicked. The last runner then stole my poles, and ran with them a few steps using them quite well, with me calling out 'gendarmerie'. He laughed, returned them and bounced off with the rest. Then it was some walkers and a dog, followed by some joggers. This probably means that these previous rail lines that our friends and us are using are more productive than the 'striking' French rail.

Like yesterday, it was the village 'feel' and the now rolling (was flat) farmed 'fields', that made our farmers weather prediction less of a challenge - yes, he said, it would rain all day. It was now becoming eerily isolated as we were entering a people scarce village, and 'sign not' territory, making us a little concerned. It was late, a Sunday (a nothing anywhere day) and we had taken an alternate route (ancient and original, but with poor signage).

We had already covered more kilometres than normal and it was getting late, so I held my stick up to show Corrie a 'path clue'. At the same time a car reversed towards us and I thought they must have seen my raised pole as a distress call. So I went up to the car and was surprised to see that he was shocked to see me there. It turned out that they were lost also and were heading up a road that was ours, but we did not know about. They found out on their 'gps' that we were a long way from home (for cars) and offered us a lift as they were lost anyway.

Their two young daughters squeezed together while we squeezed them closer making it quite hard for them to play on their smart phones. While we rarely ask for lifts, we sometimes accept the offer in emergencies and this was a time of acceptance. A lovely chat ensued between mum and dad and us, while the kids played with their 'chats' on the phones, but became more 'chatty' with us when I told them my wife also liked 'chats' as well as 'chiens'. Maybe that's a way of engaging with kids mesmerised by their phones.

Photos were taken - ours for the blog and theirs for Facebook as they dropped us right outside the door of our new home, a lovely 'auberge' farmhouse with a huge loft room (encore), a delicious supper and French wine. We would never have otherwise found it - thank you Laurence, Françoise and kids!

If in doubt, take the opportunity



### Pure No More

Were purists once and never took a lift  
Beds far apart have had us change our mind,  
I think at times it's right to make a shift  
At times accommodation we can't find.  
It's also when we lose ourselves too late  
And darkness is upon us very soon,  
A chance also to meet and make a mate  
Then get to bed before the risen moon.  
One day it was a van that stopped for us  
Another was a car we asked a ride,  
We never took a taxi or a bus  
One train we took, that hurt a bit, our pride.  
Right now we're on an ancient railway track  
No trains no more, so just a small backpack.

## Day 12 - Ablain-Saint-Nazaire to Arras

Big decision - walk another long wet muddy day or take up our hosts' offer of a tour of what a lot of the north is famous for. We really would otherwise have no chance to visit these enormous memorials to the English, Canadians, New Zealanders, and French who died defending freedom. There were also graves for the Germans who had little choice other than disobeying orders, and you can only imagine what their fate would then be.

We decided to be kind to ourselves and were driven to these very emotive sites by our host at the auberge. He offered, but it was his 'full of fun' father-in-law, Michel, with his very lucky grandson, who took time out. Leopold even seemed to enjoy my company as we chatted in the back seat guessing what the other was saying by expressions. What I found yesterday with the two young French girls, is that the best way to communicate for me, with small people, is by taking and sharing photos. Meanwhile Corrie, the big person communicator, sat in the front with the very tall big person exchanging light hearted French phrases.

Entering this enormous sacred site, we were overwhelmed by the number of graves. It appeared not to be the usual visiting hours so we ambled across this quite barren space with Leopold jumping and laughing totally oblivious to what you might call, 'an older person's experience'. Older men in uniform greeted our well known affable host as they walked us through one of the many memorials to the fallen soldiers. It was a humbling experience and we felt privileged to share it with our generous friends.

After, they took us right up to the edge of the famous Arras Squares where I quote from the tourist info. booklet: "The uninterrupted run of 155 baroque facades surrounding the Grand Place and the Place des Heros form an architectural ensemble that is without peer in Europe providing a sumptuous setting for the town hall and belfry." Our room in the square meant that we weren't so much visiting this history as living in it.

Our walking today consisted of pack-free strolls through and around this ancient town soaking up its distinct atmosphere. Another day would have us exploring more especially, the underground limestone 'boves' or galleries that were used to shelter its citizens from air raids. But this a luxury that time does not allow us and maybe we can thus reflect on what we have just seen.

But now it's time to return home to Corrie's unusual find on booking.com - Les Trois Luppars, the oldest house in Arras. The House of Three Leopards was built in 1467 with its 'sparrow stepped gable' made entirely of brick which was the basis for the alignment of the houses on the 'squares'. Now 'my little sparrow' has returned with our SIM card allowing us now to call our room provider for tomorrow night, so she can collect us from a church in a village somewhere in the north of France. But that is a story for another day.

## Make use of everything



## Arras

Arras, it's not a specially striking name  
But what is there's unique in every way,  
The Spanish-Flemish squares are of high fame  
Baroque in style, post-wars, they're here to stay.  
Facades, replaced by brick, not earlier wood  
Have sculptures that depict what that store sells,  
The Place des Heros, where there's so much blood  
Deserves its name, so let them ring the bells.  
The stunning belfry on the square looks down  
On what in Europe is extraordinary,  
While tunnels underneath a fable grown  
Safe haven in its tragic history.  
With bells above, and holes below the square  
This three floor town, oh yes, it's very rare.

## Day 13 - Arras to Bapaume

The tourist information office in Arras is quite exquisite. It is in the Hotel de Ville, one of those special buildings you find in most larger towns, with their striking architecture and tall bell tower, that can be seen from afar, even, at times, even before you see the church steeple. We found our information officer and I was ready to roll out my well-honed plan. So, it's simple, you respectfully refuse to take 'I don't know' or 'no' for an answer, (especially in France when asking anything to do with the Via Francigena, which is not well known here).

Eventually someone will know something and then when they help you, like Juliet did, there is no holding back. She even rang the president of the VF association, who then rang around in tomorrow's 'destination town' for accommodation, and eventually put us in contact with a 'chambre d' hote'. It seems they want to help but realise it can be time consuming, and that is a concern when they have people constantly arriving for advice.

The track was too long for us today - anywhere near thirty kilometres is a real struggle. So we walked our usual twenty kilometres mark, rang our hostess on arriving at the appointed church rendezvous, and she picked us up to cover the 'we would have died' distance. That was our 'story for another day' which I mentioned in my post yesterday.

By the way, the walk was superb today, reported heavy rain didn't join us, but our 'just in case' rain gear shielded us from the strong blow. Open fields reached to the horizon as their large family of wind turbines made use of the abundance of gusting fuel, to ensure that the local villages could see, cook and warm themselves in an economic, environmentally friendly way.

Along more of those high, narrow, tree-lined ridges (that used to carry trains but now keep walkers off colourful fields and offer protection from all the elements), across small roads, then winding along grass tracks, it was hard to notice the kilometres go by. There were villages to dawdle through, benches on which to rest awhile, roads with next to no traffic, and many 'world war cemeteries' to move us into a different kind of reflective mode.

In this part of France the churches are locked. I'm not sure why, and we don't use them much, but they are an architectural delight, a place of refuge offering a rain or wind haven, a not so comfortable seat (I'm sure it's to keep you awake during boring sermons) and a place just to be. And even when locked you know you are welcome in the grounds.

But the real place to be right now is with Odile, who has just given us afternoon tea, shared her family stories, and is going to ensure we cover one of those 'deadly' distances tomorrow. She will drive us out from here a few kilometres so we can make the seemingly impossible, possible, and it's an advantage of being the only residents.

Fulfilment comes from finding information you didn't think you had



### Graves Enfants

Those silent stones are stories to be told  
Of long ago when people were at war,  
The story's short cause they did not grow old  
A chance to live a life that's full, no more.  
Some people come to sit beside their grave  
While others read what this stone has to say,  
Many will talk of how they were so brave  
The dead don't care, for they're now far away.  
The graveyard's there to satisfy the living  
With memories of the past locked in their mind,  
A greater need for things they need reliving  
Instead of looking for new things to find.  
To books we turn to see what war has done  
To meet life's challenge, then our war is won.

## Day 14 - Bapaume to Perrone

During tea I asked Odile why all the churches are closed and the main reason she gave was vandalism. It's easier said than done but it sounds like the vandals have won out. It got me thinking of solutions to the problem. Maybe they can address it in a way by having retired volunteers to watch over the church. They could have more church activities, use it as a meeting place. People could sit and chat in the church instead of at home. What about a children's playground or an exercise park? I think things like this could be the key to unlocking the church as well as fearful minds, so the church could be used creatively while also attracting a wider community.

Odile took us part of the way as promised but there was a catch. Just a little way before she left us, we found out there would be no signs for the rest of the day's journey. Of course we had our book but it was hard to match it to the VF signs because they didn't exist. I hope that I had mentioned this to Sylvia to take to the conference.

Seeing these old confused people, obviously in need of help, an older man pulled up, and in broken French we worked out the general direction that we had to go and went back the other way. Eventually we caught up with our book and treasured it more than ever after this. A beautiful walk through some small singing forests, and ubiquitous open fields with that gorgeous canola lighting up the still rolling green and brown fields.

Another large canal today, sixty metres wide and flowing through a series of lochs being traversed by a large eclectic array of bridges. It was great to spend some time beside the water rather than under it, and admiring the surrounding reflections.

One of the bridges carried us across and soon there was a small creek (one metre wide). As I paused for a little, I noticed a black bird appearing to swim into the bank. Looking closer I saw that the bank had been eroded, leaving a bird-space underneath where they can hide, nest or whatever they do.

Lunch was on a concrete pylon behind a huge house, of which we are seeing many, quite grand and no two the same. Some of them seem to be government farms. Every now and then we see a large imposing entrance with buildings going to the right and left forming a huge courtyard, with the imposing government building in the middle of the back of the courtyard.

A few longer breaks today ensured the body was happy and left us with energy to slowly take in the village environment. Perrone seems to be more lively and busy than most but in a quiet, non-self-imposing way. Our first church accommodation tonight, in a chalet behind an impressive church. I don't know the French word for 'by donation' but that's what it is, and I've decided to also tidy up the wood heap and a small shed.



It's sad to see potential opportunities waste away



### The Church

The church in France does dominate the village  
Once busy with its fundamental pulpit,  
Unoccupied and locked for fear of pillage  
With no-one looking for the hidden culprit.  
Too busy with outdated stubborn views  
Too lazy to address what has gone wrong,  
Don't care that it is for the very few  
Could be irrelevant before too long.  
This church could still be there for all the people  
But what we need is monumental shift,  
Real meaning should be given to that steeple  
Preventing what could be a permanent rift.  
A start could be to open up the doors  
And take away the fear of dirty floors.

## Day 15 - Perrone to Trefcon

St Jean the Baptiste was responsible for our small 'by donation cottage' last night. It was quite austere, clean and warm, however he only provided us with single beds and no tea bags. His apartment was much more lavish. Besides the usual pews, this 1525 grand 'gothic flamboyant' structure contained three large spectacular frescoes which we sadly did not see because the only church we've found open, was closed.

We paid our donation but there was also an opportunity to donate a bit of our time as well. While the interior was spotless, outside was a different story. There were two small sheds that were just messy, with lots of paper and garbage lying around a potential vegetable garden (a lot of dug-up soil). So I tidied up the messy sheds, collected and binned the copious rubbish and raked the area to make it look as though someone cared.

Across the square however our timing was much better as the 'boulangerie' was open, and packed, and the bar next door for our coffee where we take our croissants, was also open for business. The French army was there, so weaving our way through their substantial armoury was a bit tricky with our packs and weapons (poles) also.

Back on the railway line for most of the morning, such a delightful path and clever use of the no longer useful past to the very useful present. Who would have thought that progress could mean going from rail to walk? It caters for the walkers, bikers and riders beautifully by keeping it well above bog-level; there is no noise or air pollution; no-one is on their mobile; people are exercising, and others are socialising as they walk. Churches take note!

Walking through glorious sweeps of canola brought us to Jamila. An Algerian French woman, she and her retriever, Stephie, were out for a walk. A few polite words and my request for a photo prompted her to invite us home for coffee. So a two kilometre walk with the two of them had us swapping stories in broken languages. Her ability to express herself both verbally and physically ensured 'mostly understood conversation'. She loves to cook so her kitchen is like a chef's, and she also loves her family seen in the many photos from Algeria. After a long unexpected break it was now the last leg home.

Soon a stop for lunch on the step of a tiny memorial protected by trees especially planted for that reason, on a fairly busy road, a few photos and we're on our way home. The memorial also acted as a chair so we respectfully thanked it for allowing us to use it in a way it was not designed for.

We didn't know it at the time but the two women driving their draught horses along the road that I photographed, are our hosts for tonight and cooking us dinner. I was going to end by saying this was a one horse town but as you can see, I would be lying ... but it's close.

The satisfaction of doing something for another without them knowing



### The Horse

The draught horse was invaluable to us  
In doing work impossible for most,  
Quiet and calm it's done with little fuss  
Patient and strong with little need to boast.  
The engine came and took away their roles  
This proud and smart and very docile horse,  
Was slaughtered, now few parents for their foals  
This gentle beast need find another course.  
It came in form of therapeutic guise  
They're helping those emotionally disabled,  
And some to feel again, they're also wise  
This horses' power goes well beyond the stable.  
The beauty is no therapeutic talk  
Allows for people once again to walk.

## Day 16 - Trefcon to Seraucourt-Le-Grand

The kitchen was huge, an enormous stove in one corner, our large table looking out on the grand courtyard off the horse stables. (I have an aside - I didn't realise at the time but in my horse photo, the other horse and driver were blocked out by the other). Another table was by the stove. In between there was yet another table for our hosts' children and grandchild.

The hosts joined us for dinner and English was the chosen language. We talked about their horses taking visitors on carriage rides. Our host had also learnt to kayak so they also took people on river journeys on a variety of waterways around La Somme, a name synonymous with all those deadly battles and their resultant graveyards. People like us stayed with them as well.

Over our huge dinner of special cheese pie, chicken and beans with mushroom sauce, and lovely apple pie, we drank local beer and red wine. He said that white wine and champagne were the main choice of those in the north, while red was preferred in the south. Then she cooked our dinner with wine, stating that they, in the north, mostly used beer.

We talked about the ubiquitous barking dogs, who apparently were there for a purpose. It goes back to the 18th century when the Spanish were causing trouble in France. The locals saw a need to protect themselves, thus one of the many useful roles of our walking poles. Their dog, like Jamila's dog yesterday after initially wanting to eat me, became very friendly, nuzzling up to my leg.

Lilly arrived and leant on the glass door, wanting to come inside and not just to see us. It so happens that cats appear in the horse stables for a mice evening meal. She doesn't like cats, but instead of having cat stew, her appearance was for other delicacies. We did have more in depth discussions however, talking about a wait and see approach to whether Macron can deliver on his promises; why the predominantly older French people have some misgivings about the English; and the Germans' response to the French when challenged about the war.

Our persistent companion met us at the door, left us for a while as the trees and houses blocked its way, joined us on open plains, sometimes coming from the side, meeting us at the front and then helping us along as we turned corners. While affecting us in so many various ways, good and not so, unusually, the fine recently ploughed soil between the fields of yellow and green, doesn't seem to be moved by it at all.

In Australia, it causes huge dust storms, sometimes carrying soil hundreds of kilometres. But today here in the region of Haut de France, the region stretching all the way from the coast of Calais and hosting our presence, it is more of a cooling agent as the days get warmer, and the paths have less shade.

Crossing the river Somme once more, a "chalet" by a small tributary of the Somme is calling us, a quiet camping ground with no barking dogs, just blackbirds.

Your relationship with a dog depends not on who you are but where you are



## Champagne

It's the extrovert that has to have its say  
Exuberant, excitement unconstrained,  
It's not the taste alone that marks the day  
The sounds and sights are also unashamed.  
Was born in northern France, a bubbly child  
Its childhood in Champagne it grew up fast,  
With many friends and parties very wild  
It gained a reputation and a past.  
Now with its sense of place that is terroir  
It knows the ground that guarantees survival,  
It knows its base no longer just bourgeois  
An adult now, completed its revival.  
This drink of celebration and for sorrows  
Will never die, there'll always be tomorrows.

## Day 17 - Seraucourt-Le-Grand to Tergnier

The idea of a camping ground appeals to neither of us for so many reasons. A tent is okay but getting up from ground level is becoming very difficult, especially when the loo is an outside walk away. It also means we would need to carry more gear and food, and we are at our maximum weight already.

But these grounds often have chalets, your own little two storey house, in this case, a long 'fishing line cast' to the river. A small grocery store, doubling as a 'boulangerie', meant we could cook our own pasta dish and have fresh pastries for breakfast - a pleasant change.

Our neighbours in chalets, tents, and caravans (two sleeping in their yacht which they are towing) were nearly all English. Two French men wanted to swap their chalet with ours 'cause the fishing was better where we were', while a Dutch biker couple seemed very happy with their tiny igloo for two.

Today was back to railway lines, but this time, ones with trains, so we tracked beside instead of walking on them. Mostly through open fields, and one that was not supposed to be open. The guide book told us to head toward the forest but there wasn't one. Well actually there was, but it had recently been cut down as noticed by my keen-eyed co-navigator.

Other changes that we need to watch for are: grass tracks that are now tarmac; new roads and road diversions; canola fields that are now potatoes; grain fields that are now ploughed; removed signs; new signs; demolished buildings; new buildings; and grown-over tracks.

Then it's on to the St Quentin 'three-barges wide' canal which quietly joined us on our 'one-car wide' roadway at its edge. Another singing forest nestled up against us, its 'four large tree-high width' timbered area, being the home for constantly chattering neighbours.

In the distance there are always church steeples and wind farms, at times a tower or two, all framed by farmlands, but not a hill or a mountain in sight. We are thirsting for a climb.

All the while the refreshing sight of St Quentin reflected the mood from 150 years ago, when it was the only route that serviced northern France. Today I believe it is still in use but the only life we have seen are the workers in their lock stations, a dozen fishermen (one woman), a jumping fish and a few cranes gliding close to the still water.

Counting the locks, the bridges, and roadways over the canal, I can sense that home is not far away. Arriving where the book's daily guide ended, did not prepare us for a long hike to our small hotel, the only accommodation, we were told, in this town. We must have looked a little frazzled and as though we might need to lie down in a hurry, because a mother and daughter car pulled up offering us a lift. We were in town already so we accepted because it was so spread out.

You must camp once in your life or you'll never feel the stars



### A Place to Sleep

When walking a camino there's a choice  
Of where to rest your tired and aching body,  
Quite often there's concern about the noise  
And comfort, for there's some that are too shoddy.  
The 'chambre d'hôte' it's dinner with a family  
An 'albergue' is a snoring dormitory,  
The spirit enters in a monastery  
A schoolhouse on the floor's another story.  
Bit harder to accommodate the mind  
That busy gets, when you have lots in there,  
The slippery spirit is so hard to find  
While childhood memories need be dealt with care.  
In life we need accommodate so much  
Important then, we don't get out of touch.

## Day 18 - Tergnier to Laon

Tergnier is a town still rebuilding after the war but mostly around the edges. Not far from our hotel, Le Paon, is a silent, unpeopled square. There are no cafes, no residences, no shops, so nobody. Instead it is graced with substantial red brick buildings reflecting its brutal past.

None of these places dominate the other, but almost seem to stand side by side in stubborn resistance. And it is the Musee of the resistance movement with its photos of these resilient people that is most heartfelt. Another is the imposing 'town hall' and the 'old post office', while the unimposing but still beautiful school, sweeps down the longest side of the square.

As we have seen in other towns, the words 'avant' and 'apres' show the revival from war's destruction to the aftermath's reconstruction. The edges that I referred to above, are the extensive roads and gutters that bring a new connection and life to a battered but persistent people.

Our home is as silent as the square and the Sunday non roadworks. Corrie found the owner in a kitchen out the back. He gave us keys, took our money, and was never to be seen again.

On leaving, we passed what seemed to be, on our arrival, another non-peopled, but huge square that looked like an enormous car park. Not this morning however, a market appeared, totally peopled and stalled with all the goodies one could possibly imagine.

The route today was once again nearing thirty kilometres and thirty degrees, with nil to eat or drink in between, so a day off walking while the train conveyed us to our first hill of the walk - the steep Swiss-like climb to the 'fortress' and 12th century Gothic Cathedral town of Laon.

Laon's important Cathedral of Notre-Dame (one of several with this name) pays homage to Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury who walked to Rome in 990 AD to receive blessings from the Pope. On his return journey, Sigeric documented his route, and this became known as the Via Francigena, the original pilgrim road to Rome.

We are staying in an hotel that historically housed monks (possibly resting here initially on a pilgrimage to Rome), where a winding stairway delivers us to a character-filled retreat with modern conveniences and a bed which lies beneath a very ancient beam. Our little window opens on to the fields and forests which we railed to this morning.

These hill towns have a magic all of their own, like a piece of earth has risen from the ground to serve a greater purpose. Like an outpost in the desert, you can see for miles for 360 degrees. In the past this served as protection from invaders, now the invaders are tourists but they are welcome, the only weapon they have, an 'I phone' which steals only memories, the rest is left intact.



The 'apres' provides an opportunity to heal the 'avanti'



## Resistance

The French are known for showing résistance  
Towards a very strong relentless foe,  
All classes, genders, ages, joined in France  
And showed us what the life is apropos.  
A small percentage with a common purpose  
Determined all to give their utmost best,  
Disrupt, confuse, then go below the surface  
Uncover this, your foe, and never rest.  
Resistance works with our Pds ascent  
Relentless too is how it gets its way,  
But we can interrupt its cruel intent  
Disrupting its intention day by day.  
By working in the tunnels of our mind  
There is a chance, a small clue we will find.

## Day 19 - Laon to Cheret

Les Chevaliers was our Laon home for the night and the two young Frenchmen were the personification of its title. These gentle knights cared for us from the very start, offering both of us carriage of our luggage to the very top of this dizzy staircase. They carried on their chivalrous ways by offering us the choice of rooms, early entry and anything else we desired.

Their lucky hotel is receiving the same attention, as they meticulously bring it back to its long ago 'monk' days. Instead of withdrawing from the world though, like the monks, they enthusiastically embrace it, and travel when they can, while we left with a top up of their adventurous passion. The monks would be so happy to know their previous home is being cared for in such a way.

So it's goodbye to this hilltop beauty as the walk through the ancient streets takes us into 'boulangeries, fruiteries' and grocery shops where we need to stock up. Our destination has no food, nor is there any on the way. We do get breakfast but dinner no more, so an extra load but for a shorter trip, and we are now assured of our next two meals.

Our navigator, me, however, wasn't happy with few kilometres so I decided after a meeting with my support staff to go the wrong way - she wanted to go the right way. The book sometimes takes us in circles for its own reasons, so I err on the side of perceived logic. Wrong!!!

It was becoming too confusing so I stopped a car (going the opposite way to us) for directions and he offered to turn around and take us to the next village. A bar that wasn't supposed to be there, was, and the market that was supposed to be open, wasn't. Our driver wanted to take us on to our destination but the bar was too enticing (who knows when we might see another). So we thanked this generous man who instead, transported our minds back to India when he said respectfully: "It is my duty", as he pointed (just as dutifully) to the sign on the street corner for our now much shorter trip home.

The navigator once again decided to follow the book, with the support staff (not a great fan of this book after being led astray on numerous previous occasions) unsure, so the book won out. Through some lovely shady bush tracks it was looking ominous. Even though our trusty signs had returned, this distance seemed too long. So we back-tracked to where the man had indicated, which was a quiet and bushy road that led straight past our enormous mansion. No English here, but we assume it once was a cloister set in magnificent grounds, close to yet another Notre Dame church.

I've checked out the first kilometre of our way tomorrow and we're back on track. A beautiful chambre-d'hote awaited us with a delightful old worldly sitting room where I am writing. Our second clothes line is a bit of a luxury and it also means the aesthetics of our gorgeous room remain intact.

Equality is the epitome of chivalry



### The French Bar

The perfect bar depends on many things  
Outside's my preference if there is no rain,  
No matter if it's not the place for kings  
And comfort counts, if you have got some pain.  
If hot and tired you need a shady place  
No cars, no noise, no path for passers by,  
This bar we found, of negatives, no trace  
While all of them have access to wifi.  
And just to put the icing on the cake  
A bakerie nearby is what you need,  
Barista in the bar good coffee makes  
An owner who of your concerns takes heed.  
The perfect bar is subject to the day  
It's hard to find, somewhere along this way.

## Day 20 - Cheret to Corbeny

Laon seems to mark the end (maybe temporary), of the wide open fields where you can see for miles. Part of the reason this vista exists is because there are very few trees, except for the odd narrow forest, the old covered rail line, woods along the St Quentin canal and clumps of trees on small hilltops.

Now we have climbed the first real hill, although not challenging from a walker's perspective, these landforms provide a whole different atmosphere. The hills are often forested, small fields are ringed with trees, and large areas of land seem to be dedicated to woodland.

So shade is in abundance, unlike previously where it was in patches, and from a walker's view it is much more varied and interesting, and surely would be very welcome in the summer months. The winds have softened recently and act like a huge fan keeping us cool on the infrequent hot days (ie around twenty five degrees).

A beautiful walk today similar to yesterday with a similar navigation error, but the whole navigation team agrees that the book was not clear. And my mistake, at the roundabout I didn't stop a car for confirmation, because we were sure!! Can't understand it because I love stopping cars.

As you can see, still we have not lodged or walked with a co-walker on this journey. This is the first time over such a long distance, so we have needed to be very diligent with our communication, and it has been a good challenge and experience, in a growth sense.

After a bit of a roundabout, Corbeny has appeared and after trying to get someone to answer the front door, Corrie appeared. She had gone round the back of the hotel and found a way in, but no one else in sight. This is her second break-in now in a week, so getting lost may be the least of our worries if she continues with her current errant ways. I joke, because she made the right choice. Most of us do have a choice, while others may think that choice is clouded by past actions making it not so easy to choose. While, eg., I didn't choose the Pd path that I am now on, indirectly, some actions that I took, and others forced upon me (conscription, although I could have chosen gaol), could have contributed. However, now that I am on that path, choices abound.

I have decided on the 'I want to live my life to its fullest' path. To achieve this narrowed my choices on the one hand, ie., I no longer give myself the choice of doing a little or nothing. On the other, it has widened my choices. To live to the fullest, I need to try 'everything' and give all of what that is, my best shot.

So I perform Pd specific exercises to slow the deterioration of my body, I write poetry to persuade my neurons to stay, I train my voice so I can keep talking with my friends, and I take a long trek in Europe each year to raise funds to look for a cure, so others can have different choices.

Sometimes the most important question is, “which way?”



### Which Path?

Decision time, two paths we have to choose  
No sign, no clue of where they will lead to,  
What path we take means bearings we may lose  
But also there are gains we might accrue.  
We may get lost and waste a lot of day  
We might be right and make it worth the gamble,  
Or wait for one to tell us of the way  
To prevent us going on a wild goose ramble.  
In life we chose our paths as time goes by  
And often choices made are not the best,  
Decisions we can change so we don't cry  
To make our life more true before we rest.  
So carefully choose the path you want to take  
Then later on, adjustments you can make.

## Day 21 - Corbeny to Berry-au-Bac

Well, would you know? There are 'people' at our place - five older French couples and an English couple, the latter had dinner with us, ie, they were at the next table. "He should have had hearing aids", said she, because he misses out on all the gossip. I agreed, and told her mine were so good I could hear everything they said. So when he asked her for some of her wine, she hesitated, so I said: "go on, he gave you some of his favourite beer just before which you really liked, and it's good to return a favour!"

It could have been a poor start, but she had a sense of humour and realised that she had probably heard and shared too much herself. But they did share, that they (he) had an e-type Jaguar, which (they) were driving to Monaco to enter a classic car competition. While it looks great on the outside, this 'classic' had much less class on the inside. It was quite cramped especially for the 'long-legged', and too hot and stuffy owing to the fact that these cars never had air-conditioning. So it came as a surprise that their program had similarities to us walkers - first of all, leaving early to beat the heat of the day!

The conversation moved from her digs in London to Australia, where she visits her sister and has a wonderful time with her 'on tap guide', to their sharing of charges (he would pay for the drinks, she would look after the petrol), to his appreciation of the fact that she had agreed to joining him on this trip (large age difference). Or did I not hear right?

After dinner they went up their exotic looking marble staircase, while we crept round the corner to our tiny little, much steeper, narrower and innocuous stairway hidden away in the corner behind brooms, mops and anything else that could maintain 'their' marble stairway. We met again at breakfast after ensuring they had not seen which stairway we had come from, and where the voluminous French people meant we couldn't hear where their voice was also coming from. So our first real interaction with others finally gave me something else to post.

I revised my directions first thing, having dreamt about them for most of the night, and all went well. Along an open field, (thought to be behind us), over another river, and along this same river cushioned by what seemed to be an old forest. Soon there was a carved opening, where 'firewood timber' had been felled. It was also home to a large fox who appeared out of the tall wheat before rushing into his timber residence.

A few Poppies had been spared by the mighty tractors, and it was a delight to have these bright red flowers waving in the cooling breeze. Across another small river with lots of trees, the church spiral indicated that we had nearly completed another day, which ended in a hot walk home. The keys had been left on the desk and the front reception door open. This, thankfully, prevented another forced entry by you know who!

Sometimes it's what you don't hear that causes life's problems



### An Affair of the Mind

I had my mind made up about these two  
So nervously polite, must be first date,  
The great age span must surely be a clue  
While his flash car would surely make him rate.  
Hotel des Dames, it sounds romantic place  
The rooms seem rich above the marble stairs,  
To Monaco they drive but not to race  
All smells of lust and torrid type affairs.  
Loves Executioner may prove me wrong  
This therapist has proven wrong, assumptions,  
Some couples even sing a different song  
That often come from misinformed deductions.  
So best to try to not assume at all  
It will soften, what will usually be, a fall.

## Day 22 - Berry-au-Bac to Saint-Thierry

Close to the half way mark and I'd like to share what is happening in my 'Parkinson's sphere'. Firstly it has been obvious to me that I have slowed down and it now takes a greater effort each day, especially in the early morning. To alleviate this I decided to speed up when my body wants to slow, and imagine I'm doing interval training so do sudden bursts with more energy and purpose.

Now on previous walks covering 25 kilometres was manageable, but today I have moved into the 'around 20 kilometre' bracket, so in a positive sense I have more time to take in the countryside around me. So this is great for both me and Corrie because the reduced distance reduces stress by taking pressure off and is more relaxed and enjoyable.

For the first week at isolated times I would tend to lean sharply to the right (just physically of course), after about ten kilometres, and it was difficult to walk or stand in an upright position. Because of the first point we are taking more, and longer breaks which I believe has cured the leaning.

My left leg is next on the rehabilitation list where it tends to have a mind of its own swinging in a jerking manner and where the sole of my foot lands first, and once again, after about ten kilometres. I'm not too sure what my left leg is on about, but I think it is Parkinsons related. So I insist that my leg acts as normally as possible, while I ensure that no matter what it wants to do, I place my heel down first and soon I am back to 'normal'.

During my 'off times' when my medications aren't working so well I engage less with Corrie, and this is an issue for me. I try hard attempting to keep Pd from interfering with my life and relationships so also try to be aware of changes. This awareness is more acute during my 'off times' and I am realising that just even a little effort to engage makes a huge difference.

Photos that Corrie takes show that my arm and hand seem to curl up in a gnarled way unconsciously - I notice that many changes I have experienced feel normal for me but look abnormal to others, so a bit of air brushing is required. I observe myself more now and when I see my arm curling, I do Pd exercises with it, such as taking a large high step forward and swinging my straight arms out to the side with fingers fully extended. Lastly my nasal fluid flows strongly throughout the day so I let my nose do what it wants.

On the plus side, my arms are in good shape and I am able to utilise my poles well, which helps to give my legs a rest. My left arm which years ago simply hung by my side now competes strongly (unconsciously) with my right. I am not dripping saliva on my pillow, and no muscle or body pain. I manage my increased tremor in my left arm by making my own varied movements with it, by exercising it, extending and relaxing, typing with it. I see it as simply moving the brain's attention to something else.



To remain positive a person must also address the negatives



### An Opportunity

I can walk fast but I have slowed somewhat  
Not just Pd, but cause I'm getting old,  
I'm leaning right and politics it's not  
My left foot jerks, that's Pd too, I'm told.  
My 'off time's' longer, that's an issue too  
It's worse for Corrie, she may get ignored,  
My hand curls up as tho' it's stuck in glue  
And nasal fluid leaves, it must be bored.  
So now I need to chat with my dear brain  
And listen to reactions that it makes,  
I'll then decide on actions to sustain  
My body, and decisions that it takes.  
An opportunity is how I'll see it  
Let go the body - help the mind to free it.

## Day 23 - Saint-Thierry to Reims

As you can see from yesterday's photos, the first grapes have been sighted. A little bit of Tuscany, and lots of champagne, as we see the signs of large wine producers appearing regularly. No champagne in the abbey but a good bottle of red graced our table, and if it was made by the monks it probably would have been a good wine. For a thousand years monks had the biggest and best vineyards and even saved viticulture when the barbarians destroyed the Roman Empire. They lost most of this in the 18th & 19th centuries but still remain distinguished wine-makers today, showing they can save more than tortured souls.

We met Julie first in the vast dining room. A young French woman, she was studying psychology, following her degree in aerospace engineering which she picked up whilst in the navy. Fluent in English it was great to be able to converse about different things. Like the girls we met last week in another abbey, she is studying here because "there are too many distractions at home", so we were fortunate enough to spend time with her, while being aware of not becoming a further one of those interruptions.

She said the French were quite sceptic about psychology, many still believing that it is about lying on a couch and just talking. Lying on a couch and talking about anything that comes into your mind (free association), is how the unconscious reveals itself according to Freud's methodology, and the French for some reason haven't moved beyond this limited view. Therefore she is looking farther afield for employment. On top of that, it is poorly paid and the government does not provide money for psychological services.

After an hour talking about lots of varied things, our quaint 'intricately beamed ceiling room' beckoned us for much wanted rest, and 'daily after-walk routine'. Some footsteps up on our rooftop level had us peering out for the possibility of seeing what other walkers looked like. Our bonjours to each other had obvious flaws, so we tried hellos. This couple were Canadian walkers, bikers, and marathon runners, presently content with walking which has taken them to most corners of the globe.

We talked about a possible French/English divide or an east/west divide which I've heard many Canadians talk about. Not too sure of its extent but it was something I'd like to follow up. There was a lot of sharing about walks and we will keep in contact as they move closer to Italy into our familiar territory.

Another lovely cool and interesting walk yesterday and today, different crops, tractors constantly at work, 'villages fleuri' now appearing often.

Plans had been laid to train up to Troyes to visit a French city that had not suffered damage during the war, but it looks like those train strikes have caught up with us, unlike nearly everything else. There may be trains tomorrow but definitely none on Sunday or Monday so we'll stick to our now familiar path.

It is not the taste of champagne that matters, but the idea of it



### The French Canadian

Graveyards only tell of people dead  
The stories from their homes you will not find,  
For there's divisions people have not read  
Revealing sadness of another kind.  
To fight a war you need certain conviction  
To die for war requires a strong belief,  
The French-Canadians had just rejection  
Conscription stole their soul as would a thief.  
'Twas Britains war, and France had turned its back  
No loyalty to either one of these,  
And lose their language, yet another crack  
Culture denied, not ready to appease.  
Isolationist themselves they rated  
Now more than ever they felt isolated.

## Day 24 - Reims to Chalons-en-Champagne

Dinner with our new Canadian friends was fun. A busy bar became non-busy in the blink of an eye as what seemed like a protest march was, for a moment, more interesting than a drink. So room was made for us as we watched, what was really an entree to a big football game heading for the football stadium. We're getting used to protest demonstrations in France and fans going to a football match is not dissimilar. A large loud mob of people; more older women at the protests; police, but less with the football fans as long as they're not opposing sides; a lot of noise; but the protestors have more anger and defiance in that noise.

A walk with friends through our first, I think, tram city, (I love the gentle flow of trams, with their fleeting bell ring that gives a certain calm, unhurried atmosphere to a city) was very enjoyable as we took in the special night of a lit-up cathedral. This cathedral was once lit up in a different fashion when it was nearly completely destroyed by the Germans during WW2. Ironically, it was here in Reims where the German army was finally destroyed in the sense of signing their surrender documents.

This impressive cathedral has an incredible history of survival and at one stage was lit up in a different way. It was initially burnt down in 1210, to be rebuilt beginning a year later. In 1481 the roof was burnt, not just any roof as it took ten years to repair. Then in 1580 a storm destroyed the great rose window, and in 1712 the angel of the bell tower was blown away. The rood screen and choir walls were destroyed in 1744, while the cathedrals canopy was destroyed during the French revolution. Seriously damaged during WW1, it became known as the "Martyred Cathedral" becoming the symbol of German destructions.

Back home it was all work. The four of us, for the first time in a multitude of walks between us had failed to secure a room for tomorrow. Corrie and I had planned to catch a train off-track to Troyes because our Swiss friends said it should not be missed. Trains were running to this city, but they wouldn't be there to bring us back on track - the strike will be from Saturday midnight to Monday midnight.

So we tried to book a room to continue our walk but nil available. Our friends finally got a thirty kilometre room but still too far for us. So we caught the last train and travelled through the slightly rolling open fields with their smattering of trees, again with small narrow forests probably covering a large river.

Our new residence has a lofty view over a square of fascinating architectural delights with brick terraces and Tudor-style wooden buildings. On our way here we visited the St Etienne Cathedral and were in awe of the many colourful stained glass windows, similar to the cathedral of light in Spain's city of Leon. Accommodation remains a high priority as we await a return call from a 'chambre d'hote' - husband speaks English, she doesn't. That will make it easier even though Corrie has little trouble in booking a room in French.

Surviving is the easy part, it takes effort to live



### The City Tram

I love the tram, the way it weaves and winds  
Although on tracks, it seems its mind its own,  
It creates spaces without noise one finds  
Knows where it's going without being shown.  
It takes its time while others rush so fast  
A little bell tells them they have to move,  
Once thought too slow, belonging to the past  
It proved them wrong and now it's found its groove.  
We have a track, but it's a shade of grey  
With lots of noise distracting our rough plans,  
So slowly goes, so we can find our way  
"And listen for our bell", they say: the trams.  
So keep the good and tried when we look back  
And weave and wind like trams along your track.

## Day 25 - Chalons-en-Champagne to Saint-Germaine-La-Ville

Walking the streets of Chalons-en-Champagne was an ongoing delight. There were crooked houses many leaning against the other for support (we know how it feels, our empathy now extends to old buildings); rivers, canals and old bridges to the extent that the word, 'Venice' is often whispered; a home made park - 'le petit jardin', with its own little hills and river in the shadows of one of the many grand old buildings; a cathedral that mixes gothic with baroque; a church enticingly framed by one of the town's rivers; and much more unseen, for they are hidden behind closed doors.

La Venise Petillante (The Sparkling Venice) with its Venice like canals, gives you a French interpretation of the real Venice. It sparkles - in the form of its cathedral described by some as the most beautiful church in the kingdom; in the reflections of the old church's glorious stained glass windows; along its long gallery of windows near the ceiling, which bathes the nave with soft light; in the light of the Collegiale's magnificent stained glass windows; in its animated illuminations and stunning light shows. Obviously this gorgeous city is not just called Chalons-en-Champagne just because of its sparkling wine.

While its canals wind their snake like charm through this medieval delight, its three ancient gardens weave a green band across its centre, highlighting the essential ingredients of their prodigious champagne: soil and water and sun. We passed by both, taking in a last taste as we reluctantly left our home in the roof overlooking the stunning square, the light dulled by its light grey canvas which had created a damp night, dry now from the warm winds. Bridges crossed and rivers followed, a few younger runners and a bike or two passed, we left once more from our home in a huge French village.

While the tarmac was dry, the path wasn't. It looked okay initially but after a short distance our shoes were changing fashion, with a sudden build up of mud that attached to us like a dependent child. Usually it is the wet grass I avoid because of my non-waterproof shoes, but now it was my path of choice for the next few kilometres, as I much preferred soaked feet. The usual covered river paths filtered the rain for a while but eventually the ponchos took over as the open fields soon appeared.

Lovely 'chambre d'hote hosts' welcomed us with hot drinks and introduced us to our new house mates: two recently retired Germans driving around France and a French woman walking like us. A lot of talking in three languages about previous jobs and earlier walks, before dinner, which our hosts weren't prepared for since we did not receive the promised callback. The hostess cooked something for us anyway, a delicious meal, accompanied by her attentive husband's special wine and conversation. After, they took the time out from their busy chicken farm to arrange tomorrow night's sleep for us.

It is not just the path you take, but when you take it



### Chalons-en-Champagne

The streets of Chalons-en-Champagne retold  
The stories of the richness of its past,  
Of battles fought where many won't grow old  
And 'huns' defeated down to near the last.  
The crooked houses still remain today  
The square has some, many an edifice,  
Cathedral shines with its stain glass display  
Notre-Dame-en-Vaux an instant masterpiece.  
Venice canals do play a special part  
Transporting you past all these special sights,  
Creative parks are at its very heart  
While night times glow in special shows of light.  
This is a city you could spend some time  
It's poetry, where there is many a rhyme.

## Day 26 - Saint-Germain-la-Ville to Saint-Amand-sur-Fion

Another wet night and light rain brought out our plastic attire in the morning. The chicken farmer came back to see us off, after saying goodbye to his twenty thousand long term guests some kilometres away. He will be kinder to us I trust, and leave our heads on, the others will lose theirs, after being trucked and prior to being plucked.

A croissant breakfast with our delightful hosts, who joined us for both meals even though they didn't eat, was great, as we joined a Frenchwoman who was walking elsewhere. A theatre nurse from Germany and her husband were only there for initial arrival drinks but quickly got to talking with us. She spoke Spanish which was a bonus, as Corrie and she had a wonderful time speaking their second language in a country that doesn't appear to speak it much. She rushed out as we set off, to give us both a big hug.

Our host told us that it would be inadvisable to walk through the fields tomorrow because of the mud and swampy areas and suggested the canal route, and then the back tarmac roads. Great idea, happy to leave the soil where it belongs and there are many villages to explore and time to do this.

You know it's been a hassle not finding many cafes along the way. Standing on a corner resting my backpack on someone's shuttered window sill, Corrie noticed people walking into a house every minute or so and coming out with a parcel. On closer inspection behind this very ordinary door was not only a tiny boulangerie but coffee, a table and two chairs. This just doesn't happen in France, as you usually need to take your pastries to a bar to get your coffee.

This finally got us off the streets, following the French governments earlier efforts to stop us sleeping rough by removing seats from most bus stops. Let's hope they don't lock the grave yards otherwise we will just about be out of options.

We left the canal behind with its boat tours, and huge silos of some sort. Adjacent to this was a large river flowing the other way, with water at times flowing from about a metre or so below the water surface of the canal into the river. Not sure what is happening there but will try to find out.

Seeing a few Poppies today, mostly in people's gardens, some much larger than I've seen before. I am really taken with these beautiful wild flowers (as my friends will attest to). I am sure on my biggest poppy day yet, that it was a significant coincidence that our room was called coquelicot, and the walls were covered with many pictures of these red beauties.

We've reached home, a huge antique decorated room with three double doors opening on to a courtyard vegetable garden from upstairs. No dinner tonight so Corrie has gone to the supermarket to buy a salad. There have been devastating storms and vegetables have been decimated, so many of our meals have been without greens or salad and this will be a much needed change.



Don't underestimate the importance of a hug



### Coquelicots

Our gorgeous room was called 'coquelicot'  
The walls adorned with poppies everywhere,  
That bright red beauty that I 'love-a-lot'  
Its memory makes me want to say a prayer.  
We saw them on the edges of the fields  
Some were waving in between the wheat,  
Few left because the deadly poison yields  
With just a few to colour, smile and greet.  
But now the gardens are their new found saviour  
They've found a piece of heaven here at last,  
Once were a weed but now they're back in favour  
Their future looks must brighter than their past.  
They're rich and red of unsurpassed beauty,  
They'll always have their home in poetry.

## Day 27 - Saint-Amand-sur-Fion to Vitry-le-Francois

Another huge breakfast allowed us to squeeze lunch from left over goodies again for there will be no shops along the way. Our walk seems to be more well known as villages become smaller, walkers more noticeable and there is an intimacy that wasn't there before. This makes it easier to get directions not only for our walk but to certain shops and sleeps.

The endless solar beams seem to slip in and out of its fast flowing grey/white cover aided by that huge wall of wind. Early on it was very helpful as it pushed us along saving our legs for some predicted rises. Later it whipped across our faces and pushed us from side to side. Then it stopped us like a wall as we altered direction. The people-high canola oil plants, like a flood of sunshine, swayed gracefully as they contrasted to the lower grain plants and the newly ploughed earth. Small pockets of forest dotted the countryside and gave us reprieve from nature's very cold atmosphere.

Passing through peaceful villages in between mostly farmland we saw few people, while I can't remember seeing even one walker. A meditative track if ever I saw one. The more noticeable walkers seemed to be a mirage (just when you think you've seen the water, it is suddenly 'whisked' away). A couple of tractors were the only life out there besides clumps of friesian cows, a collie, some hidden barkers, a hare and a 'nearly dead road-daring duck'.

A gorgeous path-hugging hedge led us into Wisques and our huge new home, 'Abbaye Notre Dame', a breathtaking establishment. Sister Lucie, was a gust of fresh air with her joyfulness and pleasure of meeting us, as she moved so quickly and gracefully taking us on a swift tour of our 'rooms'.

First the dinner place, a two minute jog to our quarters. A huge bedroom with lounge chairs, a kitchen with everything and breakfast, upstairs bathroom, and a lounge area with a library, sat behind a tulip garden surrounded by exotic trees and tantalising views. Three students have the upstairs while the ground floor is all ours, except we have to share their upstairs loo, their sink also our washing machine and clothes-draining room.

The great thing about the abbeys is that unlike the churches they seem very productive, and are open. And unlike the church, they are people's homes. There are the permanent residents (priests and/or nuns), the one nighters (pilgrims like us), and long stayers (students). Another thought, how could they then turn a church into a home of sorts: beautiful grounds to play in, benches to eat at, church music to listen to, and friends passing by joining in, or just having a chat, and when there is no scheduled service, there could be community activities. We finally leave the sun and the wind outside to do us a big favour, to prepare our newly washed clothes for tomorrow's journey. The flat top of a large hedge was our clothesline, with their twigs our pegs.

Try lots of things before you choose your path because once begun it may be difficult to turn around



### Quiet Time

Our thoughts quite often cloud the way we see  
Disturbing us and muddying the mind,  
While fogging up desire for clarity  
And narrowing the pathways we can find.  
The elements can take us off this path  
And people that you pass, hard to ignore,  
Those niggling pains can often rise your wrath  
Distracting you, for peace you do implore.  
But when you find a clear and open track  
With little to distract or irritate,  
Deep in the mind there is a little crack  
Where you can find a place to meditate.  
This day was made for peace and solitude  
The mind is starving for this type of food.

## Day 28 - Vitry-Le-Francois to St-Rémy-en-Bouzemont

A small red ball reminded us that three things have been happening. Primarily there's too much comfort in bed to go looking for it so we are definitely getting old; our lodgings are not facing that way, and often we don't know which way we are facing anyway, also a sign of ageing; or the mist and cloud are keeping it for themselves, a good excuse to ignore it altogether.

But it was brief. It hasn't been playing ball most of the day and thankfully the covers stayed on in the morning which made for easy walking. Lots of grass stopped the mud from getting a free ride, and a lot of the time we were on gravel and tarmac roads.

Bushland opened onto fields, over bridges with noisy rivers and creeks, through three villages, and yes we've struck gold once more, a lunch time bar open! We had our food with us, so it wasn't perfect, but there's a rush of blood when you know there is liquid other than water, and a 'proper' place to sit and with a back on it, and.....a table.

The long field stretches are hardest, but little of that today. A few hills, nothing strenuous though, and you know we like the climbs anyway, with lots of individual trees strategically placed or left on ridges, rest areas, and even hedges planted to house garbage. Poppies hide amongst the crops (they're not supposed to be there but I'm not telling), with some crouching close to the road after avoiding the ploughs, and others simply crying out for a picture. Although I don't mind tears they soon went in a flash.

A building covered a small creek allowing it to flow freely underneath it. 'Pan de Bois' (PdB) sat beside creeks, sharing their walls with ivy, but most were extra special like the poppies and the village 'mairies', and simply had to be snapped. Water flowed in other ways as we tried to avoid spray from large tractors. Our concerns were: whether the water had nasty additives, so wind direction was important; whether the huge contraption was in front of us or behind; and we also had to judge its speed so it didn't catch us, while simultaneously working out the direction it was taking.

Poplar tree paths and small plantations rattled their leaves heralding the wind, its loyal bell ringer, as we wound our way, very quickly, over the last kilometres home. This sudden gust however was no match for Corrie, renowned on the caminos throughout Europe for her late spurts home.

Two dogs, one large, one small, spoke to us very gruffly when we knocked on the huge double gates. Once their mum, our host, showed we were friends, they were ours also. As I write this, 'Gold' is resting her tired tonsils by nestling up against us on his mum's couch, probably looking for comfort against the furious deluge outside that we just missed. What really is a dog saying when they bark, because the sudden shift from perceived anger, goes in a second.

A reminder that it is not what the dog says, but what the dog does and the circumstances within which they do it



### Le Soleil

The sun enriches colours in the earth  
It changes certain aspects every day,  
The earth lay dead until the solar birth  
Without it there could never be a way.  
I love the way it slides across the fields  
And takes its glimpses as the clouds allow,  
It darkens when it wants, its power it wields  
It lets us see the way, the man, his plough.  
But it can also do a lot of harm  
Killing our home when we offend its role,  
Drying the earth so bringing drought to farms  
When in the ozone rim it makes a hole.  
To Greeks it's helios, to Romans - sol  
To life on earth, it is our very soul.

## Day 29 - St-Rémy-en-Bouzemont to Outines

She told us she didn't speak much English even though her father sent her to England to learn it. "The English speak so fast and there was no way I could ever understand", our host seemed to respond with some regret, "but I know German well because they didn't talk so fast." But she did speak our language, that of the 'pelerín' or 'walker.'

You can tell this when: they allow you your room well before you are expected; ask you inside their home and gesture for you to sit on their lounge; offer you an assortment of drinks; engage you in conversation as though they have nothing else to do; ring for your next night's accommodation; suggest driving there because the phone is unanswered; and wash and dry your clothes. That's a special language.

So another grand 'Pan de Bois' which, like the one before, had its idiosyncrasies. The previous one had a ten centimetre speed bump in the doorway between the hall and the lounge. A danger to anyone but for someone with Pd, a good test for your balance if you don't clear it. I fortunately passed. In this one, you must duck if you're over five feet. It's our category and once each, it caught us on the forehead. This caused both of us to speak yet another language that we had learnt in an informal setting when we were young.

Dinner for us, with three older French couples and a fisherman, was pleasant. I don't know if it's a culture thing but the three women rarely spoke (our friend in Munster will surely inform me) at both meal times. They were all on holidays I assumed, as we picked up snippets of their conversation. The fisherman spoke English, and had been studying the language of fishing for ten years. He now knows how to pull in hard-to-catch fish including Pike.

Once again a beautiful and diverse track, mostly flat, but with small lakes, one the home of a whole new family of white swans. Noisy dark forests clung to our cosy track, to one side mostly, as we move from gravel to mud (but saved by the patches of grass), through deeply rutted tractor wheels, muddy and puddled holes hidden by very tall grass. Slow and difficult!

At one point, and as I was in front at the time, I saw an unusual (for me), animal on the road. It heard me as I took a far away snap, but when I got there, this stripy beaver-like animal was swimming into the undergrowth.

Still in 'Pan de Bois territory' but this time the first PdB (sounds a bit like the diseased I have been entrusted with) church we have ever seen, directly opposite our rooms for the night, which had air-conditioning and a lounge/kitchen attached. We're here early so we walked around the whole small 'PdB' village admiring this exquisite fifteenth century architecture.

By the way, our Munster friend said that the quiet women did definitely not represent French culture.

There are languages that require no learning, just understanding



### Track Talk

There is a special language on the way  
You hear it in the places where you sleep,  
You know you're in a special place to stay  
Where trust is given, secrets they will keep.  
This language, it may often be unspoken  
A look, a nod, a wave, a silent sigh,  
You know an ancient talk has just been woken  
The depth of it can see a pilgrim cry.  
No questions needed, there's a certain feel  
It seems for only you is why they're there,  
An atmosphere undoubtedly surreal  
No words are needed, there is no fan-fare.  
An ancient language bedded in the track  
Is still alive, there'll be no looking back.

## Day 30 - Outines to Chavanges

A lazy walk through a laid back village with a tiny and still falling population, with a smorgasbord of PdB houses. A chance now to: take in more sunsets (easier than the sunrises for the old to see); visit the donkeys while also trying to cheer them up a little (I wonder if they are all really sad or even suffer trauma from past abuse, or that is just simply how they are); watch the white cattle (who while not jumping over the moon, at least come to you for a chat); and gaze at far off views beyond the bevy of buttercups. After dark (now 2200) the church was lit up and the war memorial glowing alternately white, blue and red.

Next door, Chantel welcomed us into her lovely home for breakfast. She spoke very good English so it was a good chance to learn about her 'shop free' village. She told us that the Pan de Bois church that we look onto happens to be the largest wooden church in the world, so we're breaking new ground here. Her running of a museum in another life convinced us she would be well informed.

"There are also three hundred bird species in this area" she said, and it was no wonder, with a lack of noise and air pollution, and an abundance of lakes. Walking through a large dense forest with swamps, we could hear many of them, the sounds of hunter gunfire not seeming to bother them. I imagine they would therefore be shooting the usual wild boar, hare or deers.

Chantel went on to tell us there was a great increase in b&bs, surprising for us given the problems we were having, but I guess it changes from village to village. The sad thing is, the industry is not fully regulated, so prices are cut to undercut the ones who are paying taxes on their income. She is a walker like us but prefers to walk in more unusual places like the deserts of Africa, maybe it's her reaction to living in one of the wetter places on earth.

Our French fellow pilgrim who shared our kitchen but not our slower pace, was off early so he could cover more kilometres in his limited schedule to get to Rome. After our host gave us some lunch (including our breakfast eggs, the first we have seen in France) we soon followed.

It was a forest most of the way, and the swamps throughout were evidence of the extensive flooding rains of March that have built up the water table and thus not allowed the water to more easily evaporate. It possibly explains the overwhelming number of mosquitoes that sometimes prevent us from accessing rarely needed shade. Days before, the look of the forest had been damaged by the rough cutting down of trees for firewood. Today they seem like small havens as hand picked trees have been left and wood neatly bundled for delivery.

Out into the open buttercup fields and into our new PdB village where there are a mixture of shops that have been forgotten or beginning anew, as we are forgotten, sitting outside on our banana chairs renewing ourselves by resting, while awaiting our new host.



Where there are birds, there is conversation



### Bird Talk

Some droppings in a circle on the road  
What was it that had happened from above?  
The sacred hoopoe sang its perfect ode  
A melancholic sound but born of love.  
So could it be the conference of the birds  
Enlightenment, the focus of these talks,  
Where everything is spoke in sacred words  
By nightingales, cuckoos and soaring larks.  
If it were true that this was such a meeting  
Divinity itself was on all branches,  
The time with thou as always very fleeting  
And one by one, all will take their chances.  
The hoopoe leads them thru to seventh valley  
Until at last they reach the grand finale.

## Day 31 - Chavanges to Brienne-le-Chateau

A broken cafe awaited us at the end of a very long and straight entrance to our village for the night. We must have looked in need of help as an older woman assisted us by first knocking on a nearby house that was for sale and then at a door at the back of this very sad cafe that wasn't meant to open. Finally a man appeared from nowhere as we removed the cobwebs from our wounded plastic chairs and readied ourselves for nourishment. So happy to see someone but he didn't have any coffee, and while he did sell beer, he didn't sell the advertised food, so we had a baguette that he said he didn't have - but nice man.

That was all before we had been forgotten by our home hosts, so we brushed the dust off our home's two banana chairs and rested. Finally Agnes arrived from the gym to greet us with some exercise friends and a walking couple who had just turned up. Finally a 'working wifi' so a busy afternoon fulfilling my blog obligations - the many photos that had been rolling around in the 'cloud' raced each other to get on to the ipad. You notice how the last photos come on first - a touch of Matthew - the last shall be first.

After dinner there were streets to wander down, a great mix of houses to discover and yet another fascinating church. I don't go to church myself but they really give historical, cultural and architectural meaning to their villages. This one, unlike the last, is made of stone, but like the last, is set alight at night to beam its beauty to the world. Maybe all my talk about closed churches misses one thing, the meaning referred to above, the precise building of it, the people who prayed in it, and what it stands for, for each of them.

The French are having yet more holidays, this one a long weekend, and with this being a fond tourist destination, it's very hard to find accommodation. We don't like to book far ahead but it saves a lot of stress if you do book for the holiday weekends, just in case.

Agnes reminded us of the more organised pilgrim trails in other parts of Europe where your host acts like your very own personal assistant. She couldn't do enough - offering to collect us on the track if we got tired, wanting to ring for our next lodgings, showing us how things worked in our room, giving us a huge breakfast for free (I think this was because she was a little sharp with us at one stage and bad experiences spread fast), and offering us any advice we may need for the walk ahead.

The sunny, yet cool weather made for another delightful walk through rolling hills, a huge forest and a long open section with a lunch time chair waiting for us by the roadside. We honoured its punctual appearance by staying for a longer period than usual, and a few photos.

No-one at tonight's hotel, so it's to the centre of town to have a drink and write this post at Le Chat.

Life's small gifts can seem huge when you're least expecting them



### Cobweb Cafe

A broken cafe cried as we walked by  
Ignored once more it took it very hard,  
Our sorrow broke and cobwebs wiped away  
Its old door winced, we opened it a yard.  
The broken man did not know what to say  
Impossible that anyone would think,  
His cafe looked like nothing but a stray  
You'd miss it if your eyelashes did blink.  
But soon he realised that we were real  
As we assured him that it was a shop,  
And anything to us could be a meal  
We didn't care if it was his last drop.  
'Twas heaven in this place he knew as hell  
So give it one more go, you might as well.

## Day 32 - Brienne-le-Chateau to Dolancourt

We left very early. An enormous chateau dominates this Napoleonic town with a large celebration bringing crowds of devotees. This internationally well-known soldier joined the army here at nine years of age and stayed for five very informative years. Bullied because he was poor, he pulled out his ace card. He was brilliant at maths which I imagine was good for setting out attack plans, enough to take over the 'bullying rights'.

There were deep gullies made from tractor tyres with water obstacles and hidden holes below the leaves and grass, but it didn't take away from the beautiful experience of an early morning walk in a great forest.

Covering 70,000 acres of the Champagne region, this 'Foret Orient' which we have dipped in and out of over the last few days, is a delight. Its three man-made lakes provide havens for birds and allows people other than walkers to experience this gem. As we walked we could see swamps on both sides reflecting the thick roof of this enormous home.

This forest, which is part of an enormous network of parks and forests covering a huge area of seven million hectares called 'French Regional Natural Parks', protects distinct areas. Firstly it is the chalky Champagne area, protected like its famous counterpart in England, the 'White Cliffs of Dover'. Next is where we are right now, the often wet Champagne region with its multitude of ponds, forests and hedged farmland. Then there are the three large lakes which attract a variety of bird species, and lastly, the Aube valley.

These are all areas of what the government refers to as 'outstanding beauty' in inhabited rural areas, where their duty is to protect its scenery and heritage, while at the same time setting up sustainable development. It is also the duty of hikers in the forest to also care for the environment as they wander through its marvelled beauties. While hikers discover the forests' real inner beauties, we are content with our more imaginative exploration, while also wishing we had the time to learn more about the inner workings of the "Foret Orient".

A huge river reminded us of our track on a high ridge as it rushed past comfortably below. Rivers are now appearing in many villages, bringing those natural sounds and vibrancies that only a river can, gifting a gentle pause to our sometimes hasty pace. Rivers like La Voire and L'Aube did just that.

Across wide fields, wild flowers such as buttercups, poppies and flowers of purple, decorate the vast areas of crops. This wild flower treat seems to happen in the less dense crops, allowing more space, light and nutrients they need.

Lunch by a fast flowing crackling creek, amongst the flowers on a stone wall by a church in a pretty village, was indicative of the day that was perfect for walking. Now our new nest is in a 'chateau' surrounded by sunlit trees, a few metres from a river running under a bridge, with a huge water wheel outside....it's time to rest.

Forests are somebody's home so why would you destroy it



### Bonaparte

Napoleon, from Corsica he came  
Aside from war, he had a special code,  
Unheralded, he had another fame  
Ahead of armies he so proudly strode.  
He had no time for aristocracy  
Religious toleration was a must,  
A strong belief in meritocracy  
And education - secular is just.  
But contradiction plays a certain role  
He reinstated Haitian slavery,  
While famous art he regularly stole  
And many wars caused endless misery.  
Along the straight and narrow path we talk  
But also there's a crooked one we walk.

## Day 33 - Dolancourt to Bar-sur-Aube

Our home last night was once a flour mill and has been cleverly converted into a smart hotel. Dinner was over a noisy stream, and the view was of the same river, a weir, and a water wheel, a bit of luxury on the track, and only because there was nowhere else to go. The reception people spoke no English so a chance to try a bit of French with the help of his google translate.

We left late because it was such a gorgeous spot and we wanted to soak it all in and of course, get our moneys worth. But it was soon time to go and it was past another weir and water wheel, over a stream and up our first very steep 'leaning forward and grasping small trees' hill, on this walk, on a dim track through a dark forest. The land round here is much more hilly, with many forested hills and cosy valleys, one tenanted by a small beautiful village, which we passed through and into farming territory.

We stopped and looked at some poppies and other wildflower beauties, and took more photos for my poppy album. We must have been there for a while because a farmer came out to talk to us wondering perhaps what our loitering was all about. His very big noisy dog bounced down the road ahead of him but it was just to talk to Corrie. It was his collection of wildflowers that had us hanging around to take photos, and he seemed happy that someone appreciated his garden and showed us a short cut. We were happy to stay on this interesting 'long cut' so it was hard to decline his advice. Long cuts though kept us with our book's directions and with past experience the short ones often don't work out.

It was a busy time, as his wife also came out to see what all the fuss was about, and later a father and son came by on their bikes. It seemed like a good time to move on, and leave the farm perched on a ridge, taking a long descent to a village below. Up the other steep hillside, hugging the forest and then through it. The shade is welcome today, and so was the sight of a wild deer eating, unawares that she was not quite hidden in the tall grass.

I took a few stealthy shots as I walked towards this smallish brown-grey figure until the scented wind informed her of my whereabouts. The sound or the scent, sent her bouncing away through the field, camouflaged with the bounce down, then into clear view on her bounce up. If it was another kind of shot, easy pickings would have been had, as the bounce would give the hunter an easy target. Through the grapevines and across a huge river, it's home again.

I'm not sure what the shop rules are on Pentecost (the French holiday today), but all the shops are closed except for three bars, and luckily and unusually, one of them had food. Here's hoping the 'dinner-makers' are open tonight as they often are on Sunday. Monday is usually the problem. No noisy stream tonight but a tree-covered hill swaying in the near distance and framing the chimney tops, will offer a pleasant contrast.

If you are suffering, attempt something difficult



### A Steep Hill

A steep hill is a thriller if a book  
A mystery until you reach the end,  
It can be scary, you're afraid to look  
Not knowing what's to see around the bend.  
It's difficult to stop when you're exhausted  
Because you really want to turn the page,  
Excited what unknowns may lie ahead  
That spur you on with no respect of age.  
So different to when you're on the flat  
Adventure non-existent, you can see  
So far ahead, no mystery in that,  
Except that special feeling to be free.  
When you have hills to climb that are so steep  
Remember the rewards that you might reap.

## Day 34 - Bar-sur-Aube to Clairvaux

A man in an unusual hat seemed to be resting or sleeping on the top balcony, as, with folded arms, he rested his body forward on the single balcony railing. On the floor below, a young man, arms akimbo looked vacantly out the window as an elegantly seated woman, her left hand on a piano key, the right raised ready to pounce on another, watched her music sheet intently. A young woman standing behind gazed at her with similar focus. On the same middle floor, but the next window along, sat a cat swinging around abruptly as if startled. On the ground floor was the 'fromagio' shop front, framing its stern 'coiffured hair' owner.

It was one of the best 'trompe l'oeils' we have seen, standing a little off the street, busier than any other building or shop. Maybe one of 'those' occupants could direct us to Hotel Le Pomme D'Or, as the Pentecost holiday means the town seems deserted but for these six. Or is this simply another trick of the eye while the town quietly busies itself behind closed doors.

A young man signed us in and showed us two rooms: the painted one for eu53, or the unpainted one for eu48. I wanted a good view, same as Corrie, and good light. We took the painted one with two double beds and were told to sleep only in one, which was our clear intention on booking anyway. A three door wall, ceiling to floor, was at the end of our two beds, looking like an incomplete 'trompe l'oeil'. Three cupboards perhaps, but only one of them actually was. Behind another cupboard door was the loo, and the other, a sink and shower.

While we could only use one bed, we couldn't use any of the three water taps, as the water motor had been sabotaged (the owners expression) by yesterdays workmen, so it was time to have a cup of tea, as the wounded shower needed a ten minute warm up period, while the toilet seat was one of those 'for women only ones' which only knew how to shut.

An English couple were at breakfast and journeys were shared. He had an Indian background while hers was of Italian heritage. They showed interest in our walk as they prepare to do a smaller camino walk in Portugal next year. I gave him my blog which he will read on his way to an Italian wedding in Turin.

Across a wide river bridge we walked, the water lapping directly onto houses, as in Venice, just below the doors. A steep hill took us out of town - a 'Swiss hill', a 'nearly falling backwards' hill challenged us all the way to its wide valley view, yet another divided the grape vines, whilst a medley of five, again roller-coastered us through another huge chatty forest. Then it was a long gradual undulating descent to town, past a vast twelfth century 'abbaye' complex built by St Bernard, which Napoleon converted into a nineteenth century prison. Still a prison today, but parts of the 'abbaye' have been surrendered, restored, and can be visited. We're not staying there, but in another St Bernard home just along the street ... like the prisoners, we don't have to pay for our room, but we will.



What you see is not always what it is



### Trompe L'oeil

How often do we mistake things around  
A mountain that looks blue is really green,  
A star that twinkles white is often brown  
Imagining a ghost that's never seen.  
A sofa in a home becomes a bed  
The gas driven glow is not an open fire,  
The book's not real, it's only how it's said  
We can't see heaven, only to aspire.  
In France on walls you see it but you don't  
A window frames a man but it's not there,  
A woman through a door she walks, but won't  
A boy is scattering paper through the air.  
Creates superb illusion, trick of eye  
Crée une illusion superbe, trompe l'oeil.

## Day 35 - Clairvaux to Chateau Villain

There were three women in this pretty two-storey home on the Rue de l'Abbaye. These nuns welcomed us into their home like only a few others have. While one chatted to us about the abbey's long history, another brought us cold apple juice and lemon cake, and the other joked around with us.

They told us about their recent guests. Some Aussies had recently been there, also a young Korean couple whom we met in Switzerland last year, and the elusive Argentinian man who is always ahead of us. Then we talked about the time one of the nuns spent in Cameroon looking after malnourished children, and how her work here continues with young kids.

After being spoilt and entertained, they showed us to our own two-storey home next door all ours, for no other guests had booked in. A lovely dinner with wine, breakfast, a packed lunch, and all they wanted was a small donation.

They picked flowers for Corrie as photos were taken, and waved us off with all the 'good journey phrases' they could think of. This journey was tiring early on for me, and a little later for Corrie, when after a couple of hours I spotted two older men and a woman sitting by a well, chatting.

I took my pack off and asked if there was a cafe, "No" said the Portuguese speaking woman, "but I'll make you a coffee". We declined because it was a cold drink we wanted, so she filled our empty water bottle instead. Corrie chatted to one of the men (who was originally from Salamanca), in Spanish, about little things, while the others spoke with me about directions in an assortment of languages. Soon there were lots of goodbyes and photos.

Another village, and Denise saw us having a rest in a small park and offered us coffee. It was still too hot, so we got another water top up. We talked again about a little of her history, our walk and other things. She was lovely, so friendly and engaging, and it was sad to leave, so photos and goodbyes, a swap of emails and we awaited our next social engagement. It happened soon after. A man pulled off the road when he saw us studying a map and helped us make an important 'direction decision', offered us a lift which we declined, thanked him, and started on our last stretch home.

An Englishman this time pulled over, warning us of a fast approaching storm. We thanked him and set off a bit quicker. As we entered the outskirts of our new home, this local once again pulled over, and gave us a large cold bottle of 'water with gas', apologising that it was not beer, or cold enough, and drove off. At the final intersection of his town, he pulled over once again to point us the right way. We found our little home with no-one at home, so rang the number our nuns had instructed. We collected our keys from the delightful girl at the town hall, who told us to make ourselves at home, which we did. Fifty metres from home and the skies erupted, and we silently thanked the Englishman for his timely advice.

It's often the little things that have the biggest impact



### Three French Nuns

Three nuns, with souls so full and hearts so free  
No gift unturned they fully gave themselves,  
Three meals and bed, were well above the fee  
Blessed we found this female form of elves.  
The day was hot, we're running out of drink  
Two individual women quenched our thirst,  
One man pulled up, a lift, we had to think  
Another drink was given like the first.  
Are people simply waiting for the chance  
Of doing good, like it's a natural thing,  
Or were we lucky, not your typical France  
Or was it just because we were pilgrims.  
Whatever be the reasons of our saviours  
We really hope our thanks repay their favours.

## Day 36 - Chateauvillain to Mormant

Another home to ourselves and this time supplied not by the church but by the local council, our first commune-owned home. There were cooking facilities, a lounge and three bedrooms to choose from, and once again paid for by donation. There was time to look around this 'rivers, creeks and bridges town' but like each day, it is brief. It seems ironic that on our first day of water shortage, that night we would be surrounded by it. For us it's about little discoveries as we go to our essential shops, stopping for awhile at special places, like revisiting our silent friends in the 'trompe l'oeils'.

Yesterday was the first long hot day without facilities on the way, so we got very short on water. Our 'Knights Templars' seemed to clearly figure this out and thankfully helped us home. Similar circumstances are expected today so we will use that kind man's large bottle to take extra water, and leave the villagers to look after themselves.

It seemed quite clear on leaving, and the forest walk once again provided the day's entertainment with everything and everyone in the forest refreshed by the evening's rain. Because of the heavy rain last night the road seemed a good option, and it was also the original route, which always gives more of a touch of history to the walk. This forest is so tall and dense the road seemed more like a very wide path, although not as mysterious.

Called the 'Foret Domaniale d'Arc-Chateauvillain', it is as impressive as its name. Yet again another special french forest and part of the French Regional Natural Parks organisation. After long periods of our singing forest walk, it would open up and then fold around a cultivated field on one side, with a different shape on the other until we re-entered another dark part of the forest where a new orchestra would take over.

A village was at the next forest opening with different surprises, and the mystery of these are not always positive. It is pleasant to sit up against a tree to eat, but it is luxurious for us to have a seat, and a village now usually means this, and it delivered, this is a great surprise. It also delivered a darkening sky and within moments it turned from very hot to very cold. So our rain gear came out and we prepared for a big storm. It didn't happen. It bucketed to the left of us, and to the right, leaving our middle section just enough light rain to justify our extensive wardrobe fittings.

In and out of the forest a couple of times and then today's final opening onto our village for the night. It looked more like a large farming complex than a village except there is an 'abbaye'. Over a bridge and round a tree-covered corner and there was number twelve. We didn't need to worry about the street name, because this was the only street in town and Anik and her daughter warmly welcomed us into their home.

A forest is like a commune for the animals



### A Forest

A forest is a sanctuary for the beasts  
A place where they are safe and have a home,  
For most are hunted for the human feasts  
It's difficult to leave your place and roam.  
Just like a family they have disagreements  
And 'I could kill you' is not a metaphor,  
They do it when a tummy needs appeasement  
The animal eats what it needs, not more.  
For pilgrims it's also a sanctuary  
A shady spot when temperatures are high,  
A seat you'll find just up against a tree  
With pleasant company from those who fly.  
A forest is a pearl along the way  
A treasure trove to honour every day.

## Day 37 - Mormant to Langres

This was the first village I can remember without a church but it did have an abbey in need of lots of love and some money. There were some old paintings painted on to the walls but they were slowly disappearing and the unkempt building seemed likely to have a similar fate. This 'eight house village' was otherwise in good order and quite unusual in that you entered through a gate as though it was someones private place. Maybe it was, and our dairy farmer host was possibly the village landlord.

Anik came to our place (which was the other half of her place, where they had similar quarters - sleeping upstairs with kitchen and dining down), to cook and serve dinner and breakfast. There were very minor words between us because she had no conversational English, however when she wanted to, she could, eg., she said: 'I cooked the brioche'. I would have learnt that phrase too, because it was delicious, and I'm sure many would have enquired.

No accommodation to be found for tomorrow night and it was thirty five kilometres to our nearest potential home. Anik said there were no buses to ease the impossible so she drove us a few kilometres, and it was walking from there. She was a busy woman so we were lucky to avoid a very long walk.

The Poppies are becoming more prolific which makes me very happy. The first poem I ever penned is in the eBook that I wrote - 'You're the Guy with Parkinsons', and it was a sonnet on poppies, and it inspired me to write scores more. I've also noticed a lot of mauve flowers engaging with the poppies as we walk, obviously compatible, as they seem to hang out together a lot. But because they get ploughed up each year, they'll take anyone.

These beautiful and exquisite small fields continue to be embraced by this tall timber, as they undulate up to the road way. The forest doesn't alter much, but the name does, even though they appear to be just one large area. Inside, the birds never seem to cease those varied languages with their free flowing conversations a highlight, while the foreboding (in looks alone) dark woods, give a mysterious backing to all that goes on inside.

Outside the forest now and the road (some traffic roads form part of the original 'Via Francigena') sweeps out and down. The cattle, hearing our sticks, did the same thing as they galloped out and down to the paddock corner where they stood for a while chatting to Corrie. I don't really think Corrie is losing it, but when she sees animals she stops and talks to them. She is speaking to a cat right at this moment, (her special animal friends) and maybe it says something about my lack of conversing with her at times.

There's our bed, somewhere near that church tower high up on a fortified hill and to sleep tonight we have to climb, and I can't wait. I love these hill towns, and the climb should ensure a good sleep.

It seems sad that some animals are free while others are not



### The Girl That Talks to Cows

They gallop, skip, and jump and twist and paw  
They moo and neigh, and bleat and stamp their feet,  
They gaze in wonder, silent in their awe  
As this strange creature talks to them, so sweet.  
She talks to them like friends she hasn't seen  
They stare at her like looking for a sign,  
A little sad she asks them where they've been  
We've never moved, it's you we couldn't find.  
We'd like to join you on your mammoth walk  
Get's somewhat boring waiting here for you,  
So now you're here we'll listen to your talk  
But can't respond cause we can only moo.  
So creatures all, come down and see my wife  
She loves to chat but not to change your life.

## Day 38 - Langres

Sitting down to our luxurious 'tuna rice dish' decorated with avocado, lettuce and baby tomato salad, garnished with mayonnaise and balsamic vinegar, in companionship with a pretty white wine, we, or maybe I, leant myself to a bit of fantasy. Gazing out on some renaissance and gothic splendours from our 'donation only' (and Corrie and I only) quarters, I had philosophical thoughts.

I received a thoughtful email from a friend some days ago who commented on a photo I took of Corrie presumably choosing one path over another. Robert Frost (whom he referred to) in his poem: 'The Road not Taken', philosophises with his poet friend about not only the opportunities in life, but also the regret about the other roads that were not taken.

Didier Diderot who was born here in Langres, took multiple pathways in his life. A religious life was contemplated early on. He then studied law, but soon found a wandering pen in his hand writing about many things. He was an art critic for some time and wrote much about philosophy. He fluctuated in his writings about this and his religious beliefs, from theism to atheism and back again, which he added to his already formidable library.

It was important in those days to provide a dowry for your daughter, but in Diderot's case, he was too poor to do this, so he chose to sell his beloved library. It seems to his credit though, that he put his love for his daughter above his books, thus allowing her to marry. It was the Russian Empress, Catherine, who bought his works and a relationship followed. This sadly ended poorly due to his unusually harsh criticism of her shortly before his death. Selling the library may be seen as an opportunity, while the criticism of his new friend ... a regret?

The first thing I look back on is that if I had changed one of my life's decisions before I was forty, I would not have met the best friend a husband ever had, my wife Corrie. I say this, because to find your ideal partner is one of the most difficult achievements in life, so rare. Would I make other choices if I had my time again? Yes, I probably would have, but I am very satisfied with where I'm at now, and that is with a life with Parkinsons disease.

Firstly, I could not have chosen a path of prevention because they do not know what causes it. When I was diagnosed in 2011, I soon took the path of owning my condition. After a short time of discussion with my wife, I decided to tell my family and friends so there was no awkwardness or guessing games about symptoms they may see. I took the road that would limit the effects of my disease, especially on Corrie. I also wanted to make sense of it by involving myself with those who were trying to give people with Pd the best life possible, and to raise awareness and funds to find a cure. In the meantime we are looking at a confusing number of roads to take for tomorrow's walk to Chalindrey. I guess there will always be a path to choose until that final path that provides no choice at all.



Is it about the road taken, or is it about how you tread that road?



## Diderot

In Diderot we had a man of thought  
But reason left alone was not enough,  
Need feeling too if harmony was sought  
Together they were made of the right stuff.  
If feeling's absent, virtue is the victim  
And work sublime one couldn't then create,  
But feelings suffer with no discipline  
Thus reason needs to be a common trait.  
With Parkinsons the feelings can be high  
With reason you can step above the fray,  
Or else both mind and heart can go awry  
And damage comes from what you think or say.  
Wise words, they come from Diderot of Langres  
A place to think, and feel, but mostly ponder.

## Day 39 - Langres to Chalindrey

A rough Roman road had us carefully making our way to breakfast in this medieval fortress high above the surrounding countryside, its renaissance-look appealing in the misty light.

The 'boulangerie' was very small but cleverly, had instant coffee, as the bars are all closed. This is an unusual situation as bakeries don't serve coffee as a rule, but when there's nowhere else to go for one, they are keeping customers, that may otherwise not, have a 'coffee-free croissant'.

In this 'clever' 'boulangerie' an older woman was ordering a feast, probably because it was mothers' day, as a man patiently waited for his turn. He had to wait a little longer as the pastry seller gave her a rose and they chatted about family. While it is usual to have a natter when the line looks manageable, it is not the rule when the town turns up, and I've even seen staff running.

Two older men had the only two seats in the shop but as our turn came they conveniently for us, left. Sitting on our high stools happy with our gift for today, others wandered in and out with mainly baguettes. We're still trying to work out how to be more French in indicating they be cut in half, then in two bags (charades not working), for ease of travelling.

In the meantime an old homeless-looking man stooped in. He had been causing grief yesterday (being agro and sitting next to outdoor touristy restaurants, snarling as he ate his paper-bag food). With him was a well dressed fifty-plus woman who was 'shouting' him breakfast, which stopped him from performing another type of shout. There was a line up now and when the shop owner asked him what he wanted, he waved his arm indicating 'everything'. Telling him others had to eat as well, she settled on her own couple of choices. Off he went with no indication of his emotional well-being obvious, to find another chair where he could share his company with other less fortunates. We left, weaving through cars continually pulling over and people coming from all directions to join the queue, in the only open 'boulangerie' in town.

Dressed to keep dry there were many path choices to make: main road, minor roads, gravel tracks, or very boggy ones from last night's drenching. We chose minor roads and ended with a cute gravel track to our quite isolated home in the bush with the birds. No queues tomorrow as we are invited to have croissants with Veronique, who is cooking us dinner right now.

An hour earlier we had arrived at our lodgings. We rang our host to advise him of our arrival but he was at a social function five minutes away. He said we had arrived too early and he would be there in four hours to let us in. I was imagining the state I would be in if we had waited, and especially with no leg-savers to sit on. I wrote a critical but polite note saying we were not waiting, and we needed to leave now, if we were to reach our only other option an hour or so away.

Adaptation would be my first suggestion on 'life's survival kit'



### Merci Mum

It's mothers' day and all the bars are closed  
'Boulangerie' is open, drinks are plenty,  
A client chats and then receives a rose  
A patient queue don't mind for there is coffee.  
The mother of all homeless men is there  
No rose for him cause he just wants it all,  
The owner says that others want their share  
"I'll chose for you an order that is small."  
Observing this - deciding to 'stay mum'  
And happy that we get to have a drink,  
The two seats vacant waiting for our bum  
The mothers left, the owner gave a wink.  
If every day was mothers' day how great  
The things you see if you are made to wait.

## Day 40 - Chalindrey to Champlitte

No! it wasn't Veronique who was cooking and singing, it was Serge, while Veronique looked after our welcome beers, aperitifs and wine. It was really worth the two kilometres walk off track to this now isolated 'chambre d'hote', Les Archots. The powers that be have changed the route leaving them isolated not just from pilgrims, but from much of their income. A superb location, great hosts seeing to our every need which included Serge driving us part of the way the next morning, because there were no lodgings for thirty six kilometres.

A wonderful walk through poppy fields with numerous other wild flowers, amid the thriving crops with the ubiquitous forests opening and closing around us. Bees were everywhere, their preferential patisserie being the poppy, unawares that I was hungry for their photo as they enjoyed their smorgasbord, before I left this colourful and plentiful food hall.

Into a small creek valley, a chair by the river beckoned us. As we were enjoying our rare chair (you know already that any type of chair is five star for us) a cyclist pedalled slowly over the bridge, and spent some time with us talking 'walking'. He was a friendly engaging thirty year old and later invited us to his home for a coffee, but for some unknown reason, I declined. Why would I (who says yes to most things) say 'no' to a talking adventure, with such a personable man on a fabulous little river? I also declined Corrie's suggestion of a bite to eat even though we were sitting already on a piece of treasure.

I was so upset that I gave up that opportunity, that I looked everywhere for the equivalent I had just rejected. After walking for a while through the fields I was excited to see a home over the rise. Maybe there was a chair! This home was huge and stunning. When the owner saw me taking photos of his place he asked us to join them for a walk round his piece of heaven. We gasped at their own large waterfront, with waterfall and water wheel, and seeing our interest he invited us in for lunch. I told him just a chair would be great. Two hours and a four-course lunch with aperitifs later, my guilt was assuaged.

This lovely couple had seen this broken down flour mill while going for a drive, bought it, and restored it into a grand home, the water wheel supplying all their electricity needs. They also had a 'lavoir' - the old method of washing clothes; a giant cherry tree that supplied fruit for our fourth course; and a Grand Bouvier Suisse dog who joined us for salami and photos at the end.

The drizzle stopped as we exchanged emails, and the prospect of changing homes, and sadly left. Finally at our village of rest and while being pampered by the tourist information girl, a woman (who we will see again in some days' time), recently arrived from Paris, heard us mention where we were sleeping tonight, knew the place, and offered us a lift. She waited while we shopped for food and then drove us home where we finally escaped our very first and very humid day.

The power of positive thinking or 'la justa de la chance'



### A Chair

Just as I've said, French seats are hard to find  
So why reject this perfectly good one,  
And then say: 'no' to our new friend, so kind  
A big mistake I thought, what have I done?  
I put it to the universe - a chair  
The guilt I had would not let my mind rest,  
I scanned the fields in hope and some despair  
This challenge now would put me to the test.  
I tarried at the arch of this fine home  
Invited in, we had lunch at their table,  
A river curved around us as a poem  
The magic of it all was like a fable.  
Amazing time we had and with great fare  
And all I ever wanted was a chair.

## Day 41 - Champlitte to Dampierre-sur-Salon

With our busy social life out of the way, it's back to the hard slog. It's been raining all night amid the huge light and sound show, so there's a bit of a worry about the state of the track. The main issues with rain are very simple ones: flooded creeks or rivers are never much of an issue; as we walk in the rain my shoes get damp (but socks remain fairly dry); it is Spring, so we don't have to worry about the cold. So the simple things that may happen after a heavy night downpour are stepping in huge water holes that cause blisters, and carrying the extra weight of mud on our shoes.

There's also a pattern emerging similar to our Swiss experience. It either rains during the night, mid-late afternoon or/and early morning, so walking has been mostly rain-free because we dodge it between 0800 and 1530. This could change of course but so far it's worked like a dream. Because there are so many hills to climb and descend in Switzerland, it doesn't allow for the boggy patches and water holes of the flatter plains of northern France.

In the early morning it was a long hike in long grass, so because my shoes aren't waterproof they get soaked through, luckily it doesn't affect my walking or my feet. Corrie on the other hand doesn't need to worry, it's only the mud that is an issue, and the grass saves you from that. The days are mostly cloudy with bits of light drizzle, so the only downside with the weather at the moment is the humidity, and the upside mostly is the breeze which is always cool and refreshing. Today's paths also helped as they were mostly gravel and broken tarmac roads.

At our new village the tourist information person is the same young girl who helped us so much in the last village. Marie actually wrote the book that we are using, so she is obviously passionate about helping walkers in whatever way she can. Observing that we weren't young and we looked (maybe it was me) a little fragile, she referred us to a hotel across the road owned by her boss in another life. Sadly they were full so we went back to our author, who then suggested a much less salubrious option, but one kilometre out of town and not on the track.

We were the beneficiaries of one of her creative ideas. It was a school which accommodated pilgrims in the evening after the children went home, and at eu5 they are not doing it for a profit. Rather, they were doing it for a variety of reasons. It seemed a pittance to pay but when it got busy, many pilgrims may mean thousands of euros which could be used for buying much needed equipment for the school. We, the pilgrims, also become volunteer security agents that, just by our presence, makes the school safer. And it is a community offering.

So we are the solo guests in a massive two storey gymnasium surrounded by kid stuff with mattresses on the floor the way kids like it, and lots of stuffed animals (kids also like these), so we're in very good company, because after those extra couple of kilometres to get here, we feel a little stuffed too.

Sometimes things work when they're not supposed to



### The Mystery Smile

She smiled at me, I couldn't be too sure  
Then lent her bike astride a village street,  
A smile again - about to cut le fleur  
I smiled at her, and in a way, discreet.  
I left her now as we had miles to walk  
Reflecting on her smile and what it meant,  
Mysterious more because we did not talk  
I wonder still just what was her intent.  
So was it but a simple village greeting  
A cover for a local petty crime,  
Embarrassed by this unpredicted meeting  
Or simply does she wear it all the time.  
So if you need the tale behind the smile  
Then best to stop, and tarry there a while.

## Day 42 - Dampierre-sur-Salon to Gy

We left 'school' at day break in case the kids arrived early, because we weren't really sure when they start. The kids, I'd say, are preschoolers, and the building has a huge inside activities area (rather than a gym) with lots of smaller rooms, a large kitchen and a dozen shower and toilet rooms. We come out of our large room with the stuffed bears, then a long walkway like a viewing platform, onto the massive activities area spread out below with their multitude of glass windows and doors flooding it with light.

What we do know about the older children is that they get bussed around a lot about midday to two. We have been told that this is for their long lunch break. The bus arrives in the town centre where parents collect them and take them home, to then return them for the reverse process. We see all this action because it is our lunch time too and it is sometimes, somewhere, in a village. I imagine that this also gives the teachers a long break, where the parents become supervisors and don't have to wait until school ends for family time.

No accommodation for 35kms and as the French might say: 'it is not possible', for us anyway. So after securing a room in this '35km place', we hitched a ride with a lovely young French woman for a few kilometres to start the day. It was a little bit of a process though. Ten minutes and no-one stopped. Maybe we were too far past the roundabout and cars were getting up speed, so we moved closer and next to a small siding where they could pull over, and Francoise did just that.

It was still a good distance and another alternate route took us through yet another forest (there seems to be a new forest every day with a different name). It was a village route where small towns can be seen everywhere, many of which we passed through. Lunch was had in one of these villages, but no school bus, just a tractor and a man using a town water pump.

The weather is emptying our water bottles very quickly now, so not being too sure about the water pump, I asked the tractor man. He filled our bottles and gave us a large brand new one, while wiping his forehead and saying 'chaud'.

Our last leg was next, following lunch as usual. The directions had been so good, that it seemed reasonable to follow a track through metre-high grass. All our author's signs were ticked, but the tall grass should have been a warning. No matter, we headed off anyway ... wrong! A barbed wire fence and a river stood between us and the forest we were to enter, so we turned back after an hour of very hard, avoidable walking.

Barred from the forest and with no idea where we were, there was only one option to get us home in a reasonable distance, another hitch. Not only did they stop for us, they turned around because our direction was too long. So another friendly woman, and her son, took us timidly to our rather plush digs for tonight, where we have a much needed bathtub to wash away the shaming grass seeds!



Thinking outside the norm can provide a brand new perspective on life



## Lost

So what to do when you have lost your way  
And there's no sign to show which path to take,  
Especially when you're losing light of day  
And there are huge decisions for to make.  
Important first to know that you are lost  
So you can make a plan to change direction,  
Whatever path you take there is a cost  
Embrace it though with all of your affection.  
And then when you've decided where to go  
Prepare for hidden paths and barb wire fences,  
Before you cross the river watch its flow  
And rest before your journey recommences.  
To lose your way is not really the issue  
It's more about the path, you now pursue.

## Day 43 - Gy to Cussey-sur-l'Ognon

A very steep climb this morning, and it has a Swiss feel about it, so we must be getting close to Switzerland. We can see some mountains for the very first time as their long dark shadowy outline stretches out before us. More forest walks today, and lots of water from last night's storm causing minor detours. It's so enjoyable in this dark cool place, just with each other. And it's so fortunate that we are a compatible walking team because this is the first time on all our journeys that we have walked so far on our own.

The Canadians did not walk with us, because they were so fast, but we did catch up with these two speedsters, only because it was a short distance to their destination, and really enjoyed our second dinner with them. But now they have raced so far ahead we will not be seeing them again, but the good thing is, they are 'keep in touch people'. They will advise us on what might interest us up front and we'll be supplying them with information from the Alps to Rome, so it feels we're still with them in a sort of way.

More villages in hollows now tucked away between forests, and we love to move through them slowly looking for their idiosyncrasies. Our lunch village today has four 'lavoirs, and three fountains, all different in their design, a water pump like yesterday's was also there. A large lush park was our tablecloth decorated with daisies, and the lavoirs provide us with a large variety of wash rooms, while the fountains are still not drinkable, the rivers probably not, and the loo is in a building for a change.

Two large rumbling rivers crossed our paths, fed by the lusty storms from last night, so the waters are high, rough and brown, coloured by the loose soil being washed with them. As I type this, the rain is here once more, and the forecast is wet for the remainder of our journey, but to reiterate, it has had little effect on our walking and comfort.

Dinner will be supplied by the 'boulangerie-come-supermarche' tonight, as there is very little else in this quaint village and we will dine in our gorgeous little room looking over a delightful river bridge. The supermarket is a one-person shop with lots of fine looking delicacies, so patience was needed, but at the same time, it is a cultural experience listening to the interchange of locals taking the opportunity for 'catch up chats'. Some cheese, fresh bread, some greens and a small bottle of red was our fare, that we took to our fabulous dining room on the river.

Just a few days to go now before this, our sixth camino, comes to an end near the foot of the great Swiss Jura mountains. It is ironic, but geographically plausible, that as we move south where it's warmer, and into summer, that the weather is becoming cooler. For us, this is heavenly, and probably a reason why we are both physically and mentally in good spirits. But or now, I am looking forward to a comfortable rest by a rumbling river.

Being patient opens up the world to new experiences



### The Cafe in the Park

'Fromage', banana, ham and our baguette  
Prepared on paper bag - that was our plate,  
Our tablecloth - the grass, our room - 'parkette'  
A vacant bench - is where we sat and ate.  
A pump - supplied the water at our table  
The 'lavoir' - washed our hands at eatings end,  
We had a rest, arose when we were able  
It's off again, there's no more time to spend.  
A rumbling river, brown with rain-loosed ground  
Reminded us of storms not far away,  
The myriad of life that nature drowned  
While making food for others night and day.  
Our muddy track now has a different hew  
The water's path - to cleanse, and then renew.

## Day 44 - Cussey-sur-l'Ognon to Besancon

Leaving our vine covered home in this gorgeous 'tucked away village', reminded me of how lucky I am to be having these experiences, and with my very best friend. So lucky to be walking; so fortunate to have the health that allows me to do this; so rewarded with the views we see, the people we meet, and those emails that you send as you take time to keep us company. It is not just our walk, but your walk as well. I write to share, but partly because it is a good cognitive exercise for the brain which indirectly effects Parkinsons disease, as I try to remember the day's events and think about how I can do it in the best way I'm able.

Nearly got lost early today because the book's track wasn't there, or maybe it was, and we couldn't find it for one of those many reasons I discussed earlier. But unlike the other day there was another track and we could tell it had recently been walked on. It eventually led us to the approximate area we needed to be in. I hailed a driver for help and he set us right, but still needed to match that up with our guide book.

Passed a woman and her collie dog, such a popular breed over here, as they are in Australia. Walked through a swampy area, tumultuous with the sound of frogs, and passed a woman with a camera and tripod who was there to observe the wildlife. She seemed very relaxed, so she was happy to take a photo of us in the swamp, much better than a selfie. By the way, did you know that monks in France in the twelfth century were not allowed to eat meat, so they somehow persuaded their superiors to believe that frogs were fish.

After a couple more village visits it was home in the large city of Besancon. The directions can be a little confusing in big places and this was no different. A young French couple out for a fast walk saw my confusion and told us to follow them. Their pace was such that it was all but running, as we got a kilometre tour of this pretty river city.

The hills are back and this makes for a new experience. These hills are the ones the guide books says are 'maybe too strenuous for those with heavy packs or unseasoned walkers'. They're the ones that they tell you not to try when there has been rain, so they organise special buses to bus you around to the other side. This means steep!

We were happy to catch the bus, but the bus doesn't run on weekends! So the worst that can happen is that we have to turn around and you get used to that when you get lost. However the thinking in this camp is: if we can walk the mountains in Switzerland, we can walk the steep hills here.

Our book ends in Besancon, but our journey will continue to Pontarlier near the Swiss border. Our friends information on previous journeys along this track, became our new guide book to Pontarlier which will also be a lot more personal and add a new flavour to our journey.

With a healthy brain we can do anything



### My Best Teacher

My Parkinsons a friend I'll always keep  
Been honest with me from the very start,  
He's always there awake or when I sleep  
Whatever happens he will not depart.  
He tells me when I'm shit and need a pill  
To exercise my body and my brain,  
And when it's him that causes me an ill  
Or something else that causes me a pain.  
I'm lucky that he's given me some time  
To do those things that give me satisfaction,  
Write prose, and poetry that has a rhyme  
And walk a lot, do stuff that gives me traction.  
When Pd leads to things like body leaning  
I look to it, so I might find some meaning.

## Day 45 Besancon to Trepot

Would love to spend more time here in Besancon, it seems an interesting place, or maybe I just got caught up in a 'tram city' which I love. We don't however love the steps that we may have to walk up over the big hill, many of them, which were on our 'not to do' list. In case you are confused, we like walking up mountains, but we're not great on steps. They use different muscles, and we find it much more of an effort to step up. Without the steps it seems an easier transition for each stride and it's easier to propel ourselves with the poles.

Thought it would be a walk in the park, well in one way it was because we were actually walking through one. Moving along early in the cool, following directions, there was confusion about different routes. The river route would, we thought, take us around the mountain which would avoid the steps, then the next directions did not fit, but no steps yet. So that awkward 'lost without knowing it' (worse than lost) feeling was upon us and we hadn't yet left town!

So I disturbed another two walkers who put us back on track, or so we thought. However it was really just another way back to our starting point. This took us through a park, so in one way it was a walk in the (you know what). Still lost, I sighted a sound looking man and his dog who were next to be targeted. They didn't mind, and pointed to the way we were going, and sent us through a small tunnel and up a long snaking, climbing road.

The hill was still there which was fine, and a few steps, but the crucial thing was that we were back on track and no longer 'not knowing if we were lost'. The worst conditions just seem to melt away once you know where you are going. It was a long steep climb but fairly easy. Past a few day walkers, overtaken by a dozen bike riders and then it was down the other side.

It was then through a town with the inimitable 'de cheveau voiture' (two steam horses), planted with flowers, and on a mound at the village entry celebrating this historical car's seventieth birthday, past an airfield and then another walk with no signs. Time to put the book away and get out the map and go from one road to another, following their numbers.

Still had to hold cars up to verify our way, but the two women, the man and his daughter, the young woman, and then the young man, all seemed to think we were harmless, and helped. Yet another walk in a dark forest, but this time there were carpets of moss blanketing the ground, creeping up the trees and over the rocks, a stunning display of nature's art.

Emerging out into the light, it was not far to our next sleep. As we moved through this 'no shop village' with our own small shop on our back, we saw an older couple waiting by the road outside a superbly renovated/converted ancient stone barn full of treasures. They were our hosts waiting for us. Maybe they'd heard about us getting lost but hey, they didn't have to make it that easy!

Lost without knowing it is worse than being lost. It is like having Pd without knowing it, better to know then you can can do something about it



### They Stopped for Us

They came and picked us up when was too far  
And dropped us off - make possible our walk,  
Then stopped for us in van or truck or car  
Where we had time to sit and laugh and talk.  
Young family took us home when we were lost  
Another was a girl whose off to toil,  
An older man, another path we crossed  
Then mother and her son did not recoil.  
So many more we stopped to ask direction  
I can't remember one who passed on by,  
Our memories of them full of affection  
All helped to do their most to satisfy.  
It's special when a stranger lends a hand  
Especially when it's in their own homeland.

## Day 46 - Trepot to Ornans

Two whole floors to ourselves, a covered balcony displaying the sunset, and lovely hosts. They waved us off the next day along a glorious route that none of our guide books referred to, an added advantage of insider information that you can't really plan for. The term 'one day at a time' was never more appropriate. After a longer than normal and hard to navigate route the day before, this option of a shorter way was just what we needed.

The high wheat stalks hugged us from both sides of the road as the wind encouraged them to wave goodbye to us, on a very quiet country road. Then we caught the train, or might have, if they were still running. As temperatures climbed dramatically, it was wonderful to be shaded by the trees and shrubs that flanked the old track. It helped when we 'over-imagined' that we were travelling in the cool carriage of yesteryear's train.

Now a walking and bike track, with relatively few others on it for a Sunday, and maybe because they looked at the barometer first. An early 19th century stone bridge like an archway to an old city, marked an entrance to this not highly elevated line. Moss-covered-cut-stones waiting for an improbable resurrection, lay askew of each other, almost settled with their new position in life.

Then a two hundred metre long tunnel that promised to light up for us, did not, so something at last to use our long ignored torches for. Immediately on exiting, the ground fell away dramatically on one side creating a deep sharp valley or ravine, while a cliff wall framed the other. And, we could hear a small creek finding its own way below.

Had lunch in what seemed a disused space on the corner of a not so busy road, where the chairs were rotting and rusty around three very tired old tables, alongside a small locked-shed and a rose bush. It might have belonged to the residents of a disused railway station across the road, but no-one saw us or maybe cared. Behind us the deep ravine came to a halt and sidled off down the roadway.

A neatly carved rocky hill marked the next section of this fascinating line, its ten meter walls coloured by that stunning green moss indicative of many sun-free spaces. More cute stations, now homes where people live rather than platforms for them to wait to return home, passed us by. And finally a huge bridge carried us across the river ravine.

A small mountain-like-hill marked the entrance to our home on the railway line, as small mountains envelop us close to the river that slices through the town. It is now storm-time (like being in the tropics) with dark noisy clouds and sharp lightning entertaining us through our French windows, about two or three sleeps from Pontarlier. We reflected on our Swiss walk last year as we spot vestiges of snow in the distance.



There's not always light at the end of a tunnel, but when there is, it's a great reward for lots of hard work



### Our Timeless Track

The wheat becomes a timeless, train-less track  
Now evidenced by cuttings in the stone,  
An archway bridge would also take us back  
A narrow tunnel echoes the whistle blown.  
Moss tried to hide the perfect cuts by hand  
And slabs of rocks since fallen over time,  
Once station now is home, but nothing grand  
The train no more, is now embalmed in Thyme.  
Our paths are also timeless though we try  
To hew our own design in countless ways,  
But in the end most fall, and then we die  
Our platform goes, our homely spirit stays.  
The bridge now takes us to another world  
The tracks are gone, a new way is unfurled.

## Day 47 - Ornans to Mouthier-Haute-Pierre

A wafting mist gazed through our window from the mountain tops replacing the sparks and roars from the night before. A little chill in the air indicating the coming of mountain country, enticed us out to walk. The large lumbering river had risen, then fallen half a metre since the storm, meandering through the village as it noisily tumbled over its man-made weirs. This sixty metre wide ocean of water appeared too large for this river village probably more so now that the skies had recently spoken. It's similar to the Venice grand canal as it washes directly onto the tall houses with no path or barrier between.

Yet another dis-used railway and we were soon back on track. The track taken however must have been just below the one we thought it was, because it flunked three of the four track-list tests. The two tunnels weren't there, the river was too close, and there's no way a train could have got up those hills that we climbed, but the two of us and the would be train emerged at the same point. And what a point, a loop in that tumbling river, La Loue, and, with a chair, (where we could watch the tumbles), for lunch.

This was just short of another stunner, the river village of Lobs, like our previous home, nestled in a valley, and split by its wild waters. The usually flat streets that have shown us around villages are now taking us up narrow curved lanes following no obvious structure, then down, and like the river, meandering in all directions. A village from a story book full of intrigue and mystery where I could let my imagination go wild like the river. I realise the specialness of where I am and savour its unique flavours.

There's been a Swiss-ness in the air over the past two days when the first cow bell could be heard, and then a rarer mule bell. Then there's a whole variety of small monuments, flowers in barrows, cute signs etc decorating lawns, houses and shops, and more of an energising chilled wind. There are gnomes of all shapes and sizes, immovable smiling ducks, cows and horses, and a variety of statues that adorn many Swiss gardens.

The Swiss border is only about fifteen kilometres as the crow flies, but twenty more as the people walk, so two more sleeps will have us there. Mostly our walking health is okay, which means it is mostly when we stop that we get temporarily reminded of our age. My back is creaking, my energy flags a little at times and I sleep better on alternate nights, while Corrie is still suffering mildly from an incident where she walked into a very low road sign (!!\*##\*?). Fortunately it missed her eyes but messed with her nose and pride a little. Apart from that, our old bodies have held together well, though I have lost more weight than I can afford.

It seemed we were also using more electricity than our new host could afford, as she asked us why we needed to have lights on in her house. So we turned them off and dreamt of better things.

A quiet mist belies the raging storm



### A Hint of Soul

The lightning strikes, the thunder roars, it's real  
The rumbling river rises from its tears,  
Venetian houses height the water steals  
And as expected flows o'er man-made weirs.  
The mountain's misty haze a sign of calm  
A chill remains as we begin to leave,  
This village with its special type of charm  
The time too short, a little do we grieve.  
It strikes a common chord with G Courbet  
Whose realism cut 'romantic ties',  
Outspoken were his words he ne'er gave way  
Tradition was his love for this he cries,  
He left his town, cold draught was left behind  
The village lost its soul with this great mind.

## Day 48 - Mouthier-Haute-Pierre to Vuillecin

Six kilometres from our final French village, Pontarlier, seemed like a good plan so there wouldn't be a long strenuous day to finish with tomorrow.

Climbing steeply out of our valley home was a great way to start the day. While it is harder than normal, for us it is more enjoyable, as there are little surprises waiting round the corners. Around one was another long steep climb which was unexpected as the book didn't mention it. But now the biggest surprise, a magical two hour rain forest walk took us up along the busy river Loue, trees and rocks coated with stunning moss of varying 'shades of startling greens'.

The track was mostly around a metre wide, roller coasting along the edge of the stream, then it would go directly up, steep and slippery, rocky and leaf covered, then down just as steeply, never really close to the river, but about thirty metres up with the river nearly directly below.

Walking across a small waterfall's rocky pathway was only made possible with a small railing, over and between large rocks, the vista always carpeted green. Past collapsed parts of a huge rock face, gorgeous rocky outcrops made their own creative designs. Another waterfall, but bigger, and falling on the large stone steps, no railing this time so we concentrated on our footing and pretended the water was not there. Waterfalls of all sorts making their own designs, swirling between, and folding over, rocks of all shapes, jumping into pools and sandy sidings. Fallen moss-covered trees gave yet another perspective while the still standing ones displayed in bunches, and moss spiralled up others.

Later, an impossible climb became possible thanks to a cable bolted into the rocks, while my balance problems required intense concentration to ensure I kept momentum going forward, while Corrie used similar tactics to persuade her sore knees. Eventually we reached the source of all the excitement and rested. A bus stop shelter appeared for lunch before yet another steep climb, this time on a dry wide road surface and through a plantation forest. Finally it was down, and a small shower reminded us of the ever-threatening storm.

Into our village for the night but there was one more surprise to come. Our hotel reservation was not in this 'six kilometres from Pontarlier village' that was carefully planned, but coincidentally, back about 6kms and off in another direction. Getting good at quickly repairing our web, we now set about finding this place.

Meanwhile the storm decided this was the moment to finally catch up with us and began to let loose. As our reluctant ponchos were preparing to finally be of use to us there was the sound of an angelic horn. An older man leant out of his van and asked us where we were going. Our ponchos quickly regained their customary position in our packs' side pocket, which were thrown into the back, while we jumped up front with this lovely man. We drove off, with the rain pelting down, persistent in its desire to finally catch us, but it was too late.

Planning doesn't necessarily lead to better results



### A Drift of Time

The swirling river shed a shaft of spray  
And through it there appeared another world,  
A sharp-sloped path did thread a rocky way  
It climbed, then fell, it twisted and it curled.  
This forest of greens did awe the hungry eye  
Pale shades crept up the trunks of ancient trees,  
A glistening green on branches masked the sky  
While scores of mossy boulders cooled the breeze.  
A rocky river dived and jumped and sprayed  
As water splashed on slippery stones ahead,  
Eclectic pools where insects swam and played  
And large cliff faces, through, which water bled.  
A stunning walk - each step revealed a gift  
Amazing sights - a place where time does drift.

## Day 49 - Vuillecin to Pontarlier

Our home was on a busy highway and well off the Via Francigena track, so google maps showed us a nearly 'non-car road' that would cut across a field and join up with our camino track from yesterday. So it was back along our field track, along the small road through the fir-tree-forest and into the storm-hit village of last night, where the council was removing the gravel from the new road that the storm had washed up.

As we rounded a village corner there was an anxious 'bonjour' to us from a luscious vegetable garden. It was the woman who had given us directions to our hotel the day before. Not knowing someone had collected us and being very concerned, her husband had driven around the countryside for some time looking for us, so they could give us a lift to our highway home. She was so very relieved to see us and we chatted a little.

Then it was Pontarlier, our ultimate goal was reached at last. Stopping for a late breakfast at a 'boulangerie' cafe, one stop shop, the owner informed us excitedly that he had just built his 'balcony' and we were the first people to sit on it. We were hoping that it had passed the final safety assessment. We told him we had just finished a long walk and his place would be the last seat we would sit on prior to finishing our journey. It wasn't a very strong analogy but because finding a seat was a large part of our daily comfort, I thought I'd try.

A day's rest here, but we are sorry too, because France's rolling train strikes continue and there are no trains for the next two days. That will mean a day less spent with our French friend who nursed Corrie's blister back to health two years ago in Italy. After walking and relaxing in her joyous company, it will be off to Holland to spend our final week with our Dutch friend (another friend we met on our Italian walk two years before).

But before we get too excited, my wife took a fall in the bathroom. The tiles opened up a fairly deep wound on her elbow, deep enough to require a visit to the Centre Hospitalier de Pontarlier. It has a certain ring to it doesn't it, like 'Corrie was sorry' for her usual end of journey fall. So as she waited for a 'stitcher sister' to turn up, I took both our packs to the station hoping both Corrie and the 'never came train' to both turn up on time. And they did, within minutes of each other, and now we will visit Dr Sabina to remove the stitches, just where we left off last time we saw her, not a good start.

Now it's time for 'reflection', as time will be spent looking back on, and exchanging, new walk experiences with our European friends. So in that sense we will still be walking along, not just our track, but also the many and varied tracks that our friends have also trod. And after that we will 'shut the gate' on another camino adventure, pursue other activities, and then wait and see what path we will choose next year.

A long walk is very under valued medicine



### A Long Walk

Thru lush grain fields fed by the constant rains  
Canola - it's the paddocks earthbound sun,  
On elevated banks where once were trains  
We trod another path till we were done.  
A multitude of forests and their guests  
Delighted us with songs and shade and sounds,  
The graves of long past soldiers now at rest  
The silence indicating peace they've found.  
By raging rivers now we trod our path  
With tumbling water falls our forest noise,  
Through these we walked, a necessary bath  
No other track but this, so little choice,  
This silent walk our longest yet so far  
The hardest part - we hardly saw a bar.





