

NON!!**A LOVE AFFAIR WITH FRANCE.****CHAPTER ONE.****SEDUCTION.**

A time of anxiety for both Lyn and myself had followed Lyn's rush into Kent & Sussex Hospital for an emergency and massive blood transfusion in December 2003. This had recovered her energy but the unknown cause of her low blood count gave rise to a nagging concern. We had suggested to the doctor that she should be seen by a Haematologist but he insisted on a programme of methodical elimination, step by step, which went on for agonising weeks. In the meantime she had attended Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead for regular blood tests.

It was only when Lyn's blood count wobbled once again followed by an earnest appeal to the doctor that we would gladly pay privately to see the blood specialist that we gained our wish (– at our expense). Lyn was referred to Dr. Anne Nandi, a Haematologist at Crawley Hospital. Being a private patient she was seen within a few days. This was in mid-March 2004.

The visit was preceded by yet another blood test at Crawley. Anne Nandi studied Lyn's history carefully and then asked a string of questions. That done she announced that this latest blood test revealed good news in that the blood count was within satisfactory parameters. She concluded that there was nothing organically wrong with Lyn, suspecting that dietary changes plus stress in 2003 might have led to anaemia. Her pronouncement lifted a great weight from our minds and at home that evening we decided that a short break of a few days in Nice would restore our spirits even more. So we set about planning a five-day visit to that city which we knew fairly well but mainly from driving through it rather than from exploration.

The Internet is a wonderful tool; wishing to arrange at short notice and at low cost a return flight to Nice plus some accommodation we started to surf.

Firstly we tried British Airways but as always they required an arm and a leg for short notice bookings. Easyjet on the other hand, with their user friendly website, wanted but £23 per person for the flight out Mondays to Thursdays and a little more for weekend travel. The total return cost which included, at our choice, Monday out but Saturday return was a fraction of the charges by the traditional airlines. Likewise we found on the internet a self-catering hotel in Nice which sounded bearable – the Meyerbeer Hotel in Rue Meyerbeer, which is walking distance from the Negresco Hotel on the Promenade des Anglais. The downside of our chosen Easyjet flight was the need to get up at about 3 am to catch a 7am departure from Gatwick. The benefit was a prompt departure on time and arrival at Nice at 9am local time, leaving the whole day for our enjoyment. By contrast, for instance, BA is due to depart at 9am (along with a couple of dozen other scheduled flights) might get away by 9.30 if it is lucky and arrives at about mid-day.

We are both good at rising at unearthly hours and so this presented no problem. It was our first experience of using Easyjet and we both half expected to travel like strap-hangers on the underground, with no seats and no food. It certainly is free of frills but the planes were modern and new – in fact our return flight was on a brand new Airbus. Food and drink is available at a modest cost and passengers are asked to leave their seating area tidy as the flights have only a ten minute or so turn-round at their destination. We enjoyed the experience and wish Easyjet a long period of success and prosperity.

On arrival at Nice at 9am we grabbed a taxi and asked for the Meyerbeer Hotel. The first warning came with the driver's failure to know where this hotel was. We had plotted this on a map of Nice on the Internet so we guided him from the back seat. No wonder he hadn't known its whereabouts; it turned out to be as seamy as we had half expected Easyjet to be! One look at the room was enough for us to say thank you and goodbye. So we turned out on to the streets of Nice homeless. Within a few minutes walk up the same road we found the Citadine which offered suites of rooms for self-catering. The rooms were satisfactory and the price was reasonable, so we booked in and spent a very happy few days exploring the city as well as revisiting some of our favourite places along the coast such as Villefranche, Menton and of course Antibes/Juan-les-Pins. Nice is a beautiful city and as with much of the surrounding area quite a distinct Franco-Italian influence; Nice once having been part of what is now Italy until being absorbed into France. For brisk walking nothing is better than the Promenade des Anglais which must be 3 or 4 miles in length. Throughout its length there is much of interest to observe though care is needed to avoid collision with the numerous dedicated joggers, roller skaters and cyclists. The latter are, like the cattle in India, sacred creatures who have been allotted a section of the Promenade to themselves. On the roads God help any motorist who hits a cyclist by accident!



Above: Le Promenade des Anglais, Nice.



It was on one of our walks along the Promenade des Anglais that Lyn announced that she felt very much at home in Provence, and that on stepping out of the plane she felt that she had arrived home.

From here on both of us will assert that it was the other's suggestion that we should move to live here. The reader will decide whether it was in truth the mercurial whimsical Lyn or the stodgy conventional Douglas who did make the crazy suggestion!

The idea took root and the next day found us hiring the smallest car ever seen, a KIA, and starting to scout the countryside to the rear of Antibes. On the Friday before our return home we were driving between Biot and Valbonne and noticed an Estate Agent (Immobilier) called La Forêt at a hamlet called Le Chêne Vert. On impulse we entered and were warmly greeted by a very Irish lady named Hilary. We gave her our badly-

thought-out requirements for our dream house on the Riviera. These inevitably included a sea view, swimming pool, large garden up to an acre, etc. Hilary explained that sea views inevitably were expensive involving either living right on the coast (expensive in itself), or being satisfied inland with an “aperçu de mer”, a distant peep of the sea. We were returning home next day and Hilary promised to email us with a selection of properties on their books which might appeal to us. As we had arranged a three and a half week holiday in France for May, staying for two weeks in the lovely apartment owned by Pierre and Thérèse Dupire we could, in the intervening period, sift through Hilary’s offerings and plan some inspection visits.

Back home on April 3rd we wasted no time in contacting Martin Cundey, the owner of a chain of local estate agents based in Lingfield, to put Bonaventure on the market for sale. We had both a high regard for Martin’s drive based on past experience and were willing to give him a sole agency. Neither of us had mentioned to the other a specific sale price but it transpired later that we had both in our minds a value of £500,000 to £550,000 for a fairly brisk sale. Martin came to Bonaventure on Tuesday the 6th, drooled at its attractions, walked round the house muttering features into a small recording device and measuring each room painlessly with an electronic gadget. He was particularly enthusiastic about the garden.



That done he sat down and opined that the house should sell for £650,000 - £700,000. Somewhat surprised, but pleased, we said that we were keen on a quick sale and would not wish to hold out for the “top dollar”. Martin then compromised with the suggestion that we should fix the asking price at £625,000. He then outlined his plan to produce a splendid brochure and arranged for a professional photographer to visit

the house, saying that he would submit the proposed photographs and draft brochure for our approval.

We were pleased but our pleasure diminished somewhat with the delay which the finalisation and printing of the posh brochure entailed, especially when many of the professional photographs turned out to be not so professional. Indeed many of the amateur photographs we had taken of the house and garden would have suited better. Consequently, whereas we had optimistically expected his sale campaign to be kicked off for the Easter weekend which started on Friday April 9th, an ideal, sunny, holiday weekend, it did not begin before another two weeks had elapsed. We had missed one bus but there many more to follow, we thought.

Amid an increasing volume of warnings from the Bank of England, covered profusely in the media, that house prices were too high and that the boom would shortly collapse, (a self-realising prediction as it turned out) a small trickle of viewers came to Bonaventure. Without exception all enthused about the property, several saying on departure that they would be making an offer, none came. We concluded that many viewers were not really would-be purchasers but in fact voyeurs enjoying an afternoon's outing.

Meantime Lyn had busied herself with practical things such as discovering the likely costs of our moving lock stock and barrel to the French Riviera, an inventory of our belongings for insurance purposes and contacting our solicitor Clare Lumley of Waughs in East Grinstead to stand by to deal with a quick sale of the house. The first thing which Clare demanded was the deeds of Bonaventure. My recollection was that, after paying off the mortgage upon retiring in 1990, the bank had suggested storing the deeds for safe keeping. As storage was then free I had readily agreed. I now asked the bank to return the deeds to me and after a pause of a few days they said they had not got them. Panic! I searched our deed box with no success and then insisted that Barclays must have the deeds, reminding them of their suggestion in 1990. Another pause ensued after which they still disclaimed possession. Things were getting tense until the bank came up with a memorandum that they had returned the deeds to me some years earlier. An ossified memory began to work and recalled that years ago the banks had started to charge annual fees for document storage. At that point I remembered that I had decided to store the deeds myself rebelling against payment of charges. That recollection did not however extend to recalling where they were stored. The only logical answer was the deed box which was then subjected to emptying in a new search. The deeds to Bonaventure were lying at the bottom of the deed box having slipped out of their suspended pouch! End of panic.....and they were quickly delivered up to Clare Lumley's safekeeping.

Lyn's enquiry about removal costs was all-embracing as she invited 5 removal contractors to tender for removal. She had to obtain costs for straight uplifting of our belongings, immediate carriage to Provence and unloading at a new address in one operation, in the event of sale and purchase dovetailing perfectly. Alternatively in case the timing was not simultaneous, costs for uplifting and off-loading at a storage point in the UK, then later, carriage to Provence and unloading.

A procession of estimators came from the five tenderers, followed by their quotations. It had been a wise move to put the enquiry about because the gap between the highest

and lowest quotes was staggering. In fact the lowest, from J&W Removals, was not far above half of the highest price; not only were the removal charges much lower but the storage charges per week were far more reasonable. We could perceive no difference in the quality of the service offered so we decided to award the job to J&W.

Another task was to open a new bank account at Barclays Bank, Antibes. An account had been held there years earlier for convenience on holidays, but later had been closed. This time the rules were different due to precautions over money-laundering and it was necessary to obtain and send a letter of recommendation from our bank in the UK. So Barclays PLC in England had to send a letter to its subsidiary company Barclays S.A. in France confirming that the Huntingtons were solid citizens and OK to be allowed to deposit money in the French bank!

Meanwhile the interest in Bonaventure continued sluggish and no offers had been made. A fact which disturbed us was the quality of some of the Cundey staff. The first viewer to come was preceded a few minutes earlier by a saleslady for the purpose of a very brief familiarisation. She took over the tour of the property with the viewers and not surprisingly made a very poor job of it. The next viewers preceded by ten minutes another new saleslady who virtually shouldered us out of the way to take over. She too made a rotten job of showing them round. After that we told the agents that we would in future do the escorting of viewers ourselves.

Such was our early disquiet that we called up Martin Cundey and suggested that the asking price was too high. The propaganda campaign by the Bank of England and the Treasury was being intensified, reinforced by a series of small increases in the borrowing base rate. Martin agreed that the asking price should be reduced by £30,000 to £595,000.

Meantime Hilary in Provence had been feeding us by email with details and pictures of properties on the books of Immobilier La Forêt. By that time we had formulated a detailed specification of what we were seeking and the locations on which we were keen. Our priorities were to have a decent sized piece of level land of at least half an acre, a swimming pool, a minimum of three bedrooms, (or rather one bedroom and two computer rooms, a good sized sitting room, at least two wcs, and a shower room. A view of the sea remained on our wish list although our expectations were already receding on this point. Our preferred locations, failing somewhere right on the coast, were the area bounded by Biot, about 3 miles from the Antibes coast, Valbonne 3 or 4 miles to the east, and Opio, Le Rouret, Roquefort-les-Pins and Le Bar-sur-Loup to the north. We sought to avoid the Cannes, Grasse, Mougins area, because these are districts heavily populated by people and by traffic. We resolved to look for a home which would require no major spending on immediate repairs or refurbishment. Finally, based on Martin's estimate of the worth of Bonaventure we pitched our spending budget at the high figure of 750,000 Euros plus or minus a bit – approximately £500,000. This would leave us enough to pay the high costs of moving plus money for unexpected needs.

As well as contact with Immobilier La Forêt we trawled the internet for other Riviera agents, giving them our detailed specification. We planned to spend a good part of our two week holiday in Antibes inspecting these and any other villas which sounded suitable. As always, despite our very positive definition of our requirements, most of

the agents, as they do universally, sent us volumes of irrelevant details of unsuitable places and at locations we had vetoed.

There are numerous articles and books published explaining the differences between the UK and French laws and practices of property conveyancing. The most significant of these differences is that, whereas in the UK, a buyer can back out free of obligation right up to the last minute before signing and exchanging contracts, in France the buyer is early on required to sign a letter of intention. From that point he is committed. His only get out is if, with the vendor's agreement, a clause "suspensif" is inserted in the letter. The usual clause states that the buyer may require a mortgage or a bridging loan in order to complete the contract. In the event that he fails to obtain such financing within a stipulated time before the completion he is off the hook. He must furnish evidence that he has tried seriously and assiduously to obtain agreement for that financing.

The other important difference concerns inheritance. Whereas in the UK the maker of his will can stipulate to whom his estate should be divided upon his death, Napoleonic law provides that the estate should be divided between the "dependants or near relations" of the deceased. In other words a person might wish his whole estate to revert to his spouse, in France such a wish would be set aside and his estate would be divided between his spouse and his offspring, or even his offspring's offspring. The French are excellent at making laws and they are equally adept at getting round them, or even ignoring them – see how they park cars, abandoning them randomly in the most impossible places! We noted that the best way for Brits to avoid this problem was to buy the property in the name of a company registered in the UK, so that its disposal on death became out of the jurisdiction of the French Courts. Using the internet it took about half an hour to form a limited company, registered in the UK, named "Bonaventure GB.Ltd", with a Memorandum specifying a wide range of objects. It cost £39.95 and over the internet came a Registration Certificate, Memorandum and Articles of Association, showing Douglas and Lyn Huntington as subscribers of £50 each to the £100 capital, and as directors. Waughs of East Grinstead were nominated as the registered office.

 <p>CERTIFICATE OF INCORPORATION OF A PRIVATE LIMITED COMPANY</p> <p>Company No. 5142385</p> <p>The Registrar of Companies for England and Wales hereby certifies that BONADVENTURE (GB) LIMITED</p> <p>is this day incorporated under the Companies Act 1985 as a private company and that the company is limited.</p> <p>Given at Companies House, Cardiff, the 1st June 2004</p> <p style="text-align: right;">  <small>THE OFFICIAL SEAL OF THE REGISTRAR OF COMPANIES</small> </p> <p style="text-align: center;">  Companies House <small>for the record</small> </p> <p><small>The above information was communicated in non-legible form and authenticated by the Registrar of Companies under section 710A of the Companies Act 1985</small></p>

French practices are different from UK usage in a variety of other ways. Firstly it is the buyer who pays all the costs, including the agent's commission of from 5 to 10%. It begins as 10% but if the negotiations become tough the agent might reduce his commission down to 5% to help things along. Even at 5% the commission is handsome compared with the UK norm of 1½%, often reduced to 1¼% or even 1%.

When we eventually bought our French villa for a price of €695,000, (about £465,000) the agent will have earned between £24,000 and £45,000, probably nearer the higher figure because the property suited our needs so much that we paid the asking price. This explains why there are so many estate agents in business.

Secondly the buyer also pays all the legal costs and taxes arising from the transaction. These include the fees of the Notary which, after taxes are added, amount to 6 to 8% of the sale price. Because it is incumbent on the Notary to ensure that the parties understand every word in the contract it is necessary to hire an interpreter – another €400. So it can be seen that the total cost to the vendor can work out at about 20% oncost to the price the vendor is willing to accept. The homework necessary to discover these facts was well rewarded in that it enabled us to budget carefully for the project.

Our holiday began on May 4th with stops overnight at Troyes, a quaint city in Champagne/Ardennes, then on the second day at Valence on the Rhone opposite the Ardèche, arriving at Antibes in the late morning of the third day. After a few days enjoying the beautiful vista from the Dupire's balcony terrace and of visiting some of our favourite haunts we were ready to begin our search.

ANTIBES TAKEN FROM CAP D'ANTIBES



Our first appointment was on the Friday morning, May 7th, with Cabinet Michel of Roquefort-les-Pins run by Madame Bouchacha and her daughter Yaël. They are a charming pair of ladies but the first property they took us to showed that they had not understood (or had ignored) the requirements we had clearly indicated. One of these was a preference for a single storey on a piece of flat land. The house had three levels with steep unrailed staircases. The level of the back garden and the pool was higher than that of most of the house, whilst the front garden led up to the front door via a steep, stepped, slope. The next house, owned by a Dutch couple in Le Rouret, was charming, well laid out with a distant peep of the sea, but access to it from the village was up a long and winding series of steep, hilly, roads culminating in an impossibly sharp turn into the property's drive. Fine for a mountain goat! It was a pity because we really liked the place. We saw two more that morning but neither of these came near to our brief; a fifth prospect, on which we had had high hopes was mysteriously left off our visiting schedule with no explanation given.

Our next sally was on the Saturday morning at Magagnosc near to Chateauneuf-pré-du-lac, high up in the foothills. The lady escorting us was clearly non too pleased at having to sacrifice her Saturday morning. She took us to see one unsuitable place in the pretty village of Le Rouret and then led us off on a long cross country trek ending up at the end of a mile-long cul de sac near Mouans Sartoux. It was really out in the sticks, possibly perfect for a hermit. That was two days used, six properties inspected, none of which matched our detailed specification.

Our real hopes were vested in our original contact with Hilary at Immobilier La Forêt. Monday the 10th May had been set aside to be escorted by this charming, loquacious lady. During the sifting, prior to our departure for France, Hilary had come up with two properties which were outside our stipulated price range of €750,000, both these being about €810,000, (about £542,000), to which would have to be added the Notary's and other oncosts. We agreed to inspect these, having in mind that they had both been on the market for about 9 months and that the prices might be negotiable. One in particular took our fancy. It is located about 2 miles from Biot, just off the Valbonne-Biot road, number 929 in a lane called Chemin des Souliers. (Shoemakers Street, thereafter called "Cobblers Lane"). Opposite the end of the lane was a convenient local hostelry, called "Auberge de la Vallée Verte". The single storey house was not particularly attractive from its front elevation, but the rear faced south, with an excellent covered terrace overlooking an attractive swimming pool. Inside was a large attractive sitting room with large picture windows along its length, everywhere was floored with white marble, and it had ample other space for our needs. Our mental reservation was that it was rather contemporary in style and that the price was out of our reach. At the end of that session we withdrew to Antibes to mull it over.

The next day, Tuesday, we had arranged to visit Barclays Bank in Antibes to open our account with an initial deposit of €5000. Our appointment was with one of the local management staff, Guy Suzan, and with Christiane Perroud from Barclays Nice, which appears to be the local head office. It all seemed quite complicated, compared with the previous occasion twenty years earlier, when I had opened an account at the same branch. A brief visit to the local Manager with £1000 pounds worth of French Francs had sufficed. Nowadays it seems that the first concerns of financial institutions are to avoid deposits from money-launderers and other undesirables. We opened our account and were told that cheque books would follow “later”. They followed about three weeks later.

During that afternoon we telephoned Martin Cundey in Lingfield, from whom we had heard nothing since leaving the UK a week earlier. The slow trickle of viewers appeared to have become even slower with no offers made. We then discussed together the properties we had visited so far, and agreed that number 929 Cobblers Lane was very desirable especially as it appeared to require no further expenditure. We decided that it would suit us nicely.

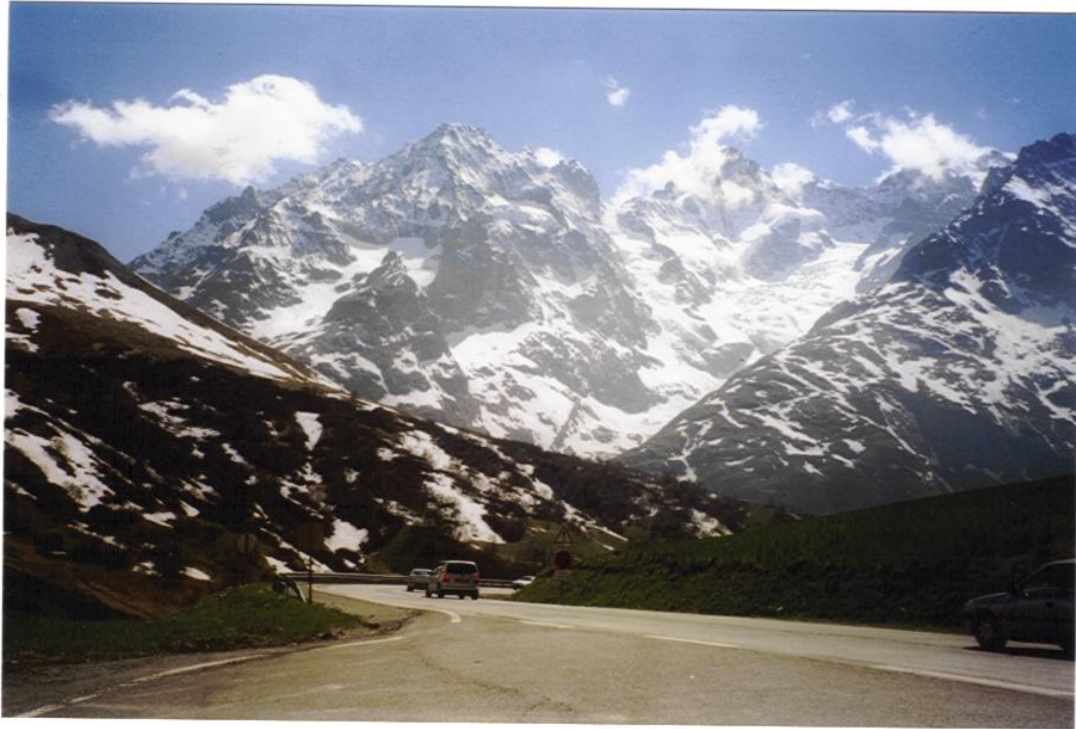
As our conviction grew that 929 was our dream home we made an offer, through Hilary, of €750,000, - €8,000 less than the asking price but way over our budget of €750,000 which was intended to include the commission, notary’s fees and other costs. That done we telephoned other estate agents and cancelled our visits arranged for the following Wednesday through Saturday.

Our answer came on Thursday morning to the effect that the owner was prepared to accept €762,000 but not a cent less. After debate we decided to raise our offer to that figure, still confident that we should be able to sell Bonaventure for a comfortable price. We asked if we could make a second visit to 929 to note measurements, and to check on certain features we had not noted before. This took place on the Friday morning and confirmed our enthusiasm for the house, though Lyn did detect some insect infestation in a bedroom.

On Friday afternoon we were summoned to the offices of Immobilier La Forêt to sign the “Letter de Compromis”, the document which was to commit us to the purchase. Before that a partner of the Immobilier, in accordance with French Law, took us in detail through the provisions of the document, translating it into English line by line. His very bossy wife then required us each to initial each page, to write in French our acknowledgment that we understood and agreed its terms, and then to sign it. We returned to Antibes elated and treated ourselves to a bottle of Champagne, a little sobered by a call to Cundeys to find the situation unchanged. Never mind, our hopes were high. We proceeded to enjoy the rest of our two weeks based in Antibes before setting off for Briançon, a town 4000ft high in the Alps, close to the Italian border, followed by a three day visit to Yvoire on the southern shores of Lac Lemane, (Lake Geneva) before the drive homeward.

We enjoyed our stay in Briançon surrounded by snow-covered slopes and peaks and the three day stay on the lake. Particularly we enjoyed the paddle-steamer trips along the lake to Lausanne and to Geneva. And of course we enjoyed revisiting Reims on our last night in France, testing various champagnes with the help of Antoine, who remembered us from the previous visit. It had been an enjoyable, and as we saw it at the time, profitable holiday having found our French home-to-be. We drove the last leg homeward hoping that some good news about the sale of Bonaventure would await us.

THE PASS FROM BRIANCON TO ITALY. BOTTOM: LAKE GENEVA



CHAPTER TWO

THE SEARCH FOR NIRVANA.

Our spirits sagged a little on enquiring about the progress made by Cundey – zilch! The property had been on the market for over eight weeks, during which only a silly offer unacceptable to us had been made. We took stock of the situation, being conscious that the letter of promise we had signed required, among other things, completion of purchase by September 7th. We felt that we had made a mistake in giving Martin Cundey a sole agency, so we promptly gave him notice of termination of the sole right, and visited seven other local agencies, giving them a shared agency. This meant a procession of agents and then photographers visiting Bonaventure, a bit tedious but also gave us the opportunity of obtaining their views on the currently saleable price. Most estimates were in the region of £585,000, but one, Chris, the manageress of King and Chasemore in Crawley Down forthrightly named £550,000 as the likely best price we could expect, and proposed an asking price of £565,000. By the time these agents had started marketing we were well into June. Most of them were damp squibs, as ineffective as Cundey's and the flow of viewers remained a trickle.

We realised that we could not hope to complete the purchase of 929 Cobblers Lane by September 7th, neither could we afford its price now that we had been forced to reduce the asking price for Bonaventure so drastically. We had applied for a bridging loan to our bank in Antibes, believing that there was going to be a gap between the sale of Bonaventure and the promised completion date. Along came the news that Barclays Bank Antibes had refused either a bridging loan or a mortgage. The reason was my age of 77 and they considered me a bad risk. We advised Immobilier La Forêt immediately and proceeded to apply to other banks with the same negative result. The realisation came that we would have to invoke the let-out clause in the Lettre de Compromis. There was consternation at La Forêt and fury at 929 Cobblers Lane whose owner swore that he would never again deal with an Englishman.

Eventually, in early July a couple named Ransell visited Bonaventure and openly enthused about both the house and garden. They followed up with a further inspection, bringing an architect with them to advise on the possibilities of enlarging the accommodation to house their offspring. After some haggling and much to our relief they agreed to buy the property for £562,500, not far off our own initial expectation. More visits ensued accompanied by sons and daughters, who all seemed keen. We settled on a target completion of September 7th, both parties resolving to keep pressure on our respective solicitors to meet that date, then about eight weeks away.

Having an agreed sale with a couple who looked genuinely enthusiastic and unlikely to back out we could now resume our search in Provence with a certain knowledge of how much we could afford and several lessons engraved in our minds by the experiences gained in the past few weeks. Thus we planned a five-day visit from the 19th July, returning on the Saturday the 24th. We booked a room at the Auberge de la Vallée Verte for about €60 per night, located at the heart of the area we liked best, and proceeded to sift the new prospects which had been unearthed by Lyn's contacts with several new agencies. One of these a frenchman called Thiery, based in London, took up our quest seriously and peppered us over the internet with prospects. Another, Edith Wilson, a French lady married to an American, also took our specification to heart and although she did not exactly pepper us we felt that her prospects would be meaningful.

So with a programme of inspections booked in advance we set off on the 19th July for our second search. Once again the flight with Easyjet went well and by mid-morning we were ensconced in the Vallée Verte, run by the friendly Alexandre. We made contact with Hilary but she had no new prospects to offer us.



The next day began sunny and hot, as it was to remain for the rest of that week. We duly met Thiery near Valbonne and he took us off on a tiring trek of viewing. It was a fruitless day. Though we looked at some quite nice properties; all fell short in one or more respects, either in unattractive location, or decorative condition, or rocky, stepped, mountain-goat-style landscape. We concluded that it was useless to specify anything to most estate agents – they worked on their own, faulty, instincts to show us what they thought we should like. Wednesday turned out to be another hot, tiring and fruitless day, mostly spent in following the irrepressible Thiery around the country roads. It became necessary to get shirty with him to impress him that we knew what we wanted. The charmer would then become temporarily contrite and assure us that the next one would be the one. In the afternoon we kept our date in Opio with Edith Wilson. She showed us some nice properties, but none of them suited.

Thursday dawned hot again and we were due to meet another contact of Lyn's, Michel de Beauville, who promptly angered us by driving us all the way to a town near Grasse called Mouans Sartoux which we had specifically named as a non-starter. It was too heavily populated and busy, as is all of the Cannes, Mougins, Grasse area. In the afternoon we were due once again to meet with Thiery. He took us to an Immobilier called Century 21 in Roquefort-les-Pins, where we met the charming manageress Nusch Semo. The second prospect she escorted us to was 27 Avenue des Alpes, located ten minutes walk from the village and shops and in a private domaine called Central Park. We both liked it straight away. It faces south, has a nice swimming pool, a summer kitchen sheltered by a verandah, a garden of about half an acre which actually boasted a green lawn. At the time of our visit the lawn was being mowed by a hired handyman called Nordine. Inside is mainly open plan, with a large sitting room, leading into a very attractive, newly equipped kitchen. On the ground floor there are three bedrooms, a cloakroom, a bathroom, and a shower room. Upstairs is another bathroom with shower and toilet, a smaller bedroom, a larger room which we earmarked as a library/snooker room, and an outside solarium. It turned out to be owned by an Englishman, Sam Craig who is a British Airways pilot.

Below: No.27 Avenue des Alpes, Central Park, Roquefort-les-Pins, Alpes Maritimes.



We returned to the Vallée Verte to think it over, but were both convinced that number 27 suited us. The asking price for the property which had just come on to the market was €695,000. To ensure a successful bid we decided to offer the asking price, subject to one proviso – that a clause suspensif should be included in the Lettre de Compromis letting us out in the event that the sale of Bonaventure was aborted. Our previous experiences and advice was that this clause would not be acceptable to the vendor or to the notary but we decided to try it on nevertheless, thinking that an English vendor, aware of British practices, might be more amenable. We telephoned our offer to Century 21 and arranged to visit their office next morning, the Friday.

Next morning Nusch Semo had arranged for her husband, Didier, a director of the company to attend, and he contacted Sam Craig then in Johannesburg by mobile phone, told him of our offer and of the proviso. Sam Craig agreed promptly. That was one hurdle out of the way; the next was the Notary. Didier explained that he was on familiar terms with the notary, Patrick Ivaldi of Chateauneuf and felt confident that, the vendor being agreeable, the notary would also be agreeable. He telephoned Maître Ivaldi and obtained his agreement with the clause suspensif. Having been warned that a firm date for completion could not be fixed because August was the month for universal holidays in France and the notary had a lot to do we took the precaution of reserving an apartment at Le Roi du Soleil for the month of September, with an option of extending it, if necessary, for the further month of November. We paid a deposit on account of the month's rent which would be €876.

We decided that we should celebrate the reaching of agreement by going over to Pegamos for a nice lunch at the L'Ecluse by the riverside. On the way to Pegamos, at a roundabout near Mougins we suffered a brazen robbery. As Lyn slowed up in the roundabout a pair on a motor cycle drew alongside, the pillion passenger reached over, opened the rear door of our hired Renault Clio, and was about to grasp Lyn's handbag which was lying, with the camera, on the back seat. At this point Lyn became aware of the intrusion and put her foot down, dragging the thief hanging on to the door half-way round the roundabout until he let go and fell off. He had to let go of the handbag, which contained all our money, credit cards and passports, but managed to cling on to the camera. Thanks to Lyn's quick reaction we still had the important things, though we lost, in the camera, an undeveloped film containing pictures of our new home-to-be. Renault cars have an automatic locking device which comes into play when the car is moving off from stationery. Obviously the car hirers had disabled this device, as indeed we had in our own Renault Laguna. After this incident we immediately had the locking device re-enabled on return to England.

It was arranged that, because we were returning to the UK the next morning, we would attend the notary's office that evening to go through and sign the Lettre de Compromis, leaving Sam Craig to sign it on his return to Roquefort-les-Pins. This we duly did that evening in a very affable atmosphere. Maître Ivaldi spoke very good English and took us meticulously and with humour through the terms of the Lettre, ensuring that we understood every word. The date for completion was set to be by September 28th, and Lyn and I were asked to sign the document, initialling every page. We understood that when the notary's legal work was completed he would summon all parties back to his office to sign the "Acte de Vente". Congratulations were offered all around and we returned to Vallée Verte in the glow of the setting sun and also of ultimate success in our search for Nirvana.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GESTATION PERIOD.

Back in England our pressure began to ensure that the respective lawyers fulfilled our wish to complete and exchange the sale contracts for Bonaventure by September 7th. Now started also serious preparations for that day and of our departure for permanent residence in France. Lyn booked provisional arrangements with the removal firm, J.&W. Removals for the collection of our belongings on the Monday 6th and Tuesday 7th September. We had chosen the Tuesday for our departure because J.&W. had explained that French regulations forbade the movement of heavy vehicles at weekends after mid-day on Saturdays. Presumably this applies only to Traffic on Autoroutes because we notice, now as residents, that plenty of heavy traffic moves at weekends on non-autoroute roads.

My job was to plan the route and travel arrangements for our migration. We decided to make the first leg of our journey a short one because we could not forecast the exact time when on the Tuesday the removal team would have finished loading up ready for departure. We guessed it would be about mid-day, so we decided to make Reims our first stop. We liked the city and the Mercury Hotel by the Cathedral; we also looked forward to another of barman Antoine's tour de force on Champagne. From Reims we planned on the second day to travel to Valence on the banks of the Rhône and to stay at the Mercury Hotel there, leaving a morning's drive to Antibes on the third day, the 9th September. We made those bookings via the internet, confirmed to the Roi du Soleil immobilier that we would be taking up the apartment from the 9th, and booked our crossing with Eurotunnel.

Lyn is a keen and efficient organiser and took on most of the planning, including notification of our departure date to our relatives and friends, deciding just what belongings we should carry with us in the car to cover the, so far unknown, period between leaving Bonaventure and the arrival at Roquefort-les-Pins of our stuff via J. & W. Removals. There were a hundred other matters for her to attend to.

One matter which had exercised our mind, bearing in mind that we would shortly be transferring over half a million pounds sterling to France in Euros, was the exchange rate. Varying only marginally from day to day when it came to small amounts such as for holiday funding, a variance of only a few cents could make a huge difference in large transactions. We had worked out our budget for the purchase of a villa and for the accompanying costs on the cautious basis of an exchange rate of €1.43 to the £1. During this period the exchange rate stood near €1.50 to the £1. So we made enquiries of Barclays Bank about buying a forward option for £520,000 worth of Euros. We were quoted a rate of €1.4848 to the £1, so we took up the option. On that amount our budget would be bettered by the Euro equivalent of £18,000. By the eventual date of completion of our purchase on 17th September the actual rate had deteriorated quite a lot from €1.48 to €1.44 and at the date of writing this in January 2005 the rate is even lower, at €1.41, so it had been a good move all round.

These were hectic days of preparation and planning but pleasing because everything at last seemed to be going well for us: we had sold Bonaventure to a family who obviously were thrilled with the garden as well as the house, we had found a new home in a part of the Alpes Maritimes that we both loved, and the solicitors and notary in France were proceeding according to schedule. We made a brief visit to Devon, staying at the Woodbury Park Hotel near to Budleigh Salterton. On the way we stopped off at Trowbridge to call at the home of Lyn's parents. In Devon we spent a pleasant day with brother Gordon. We also arranged to meet Lyn's brother Martin, his wife Jo and son Jamie for a Sunday lunch in Sussex, and Lyn's parents joined the party as they were spending the weekend with Martin.

A real treat occurred a couple of weeks before our planned departure. Lyn had for some time been hinting that she would like to lunch at Lannies in Reigate during a weekday. As it was our regular Sunday haunt I thought it was another strange whim and Lyn fixed up for us to go there. On the day of this planned outing Lyn suggested that we should take our camera so that we could photograph some of the staff whom we had befriended over the past few years. As we drove into Lannies car park I recognised a familiar car parked there; it was Geoff Bowden's car. I realised that it was a set-up by Lyn and was not surprised when Alan and Jean Walker walked in a little later. It was a wonderful occasion to spend a few hours with these beloved long-term friends. Alan, always open and truthful, still could not understand why we should wish to forsake the land of our birth for another country. It would have been useless to try and convey that, despite the differences in culture and language, we both felt more at home in contemporary France and wished to integrate with their people.



We had between us a huge amount of possessions and we found it difficult to judge what we could appropriately use in our new home in France. There was too much furniture for a start, not just for the new villa but also bearing in mind the style of life of just two persons. We discarded a fair amount either by give-away to local charities or to individuals. Over the final weeks before our migration we kept the local refuse collection agency very busy discarding a lifetime's accumulation of papers and mementos. In the event we still brought far too much with us and still, several weeks after our arrival have quite a few unopened boxes of possessions standing about.

Eventually the pressure we and the Ramsells had exerted on the solicitors came to fruition, and we were told that David Ramsell had signed the contract and that the completion date would be September 7th. About the same time a message came from Chateauneuf that all parties could assemble there on September 17th to sign the Acte de Vente. So we were able to firm up the date for the removal to take place – on the 7th September as hoped. Furthermore we could fix a date for the departure from England by the removal team. To comply with French rules about weekend use by heavy vehicles they had to time their round trip to be completed during the weekdays. Therefore they arranged to depart on the Monday 20th September, arriving at Roquefort-les-Pins on the Wednesday the 22nd. Consequently there would be a gap of about two weeks before we could move in to number 27 Avenue des Alpes.

September 6th dawned on a Bonaventure looking internally like an evacuation centre. But very early J.&W. Removals men turned up to load their first vehicle. They were very helpful, though the driver, Steve, rather surly at first, expressed horror at the amount he had to uplift, and disgruntlement that we had packed all the makings of tea or coffee. They cleared all that they intended to load for that day, leaving us easy chairs in the sitting room and a bed to sleep in that Monday night. Sleep! That was a joke! I don't think we slept four hours between us. We waited impatiently for the removal crew to turn up in the morning. Eventually they did at soon after nine, but not before an anxious couple of phone calls from us. By 11.30 they were finished and ready to depart. A quick last look around for things overlooked and we were away too.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MIGRATION.

We had booked our crossing for 2.05pm on the Tuesday but we arrived at Folkestone over an hour early. We had paid a fare which allowed us flexibility so we were able to board an earlier train. Disembarked in Calais we had a comfortable drive to the Hotel Mercure at Reims. In the evening, feeling hungry after a stressful day we went out in search of something to eat. Not far from the Cathedral we came across a little bistro offering a variety of salads, one of which we chose and enjoyed very much. It is usually hard to find an eating place in France where one can get a light meal but this choice was perfect for our needs. Back to the hotel for a couple of glasses of Antoine's champagne and we were ready for bed. We slept more soundly than we had done for months and awoke refreshed for our first full day as permanent residents of France.

It became steadily warmer as we drove southwards through Champagne-Ardenne and Burgundy and down the River Rhône on our way to Valence. Just south of Lyon we left the autoroute and followed Lyn's nose to look for a place for lunch. We found Tante Yvonne in a little village south of Lyon. We ate in the garden shaded by magnificent plane trees. At Valence it was warm enough for us to be able to sit out close by the banks of the river drinking fruit juice until quite late in the evening.

Thursday the 9th we drove leisurely to Antibes to check in with Le Roi du Soleil Immobilier for the keys to the apartment which we had reserved in Le Lavalliere Bloc. To our consternation nobody there knew anything about the booking or the whereabouts of the keys for it. Stress was mounting fast when Richard, the Manager strolled in and handed us the keys. However he did not hand us the remote controller opening the gates for the private car parking lot. A car with English registration would be vulnerable if parked in a public place all night and we had to go and see the "Gardienne", Madame Dubois, to borrow a remote controller from her. Fortunately we knew each other well and she willingly co-operated.

We had been spoiled over the years by the excellent condition and comfort of the Dupire's apartment at Le Roi du Soleil. This one fell very short of that; the bed was a pit, the furniture was old-fashioned and uncomfortable, the kitchen was not nearly so well equipped and the terrace furnishings were on the shoddy side. Lyn endured it well for the ten days we had to stay there, but comfort-loving Douglas hated it. We filled our time with long walks along the promenade at Antibes, or with striding along part of the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. We borrowed the keys for our new-house-to-be and refreshed our memories about its features. Meantime it was confirmed that the £520,000 had been converted into Euros and that the super-efficient Sue Woolley at Barclays East Grinstead had transferred it to our bank account in Antibes. We both owe a lot to her willing assistance and efficiency and only hope that Barclays Bank appreciate her services as we do.

CHAPTER FIVE

OWNERSHIP.

At last the sun rose on 17th September, the day for the Acte de Vente. The summons was to attend at 10am at the offices of Notary Maître Ivaldi to make the purchase. Naturally we arrived early, and by the entrance, met for the first time the vendor, Sam Craig. We all entered the offices where we were joined by Didier Semo from Immobilier Century 21. We were then greeted by Patrick Ivaldi who ushered us into his office, together with Susan Nicholson who had been recruited, at our expense, as interpreter. Despite the fact that the notary was pretty fluent in English, Susan had been brought in to comply with French Law which requires that both parties must understand the commitments into which they were entering.

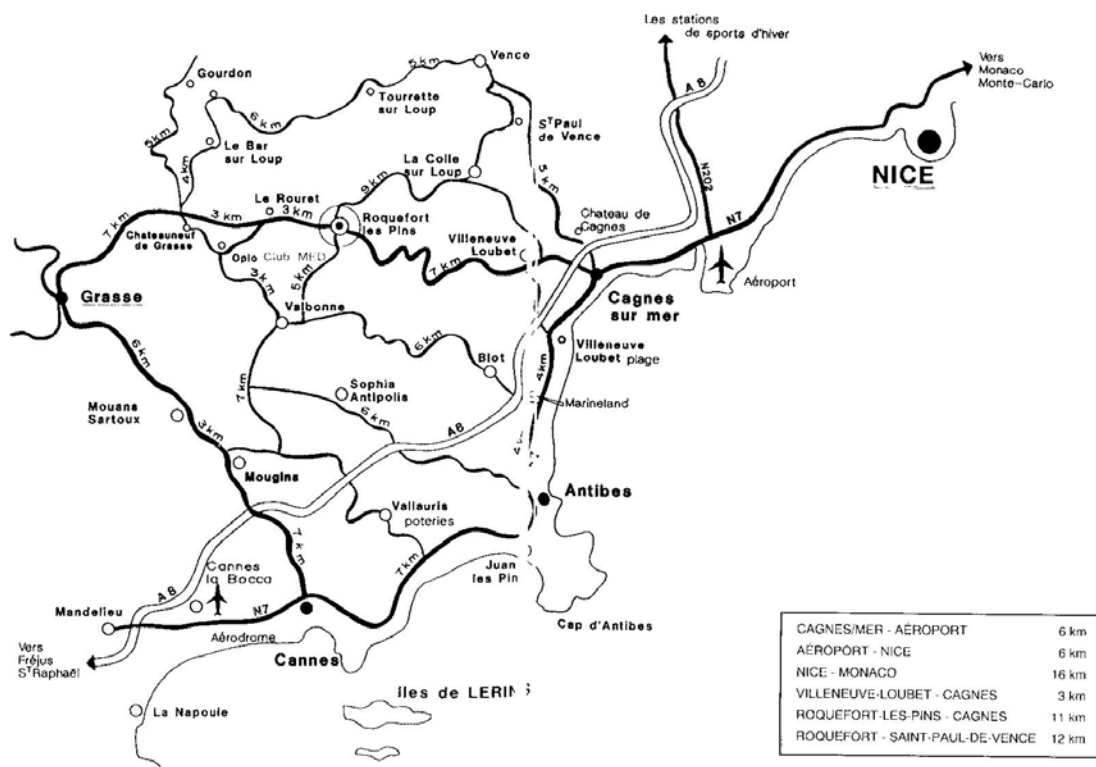
Proceedings began shortly after 10am. Everything was explained in English to us, lots of signing and initialling of the pages, our draft for the balance of the purchase price handed over and warm congratulations offered all round; number 27 was ours as of then. We were homeless transients no longer.

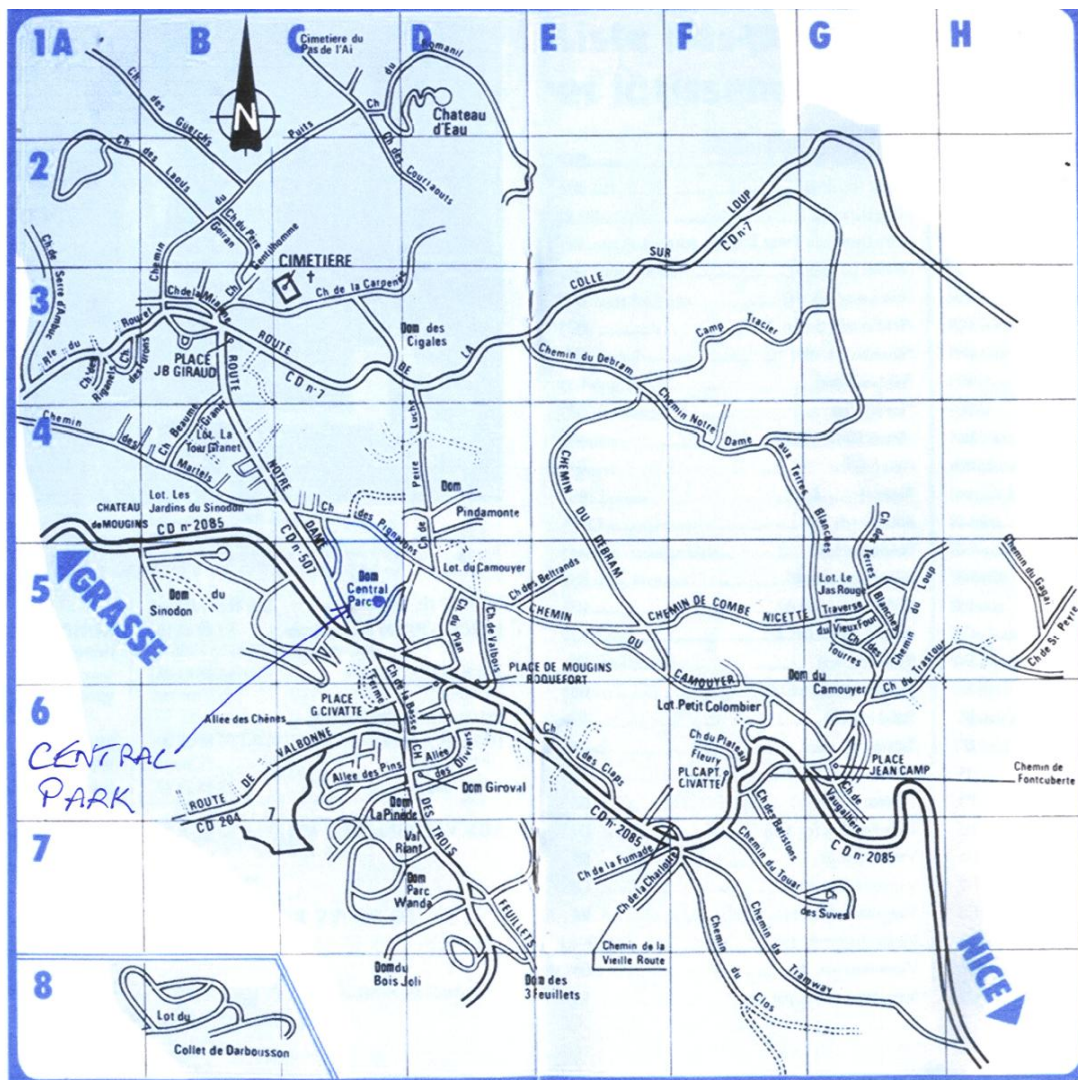
Sam Craig accompanied us back to number 27 in order, as promised, to show us how things work, such as the alarm system, etc., and how to maintain the pool. It was all pretty brief and Sam said he didn't know much about the systems because his handyman/Jack-of-all-trades, Nordine "looks after it all". At that moment, as if on call, the aforementioned Nordine, an enterprising young man of Tunisian parentage arrived at the front door and was introduced to us. He speaks little English but is very intelligent and we find that we can understand each other fairly well. Like all French people, however, no matter how many times one beseeches him to "parlez lentement svp" he gabbles at top speed. I can speak reasonably atrocious French, can read and write with reasonable ease. My receiving is not so good, partly because my hearing is not so good as it once was and partly because I am naturally a slow absorber. Lyn, on the other hand is virtually a starter at the language, but she is not phased, has a go, and everybody responds warmly to her efforts. The situation is not helped by the fact that a very much higher proportion of the French can speak some English and most of them want to practice it. In due course Sam Craig gathered up his remaining belongings and drove off to stay with friends nearby and we remained in the empty house. This was the Friday and the removal people were not due to arrive until the following Wednesday. Lyn suggested that, as we needed to buy a new bed, we should do this immediately, arrange to have it delivered on the following Monday, and move in that day. Camping there in an otherwise empty house appealed more than three further days in the apartment, so we did just that. In upper Antibes we found a store describing itself as a "Literie" and we entered to inspect their extensive choice of beds. We were greeted by Bernard who proceeded to show us round and to extol the virtues and benefits of each type. As so often our own attempts at French went out of the window – Bernard wanted to practice his English! We compromised and thereafter tried to speak in each other's language. Amazingly we ended up a good result. This was Saturday and we then asked Bernard to have it delivered on the following Monday morning, together with bed linen, pillows and cases. This he accomplished efficiently.

Monday found us as permanent residents in France and our new life there began at last. The wish had taken root in early April and just under six months later it was fulfilled.

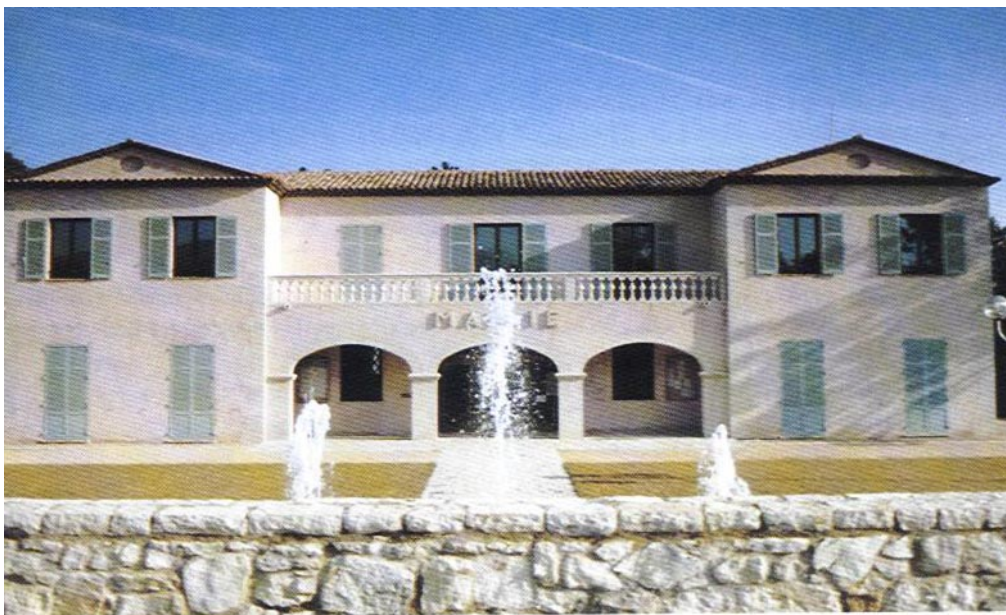
We spent the intervening time before our possessions were to arrive in familiarising ourselves with our new home and with the layout and amenities of the village of Roquefort-les-Pins. It lies 750 feet above sea level and is tucked under the foothills of the Maritime Alps. These are about a mile to the north and rise to about 2000 feet. The Alps run in ever higher layers, more or less parallel to the coast, each layer being separated by an east-west valley before rising higher than the last up to altitudes of 8-10,000 feet. Twenty miles or so to the east, over the border in Italy, the rugged Piedmontese mountains tower to those heights much nearer to the coast. They are snowcapped for much of the year and on a clear day they glisten brightly in the sun.

Roquefort-les-Pins lies on this undulating plain between these mountains and the coast and as its name implies, hosts a lot of pine trees as well as plenty of deciduous oaks. Also, as its name reveals, the landscape is rocky with only thin layers of loam clothing its rock foundation. The view to the north-west and north from our villa is of those modest mountains, and just out of our view, hidden by nearby trees, are the jagged cliffs of the Gorge du Loup. Rising about 30 miles inland, among the Alps, the River Loup forces its way through the intervening valleys and gorges, on its way to the Mediterranean. For the final ten miles or so of this journey the Loup cuts through its last obstacle at the spectacular Gorge du Loup before rushing on to the sea. It owes its passage to the glaciers of 10,000 years or so ago, which, as the climate changes brought about their melting and shifting coastwise, scoured out these routes to the lowlands and thence to the sea. At the same time the lifting of their vast weight enabled the land they had vacated to rise up and become the Alp mountain range.





BELOW: THE MAIRIE OF ROQUEFORT-LES-PINS



The village lies on the Nice to Grasse road and is consequently quite busy with traffic, commuters to-ing and fro-ing to work, and increasing volumes of heavier vehicles. Currently this is being compounded by considerable enhancement of the main thoroughfare which carries this traffic. The road is being widened with several central islands intended for floral displays. The shopping facilities comprise a medium-sized supermarket named “Shopi”, a branch of the Credit Agricole Bank, a post office, a butcher/fishmonger/greengrocer, a newsagent, a hardware store, various beauty parlours/hairdressers, a pharmacist, a medical analysis laboratory, a medical equipment retailer and three estate agents. There are also several bistros and restaurants as well as a couple of small hotels. One of the best restaurants is within five minutes walk of our house and is called the “Auberge du Clos des Pins”. It is owned by an English lady, Sally, and her husband Yves, who is French. The chef is Australian but of English birth.

The village boasts an impressive “Mairie” from which the village services are run. Still, after 5 weeks in residence here, we have not yet fathomed their routine for refuse collection even though we secured two leaflets describing it. Refuse is categorised into several types of recyclable waste and one sort which is sheer rubbish. This latter goes into black plastic sacks, glass bottles have to be put into wheelie bins marked for glass; plastic waste, but only certain types have to be put out in another colour sack, and cardboard waste into yet another colour. Finally newsprint etc., have to be posted into booths placed for their collection in various locations in the village. All these categories are collected at unearthly hours in the mornings on different days of the week, some fortnightly, some weekly. The sacks are transparent and if a sack is seen to contain any category not meant for it then it is left outside your house for the magpies to ravage. We have tried to follow the instructions in the leaflets, some of which conflict with one another, but so far have failed to get it right. We conclude that the best way is to leave everything out and see what has disappeared by the next morning!

The Mairie is also the place where a new arrival, particularly a foreign one, has to register to get into the frame for social services, including health care. This business starts with the Social Service Agencies in Britain, and as long ago as last April we began filling in forms and sending them to Newcastle, to enable us to benefit from French health care. In return the agency sends further forms (121) giving details such as NHS registration number. These in turn have to be submitted to the Mairie, which, after a bureaucratic pause issue the resident with a “Carte Vitale”. This is his/her passport to use the French Health System. France and the UK have a reciprocal agreement whereby nationals from either country may benefit locally from the other’s health care system. In France the system works in such a way that the patient has to pay the doctor for consultations, the pharmacist for prescriptions and hospitals and surgeons for hospitalised treatment. Retaining receipts for these costs the patient then sends them to the mother country for reimbursement in due course. It is a logical, simple system which cuts out much of the administrative bureaucracy. It is not necessary to wait for the issue of the Carte Vitale before seeking the use of any of these services.

During this time we found the name and address of an English-speaking doctor, of Dutch nationality, located in Valbonne, three miles from Roquefort-les-Pins. His name is Doctor Dirk Heerding. We visited him without appointment to register as his patients and it was in his waiting room that we both contracted the nastiest cold ever from a sniffling child. He seemed glad enough to take us on and we spent an hour in which he noted down on his computer our medical histories. At the end of this hour he asked us for €50, the equivalent of £30. At a later visit he charged €25 and issued several prescriptions, and also booked Lyn in at a Nice hospital for a consultation with a surgeon. We visited the very modern hospital, finding all we met to be very courteous and helpful, most of them insisting on practising their English. Lyn had her session with the surgeon who recommended a minor operation, and on the spot, booked her in for three weeks hence. He told us that the cost would be €250 and if Lyn wanted a private room the cost would be €13 per day (£8). We were staggered because in the UK there would be a long wait before the surgery could be fitted in, unless it was carried out privately, when the cost would be in the four-figure bracket. No wonder the French health system is reputed to be the best in the world.

As mentioned earlier, we had sought to choose a home which would require little or no work or cost to make it to our liking. Optimists! We had not been in residence long before we realised that, as so often, the house had been cosmetically treated for sale in spite of the neglect of ordinary maintenance. Not only did we find that the electric radiators which heat the building did not work very well, if at all, but that because of their outdated age they were “interdit”. So we had to spend €6000 to replace them with modern, programmed radiators. Then a plumbing fault came to light which required attention. Next we discovered each morning that the bed was littered with what looked like dead insects which had dropped from the heavy wooden beams supporting the ceiling. This puzzled us as we had acquired the house with a certificate dated July 2004 asserting that the timbers had been inspected and were declared free of termites. Concerned, we called in a local “Rentokil” type agency recommended to us by Didier Semo of Immobilier Century 21. On inspection they declared the beams to be infested by woodworm of the Capricorn species. They quoted us €2600 for the treatment necessary to eliminate their infestation for ten years. This was becoming serious money and we demurred at which point the salesman reduced the price to €300 and then whilst we were drawing breath, to €2000. We supposed that if we could detain him for another day or so he would end up paying us for the privilege! But wishing to be rid of the Capricorn worm who were dining off our timbers we agreed to accept, hoping that will be the end of the uninvited guests. The salesman explained that the treatment involved the drilling of bore holes at frequent intervals along all exposed sides of the beams, then the injection of chemicals lethal to the invaders. Clearly that was going to be a messy operation. It was settled that this should take place on the Tuesday, November 3rd.



Security from burglary figures high in the priorities of the French. Hence their private dwellings are usually like miniature fortresses, with high fencing round their properties, surveillance cameras, or security lights installed, and in addition to their windows, either heavy wooden shutters closed and locked when they vacate the house or barred with static grilles to prevent illegal entry. We decided to invest in electrically operated remote control to our front gate to save a long trek up a 40 yard drive to open it or to admit visitors. This cost about £1500. We found it a hardship, each time we left the house for shopping etc., to go round closing and locking the shutters to each of the 6 external doors and also those windows which are not already grilled. Also the house is very dark and gloomy with all light shut out. So we approached a local security firm, Azur Sécurité for quotations to fit steel open-mesh doors in addition to the existing glazed doors which would be much less trouble to manipulate, and would allow light into the rooms.





Another priority was to get our computers up and running, complete with wire-free broadband connection via Wanadoo, the ISP subsidiary of France Telecom. We had been three weeks without this vital tool of communication. We also wished to get the TV up and running and able to receive UK programmes. Sam Craig had given us the name and phone number of a British expat, James Cook, living in Cannes, who was in the computer and TV business. We contacted James early on. Not surprisingly his services are in heavy demand and we have had to be patient both with him and also with French Telecom, as there was a four week wait to receive the necessary kit from them. When the kit arrived it was minus the wire-free kit so there was a further delay until four days before this is being written for that to arrive. To date Lyn's computer has been set up, not totally satisfactorily, with broadband and the writer hopes his will be set up shortly. But at least we can communicate with the outer world on Lyn's computer. As Lyn is often saying at the end of some days: "so far today it has been three steps forward and two and a half back". It does seem like that but then on reflection it is only six months since the idea of migrating permanently germinated and today we are living in a comfortable home which Lyn has put together from scratch. It is quite an achievement.

In addition to doing quite a lot of work in the garden, clearing up neglected growth, every day Lyn is busy putting up shelves, hanging pictures, etc., working from the time we get up in the mornings, usually at 6am, until 8pm or so in the evening. Although life is pretty busy, currently thought is given to future recreation when more leisure time becomes available. We decided that, as we had both enjoyed snooker in our younger days, we should equip the library with a snooker table. The room is only about 17 feet by 13 feet and therefore is far too small for a full size table. We contacted a manufacturer who has a sales branch in St. Laurent-du-Var, on the western outskirts of Nice, and the next day their salesman, Christoff, arrived on our doorstep. He measured the room, advised us on the size of table which would fit and showed us the options of wood, slate bed, and cloth we could choose. The upshot was that he drove to his home with an order worth €3600 for a table to be manufactured to our specification. Delivery is hoped for by Christmas, in eight weeks thus enabling us to re-live our misspent youths in our own home. Perhaps by then we shall find the leisure to use it.

The French Riviera is universally thought of a region of constant sunshine. In fact the records show that normally it enjoys the sun 300 days out of the 365. Rainfall mostly only lasts a short time, giving way to more sunshine and the air is usually crisp rather than humid. However the country could not be as green as it is without its vital rainfall. Much of this falls in the Autumn and the months of October and November can be very wet ones.

Thus it was, on a Thursday in late October, that we saw Provence at its most English when it rained heavily without stop from the moment we awakened, through the day and following night and into the Friday morning. Fate decided that day that the house should be inundated with a collection of workers. Firstly on the previous evening we had a phone call from Boissûr, the infestation company, that they would like to come to the house at 8.30 the next morning; we presumed that this was just a reconnaissance visit in preparation for the following Tuesday. So on the morning when the heavens were dumping endless rain on Roquefort-les-Pins their two-man crew arrived, not to reconnoitre, but to do the treatment. This necessitated our preparing every room to be treated – removing all pictures and other objects on surfaces and covering all furniture, etc. Then the plumber (Dominique Méry) arrived to fix the faulty toilet cistern and to make estimates for a variety of other jobs we had in mind. He was quickly followed by the Jack-of-all-trades Nordine who had some remaining electrical work to complete. A little later two men from the security company, Azur Security, arrived with a quotation which they proceeded to explain.

So we had, at the same time six men with wet boots tramping in and out of the house, door and windows open all the day, despite the cold wet rain. Finally at about 5.30pm the Boissûr men departed, having finished their job (so we thought), and we had our house once again to ourselves. It had been a long uncomfortable day. And despite the fact that the Boissûr men had cheerfully tried to clear up behind their messy job, a lot of cleaning up and tidying remained after they had gone. The sequel to their visit arose when Lyn discovered a dead insect in the guest bedroom. She phoned Boissûr at Juan-les-Pins and they promised to send someone out to inspect. A couple of men came later and without further ado they announced that the work they had done was incomplete. They said that they had neglected to treat all of one of the upstairs rooms and needed to return to complete that job. Furthermore they had not included the beams under the roof in the loft in their quote. These needed treatment and the cost would be €300 on top of the €2000 already agreed. We expressed annoyance at the prospect of having our house invaded and made smelly once again and we also insisted that as far as we were concerned their quote had included all necessary treatment. We were not willing to pay any more for their oversight. They made phone calls to their Juan-les-Pins office, reducing the price for the extra work to €250, but we remained angrily adamant. Impasse! Both sides withdrew to ponder, since when after a month we have not heard back from them. We decided to pay €1800 of the €2000 invoice and to withhold the balance until a solution satisfactory to us is offered. We had also written to Sam Craig, the vendor, asking him to take some responsibility but no reply was forthcoming. So we wrote to Maître Ivaldi, the notary suggesting that Craig had a liability. No reply came from him so we phoned his office and spoke to his associate. She advised that there was no liability because the certificate given us at the time of purchase had been confined to freedom from Termite infestation only and did not cover infestation by other species of woodworm. On this occasion it proved that we had been defeated by the small print!

The guest who came to dinner, uninvited.



The following days, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday brought more heavy downpours of rain, interspersed with occasional brighter spells. In those five days we calculated that about 6 inches of rain fell. At about 1am on Saturday night the main fusebox shut down. We managed to get most of the circuits reinstated, but two circuits had to be left off. We concluded that water had penetrated into parts of the circuitry and reconciled ourselves to wait for professional help on the following Tuesday as work closed down for the weekend, which on this occasion included Monday 1st November, All Saints Day, and a public holiday. Disaster always strikes at the weekends!

CHAPTER SIX

CONSOLIDATION

The last Chapter ended five weeks ago during the first week of November – the wet month. We are now in mid-December and getting ready for Christmas in our new home.

Much has happened in the intervening period. Also much that we hoped would happen has failed to materialise. Nordine's electrically remote-controlled gates joined the failures; within a few days of their installation their shortcomings became manifest as did many others of Nordine's claimed talents. The sections of the gates to which the opening mechanisms are attached started to split and evidently will not last very long unless replaced. A continuation of frequent power failures demonstrated that there are fundamental flaws in the electrical circuitry which Nordine proudly boasted that he had installed during the previous owner's tenure. The "plumber", Dominique Méry, whom we had called in during November turned out to be a true craftsman, being a qualified electrician as well as having his own metal forge. After inspection of our circuitry he described it as a dangerous scandal, pointing out that the quality of Nordine's electrical work was illegal. Needless to say, we paid Nordine off with the determination that he would never be let loose in our house again.

Dominique agreed that he could fabricate for us a set of wrought-iron gates with electrical remote control which he is in course of doing, among other tasks we commissioned. He is going to carry out a complete investigation of our electrical circuitry as clearly some circuits are badly overloaded thus causing the failures. This study will require a few days, preferably when we are not in residence. So we have arranged to spend a few days in the Dupire apartment at Antibes during January or February to enable Dominique to do this work.

The quotation we sought from the security company for wrought-iron window and door grilles turned out to be very costly. Again Dominique has quoted a much lower price so we have given him the contract. The down side is that we must wait for these jobs as his is a one-man business.

The volume of rain which fell within a short time during late October/ early November was so much that we decided that, although Provençal style roofing is very attractive and rustic, we would nevertheless like gutters all round it to catch and take away the water. Again the talented Dominique took on this job as he did the construction of a porch outside the front door (roofed in Provençal style!)

I found our steep staircase, which lacked handrails, quite dangerous for an elderly person and we turned to Dominique for a solution. Within a few days he had made sets of smooth-timbered handrails, not only for the main staircase but also for a smaller one leading down from the hall to the lower level. For the two external stairways, one from the garden level up to a raised balcony overlooking the garden and one from the garden down to an underground storeroom, he fabricated and fitted sets of wrought-iron rails.

Below: Dominique's new Porch, handrails to the Balcony and Cave and gutters.



We found the downstairs shower unsatisfactory. The cubicle has no door and consequently lots of water collects on the shower-room floor. We miss a mixer tap which saves sorting out the temperature every time it is used. We have commissioned Dominique to fix that problem.

With Christmas approaching we found it difficult to locate and buy suitable external Christmas decorations, particularly having in mind some coloured lights round the Verandahed Barn, or more poshly called the “Cuisine d’été”, where, even in the winter we spend a lot of time. A mention to Dominique and he went off, after measuring the size of the barn and returned with a perfect solution, which he installed.



Above: Verandah with Christmas Lights.

Below: The main staircase



Hall with Christmas Lights



Below: The Sitting Room fireplace with Christmas decorations and presents.



As mentioned earlier, when resident in France it is necessary to have what they call a “Carte Vitale”. This identifies entitlement to medical care. We began to obtain this in April by applying to the DSS to provide a form 121 which confirmed that we were entitled to benefit from the NHS. It took until September 22 to obtain this in respect of Lyn. The next step was to take this document along with a raft of other documents, birth certificates, marriage certificates, etc.,etc., to the Mairie. Here, a very efficient seeming lady went through the papers, pronounced them good and complete and promised to send them off to the higher authority in Nice. A couple of weeks elapsed when we received a letter from Nice demanding several documents, including those we had already provided, but pointing out that Lyn’s birth certificate omitted vital information, such as her parents’ names and details. We took this back to the Mayor’s office and assured the lady that Lyn did have parents but despite her assurance previously that all was satisfactory she insisted that we had to obtain the full version of birth certificate. Thanks to the internet we were able to order and pay £37.50 for this document to be posted next day to us. We duly took this back to the Mairie where the lady responsible once again assured us that all was in order. This was our first experience of how French bureaucracy can easily outdo that of other nations. We still await our “Cartes Vitales” The time came for Lyn’s operation at the University Hospital, L’Archet 2 in Nice. This is a huge modern complex set high in the hills at the rear of the city with a magnificent view of the whole Bay of Angels. Lyn had previously attended the week before for tests with the Anaesthetist which had taken the best part of a morning. The methodical French have a system whereby, upon admission, a task sheet is issued for the patient to which are adhered stickers, rather like postage stamps, one for each task on his/her particular agenda – blood tests, cardiac checks, recording of weight, quizzes about any allergies, etc., ending with the interview with the anaesthetist. At each stage the sticker for each task is peeled off and retained by the nurse in charge. The same procedure is used when admission for the actual operation takes place. Upon admission Lyn was taken up to the room which had been allotted for her, was told to have a shower after which the operation would take place. In the course of this a hospital doctor appeared, with a collection of young interns or students in tow and proceeded to lecture them on the case in front of them. The nurse in charge insisted that Lyn divest herself of her mobile phone, money, wallet, watch, rings and necklace, etc., and I had to take these articles home with me. Later in the day I phoned her and we had a one-sided conversation as she was still quite groggy. Not groggy enough though to have a good grouse; Lyn doesn’t make a happy patient and certainly doesn’t suffer in silence. One of her complaints was that although she had a telephone in her private room she couldn’t use it for outward calls unless she paid for the calls. As she wasn’t allowed to keep money or even a cheque book payment was impossible. Doubtless, she made the lives of the nursing staff impossible in reprisal. Perhaps that is why she turned up unexpectedly at our front gate at home, the staff having been only too anxious to see the back of her! Lyn had been told that she could come home the next day, provided that she felt OK and that the surgeon agreed. So she discharged herself called a taxi promising to pay him when she got home in Roquefort-les-Pins. Fortunately I was at home and answered her call on the intercom from the front gate. Had I been at the shops there would have been a problem with her locked out and unable to pay for the taxi.

Over five weeks have elapsed since the operation; for Lyn they have been five painful weeks, interspersed with the odd better day. After a month we went back to Nice for the surgeon's check-up. He pronounced all was well and arranged for another check-up in a further month's time, the 17th January 2005. The surgeon produced his bill for the operation - €250, which we paid by cheque. Another official produced a bill for the stay in hospital - €750. With this she accusingly told us that we should by now have produced Lyn's "Carte Vitale" which entitles her to have the operation paid for by the French National Health authority. We retorted that we had been trying to obtain this for months but bureaucracy had so far prevented it.

We had been advised that we should apply for French registration of our Renault car. Not only were cars with foreign plates more vulnerable to vandalism but it was hard if not impossible to obtain insurance with UK registration. Having experienced the ponderous nature of French bureaucracy we began the application by writing to the Sous-Préfet of Police at Grasse. After a pause back came a stereotyped letter listing the numerous documents we should supply with our application. One of these required that we should go to the tax office in Sophia Antipolis and obtain a form. We duly found the office and waited in a queue for some time. The queue did not move but we did, becoming fed up with the prospect of hours of waiting just to obtain a form. We decided to pounce on them very early one morning – a ploy we have found which works. Another requirement was that we should obtain from Renault Head Office a certificate that the car conforms to French regulations. Although the letter was written in "best French" and was accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope, we still await, after two weeks, a reply from Renault. Just as well our insurance runs until April 2005!

In Antibes there are two shops stocking goods for British émigrés, one called Geoffreys of London, located near the Marina and the other called "Eurobrits" in the city centre. Being in Antibes one morning we decided to pay Geoffreys of London a visit. We found a wide selection of provisions not normally available in France and bought a selection of things. The shop was packed with Brits and we felt rather ashamed that, having come out to live as the natives do, we were succumbing to such a weakness. Then Lyn's eyes fell upon some packets of Cumberland and Lincolnshire sausages. Our shame dissolved promptly and we grabbed a couple of packets. We had, a few days before tried to give French sausages another chance but once again had found them inedible. We crept furtively out of the shop with our purchases as if we were leaving a brothel. In fact our local "Shopi" in Roquefort-les-Pins does stock quite a lot of imported goods familiar to the British, but unfortunately they are rather erratic in their stocking policy. A week ago they had a few packs of mature Cheddar Cheese, three of which ended up in the Huntington basket.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GETTING DOWN TO IT.

The garden of 27 Avenue des Alpes is surrounded on three sides by laurel hedges. They were not only too deep but also far too high, cutting out a lot of light as well as spoiling views. Without exception the hedges on all three sides are within the boundaries of our property so we feel free to cut them to a height and depth which we prefer. Early in December we set about the task of doing just that, aiming to bring them down to a height which will be controllable in the future without climbing steps or ladders. Quite a mammoth task! Lyn is doing most of the lopping of the branches, most of which are eight to ten feet long. They then have to be dragged to the bonfire area, cut up to make manageable bonfire material and then burnt.

Our target was to complete the two longer sides by the end of the year, leaving the final section until early January 2005. Today's date is December 24th so with a week left our work is well on target.



One of the assignments given us by daughter-in-law Bridget before we departed from the UK was to write regularly to grandson Harry in French. To date we have written a couple of letters to him enclosing some pictures of the house and garden. The observation was made that the pictures did not include people and thus lacked interest. Since then I have been followed around the house by Lyn plus camera, taking shots of me in all sorts of poses.



Christmas Eve arrived in damp clothing, ending several weeks of dry, mainly bright weather. It rained steadily and relentlessly for two days – Christmas Day and, what would be called in the UK, Boxing Day. This rather curtailed our activity, especially because Lyn had set the target to cut down to size the second length (and second longest) of the laurel hedges. In the event this was finished on the 27th so Lyn set a new target for completion by the year end of the third and last side of the garden. (The fourth side is not hedged). By the end of the same day quite a bit of that side had also been dealt with too! So we are on target to finish the hedges in 2004 and Lyn already has her eyes on one or two of the Chêne Vert (Green Oak) trees. Unlike the English Oaks they are not handsome trees, being a gloomy dark green in colour, shapeless and very dense in habit. We do not like them. Some will be left as they provide good roosting and shelter for the small birds but some have got to go as they obscure the views and sunshine.

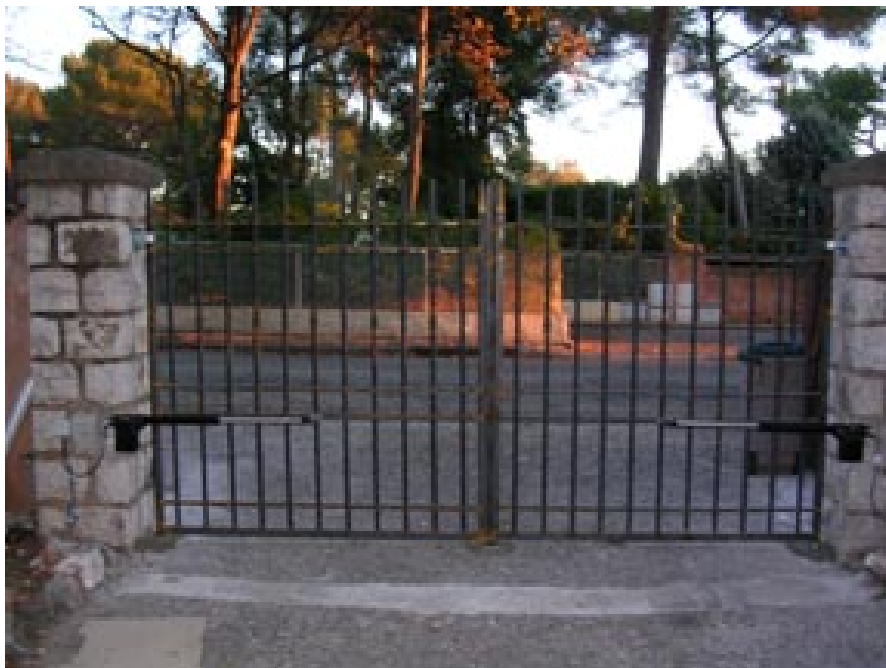
On the same day, the 27th, we woke up to dry and brighter weather and to find that our nearby mountains were snowcapped and on the same evening we were treated to a lovely sunset sky.



The 28th December was also the day when, having planned to go out for lunch, we could not find any of our restaurants open. So Lyn bought a fillet of pork and set about concocting a sweet and sour sauce. In the course of this she decided that an orange was essential but we hadn't bought any oranges. We found the solution in our garden and picked a home-grown orange from our tree. It proved the perfect solution and the resulting sweet and sour sauce was delicious.



Thursday December 30th was another day which marked progress in the plans for our new home. Dominique finished the installation of our new gates, the parts for which he had forged and fabricated himself.



Unfortunately the faulty installation by Nordine of the equipment controlling the opening and closing of the gates proved to have damaged the motorisation with the result that they would not operate properly. Dominique told us that there was a better system which he could instal at extra cost. We had no option but to give him the go-ahead to buy whatever was necessary and instal it.

On the same day he also set about the final improvement to our downstairs shower room. He had already installed the new folding door and there remained the installation of a new shower kit. The one we had inherited had no temperature control and the hot and cold taps were very dodgy, falling out of their sockets unless very special care was exercised. This could result in either scalding or freezing depending on which tap fell out. He had waited for six weeks for availability of the kit and very proudly demonstrated its superior quality.



Also on the same day our carpet ordered for the Library/Snooker room arrived from Saint Maclou of Villeneuve-Loubet.



Now the room was ready to receive the snooker table which we had ordered back in the autumn and which was due for delivery on the following Monday, January 3rd 2005.

By Friday 31st December Lyn had cropped the laurel hedge to about half of the final side of our garden and by dusk we had chopped it up into manageable pieces and burnt it on an enormous bonfire. She had also felled another of the much disliked Chêne Vert (Green Oak) trees to the pleasure of our neighbour on that eastern side. We were satisfied that the birds still had plenty of roosting space in our garden. As soon as we had arrived in Roquefort-les-Pins Lyn had hung up two seed feeders and one nut feeder, which had already attracted Crested Tits and Siskins.

Below: A Siskin at the seed. In the UK Siskins are usually fleetingly seen. In this area, when they appear they stay for long periods and don't seem to be shy.



Right: Lyn tending the bonfire. 31st December 2004.



A few days after Christmas we found the time to visit the mountain village of Gourdon, which is about 5 miles from our home but which involves driving about 10 miles. We wanted to see Josée, our friend of many years, who owns a shop from which she sells pure silk clothes dyed and made by herself. We bought 4 silk shirts for Lyn's Christmas present and then had lunch with José at the local bistro/tabac.

On a clear day the view across country from Gourdon, altitude over 3000 ft., to the Bay of Angels is stunning.



Shortly afterwards, on January 2nd, we visited what had by then become our favourite local restaurant, Le Jarrerrie in Le Bar sur Loup. This village is situated directly below Gourdon and the view of the latter, perched on the mountainside is equally stunning.



One day in December we had visited the local hardware store in Roquefort-les-Pins. This is quite a small shop but the owner is an enterprising fellow named Christian Cloche (Chris Bell). Among the interesting artefacts on his shelves we found an unusual glass vase designed in a sort of art deco style. The electrician Patrick Mocca had recently walked into and shattered to pieces the tall vase which we had used to contain single stems. So we bought this vase from Christian for 80 euros, named it inaccurately “our Lalique” and it now sits at the foot of the staircase in the sitting room, awaiting the next clumsy workman.



The period up to and just after the New Year, when everything seems to stop for a few days, was welcome as it forced us to relax from our labours and enjoy a bit of leisure. So on New Year's morning we jumped into the car and drove down for a long walk along part of the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Before leaving we thought it would be easy to park along the Promenade expecting that everybody else would be in bed sleeping off their celebrations of the previous night. How wrong we were! The many parking spaces along the promenade were packed with cars and "campers" and there were still, at 9am, a few people celebrating on the beach. Although it was very cold, there was a lady swimming offshore, whilst a few were sleeping it off on the promenade benches. As usual there were also plenty of people, like ourselves, out for a constitutional either walking briskly, jogging, roller skating or cycling along the front. It was so enjoyable that we repeated the exercise on the next morning, Sunday the 2nd January.



Monday January 3rd was the day when our snooker table was due for delivery. A phone call to the suppliers in St. Laurent du Var on the outskirts of Nice elicited that it would arrive at 3.30pm. It did in fact arrive at 3.50pm. The two installers made an initial inspection of the table's destination in our house and expressed concern at the difficulty of access – up a fairly narrow staircase followed by a sharp, tight, right turn into its ultimate resting place. Their concern became understandable when we learnt the weight of the slate slab which forms the bed of the table. It is over 135kg – 300lbs- the weight of a 21 stone person. Apart from this large component the rest of the table came in packs to be assembled in situ. The two installers, very cheery men, had a very difficult and exhausting time dragging the dead weight of the slate bed up the stairs and were very grateful for a refreshing cold drink when they had done so.



They had the assembly procedure drilled to a fine art, working together, checking measurements carefully at each step, and very expertly levelling the table in the centre of the room. Our concern was initially stirred when we realised that the spaces on each side between the table and the walls were not sufficient for the length of the cue even though we had chosen the correct size of table on the advice of Christoff.



The skilful parts of their job were to put the hefty slate bed in place, lay and anchor the cloth, then fit the top “shoulder” to the table and pin it before fitting the pockets.





The final package was opened to reveal the scoreboard, the cues, the rests, the triangle and the balls. Here came the big shock of realisation that they had supplied a Pool Table. The balls were a set of American Pool Balls, the score board only went up to 129, presumably because that is the maximum score possible in that particular game, and we realised that the pockets were slightly larger than for snooker and that the shoulders of the pockets were square-cut, unlike the snooker table's rounded shoulders.



The two installers were very upset and assured us that things would be put right by the boss, Christoff, who was due to come over on Wednesday the 5th January for the purpose of putting the final touches to the table, including the marking of the “D” and the place spots.

Next day we spoke on the phone to Christoff who confirmed that he would bring the correct accessories for the game of snooker on the following Wednesday, at 11am. He eventually turned up at 12.30, bringing with him hardwood cues of the right size and a set of snooker balls, which are appreciably smaller than pool balls. He didn't bring a proper rest, but promised to bring one when next he was in the district. Nor did he bring a proper snooker scoreboard saying that we would have to make do with the type delivered. He then set about locating and putting the “D” and place spots on the table. Needless to say that we were not impressed with this catalogue of inefficiencies.

Later that day we had our first practice on our new table which demonstrated that it would be a long time, if ever, before we reached Steve Davis's standard!



Wednesday the 5th January was also the day when the industrious Dominique finally fitted the new, more powerful motors to the front gates, at the same time improving the remote control of them by enabling us to close them at will. Previously it had been possible only to open the gates; once open they would commence to close after a defined pause. They look very smart and will look even smarter when they have been painted.



And on the following day Dominique Méry arrived with the steel door/grilles for Douglas's study which he had fabricated in his forge. This was because he knew that we were going into exile at Antibes on the coming Monday in order to allow him to make a thorough check, in our absence, of the electrical wiring and circuitry in the house. We had been worried because the wooden shutters for the study would not close properly, creating a security risk. Dominique spent that and the Friday, 7th January, fixing the grilles in place. He had, as usual, made a professional job of it so that we can unlock and open the doors at will.



Thursday, 6th January also saw the cutting of the final stretch of the Laurel hedge. This enormous task had occupied several hours daily for about a month. We slept very soundly on those nights! Lyn had done about 95% of the cutting whilst my job had been to drag the huge branches to the bonfire area, to cut them up into manageable and burnable sizes and to feed the fire. This last stretch obviously pleased our neighbour on that side because he had set about culling and pruning the trees and shrubs in his garden. About 24 hours after we had moved in to the villa he had made a point of politely asking us to cut that hedge. Those who plant laurels for quick-growing hedges must usually rue the day because, not only do they grow very tall, but also very densely, becoming several feet wide. Now we shall enjoy much more light in our garden.



We also enjoyed another glorious sunset sky whilst drinking to our successful work.

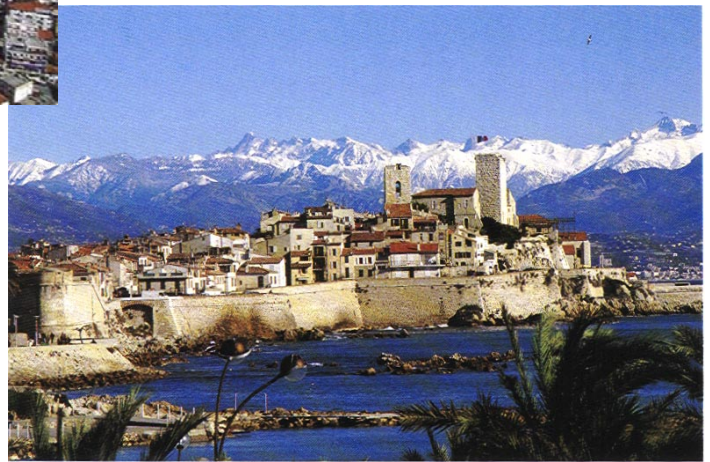


On the 9th January, the Sunday before our departure for the stay in Antibes, we decided to drive to Nice for a long walk along the Promenade des Anglais. This is the best day to see the variety of joggers, cyclists and rollerskaters on the promenade for their exercise. We set off before 9am expecting that, as usual on a Sunday morning, the route would be quiet. Once we got to the Promenade we found that three of the five eastward lanes were coned off. This spelled difficulty for our walk because a sixth lane usually reserved for parking cars had also been coned off. About halfway along the promenade motorists were shunted off inland, leaving the whole width of the road unavailable. We then realised that cyclists in France are not the only protected species – the Promenade was being cleared for masses of runners.

We were re-routed to the long tunnel under Nice at the end of which we found ourselves out in the north-east quarter of the city, totally lost. We navigated back to more familiar surroundings by the harbour and tried our luck approaching the Promenade from the east. No such luck, at the eastern end we were once again shunted off inland and had no option but to navigate our way to the autoroute back at the north-eastern sector of Nice and so to home. The only other privileged section of the public on that day in Nice was those out on roller skates; they had the 25 yard-wide pavement to themselves. Our frustration gave way to the realisation of how tolerant and democratic the French are; the motorist does not rule the road. Another thing which is sacred in France is the Olive tree. It is forbidden to fell ancient olives without specific permission. Hence one sees numerous very old Olive trees throughout Provence.



After the exertions of taming the laurel hedges in the garden we were both quite weary and the enforced exile from our home whilst Dominique reviewed our electrics was very timely and welcome. That is not to deny that we felt a pang of regret on leaving. It was good, though, to visit our old haunts in Antibes, to have again the unique view, from the apartment, of the whole Bay of Angels from a height, to walk again along the promenade, and to be greeted as familiar friends by the shopkeepers.



On the Tuesday we drove westwards to Saint Tropez which Lyn had never visited before. It was a pleasant drive through country boasting lots of flowering Mimosa trees. We found St. Tropez rather tatty and disappointing. As usual Lyn's instinct led us to a very good restaurant "L'Écurie du Castellas" at a village nearby called Ramatuelle. On the Thursday, 13th January we drove into Italy, once again seeing lots Mimosa. We drove as far as Alassio, a popular resort on the Italian Riviera. By mid-morning the January sun was quite warm and the promenade at Alassio looked very inviting with the sea lapping gently up a sandy beach. We found a beachside restaurant and enjoyed lunch in the sun.



CHAPTER 8

WINTER ARRIVES

Once back home in Roquefort-les-Pins the weather began to reverse itself, turning much colder and some of the time overcast. Obliging the car rugs we had ordered online from Amazon arrived in the post. Lyn had chosen a Black Watch tartan because she liked the colours - mainly green - and I, inventively had settled for a Douglas tartan.

Below: Black Watch Tartan



Below: Douglas Tartan



The weather steadily became colder and bleaker, making us grateful that we had a snooker room to which to retreat when it was too cold outside in the garden. On the 24th January we woke up to find really threatening skies and a friend, Peter Johnson, phoned us to warn that snow was on its way for any altitude above 200 meters. We are about 270 meters and sure enough, by mid-afternoon it was sleeting, then snowing fairly briskly. By nightfall there was about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch lying on the ground and we could hear the excited voices of the village children a few hundred yards away. Out came the camera because we had not expected snow on the French Riviera and the scene outside rather contrasted with the picture shown on the previous page taken only 9 days earlier.



Local people told us that the last fall of snow in that region had been in 1999. The next morning dawned sunny and bright as if nothing wintry had occurred – except for the persil-white landscape! Note also below the lemons ripening in the foreground.



We made our third visit to the Hôtel des Impôts at Sophia Antipolis in our attempt to register our Renault with French plates. We had learned that it pays to arrive at such establishments before their opening times in order to be first, or early in the queue for attention. This time we went fully armed with all the necessary documents; the certificate of attestation of identity from Renault (the piece of paper which had cost us €120), the car ownership document, a certificate of permanent export of the car from the United Kingdom, the bill of sale from Crawley Down Garage, our driving licences, passports and an electricity bill to us at 27 Avenue des Alpes to prove our residence in France. This time, also, instead of a bureaucrat seemingly determined to find a flaw in our preparations, we encountered a kindly lady official who smilingly proceeded to write out and issue to us a certificate that all was in order and that the car had been properly taxed in the UK. Successful mission! Now all we had to do was to present ourselves at the Prefecture of Police with all those documents to complete the re-registration of our car with French plates. That would enable us to secure car insurance at reasonable rates when our UK cover expires in April. We were also advised that we could, if we wished, apply at the same time at the Prefecture of Police for French driving licences. It is debatable whether this would be a good move for Lyn, whose UK licence is valid until her 70th birthday, but mine, as I am over 70 years of age, has to be renewed every three years, and therefore will expire in 2006. Our main source of advice in all such matters came from an English expatriate, Peter Johnson, who has lived in France for twenty years and makes a living from providing resident Brits with advice on taxation and other financial matters.

So on Thursday, 27th January we checked out all the documents necessary to take to the Prefecture for the registration of our Renault Laguna and made off, full of hope, to Nice. Peter Johnson had recommended that the best time to present ourselves at the Prefecture was just before lunchtime, rather than at crack of dawn. By then the crush of people should have diminished. We took his advice and arrived at mid-day. The Prefecture, or Centre Administratif du Préfecture des Alpes Maritimes is almost a city in its own right, comprising a complex of office buildings. If the time at which we arrived is considered the quiet period then the busy period must be a bedlam of total congestion. The reception hall has an enquiries desk manned by a team of advisers directing visitors to the section of the complex which deals with their particular mission. On the third attempt we found the section handling applications for “Carte Grises” in respect of cars purchased and registered abroad. The waiting room had a machine dispensing numbered tickets and having taken our ticket we settled down to wait for our number to come up on the screen. Sure enough, as Peter Johnson had predicted, the applicants each spent about 20 minutes in the official’s room. So we felt that in about one hour’s time we would be in possession of our “Carte Grise” and could then proceed to have French plates fitted.

When our number came up we were received by a kindly, but flustered-looking, lady official who proceeded to riffle through our wad of certificates and papers. Occasionally she would grunt with satisfaction and sometimes she would frown and sigh with perplexity. After ten minutes we were anxiously sitting on the edge of our seats. Were we on the brink of success? Then the bombshell came. The attestation certificate from Renault stated that the Laguna had an “eleven cheval puissance” whereas her records indicated that the horse power of the Renault Laguna was 9. She huffed and puffed over this discrepancy for several minutes, spoke to colleagues and on our suggestion, phoned Renault in Paris. This proved fruitless because apparently the issuer of the document was not available. Clearly he had made a mistake on the piece of paper for which he had charged us €120. This created an impasse for our lady official because the fee for registration is based on the horsepower of the vehicle. Regretfully she sent us away to get the discrepancy sorted out. It was pointless for us to say that we would gladly pay the fee for the higher horsepower – she had to play the matter by the book – and in any case we might have been paying, for years to come, a much higher insurance premium.

We returned home dejected, having so far made three visits, two of them fruitless, to the Hotel des Impôts at Sophia Antipolis, and now one unsuccessful visit to Nice. It was the same story as with our quests for the “Cartes Vitales” – lots of paperwork, time spent on fruitless visits and a long wait. The French bureaucracy is crushing and it is no wonder that so many rules and laws are ignored by the populace. The level of officialdom is almost as heavy as it once was in Russia and other communist countries, except that in those countries people had to obey or else!

In an earlier chapter we described the French system for rubbish collection and recycling; there seems to be a problem over bottles and glass, which should be collected every other Tuesday. For some reason our wheelie bin, now full, has been ignored for the past 3 ½ weeks. We visited the Mairie to point this out and their initial advice was for us to leave the bin out for the next collection in a further two weeks’ time. When we demurred the lady official promised that they would be collected next Monday – three days time. We waited to see whether this promise would be fulfilled.

It wasn't! It took a letter, hand-delivered, to the Mayor to have the collection promptly made that evening. Probably the Mayor never set eyes on the letter and one of his staff intercepted it and took the required action.

Saturday, 29th January, was Lyn's 54th birthday. We had provisionally planned to follow the "Mimosa Trail" on that day. Three years previously, at the beginning of January we had seen some early, tentative flowering of Mimosa during an outing to the Esterel Coast, west of Cannes. This had fascinated us as we had, until then, associated Mimosa with the warm weather of spring and summer. We were delighted that we had a large Mimosa tree in our garden and had been waiting for it to flower. We now know that flowering takes place in late January to early February and tours of the "Mimosa Trail" are advertised heavily as a local attraction. The trail starts at Mandelieu and follows westerly the Esterel Coast to Bormes les Mimosas and returns east through the Esterel Forest via Lake St. Cassien and Pegomas. A round trip of some 60 or 70 miles.

On the day however, we decided to have a quiet day at home. The reason for this decision was a longing for privacy and solitude in our home. We were both very fond of Dominique Méry and were grateful for his attentions and skilful work in making our home increasingly comfortable. Everything he undertakes receives his perfectionist care and in addition to the work we had commissioned he had of late bombarded us with suggestions for more improvements to the house. His enthusiasm is boundless and tends to assume that we have bottomless resources. We have had to fend off many suggestions lately but hate to offend him by choking off his ideas. We have probably made the mistake, inadvertently, of giving the impression of wealth. He is not greedy but genuinely loves his work and the challenges of solving problems.

Lyn's birthday went pleasantly; her presents included a Wok and two recipe books for Chinese dishes. So for lunch we enjoyed a turkey stir-fry. Because it was very cold outside we played several games of snooker and it was during one of these in the early evening that disaster struck. As Lyn was moving round the table to line up for a stroke there was a loud crack since when she has been limping painfully. Probably it was a tendon in her calf which was sprained; we await to find out. These things always seem to happen at a weekend when there is nobody to consult. We phoned a couple of Osteopaths for advice. One of them had an answer phone in operation and the second one answered the call on his mobile phone from Paris 1000 km from here! It sounded as if he was at a party. He advised that he would be back in Provence on the following Tuesday..... We phoned daughter Sherilyn for advice. Grand-daughter Abigail answered and said that her mother would be home at about midnight. Would we phone here on Sunday morning? We phoned again twice on Sunday morning but there was no reply. Neither did Sherilyn contact us that day.

During Sunday morning, however, Lyn's pain subsided a little, which was a good sign. She felt mobile enough for us to stick to our arrangement to have a birthday celebratory lunch at "Le Jarrerrie" in Le Bar-sur-Loup. This had become our favourite local restaurant and was beginning to match "Lannies" in Reigate in our esteem. This occasion only served to confirm that feeling. We were warmly greeted by the proprietor, Monsieur Morrisse and treated to a complimentary glass of Kir Royal. It was delicious but did not have the expected colour and flavour of Cassis. On enquiry we were told that a peach wine had been added to the champagne in place of cassis.

We decided on a four-course menu and between the second and third courses we were presented with a complimentary apple sorbet in a small glass of Calvados. Shortly after the music stopped and “Happy Birthday” was played. It was for a lady at a table nearby and the waiter marched in ceremoniously with a rich and creamy looking dessert which had five sparklers blazing. This was greeted by applause from all the other diners. Ten minutes later the music stopped again and was replaced by “Happy Birthday”. To general applause Lyn was presented with the dessert and sparklers. This was followed by a large glass of champagne. We felt that we had “arrived” in France and literally had our feet under the table.

Le Jarrerrie is an enterprising restaurant and, unlike many others, its “specials dishes of the day” are often worth trying - if you are adventurous - that is. On one occasion the special of the day was Sanglier which turned out to be wild boar. Lyn tried it and pronounced it to be delicious though rather rich and gamey. On another occasion the special was venison; Lyn ordered this, again finding it very palatable. Conservative Douglas played safe with Supreme de Volaille. We intend to celebrate our wedding anniversary at Le Jarrerrie – more sparklers no doubt!

Below left: The restaurant.

Below right: Lyn being served Crêpe Flambé.



Bar-sur-Loup, Provence



Having looked everywhere we could think of for wooden half-barrel planters for the garden we were becoming resigned to the need to use Terracotta pots. The need became more urgent when we bought a couple of Camellias. Then, under our noses, we found an aquatic centre in Roquefort-les-Pins had four in their show garden. They were willing to sell them and we had them delivered a couple of days later, promptly filling them with water to keep them tight and in good condition. The aquatic centre had a source in the Netherlands and we were told that the suppliers would only accept an order for a minimum of ten. Although the barrels were made of oak the suppliers had obviously never learned anything about acorns.

That discovery started a search for an ericacious compost suitable for acid-loving plants. The lady at the nursery directed us to an agricultural co-operative situated in a nearby village, Plascassier, on the Grasse road. So on the following Saturday we set out to find it. After driving many miles in every direction without success we finally asked people in a bakery. A gentleman gave us directions which took us into the heart of Grasse where, not without difficulty, we found the co-operative and loaded the car boot with three huge bags of the compost.

Sunday morning saw Lyn emptying two of the tubs of water, oiling them, packing them with compost and planting the two camellias.

Below: Two of the new tubs duly oiled and planted with Camellias.



On Sunday the 13th February we lunched at “Le Jarrerrie” in Le Bar-sur-Loup to celebrate our wedding anniversary. This fell on the 14th but we were due in Nice on

that day at the Archat Hospital where Dr Fabiani was due to have a final check-over after Lyn's operation. The lunch was excellent. The Patron, Monsieur Morrisse, and his daughter, Gail, greeted us warmly and when we were waiting for the dessert course, Janneau marched in to the music of "Happy Anniversary" with a dessert lit with sparklers and to the accompaniment of applause from the other guests.



This was accompanied by another complimentary glass of champagne. On our departure we were seen off with hugs and kisses from both the Patron and his daughter Gail. One or two of the guests also made a point of wishing us "Bonne Anniversaire".

Below left: The Patron and daughter Gail. Below Right: Douglas and Gail.





Tuesday 15th February saw us fit for exploring the much vaunted Mimosa Trail. The weather promised to be sunny so we prepared ourselves for a visual treat. The advertised trail started from La Napoule on the eastern edge of the Esterel Massif and stretches across to Bormes-les-Mimosas. We decided to curtail our trip to take in Lac Ste Cassien and Tanneron. As soon as we reached the trail we were disappointed to find most of the Mimosas in the budding stage with seemingly a good two or three weeks to go before they were in full bloom. Everything must have been retarded by the bitter winter of recent weeks. As we were committed on the trail we decided, luckily, to see it through. It wasn't until we reached Tanneron that we were rewarded. There the nearby hills were a blanket of golden blossom, much of which was in full bloom.



Thursday, February 17th, we had the pleasure of meeting Pierre and Thérèse Dupire at their apartment in Antibes. The apartment, of course, was familiar to us but Lyn had never before met the Dupires and I hadn't met them for over 20 years. It seemed strange to be guests in a place where we had been in charge during our stays there. Our hosts were very charming and opened a bottle of Champagne to go with delicious patisserie. Although enjoyable we found the two hour visit tiring. We conversed mostly in French and although we enjoy having a go with the language two hours is a long time. However, it was the sort of experience which will eventually improve our French. We invited the Dupires for a return visit in the afternoon of the following Wednesday.

Below: Pierre and Thérèse in their apartment.



The winter continued to be very cold, though mostly fine and bright. It was hard to believe that on January 13th we had been basking in the warm sun on the beach at Alassio. Locals assured us that the weather was exceptional. Both Lyn and I contracted heavy head colds – our third since we moved to France. Everybody seemed to be snuffling. Lyn developed a nasty cough and mine developed into Sinusitis which experience had taught me that it would last two or three weeks. Our consolation was that Spring was only a matter of a few weeks away. We had been reminded of this by hearing a Thrush practising his songs in a nearby garden.

CHAPTER NINE.

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT. (Richard III, William Wagstaff)

By the 18th February we had been residents of France for 22 weeks. On the settling in front we had made good progress; the house was more like a fortress with its steel gates, steel window grilles, steel openable grills over the outer doors and security lights all round the house. This however is the way the French like to protect their property from unwanted intruders and it seems that the UK will likely develop the same mentality as more and more illegal immigrants pour into the country.

On the Administration front however we could show very little progress, despite our efforts. We had not received our “Cartes Vitales” and we still had not been able to register our Renault car with French plates even though the law requires that this be done within six months.

Sunday 20th February we had booked a table at Le Jarrerrie for lunch. It was a bitterly cold morning at Roquefort and as we drove up to the mountain village of Le Bar sur Loup it began to sleet. We arrived early for lunch but were greeted with a puzzled look by a waiter at the door. Monsieur Morrisse, le Patron, with whom we had made our reservation had obviously forgotten to put our names in the book and he was absent on this day. His daughter, Gail, assured us that although they were fully booked she would fit us in. Other guests meanwhile poured in for the next ten minutes, leaving us standing like lost sheep in the middle of the restaurant whilst Gail bravely strove to greet them and to work out where she could place us.

It seemed that we could spend the next hour waiting to be seated, order placed and food served and Gail tacitly confirmed this by offering us drinks whilst we were waiting. We decided to quit even though all other worthwhile restaurants would probably be fully booked. This proved to be so; in driving sleet we stopped off at the Campanile Hotel in Chateauneuf. It was full but we were offered a rickety table just inside the door. We decided to take pot-luck at home where Lyn knocked up a corned beef stir-fry in quick time. Even so it was half way through the afternoon by the time we ate. We would have a few hard words to say the next time we visited Le Jarrerrie....

The weather continued to be extremely cold and bleak and we began to wonder whether we shouldn't have migrated to Sicily rather than to France. This feeling was largely due to our run down condition; Lyn was still recovering from her heavy cold and my sinusitis was rampant, causing widespread pain and swelling of the glands from the neck upwards. A visit to the doctor on Monday the 21st brought forth a bundle of pharmaceutical remedies to alleviate pain and to deal with catarrhal congestion. We had read that French doctors customarily send their patients happily home with lots of pills and potions. Regretfully we postponed to a later date the visit of the Dupires which we had arranged for the afternoon of Wednesday 23rd February. They wouldn't have thanked us for passing on our infection. Normally they have three or four prolonged visits to Antibes each year so we hope to ask them on a later visit.

On Wednesday the glandular swelling was, if anything, worse and Lyn likened me to a hamster. The gums and tongue felt as if they had been lacerated so we sallied forth once again to Dr. Heerding in Valbonne. This time he decided to stop one of the remedies he had prescribed and wrote out a prescription for three more potions, one of which was an antibiotic. Thursday saw some improvement and hopefully the bugs were on their way out.

Not for our Lemon Tree though! The frosty north winds had burned it in its exposed position in the garden. We were forced to relieve it of its heavy load of ripening lemons to reduce the stress in the hope that it would recover in the summer. If so we shall shroud it with protective netting against the cold in the future.

Lemon tree before frosts.



and after frosts



On the other hand the blossoms on our Mimosa tree had steadily developed and in about ten days should be in full bloom. Likewise the orange tree has survived the cold



Thursday also saw, hopefully, some beginnings of the end of the long catalogue of improvements to the house. Much as we like Dominique neither Lyn nor I enjoy the invasion of our privacy by having permanent work going on about us. He continued to come up with new suggestions and we had to explain clearly that a pensioner lives on a fixed income and our available capital had to provide for future emergencies and unforeseen expenses. We would need to spend money on the garden in the spring and summer. We would need to comply with a new law that private swimming pools be protected against accidental intrusion by children. His latest sally was concerning the garage doors and he pointed out, quite rightly, that whereas we had spent a lot of money on making the external doors and windows secure from unwanted entry, the garage, which was integral with the house, was vulnerable to a determined intruder. We pointed out, also quite rightly, that if we continued to spend much more there would be little in the house for an intruder to steal. It was a difficult time because both of us were feeling very much under the weather and felt insufficient patience to cope with his relentless enthusiasm. In the end we sorted the matter out satisfactorily by explaining that we had €5000 more we were prepared to spend and if he could carry out our plans for the garage doors within that sum we would give the go-ahead. It should be noted that the integral garage, the name we still gave it, was being used as a dining room. Not that we ever dined in there because, with insufficient light from one south window, it was rather gloomy. To make it more attractive the garage doors would have to be removed and replaced by aluminium Venetian Shutters. Inside these there would need to be openable, lockable, steel grilles to provide the security. Dominique agreed to do this, including painting, for the €5000. Apart from minor jobs this should see the end of the programme of works.

By the weekend, with the last vestiges of our heavy colds and sinusitis had begun to clear and we began to feel that our winter of discontent had reached and passed its nadir. It even warmed up slightly, though this could change at an hour's notice. Another welcome sign was that a letter came in the post from Renault Head Office enclosing a corrected Certificate of Identity revising the "puissance" of the Laguna. No apology accompanied the letter for such basic neglect, for which we had been required by Renault to pay €120 (£80) and as a result of which we had wasted nearly a day of our lives making an abortive visit to the Nice Préfecture. We could now plan, travel again to the Préfecture in Nice and hope, on that occasion, that we should successfully obtain French registration plates. With new plates our car would be less likely to attract unwelcome attention from villains and the insurance premium would be much lower.

On Sunday 27th February it was a sunnier, brighter drive to Le Jarrerrie restaurant at Le Bar sur Loup than it had been on the previous Sunday. This time we had telephoned beforehand to confirm our booking, emphasising the point that to overlook our reservation a second time would be unforgivable. We were treated, once again, to a complimentary glass of Le Jarrerrie's style of Kir Royale – champagne with a dash of peach brandy, fussed over by Gail and her father and enjoyed a pleasant lunch.

Once home we had a glass of wine and a game or two of snooker, whilst the weather began to deteriorate again. Clouds gathered over the hills we had just vacated and there was the occasional flash of lightning and clap of thunder. In the course of the evening, whilst we were sipping a glass of Calvados in the barn and Lyn was chatting on the phone to her parents, it began to snow. The fall grew heavier until we were

sitting in a blizzard. On the 28th February morning dawned to reveal a white landscape. Winter had not lost its grip!



In the UK we had never parked the car outdoors overnight and we had scarcely given a thought to the possibility of snow in the Riviera. The last time I could remember hearing about snow there, had been in the mid-1980s. It was therefore a shock to find our beloved Laguna covered with snow on February 28th and we felt suitably guilty. However we made up for it on Tuesday March 1st by electing to drive to Nice and

presenting the full set of the required documents to the Préfecture. Our previous, abortive visit there at least saved time as we now knew how to find our way to the right office. In there we collected a numbered ticket and waited half an hour for our number to come up. When it did we sat down in front of a dumpy, smiling lady who, once more riffled through our papers and rapidly printed out a voucher for us to take to the Cashier along the corridor. Here again we had to sit and wait for our name to be called. After ten minutes or so the words “Madame Untington” were broadcast and at the window, we were presented with our prize – Le Certificat d’immatriculation. It had taken three trips to Sophia Antipolis, two trips to Nice, four letters (one to their President) and several emails to Renault Head Office, had cost €120 for Renault’s certificate of identity and now €328 for the Préfecture’s certificate. It remained for us to order and pay for the plates carrying our new registration – 300 BKE 06.

04FV26955

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Communauté européenne

F Certificat d’immatriculation

PREFECTURE DES ALPES MARITIMES
06/001/TERMG2/OPLA/

N° Immatriculation Date du certificat Date de 1^{re} immatriculation
(A) 300 BKE 06 (I) 01/03/2005 (B) 18/01/2003

(C.1) MME HUNTINGTON LYNDA

(C.4a) EST LE PROPRIETAIRE DU VEHICULE
(C.4.1) 1

27 AVENUE DES ALPES
105 06330 ROQUEFORT LES PINS


(D.1) RENAULT (D.2.1) MRE3512CP122
(D.2) BG0K0A
(D.3) LAGUNA (E) VF1BG0K0A28124603
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(G) 1390 (G.1) 1315
(J) M1 (J.1) VP (J.2) AB (J.3) CI
(K) e2*98/14*0206*24
(P.1) 1998 (P.2) 99 (P.3) ES (P.6) 9
(Q) (S.1) 5 (S.2) (U.1) 83
(U.2) 4125 (V.7) 201 (V.9)

(Y.1) 328,00 (Y.2) (Y.3) 328,00


(I.1) (A.1) GP52FAP

(X.1) VISITE AVANT LE 18/01/2007
(SAUF REGT. SPEC.)

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La Direction de la Réglementation
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06/001


Francis EVESQUE

Certificat d’immatriculation COUPON DÉTACHABLE
HUNTINGTON LYNDA
RENAULT
VF1BG0K0A28124603



300BKE 06 01/03/2005 04FV 26955

On the evening of Wednesday 2nd March we sat in our barn sipping Calvados before retiring to bed. It was a cold calm evening but we had our car rugs to warm our extremities. I remember that we expressed a hope that winter was soon to be on its way out. Little did we know! The next morning we awoke to find our world carpeted with snow once again. It had stealthily crept up on us in the night. As we lay in bed we heard a sharp crack and thought that perhaps a pine branch had snapped under the weight of snow.

It was not until breakfast time that we discovered the nature of the disaster. Our Mimosa tree had split at the base and crashed to the ground. It must have been rotten because a healthy tree would have withstood that comparatively light burden of snow. Worse still it had fallen and completely smothered our orange tree. That destroyed, it would have meant that our lemon tree, the mimosa and the orange had all fallen victim to the winter. We now faced the sad task when the snow disappeared, of clearing up the debris of the mimosa.

The Mimosa on 25th February.



And on 3rd March.



CHAPTER TEN

SUMMING UP SO FAR.

Looking back over the arduous six months we had so far spent as residents of France and having catalogued, in the previous chapters, the frustrations and difficulties we had encountered, we should also review the achievements and unquestionable plus points. Firstly we have invariably found the natives courteous and considerate – except perhaps occasions when some of them are in the driving seat of a car. There is certainly no sign of the animosity towards invaders such as one hears about in Brittany and Wales. Perhaps this is because so many of those who buy property there do so for holiday homes rather than for permanent residence. Even the frustrating bureaucrats are courteous and helpful. For example the official who rejected our application for French car registration because Renault had sent a faulty certificate of identification tried, unsuccessfully, to phone Renault Head Office to sort it out. Importantly, on the home front we can catalogue an impressive list of improvements to our comfort, security and to the condition and appearance of the house:

1. Smart hardwood handrails to the staircases in the house and for the steps to the Cave and the garden balcony;
2. Remote-controlled electrically operated steel gates at the entrance to the premises;
3. Gutters to take the rain away all round the house;
4. A smart porch at the front door;
5. A more reliable electrical circuitry. Though not yet perfect frequent power cut-outs are a thing of the past;
6. New and adequate electric radiators in every room;
7. Steel security grills over every downstairs window and lockable, openable steel grills over the five external entrances, excluding of course the very solid front door.
8. Yet to come is the same arrangement for the garage entrance, which will be in place by mid-march;
9. External steelwork freshly painted.
10. External doors, windows and shutters freshly painted with wood preserving coating;
11. All hedges surrounding the garden had been pruned back to our satisfaction, allowing more light into the garden;
12. Large mirrors in our bedroom to brighten it.
13. Attractive and effective lighting installed in the summer kitchen (the barn);
14. Proper lighting in the billiard room;
15. All timber beams had been proofed against woodworm. But see later!
16. The main shower-room had been re-jigged with better drainage, a new shower cubicle with proper closing doors and a new, temperature-controlled shower;
17. The upstairs shower-room had been greatly improved, with a heated towel rail and shelving;
18. Curtains put up to make the place more homely;
19. Carpeting or rugs placed in the living rooms;
20. The television could now pick up all channels on Sky and the Sky-plus facility installed by James Cook now enabled us to record up to 20 hours of programmes on a hard disc; similarly the music centre was installed and provided perfect acoustics in this uniquely designed house.

Here are some pictures depicting the improvements listed above:



Staircase



Gates from outside



New Gutters.



Bedroom



New Porch.



Sitting Room



South side of house.



Front gates from drive.

The next few days after 3rd March saw us clearing up the debris from the fallen mimosa tree. For a few days we enjoyed a vase of mimosa blossom in the sitting room.



We then noticed that a large branch of one of the pines on the western side of the garden had cracked under the weight of snow. It was too high up the trunk for us to be able to deal with it. We watched a trio of tree surgeons in the next garden lopping branches off a tall pine and satisfied ourselves that they were not cowboys before asking them to quote for removing the damaged branch. We also asked them to quote for trimming several more branches from the same tree in order to improve the sunlight input in future winters when the sun was low. They quoted €120, which seemed reasonable. On the following Monday, March 7th they carried out the work very professionally, including sawing up the logs into manageable sizes, within about an hour.



Before they left we asked them to quote for the removal of three large pines in our southerly neighbour's garden, subject to our obtaining his agreement. They quoted €500 for three and €650 if we wished for a fourth tree to be felled. We obtained the owner's name, who, it transpired, is British living in England.

Wednesday March 9th was a day of tangible progress: we took our Laguna up to the Renault garage where they fitted our new French plates. We immediately felt that our intention to integrate had been fulfilled a little. We still had not received our Cartes Vitales but we intended to chase this on the following Monday at the Mairie.

Before:

After:



On the same day Spring seemed to have arrived. Although up to then the days had usually begun bright and promising, they had then deteriorated by mid-day into overcast weather with bitterly cold winds from the east. The 10th March dawned likewise, but there was a softer feel to the air. More decisively, Dominique announced grandly that “L’hiver est finis, c’est le printemps!” That settled it. Our thoughts began to turn to wearing shorts and sandals and doffing stuffy winter clothing. Indeed, later in the morning Lyn was basking in a state of *deshabillé* in the warm sunshine.

Dominique also announced that he would have completed the new garage door arrangement, including the painting of the steel grilles within the next day or so. This was good news. The so-called garage was in fact designated as our dining room and his project would enable us to set about making the room more habitable and less like an outhouse. Importantly, without the shutters the room would have some daylight as can be seen on the following page.



Dominique raved enthusiastically about our choice of paint finish for all the metalwork in the grilles and windows - slightly roseate brown gloss – as he lovingly applied two coats. He was likewise justifiably proud of the new garage grilles, shown above, as he set to work to fabricate the mini-porch under which to fit the venetian blinds he had on order.

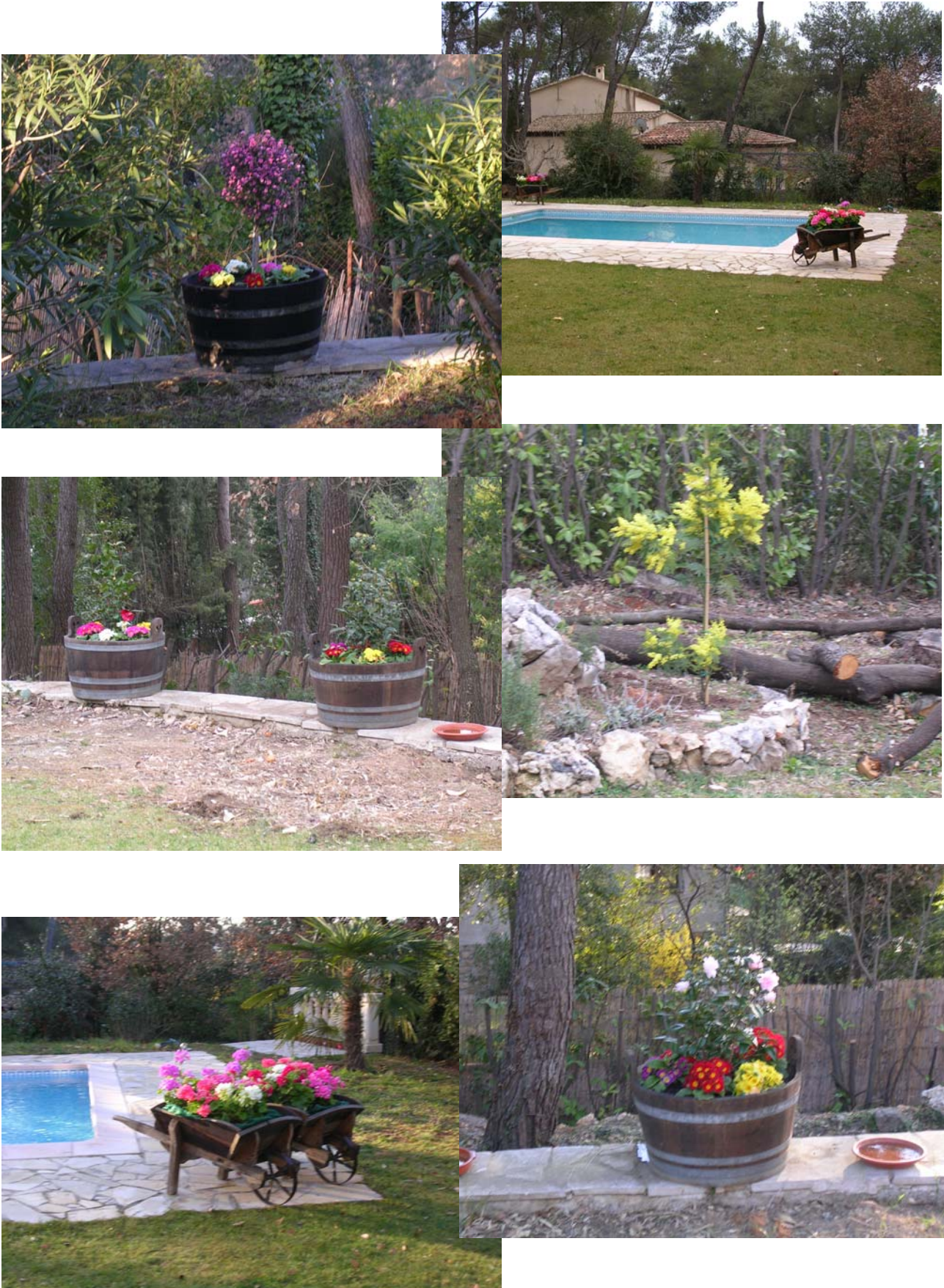
We had been searching for another restaurant of the standard we enjoyed at Le Jarrerie in Le Bar sur Loup. Our criteria were to find a family restaurant offering a good menu at a reasonable cost, where we could feel we were part of the French scene. Not surprisingly there is a vast range of choices in the vicinity, some of which call themselves “Gourmet Restaurants” and have fancy prices, some of which are very specialist and therefore with a reduced choice of dishes. There are some also, like the

Sarrazin in Gourdon and the “Mas des Geraniums” in Opio, which meet the quality criterion but which are very expensive. We decided to try “Adele’s” at Valbonne on the Sunday March 12th. This advertises widely that it is a Gourmet restaurant with “worldwide” dishes and reasonably priced menus. On arrival we were greeted by Adele and found the décor of the restaurant as well as most of the menu very africanised. Adele took us through the menu of that day, explaining that she would cook any dish to our liking. Lyn ordered veal whilst I chose the beef curry, in my case preceded by ravioli floating in a bowl of lentil and coriander soup. To our surprise we remained the only guests for most of our meal; only later another British couple turned up. Our verdict afterwards was approval of the attentiveness of the hostess, Adele, disappointment that it did not represent the French family atmosphere which we sought and a decision to give it another try in a few weeks’ time.

On Monday we paid our visit to the Mairie. Here we lodged our now frequent complaint about the unreliability of the rubbish collection service and then sought out the official who deals with applications for the Cartes Vitales. Her job is to process all the paperwork required of the applicant to ensure its completeness and then to send it to Nice who then collaborate with the ministry in the UK. This lady is very pleasant and patient. She had difficulty finding record of our previous visits and it transpired that her colleague had failed to log the details efficiently on the computer. She rang Nice and tracked down our application then handed over the phone so that the official at Nice could explain that there was a problem concerning the form E121 which we had received from the UK and which we had submitted with our application. On this form there was space recording my details – NHS number, date of birth etc. and on the reverse side a section recording Lyn’s details. As there are sections on the official form for both these entries it would seem logical to a sensible person that completion of these is the required thing. But no, the French bureaucrats require a separate form for each person – husband and wife! The lady at Nice could not explain the reason – “that is the rule laid down” she added. It was irritating that, having received the forms in December, they had not contacted us to advise that there was a problem, but had just put them to one side to moulder. Back home I telephoned the ministry in Newcastle-on-Tyne who promised to post us another form E121 as required. This paints an accurate picture of government bureaucrats, with generous terms of employment, industriously shoving paper to and fro without any use of initiative or care for the citizens for whom they are supposed to be servants. We had begun the procedure for obtaining our “Cartes Vitales” in April 2004 and here we are in mid-march 2005 still awaiting their issue. During this time we have to pay cash for all medical attention and medical supplies. We hope to recoup this considerable expenditure, which includes a surgical operation in a Nice hospital, when, eventually, our Cartes Vitales have been issued to us.

On Tuesday 15th March, the Ides of which we are supposed to beware, we enjoyed a day of several steps forward, with none backward. A rare occurrence. At the Champion supermarket in Opio we found and bought three packets of Kellogs Bran Petals, a part of our breakfast diet for which we had searched several supermarkets as well as the internet. This small success was followed by the purchase at Weldom in Rouret of a powerful high pressure cleaner with which we could clean the walls of the house as well as the car. From there we drove to Nova Jardin, the garden nursery in Opio. They had some beautiful Geraniums for sale and we bought thirteen, twelve of them to put in our antique wheelbarrows. This, plus the purchase of a couple of young

mimosas, one in tree form and the other in bush form, to replace our lost mimosa tree, continued the process of beautifying the garden à la Huntington.



We had always admired the custom in Provence of enhancing the beauty of the houses by growing geraniums in window boxes and so Lyn set about following this practice at number 27 Avenue des Alpes. She started with two boxes on the upstairs windows and then a couple more on the balcony balustrade overlooking the back garden. I am sure that others will follow elsewhere about the premises. Lyn also set about the garden at the front of the house, clearing the ground of some tatty shrubs and arranging an alpine-type rockery interspersed with flowering plants.



Below: Work in progress in the front garden.



At the end of March Spring was officially heralded by the appearance in our garden of a large, very attractive Game Bird. Lyn took a number of photographs of him, some of them from within six or eight feet. Although he kept a beady eye on our movements he seemed quite unperturbed by our presence. Our Bird Book revealed that he was a Red-Legged Partridge.



This was the week when we felt that we would see the beginning of the end of the major works in and around the house. We had spent about €60,000 on this work, most of it with Dominique Méry. By Wednesday Dominique had fabricated and erected the mini-porch over the garage doors, leaving only the delivery and installation of the venetian blinds. The porch blended very well with his new construction over the front door.

Below: The doors and mini-porch awaiting the venetian blinds.



Things were not going to proceed quite as smoothly and uneventfully as that however. Whilst washing the garage door windows Dominique noticed that a great deal of water had somehow found its way inside. “Un problème incroyable!” After close examination Dominique identified the cause and the solution. The cause apparently was the use of badly mixed cement around the door fixing which was absorbent. The solution would be to fit a new threshold with tiles which sloped outwards thus keeping the water from infiltrating. More work. More expense! We had no option but to agree and off Dominique went to buy some specially designed tiles of a colour approved by us. He spent most of the next day gouging out the existing tiles and the faulty cement on the threshold, and laying properly mixed mortar. When this was set after three days or so Dominique would lay the new tiles, hopefully rendering the interior watertight.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SIX MONTHS COMPLETED – THE VERNAL EQUINOX.

The welcome spring weather continued for that week providing a pause, hopefully until November, in the hefty electricity bills arising mainly from the use of electric heaters in the house. Some rain was forecast in the ensuing week though how much remained to be seen.

From the solarium upstairs we had noticed what looked like a silken peardrop hanging from the branch of a pine. We then noticed some others suspended from the pines surrounding our house. We concluded that they were nests woven by some creature.



We enquired about these of the ever knowledgeable Dominique Méry, who explained that they were nests of the larvae of the Processionary Pine Caterpillars (*Thaumetopoea Pityocampa*), which later would develop into Processionary Pine Moths. He issued a dire warning that we should not touch them. Apparently their spines contain a poison which can be dangerous to animals and humans, causing severe allergic reactions and rashes on the skin. They have an interesting habit of marching in “daisy chains”, nose to tail, sometimes the chain being metres long. Sure enough, within a few days we came across a chain of eight caterpillars crossing the road in the Avenue des Alpes. We found a chain of five on our terrace which presumably was looking to climb another pine in order to dine on the needles. Instead the chain laboriously climbed the wall of the house and when it reached the eaves its leader turned back earthwards to try elsewhere. There is something weird and frightening about their apparent purposefulness. We read up about them from the Internet which confirmed Dominique’s warnings about their dangers. They are apparently active normally in late February to early March but because of the bitter

winter they had been late. We were grateful that Dominique had warned us about them because one of us might have been tempted to pick up and handle one of these furry creatures. People with children and pets who have not been forewarned are especially at risk. In parts of southern France and Spain people are advised to have some antihistamine among their emergency medical supplies. One internet article described how a pet dog ate one of these caterpillars and was only saved from death by veterinary treatment when its tongue swelled to enormous proportions. In the event the dog lost half of its tongue.

Below: A photograph, taken by our pool on the 24th March, of a chain of 47 caterpillars searching for their next Pine tree on which to feed. We had noticed this chain on the march some days before. Apparently they can cover several kilometres in their search for a new home.



And below: The chain halts for the night, forms a defensive heap, and rests.



And the next morning as the sunlight reaches them they are off again.....



This lot didn't have a very efficient leader/navigator because they spent the day aimlessly traversing the length and breadth of the garden, some of them falling into the pool, and ended up at dusk still on our lawn only a few yards from their early morning starting point. By this time the chain comprised over 120 caterpillars.



On the next day Lyn found a train of over 150 caterpillars marching purposefully across the lawn and nearby another train converging of over 20 more. We decided to follow the advice of several people consulted and put an end to this potentially dangerous scourge. We collected them gingerly, using a long-handled snow shovel, into an empty wine box, drenched it with petrol and set fire to it on the bonfire. Not one has been seen on our premises since that day.

Next our interest turned to the garden floodlighting system which we had inherited from the previous owner. It was in very poor condition with about half of the floodlights out of order. Lyn checked all the lamps and found the wiring to be in order. So apart from the need to replace half a dozen bulbs and adjustment to their direction the system was in working order. We replaced the bulbs then spent the next evening adjusting and redirecting the lamps and photographing the result.



At last, on the 4th April, Dominique received delivery of and came to fit the Venetian Blinds for the former “Garage Door”, now designated as the Dining Room. The effect looked very smart. Dominique also spent the rest of that day doing all sorts of finishing jobs which had accumulated. As a final (for the time being) project we asked him to quote for a handrail along the steps next to the garage leading up to the east side of the house.

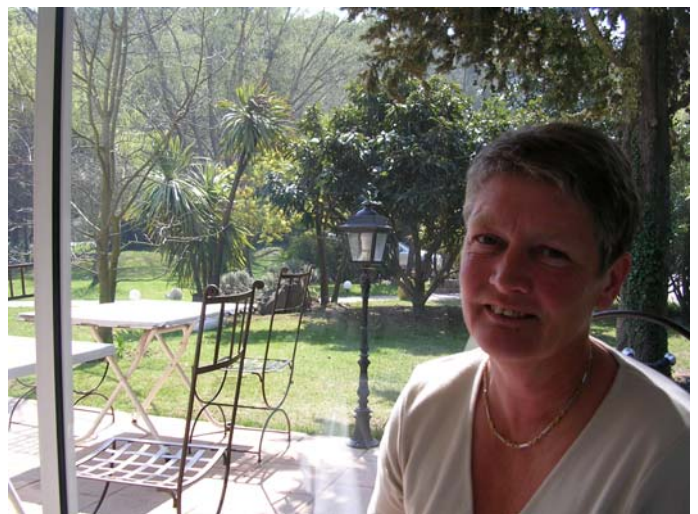
Below left: The venetian blinds in closed position. Right: In open position.



On the Sunday previously we had tried a new restaurant in our search for a handful of those approved for our Sunday lunches. This is necessary because French restaurateurs have a habit of closing at short notice for prolonged holidays leaving one high and dry. This occurs particularly but not exclusively in the quieter seasons. This one we chose was Le Bois Doré on the Antibes to Valbonne road. It has a very pleasant setting, the service and attentiveness were excellent, the menu was to our liking, though the bill came to a lot more than at Le Jarrerrie in Le Bar sur Loup.

Below left: Le Bois Doré Restaurant.

Below right: Lyn at table.



With some guidance from Peter Johnson we had completed various forms connected with Income Tax. As new permanent residents of France we needed to get our names “on the books” with the tax authorities. Firstly, because tax had been deducted from our sources of income in the UK we needed to set about recovering this from the Inland Revenue in accordance with the Double Taxation agreement between France and the UK. This involved filing in some forms and taking them to the Hôtel des Impôts in Sophia Antipolis. Here they would certify that we were indeed permanent residents, liable to French tax, and confirm the fact to the UK. This should trigger the tax refund from the Inland Revenue and also cause the latter to authorise our sources of income (pension funds etc.) to pay us gross in future.

The forms were due to be submitted to the Hôtel des Impôts by the 4th April. We were a day late in going to Sophia Antipolis but the kind lady who received and inspected our forms changed the date on her rubber stamp from the 5th to the 4th. This, in view of the bureaucracy we had so far encountered in France, was a pleasant surprise. We now had to sit back and wait patiently for the French and British tax offices to grind into action. So we thought!!

Not so, we also should have taken the Forms FD5 duly completed. These would be sent by Sophia office to their Paris office for onward transmission to the Inland Revenue office for Non-Residents in Nottingham. Lyn had hers with her but I did not have mine. We had to return home, dig out my form FD5 and take it back to Sophia Antipolis. We did this two days later and encountered two different ladies in the office who, whilst perfectly polite, were of a much more bureaucratic bent than the lady two days previously. They insisted that we should re-complete the declaration of income and tax deducted. The officials then began to point other problems and we were feeling that we were about to be sent home empty-handed once again. I think we were saved by the time; it was then mid-day – lunchtime for these civil servants. They then hurriedly signed and rubber-stamped our forms, kept the French version and handed back to us the British version. We pointed out that the instructions on the forms indicated that they should keep both versions and send them to Paris for onward transmission to the Inland Revenue in Nottingham. They said no, we should send it on to England and ushered us out of the building. Once back home we posted the FD5 to Nottingham under cover of a letter explaining why we, and not the French Tax office, were doing this. This was another example of French bureaucracy – they are sticklers for the rules but they change them, or interpret them differently, seemingly at will. Watch this space for further developments.....!

En route to the Hôtel des Impôts in Sophia we stopped off at the best garden centre we had so far discovered in France – “Nova Jardin” at Opio. Here Lyn espied a Weeping Willow, (about 12-14 ft tall). We had to buy it, leaving to later the decision as to where we would site it. We had decided to pay for the felling of one of the enormous pines in our garden and to plant a tree of our choice in or near its place. This would cost €550 plus the considerable work or cost of disposing of the trunk and branches. Then Lyn had a better idea. At the cost of much exhausting labour (most of it Lyn’s) we had dug out a very large Laurel leaving a big hole. The willow would fit in very well in its place. This would avoid the necessity of paying some contractors the equivalent in Euros of nearly £400 to fell the pine, as well as a lot of work for ourselves. So we had a ceremonial planting of our new Weeping Willow whose fresh

green foliage made a pleasant change from the dark green of all the pines surrounding us.



The downsides of the pines, we were discovering, were manifold: in winter they deprived us of a lot of sunlight; in the Spring they attracted those poisonous caterpillars and later we found that their profuse pollen covered everything with a coating of dust.

On Monday April 11th Dominique turned up to complete his final project in the long list of improvements to the appearance and safety of the premises which he had undertaken within a period of six months. This was the fabrication of another handrail for the steep steps beside the garage from the higher level of the garden on the north side. This handrail he brought already painted and he spent about an hour installing it. The use of the words “final project” is surely inaccurate because it is certain that he will be called upon for other tasks – such as we can now afford. We have spent well over €60,000 on these improvements and must retain a substantial cushion of resources for other needs, emergencies, etc.

Below: The new handrail in place.



A problem came to light regarding our motor insurance for the Laguna. When we finally succeeded in registering the car with French plates we wrote to Norwich Union advising them and trusting that our policy which expires on April 22nd would continue to be valid. We wrote direct to them because we knew that the agent, Ian Newson, through whom we had effected the policy had retired without informing us. We also invited Norwich Union to send us a renewal offer.

About the same time we received a letter from the credit control advisor of Norwich Union advising us that “we had not kept up our instalments for the premium since April 2004.” It was addressed to Huntingdon, was wrongly addressed, and quoted the wrong policy number, so we assumed that our name had been confused with some other policy holder. We wrote a snooty letter back to the credit control advisor pointing out that we had paid Ian Newson in full by cheque in April 2004 and that we did not ever pay for things by instalments.

A letter came back from Miss Scriven, the credit control advisor, saying that as we had not replied to her letter nor paid the premium our policy was cancelled. Needless to say we were furious and contemptuous at this show of arrogant stupidity and immediately wrote and faxed our feelings to Miss Scriven, copying it to the Director of Customer Relations and following it up with a letter to the Chairman of Norwich Union. We had also that same day received a letter from a firm of insurance brokers – Emery-Little – based in Amesbury, who had apparently taken over the agency from Ian Newson, so we phoned them because we wished to discover whether Norwich Union would renew our policy.

This phone call brought to light the fact that we were not alone in having paid Ian Newson our premium which had failed to reach Norwich Union. Furthermore Norwich Union would not give motor insurance in France; worse still their policy only covered the first 90 days abroad. So we had been driving around France since December uninsured. We had advised Ian Newson before we left England that we were going to live permanently in France and he had not acknowledged our advice let alone told us about Norwich Union’s policy.

Our first move was to secure immediate motor insurance cover with Axa via Peter Johnson, meanwhile thanking our good fortune for not having had an accident during this time. Because Ian Newson had been acting as agent for Norwich Union we could in the event of necessity have enforced them to honour their commitment, but probably only by resorting to legal action.

Later that day we received an apologetic email from the incompetent Miss Scriven saying that she was reissuing our policy “but only up to December 2004 when our 90 days had expired.” More crass stupidity! We rejoined by demanding return of the premium for the period since then. She replied that they would do so when they had recovered the money from Newson.

Another case of inefficiency reared its head over a shipment of birdseed which we had ordered in mid-february from a Yorkshire firm called Haith. They took our payment by using our credit card on 28th February. In subsequent telephone chasers they gave a variety of excuses for non delivery – firstly the carriers couldn’t find our address, secondly that there was a strike at Calais. After that they went silent and ignored our

calls. Now on the 15th April, two months after the order was placed our birds are seedless and very angry. We have reported to the Trading Standards Office that the firm illegally took our money before despatching the goods but they have not acknowledged our complaint either.

The sequel to this occurred later on the same day. Lyn received a desperate phone call from a man who requested her to meet him at the village pharmacy. She drove down there and collected the large parcel of birdseed from the carrier – ANC – who couldn't find our address. The despatch date on the parcel was March 22nd so it had taken the carrier 24 days to deliver. ANC's letterhead describes them as "Express Carriers". So now we had 25 kilos of birdseed and 4 kilos of Niger seed and hoped that we could quickly tempt back the birds, especially the siskins, which had deserted us in disdain of the French seed which they found unpalatable.

That night there was a severe storm which raged around the mountains for several hours, dumping heavy rain on Provence. The rain was certainly needed after a dry winter and the extra benefit we hoped would be to wash away a lot of that accursed pollen which covered everything outdoors.

Below Left : Pine Pollen on the newly painted doors. Right: On the terrace.



As has been stated earlier we were finding the predominance of so many large pines had many drawbacks; year round they shed needles to clog up drains, gutters and the pool, they provide unwelcome shade from the low winter sun, they provide breeding ground for the poisonous caterpillars, and shower everything with their pollen in springtime. This pollen can be a real nuisance to allergic folk and both Lyn and I were more sniffy and sneezy than is our custom. We began to wonder how many pines we could afford to have felled.!

CHAPTER TWELVE

WAITING FOR SUMMER

Dominique Méry has finished his last major project for us, plus numerous small tasks improving our lives and making things work which earlier didn't work. He has handed over the remote control beeper which operates our electric front gates and all three of us feel quite sad that he will no longer be a regular, almost daily visitor to the house. We have been continually surprised at the numerous talents he has demonstrated and his knowledge of his calling and of nature seem to be encyclopaedic. He also has a fine sense of humour and we have enjoyed much merriment in his company. Although he has a greater knowledge of the English dictionary than he lets on he insists that we converse in French, patiently repeating himself if he has not been understood. We are sure that we shall see a lot more of him when in need in the future.

So Dominique has gone but Winter has not done so. It remains stubbornly with us. One beautiful sunny day is followed by one or more cold or wet, (or both) days. We are hoping that summer will come soon especially as we are due to meet our old friends John and Dee West in three weeks time – on May 10th. They are on a three week cruise on the “Royal Princess” which starts at Fort Lauderdale in Florida, cruises up the River Amazon for a stretch, crosses the Atlantic to some North African ports, then visits Gibraltar and some Mediterranean destinations, which include Cannes on its final leg to Rome. We are looking forward to picking them up at Cannes and spending a few hours with them before their re-embarkation. Their visit is complicated by the Cannes Film Festival which is held during the week of their arrival. This fills Cannes with construction workers, wannabe film stars, thousands of film fans, journalists as well as numerous gendarmes controlling the traffic and the crowds. On Saturday 16th April we drove to Cannes which, three weeks before the festival starts, already was jammed with stand fitters and others involved with its preparation. So we shall have to arrange to meet them some way along the promenade from the jetty on which they will disembark.

On Monday the 18th April we again visited the Mairie in Roquefort to chase up our Cartes Vitales which we had first applied for in October 2004. The official there phoned through to the office in Nice and within a few minutes received an emailed copy of the “Attestation” which in effect is a provisional Carte Vitale. Two days later we received the original of the Attestation in the post. This meant that we were now officially accepted within the French Health Service and could now set about recovering a lot of the costs and charges which we had incurred so far. We have yet to discover exactly how much we can recover but we shall learn this when we have submitted our claims and received reimbursement. Generally we understand that about 60-65% of costs for doctors' consultations, medical prescription costs are refundable, a varying scale of refunds for surgical operations, and another scale for dental costs. For the unrecoverable portion of the costs the practice seems to be to take out private insurance. We received a quote from Peter Johnson which worked out at about €75 (about £50) per month to cover both of us. We decided to bear the unrecoverable costs ourselves for a year or so which was the policy we had adopted in

the UK, finding that insurance was not, in our opinion and in our circumstances, an economic proposition.

Below: The certificate attesting that we are accepted within the French Health Care system.



l'Assurance Maladie

sécurité sociale

caisse primaire des Alpes-Maritimes

NICE, le 14/04/2005

Pour toute correspondance,
adressez-vous à votre
Centre d'Assurance Maladie

616

RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES 06180 NICE CEDEX 2

M HUNTINGTON DOUGLAS

0027 AV DES ALPES
06330 ROQUEFORT LES PINS

attestation

Madame, Mademoiselle, Monsieur,

Nous vous prions de trouver ci-dessous une attestation vous permettant de justifier de vos droits auprès des professionnels de santé, des établissements de soins et des organismes complémentaires.

Cette attestation reproduit les informations essentielles contenues dans nos fichiers.

Dans votre intérêt et afin d'éviter tout retard dans le règlement de vos dossiers, n'oubliez pas de nous informer de tout changement de votre situation (adresse, état civil, composition de la famille).

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With summer round the corner and spring playing hide and seek we took advantage of the mixed weather with a rush of activity in the garden. The 20 metres by 2 metres strip to the west of the house had been lined with a Bamboo hedge and alongside of it we had inherited a row of shrubs, mainly of Oleanders about 2 metres tall, but also including a laurel and a Viburnum tinus. These obscured our view somewhat and the Oleanders did not show any sign of blossoming. Earlier we had made a start of clearing these with a view to extending the lawn over the strip. Our spurt of activity succeeded in digging out and uprooting all of the shrubs, leaving the tiresome and fatiguing task of grubbing out the extensive root system of the Bamboos.

This done we were able to order from Nova Jardinerie at Opio delivery of 3 cubic metres of soil and 45 square metres of turf for completing the lawn extension project. It has to be pointed out that “we” should be interpreted as Lyn the do-er, with Douglas providing the encouragement plus a fraction of the physical work – a fair division of labour, he might say.

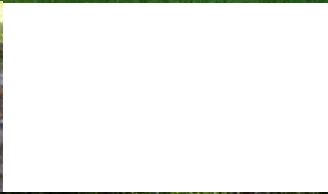
Below: The strip cleared and awaiting the soil and turf.



We also visited some garden centres, including Nova Jardinerie, and bought another selection of geraniums, more window boxes, a couple of dozen Impatiens, (Busy Lizzies) which would shortly replace the fading primulas, some Lanterna plants, including a standard one, a Wisteria to plant on the south wall, a standard Daisy to replace one of the Leptospermums which did not look happy in its present location and some trailing petunias for one of the new tubs. We now had eight tubs for floral

display with a further one on order. The garden, as we had planned it, was beginning to take shape.

Below: Lyn's been shopping!



We had planned a short holiday in Italy for the week starting the 2nd May, staying for two nights at Lerici, visiting Carrara, the site of white marble quarrying, Pisa and then going on into Tuscany to stay two nights at Florence.

The journey to Lerici took about three very tiring hours, the fatigue mainly caused by the vast number of tunnels, some of which were over a mile long. Driving alternately through these dark tunnels then emerging into blinding daylight was tiring enough, to which was added the character of Italian driving. It is quite unnerving to have cars roaring past you at 80-100 mph. Whilst French drivers can be pushy, Italian drivers are frenzied.

We arrived at Lerici in the late afternoon after having stopped for a pleasant lunch at Santa Margherita. In the 1980s Lerici had been quite a popular resort, but very much a fishing village. Now it was just a popular seaside resort; its character departed. We found the Florida Hotel rather lacking in comfort especially as our room looked out at the wall of a neighbouring apartment block and suffered the noise of passing traffic magnified by the corridor of space between the buildings. The next morning a drive round congested Lerici confirmed our disappointment and we found a space in the nearby car park to discuss our next move. If Lerici was this bustling and unattractive how would we find Pisa and Florence to be? We decided to drive to Carrara to look at some of the “ateliers” where the marble was being sculpted. In manoeuvring to leave the car park we reversed into a tree which drastically reshaped the rear end of the car.

This settled things. We decided we were missing our home in Roquefort-les-Pins and that we would drive the short distance to Carrara, inspect it and then make for home. We found Carrara equally disappointing. On my previous visits twenty-odd years before it had been uncommercial, but now the place was teeming and has notices beckoning everyone to “caves” where they could buy mementos. Nearby we found a little off-the-beaten-track restaurant where the hospitable owner cooked us a plate of pasta and treated us to a tot of his home-made grape spirit. That done we made our way back to the hotel at Lerici, checked out and set off for home. We were tired by the time we got home at about 5.30 pm., but overjoyed to be back. We are sure that we shall revisit Italy many times in the future but hopefully not to go with any false expectations based upon long-past memories. Quaint places attract large numbers of visitors; these attract commercialism and before long the quaintness has disappeared.

My birthday on the 10th May was enhanced by the visit of John and Dee West. We drove to Cannes in the mid-morning and found them waiting for us outside the Palm Beach Casino. Their twenty two day cruise which had started in Florida, sailed down to Brazil, up the Amazon River before crossing the Atlantic, visiting Dakar, Casablanca, Gibraltar and Barcelona before reaching Cannes, was to end at Rome where they would fly home via Heathrow. We spent a very enjoyable few hours with an alfresco lunch of bread, cheeses, paté and Médoc before a taxi collected them for their re-embarkation at Cannes. Lyn’s hospitality was later rewarded by the delivery of a magnificent bouquet of flowers sent by the Wests on their arrival home at Winchester. They had been our first visitors from the UK since we had migrated eight months previously. To come later in the summer would be Guy, Bridget and family staying at St. Tropez, Lyn’s parents on a tour which would take in nearby Nice, and finally, Anne Phillips who would be staying with us for a week in September.

Below: May 10th at home to the Wests and the bouquet they sent later:



I was pleasantly surprised with the number of birthday cards, shown below, which I received. The evening was spent in telephoning friends and relatives for their thoughtfulness.



On the next day the delivery was made by Nova Jardiniers of 3 cubic metres of soil plus several large bags of compost. So began the exhausting task of barrowing all this soil across the garden to the ground cleared for the extension of our lawn. I did most of this muck-shifting whilst Lyn concentrated on its spreading and levelling, ready for seeding. We were pleased with our efforts which accomplished these tasks by the weekend. On Monday 16th Lyn then set about sprinkling the compost lightly over the fresh soil and seeding it. She had completed about a quarter of the area when we noticed black clouds quickly gathering over the mountains. The grandfather of all storms then broke, with thunder, lightning and torrential rain. The storm continued for several hours and, with dismay, we had to watch the fruits of our work washed away in the floods.



This setback depressed us considerably; the weather continued to be unsettled for some days afterwards and the ground will need several days of dry and warm weather to enable us to start over again and then to sow seed. A light interlude broke the gloom when we found a duck and a drake in our swimming pool.



We also took consolation from buying some more plants to lend colour to the garden.



In the meantime, whilst waiting for the ground to dry out, there was plenty to do – mainly by Lyn. The swimming pool occupied a lot of attention as we found that rapid and frequent changes in temperature adversely affect the condition of the water. Apart from the so far abortive attempt to extend the lawn the garden was looking beautiful.



The next main event would be on Tuesday 24th May, when we were due to fly back to the UK for the day for the purpose of joining Geoff Bowden and Alan and Jean Walker for lunch at the Gravetye Manor.

By Monday the 23rd May Lyn and I had hoed and re-levelled the area to be grassed and Lyn duly re-seeded it, covering the surface with composted soil. So we were back to square one with that project and now prayed for a dry warm spell to enable the seed to germinate quickly.



May 24th was the big day we had planned for our first return to the UK. Geoff Bowden had kindly reserved a table at the Gravetye Manor and arranged for the Walkers to meet us at 12.30.

We had booked flights with Easyjet, departing at 09.30. This meant rising at 5 am and leaving home at 7 – no problem to us and all went well, parking the car at that time in the morning in Nice airport was easy. As always though the two hour wait for departure was a drag. The large Easyjet Airbus was fully booked. Presumably the end of the Cannes Film Festival immediately followed by the Monaco Grand Prix had something to do with the number of young people flying back to the UK. We felt quite old surrounded by the pushful, polyglot crowd of youngsters. However, although the plane was late in taking off, the Captain announcing sarcastically that “the last dozen or so passengers have finally found their way to the plane and we can now leave” we made up the time between Nice and Gatwick and arrived on time.

Once at Gatwick we had an hour or so to spare so we tried to look up Bob and Savino, respectively the Maître D and Deputy Manager of the Garden Restaurant at the Gatwick Hilton. Unfortunately they were both absent so we settled for a drink at Amy’s Bar and ordered a taxi for mid-day.

Below: In Amy’s Bar at the Hilton.



The driver of the taxi, unusually from our experiences at Gatwick, was an Englishman, born in Cheshire and he lives at Sharpthorne. We were all so busy talking that he nearly took us to Alexander House at Turners Hill by mistake. However he dropped us off at the Gravetye Manor in good time and we found Geoffrey Bowden and Alan and Jean Walker waiting for us in one of the baronial lounge bars.

Unfortunately the weather was dull and overcast and did not favour the spending of time in the beautiful gardens of Gravetye Manor to which we had looked forward. But the service and food were as perfect as ever, as was the company of Geoff, Jean and Alan.

Our flight time back to Nice required that we break up the party at 4 pm. and Geoff kindly drove us back to Gatwick Airport. Our extra luggage on the return trip was 12 boxes of Tempo tissues, a Gertrude Jekyll climbing rose purchased for us by Anne

Phillips, a bottle of Armagnac and some Pinneau de Charentes, generous gifts from Geoffrey Bowden.

By the time we reached Gatwick we were both pretty tired and when we eventually boarded the plane for Nice we felt our ages sitting among the noisy, brash, crowd making their excited way to the French Riviera. Arriving at Nice at about 9.30 local time we thankfully drove the ten miles home to Roquefort-les-Pins. Once there we unwound with a drink in the garden and thankfully retired to bed at about 10.30 pm.

Below: Left to Right: Douglas, Jean, Geoffrey, Lyn and Alan Walker at the Gravetye Manor



Having made our first trip to the UK we felt doubly at home back in Provence and doubly sure that we had made the right decision to migrate here. To endorse that feeling the weather has remained consistently warm and sunny for the ten days since we made the visit and looks to be set fair for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kärcher in the Act!

The next day Lyn planted the Gertrude Jekyll rose which Anne Phillips had kindly procured for us. Ten days later its first bud is about to become a flower.



Below right: a week later.

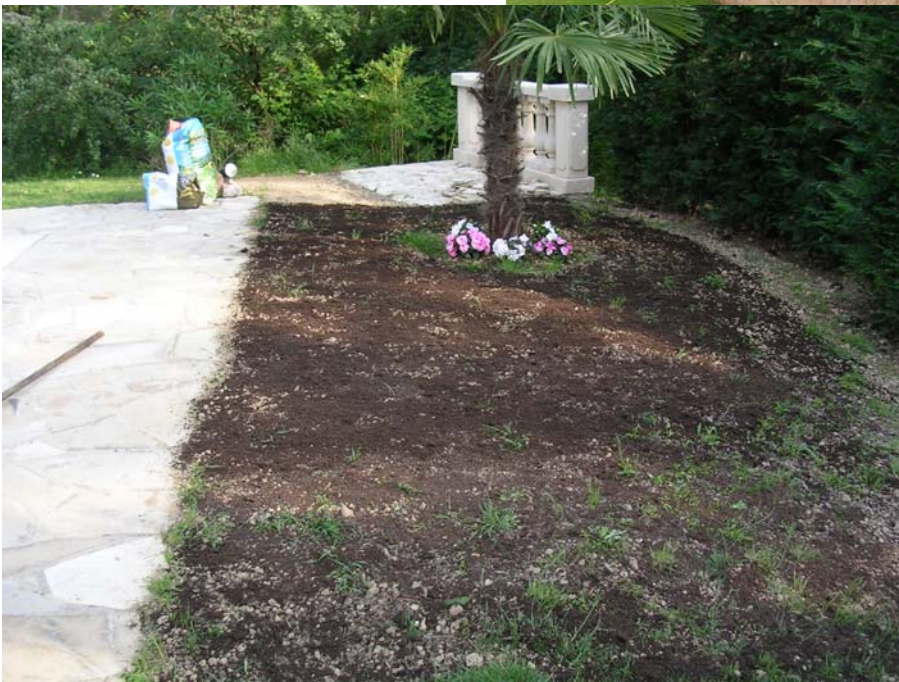


Another example of how rapidly growth develops here is the lawn, seeded just ten days ago, which had its first mowing yesterday and is depicted below.



Simultaneously with this activity Lyn had been cleaning the exterior walls and the drive with the new “Kärcher” pressure cleaner we had bought. The high pressure water transformed the walls of the house, cleaned the drive of years of detritus and effectively cleared the conduit drains of huge amounts of collected mud and rubbish.

Below: Lyn at work with her pressure cleaner and a clean west wall.



Left: The next piece of ground to be sown with grass seed.

Although she was enjoying regular swims in the pool Lyn was finding it hard going to maintain the correct ph balance. The frequent changes in temperature upset this balance and affect the growth of algae in the water. Consequently Lyn was spending more time cleaning the pool and adding various compensatory chemicals. We decided to invest in a robot cleaner which permanently scrubs the surfaces and sucks up debris and suspended matter. The Polaris 280 model cost €990 and three days later the engineer delivered and installed it. It was fascinating to watch it moving around the pool



However, although it snaked around the pool for several hours each day, we did not perceive any improvement in the quality of the water. It remained green and cloudy. The engineer had not left any book or literature of instruction. So after several days we revisited “Loisirs Piscines et Tennis” at Chateauneuf Prés du Lac and pointed out that it did not appear to be effective. Whilst there we noticed that the sample model on their shelf had an attachment with a brush on its tail

which ours lacked. They produced a copy of the instruction book for us and promised to send the engineer that afternoon to fit the missing component. When he came he swore that he had fitted the part and thought that it must have become detached and be lying at the bottom of the pool. We were sure that he hadn't fitted it. Once fitted the cleaner became much more active and effective.

Below: the Polaris complete with its tail scrubber. Note difference in colour!



We had bought some Lavender plants to make a row behind the roses bordering the eastern end of the pool terrace and Lyn set about clearing the rough ground in readiness for planting. Unbeknown to us a water pipe supplying the garden irrigation lay only 2 or 3 inches below the ground. We had no idea that it was there until Lyn put a garden fork through it, causing a huge jet of water of Lake Geneva proportions.

Lyn acted quickly and turned the water main off and then discovered that luckily the garden irrigation supply could be isolated from the mains supply. This meant that we did not have to go without water in the house pending repair of the punctured pipe.



We telephoned the trusty Dominique who promised to call at 8 am next morning.

The outcome of this adventure was that, on arrival, Dominique pointed out to us the possibility that this unsuspected water pipe could enable us to irrigate the eastern side of the garden and enhance it from a rough, arid piece of ground into a natural extension of the rest of our nicely developing garden. This would involve extending the irrigation system, adding several new points and a new controller/timer. As so often before Dominique, by his sheer enthusiasm, sold us his idea without any serious enquiry as to cost. After repairing the punctured pipe he departed with the instruction that, to save cost, we should dig a large rectangular hole 40 cms (16 inches) deep to accommodate the control panel. We should also dig a long trench of the same depth in which to bury the supply pipe currently only 2-3 inches deep. Lyn set about to do this.



We also set about chainsawing into manageable logs the felled trees which lay on the ground in this so-far uncultivated area of the garden. These included the Chêne Vert Oak which we had felled in the previous autumn and the twin-trunked Mimosa tree which had been the victim of January's heavy snowfall. This cleared the ground for future development.



We were also delighted that another stretch of new-sown grass was growing well after only four or five days as is shown below.



With the old man adding some help plus encouragement Lyn spent a lot of time on Saturday digging an adequately deep trench along the stretch where the new irrigation system was to be fitted in the following week. This had to be about 16 inches deep which was a tall order in this very rocky soil, requiring the use of a pick as well as a spade. By the evening Lyn was very tired indeed having, not for the first time, overdone it. At about a spit deep we decided that the trench was deep enough – better anyway than the previous 2-3 inches. We also decided to take it easy on the Sunday, fitting in a walk along the Boulevard des Anglais in Nice, as well as a nice lunch at Le Bois d'Orée.



Dominique wasted no time, despite the mounting daytime heat, in laying this secondary irrigation system designed to water the new border which was already stocked with roses, a few alpines and a row of double begonias. When finished it was also to stock a number of lavenders and later some hisbiscus plants which Lyn had grown from seed. The system already extended to the end of the garden beyond the pool, so that it could nourish shrubs there. This work having been duly completed it needed a week or two to fine-tune the programming of all the arroseurs on the premises. They seemed to have a mind of their own whereby, though they had been programmed to operate in sequence round the property once each night, they would do their thing twice or even three times a night. Lyn finally gained control and by mid-July the system seemed to be obeying instructions. The installation was timely because the heat was drying up the ground rapidly.

In Saturday's post came an explanatory account from L'Assurance Maladie (the local Health Authority) giving us an insight into their system of refunding medical costs.

As explained earlier patients are required to pay for their costs – doctors' fees, prescription charges, hospital and x-ray charges as incurred and then to claim refund of part of these costs from L'Assurance Maladie. The amount of refund varies, depending on circumstances, between 40% and 75%, excepting serious operations when the refund can be 100%. The percentage refund is not necessarily of the full amount paid out by the patient. For example a sum of €19 is allowed for doctors' consultations, whereas our doctor and presumably most of or many other doctors charge €30. So the refund for a doctor's consultation is based on a percentage of €19 not on €30. It is a strange system, heavy with bureaucracy as usual, but has the logic of requiring citizens to bear some responsibility for and the cost of their health care.

Another welcome occurrence was the news by letter from the Non-residents section of the Inland Revenue that they had given instructions to the payers of our pensions and other income, under the provisions of the double-tax agreement between France and the UK, to make payments to us gross, free of tax deduction. This was because we are liable for income tax to the French government. The Inland Revenue also informed us that they had refunded to our bank account all income taxes deducted in the UK since the day, 17th September 2004, when we became permanent residents in France. It would be necessary for us to reserve this refund to enable us to pay French tax when it becomes due at the end of 2005. Later in August we received a demand for income tax from the French Tax office in Sophia Antipolis. This was for €1547 (about £1000) and covered the period from 7th September to December 31st 2004 –the end of the French tax year. This was considerably less than the tax we had been refunded by the Inland revenue for the same period and less than we had expected to be asked to pay.

AVIS D'IMPÔT SUR LE REVENU			2004
DETAIL DES REVENUS	Vous	Conjoint	
Pensions, retraites, rentes	19603	155	
Abattement spécial de 10%	- 1960	- 155	
Abattement de 20%	- 3529	- 0	
Salaires, pensions, rentes nets	14114	0	14114
Revenus perçus par le foyer fiscal			
Rentes viagères à titre onéreux nettes (8)			6999
REVENU BRUT GLOBAL			21113
... REVENU IMPOSABLE ...			21113
TAUX EFFECTIF (REVENU MONDIAL)			22770
IMPOT APRES APPLICATION DU TAUX EFFECTIF (14)			1547
Impôt sur le revenu net avant corrections			1547
Compte tenu des éléments que vous avez déclarés, le total de votre imposition nette à recouvrer est de			1547
Votre taux d'imposition est de (24):			5,78%

INFORMATIONS COMPLEMENTAIRES			
Revenu fiscal de référence (25):			22770
A			2,00
N° FP : 060 23 36 3059178789 3 A			

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SUMMER HEAT

Apart from the occasional storm which would rattle around the mountains and treat us to a light shower, the weather was fine and very hot in July and most of August. It was usually too hot to do any work during the day. This had to be done early in the morning before the sun's rays made it too uncomfortable, or in the evening at sundown. Mowing became a problem; we would start at 7am until one Monday morning an unshaven neighbour put his head over the hedge. He informed us that using garden machinery before 8 am on weekdays, 9 am on Saturdays, and 10 am on Sundays and public holidays was "interdit". He had obviously been kicked out of bed by his wife to do this task. The same prohibition apparently applies to barking by dogs but nobody seems to have got the local dogs to understand this!

The next job we asked Dominique to undertake was to complete the crazy-paved terracing between the pool terrace and the balustraded area and also to construct a stairway, complete with handrails from that area down to the lower level where the pool pumphouse is located. This involved the purchase of 22 ex-Chemin de Fer sleepers, each about 8ft long and the fabrication in his forge of a steel hand rail system. This appealed to Dominique's inventive tendencies and he tackled the work with relish.

Below: The completed task.

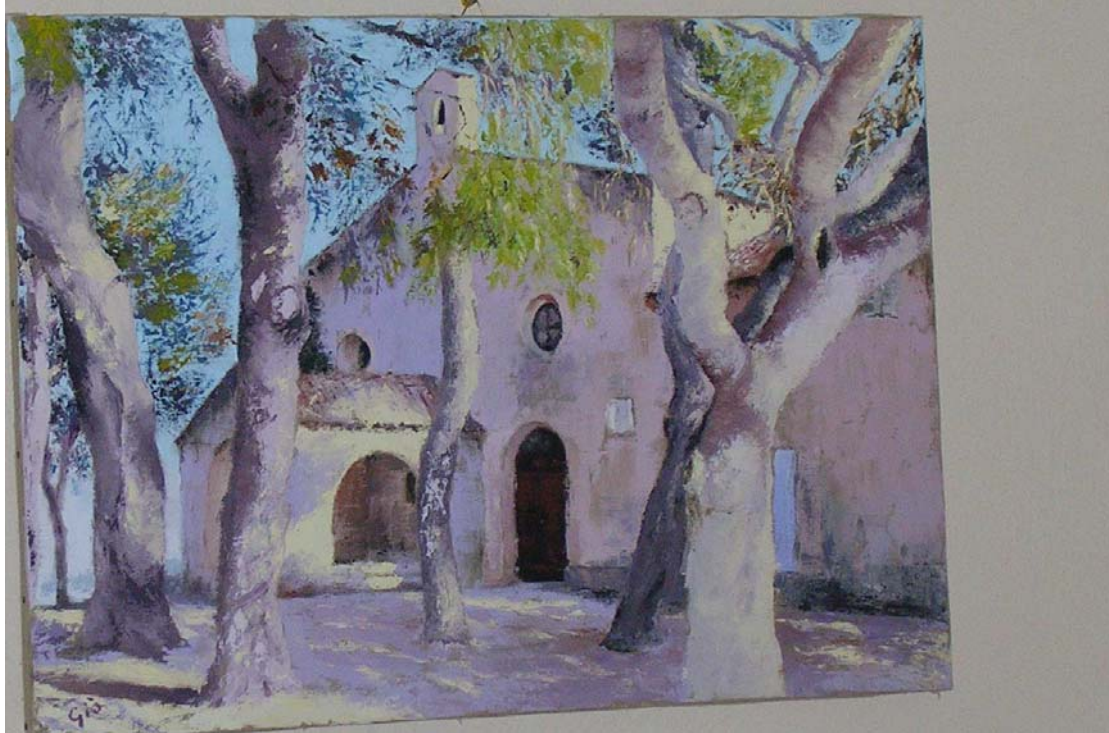


Because of the daytime heat we found the pool to be invaluable. It was particularly good that we could bathe in the nude thus saving the discomfort of a wet costume or trunks afterwards. Fortunately our garden is fairly secluded so any embarrassment to neighbours is avoided. The pine needles and seeds continued to fall all the summer, as did also the eucalyptus leaves, so it became a daily job to sweep the surrounds of the pool. Frustratingly a breeze would often get up soon after the sweeping bringing further showers of needles.

Another feature of the high summer was the chorus of the many cicadas in the pines surrounding us which would become almost deafening at times. This lasted from July right through to early September.

One day we visited the neighbouring village of Le Rouret where an art market was being held in the square by the Mairie. There were about thirty stalls set up by artists selling their work. We had been on the lookout for some typically Provençal paintings and eventually chose one of the Garoupe church on the Cap d'Antibes – a scene with which we were very familiar from our times on holiday at Le Roi du Soleil. Without a frame it hangs very well in our sitting room.

Below: The Garoupe Church.



Since moving in we had missed the battery of compost cages which, in the UK, we had used to make our own compost from garden and kitchen waste. A large and unproductive heap of waste was getting out of hand. So we decided once again to make our own this time out of a couple of surplus railway sleepers, some posts which we bought and some plastic netting. Dominique sawed the sleepers to the sizes we required and we set to. “We” means mainly Lyn, with Douglas offering advice and generally being carpenter’s mate. The result was a couple of compost containers each of about a cubic meter, which we hoped would suffice, one “cooking the compost”, and the other into which to turn the half-finished compost when needed. These we sited under the wall surrounding the cultivated part of the garden so that we could use gravity to tip the waste from above.



We were concerned about the mistakes we had made in planning the garden and becoming aware that the biggest error had been to go about things as if we were still in an English garden. Apart from the huge power of the sun the ground is very different, being part of the foothills of the Alps. Consequently, whilst we had created a beautiful garden, full of colour, there had been too many failures, including to our surprise, the many geraniums which were failing to prosper.

At the Nova Jardinierie we had become acquainted with the owner, Roland. He had been born in the Benelux countries, had been educated in England and had started the nursery at Opio as a young man. During our visits to his nursery he had been very generous to Lyn with his time. He recognised a fellow spirit in Lyn's enthusiasm and knowledge. Consequently when Lyn asked him if he could recommend someone to come to our garden and give advice he volunteered that he would come himself. He was not insincere because he offered a date one evening of the following week.

He duly arrived at about 8 pm, sat down and drank about a pint of Lyn's homemade Lime juice before looking round the garden. In the 90 minutes he spent with us he gave much good advice. On leaving he would not hear of being paid for the visit. He has a very successful business but nevertheless was very kind to spare us his evening.

Another visitor, and this one became a regular caller, was a local cat. She walked into the house and inspected every room before saying hallo to us. After that she became a frequent visitor. Cats seem to know instinctively those who are her true friends and from the start allowed Lyn to pick her up and cuddle and romp with her.



During July the heat really built up, culminating in the 31st which was the hottest day thus far. We were thankful for the pool and sometimes enjoyed three or four dips each day. Lyn took great care in learning how to control the condition of the pool, measuring the ph value of the water every day and adding the requisite chemicals accordingly. We had decided to invest in a summer cover, made of bubble plastic, whose purposes would be to maintain the water temperature when the sun went down as well as help protect the pollution of the pool from falling pine needles and other tree debris. We ordered this from the local "piscine accessories" supplier, giving exact measurements of the pool – 7 metres by 5 metres. On delivery the cover turned out to be short in width by about half a metre. On September 4th we are still waiting for the correct size to be made and delivered. Meantime we are using the one delivered.

We shall also order another cover in order to comply with a new French law which requires pool owners to take precautions against accidental drowning of children. These precautions may take the form of a protective fence round the pool to prevent entry by straying children, or an alarm system which alerts the owners should a child stray too near to or fall in the water, or a stiff cover over the whole surface of the pool. We shall choose the latter because it will have the additional value of protecting the pool throughout the winter from falling leaves, pine needles and pine seeds, etc. Below: The summer cover over the pool.



At the end of August we enjoyed a visit from Guy and Bridget, together with their sons Harry and Jack. They were en route for a holiday in Port Grimaud/St Tropez and stopped for a couple of nights at a hotel in Juan-les-Pins. Lyn and I picked them up and escorted them home to Roquefort-les-Pins. Harry, 7, loved the pool and spent a lot of time jumping in, whilst young Jack sat on the edge and watched. We all then went to the Toscana Restaurant outside Antibes for a pleasant lunch before they proceeded on their way to Port Grimaud.



On Sundays we continued with the practice of varying our lunchtime venue. Le Jarrerrie remained our favourite haunt because of its extremely good value, its setting under the mountains and its welcoming ambience. But because all French restaurateurs close for holidays almost without warning in the late autumn and winter, post New Year, we choose to have some fall-backs up our sleeves. So we experiment with other restaurants from time to time for this purpose. We tried Adèles in Valbonne a couple of times – Adèle is very welcoming but her food is virtually all heavily spiced. Her “mild” curries are certainly not mild! Le Colombier in Roquefort-les-Pins is excellent but not excellent enough to justify their prices. The same applied to Le Mas des Géranioms in Opio. We enjoyed a couple of meals at L’Orée d’Opio except that it lacked atmosphere and welcome. La Lavande at Valbonne quite pleased us a couple of times but on the third encounter when our steaks were virtually inedible our complaint to the Maître D’ was met with an offhand shrug and the advice from the chef was “have a free dessert on the house”. Our own local Auberge du Clos des Pins run by Yves and Sally, whose chef is Adam from Australia, is good and we eat there now and then. But again it does not justify their prices. In Mougins we had been recommended to try Le Clos St. Basile. On our first sortie we found a place with a name like that in the district of St. Basile and thought we ought to try it though it looked very like a low-class bistro. It was! It turned out to be the equivalent of a greasy spoon for truck drivers. Le Clos St. Basile was a couple of hundred yards further down the road so on our next sally we sought it out. It was closed. Almost next door was Le Broche de Fer which was open. We had quite a nice meal and decided it would be worth another visit. The next time the service was so painfully slow that we decided we would not be regular visitors there.

Finally we phoned Le Clos St. Basile to make sure they were open and booked a table for the following Sunday. We liked it and have so far visited it three times. The lady owner is strikingly like Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal of “Tootsie” in the film of that name. So we refer to the place as “Tootsie’s”. We had also tried another restaurant on the outskirts of Valbonne called Le Bois Doré We liked the setting in a pretty treelined garden and the food proved to be excellent, especially one memorable dish – Filet de Boeuf au Jus de Port, which Lyn now replicates in our kitchen. This restaurant has become our next favourite after Le Jarrerrie.

Below left: “Tootsie’s”

Below right: Le Bois Doré.



August was really hot and we would impatiently wait for sunset to enable us to do some physical work. On the 16th we were treated to another beautiful sunset sky.



On the same evening we were also treated to witness the birth of a moth from a chrysalis.



A project which we had deferred so far in order to see how the finances stood was an improvement to the front drive and forecourt which was rather tatty and crumbling. Our initial thought was to have the whole area crazy-paved and we sought an estimate from Dominique. It came to a mind blowing €30,000 plus. Dominique pointed out that the work needed to include a system of drainage to avoid flooding into the house when the heavens opened. After the experience of the previous November we didn't doubt his judgment. We asked him to propose ways of reducing the cost knowing from past experience that, given time to think he would surely do so. After to-ing and fro-ing he came up with the suggestion of substituting quarry stones of a size of our

choice embedded in concrete. For drainage he proposed grills in three new locations with conduits designed to remove surface water underground away from the house to the bottom of the garden. This would entail changing the levels of surface in the forecourt which currently sloped towards the house. For this revised project he quoted €16,300 – about £10,000. We accepted this quote and he started immediately on the work which will take him about 39 working days to complete. Those 39 days are going to be uncomfortable because of the difficulty of access caused by the breaking up of the existing surface, the necessary excavation with a hired mechanical digger, the laying of grills and conduits, followed by the laying of the new surface. This at a period when we shall have visitors coming to the house – Anne Phillips on the 7th September and Lyn's parents about a week later.

Below: Dominique's preliminary work.



In the course of the the four days whilst he hired the mechanical digger Dominique asked whether we had any other jobs requiring its use. We had seven or eight of the sleepers left over from the stairway job and we proposed that he use those in reshaping the steeply sloping area by the bonfire site. Dominique spent a sweltering two or three hours reshaping – not quite in the way we had envisaged, but an improvement all the same. The steep slope down to the bonfire area from the main lawn, which had been useful for barrowing stuff down to that level, became stepped. Thus, whilst perhaps making it easier to walk down than the slope, it made it impossible to take the barrow down that way. Instead we would have to take the barrow down by the longer route. No problem. We can always reverse that situation if it proves impracticable.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SUMMER STORMS

The eve of Anne Phillips' arrival, after a beautiful warm and sunny day, the mother of all storms broke over us in the night. I was awakened by a flash of lightning and a clap of thunder which flipped our fusebox to find the driving rain coming in through our windows, all of which were wide open.

The storm continued unabated all night, accompanied by heavy non-stop rain. It paused at dawn and we were greeted by leaden skies. We drove down to Nice Airport to meet Anne thinking sadly that she would not be greeted, on flying in to Nice, by the customary beauty of the Azure coastline. Anne's arrival was pretty punctual and we had a joyful reunion with our dear friend. For the rest of the day Anne was bombarded with information as if she was with us only for a few hours rather than six days. The weather was kind enough to become sunny for a few hours, enabling Lyn and Anne to enjoy a swim in the pool. Our regret was that most of the geraniums and other flowers, which only a few hours previously had been looking glorious, now had that sad, washed-out appearance. Anne was pretty tired after her journey so we retired to bed fairly early.



Overnight the storm returned and it rained virtually all of the night. Next morning we decided to drive to Cannes via Antibes, the Cap d'Antibes, Juan-les-Pins and Golfe Juan. It rained most of the time and by the time that we reached Cannes it was raining too hard to take the walk along the beautiful promenade which we had planned, so we turned for home to have a lunch of French bread, Paté and cheese.

Thursday night was another one of violent storms, accompanied by heavy rain, which continued through to the dawn. By early morning the weather brightened and we decided to drive to Menton, close to the Italian border. Before leaving Lyn and Anne walked down to the village and found extensive flooding with the pompiers pumping water out of roadside properties.

Passing the River Loup on the way down to the coast we noted how swollen it had become after several days of rain. Our route eastwards on the autoroute was diverted before we reached Monaco, we presumed by a landslip or rockfall blocking the road. So we drove through Monaco, on through Roquebrune, to Menton. This town, once so run-down and dilapidated, has in recent decades been revitalised and is now one of the most attractive resorts on the Mediterranean. We parked the car, walked the promenade, and found a beachside restaurant where we had a glass of wine, then lunch in the bright sunshine.



Above: Menton beach and right the Marina. Below: Lunch by the beach.



On Saturday September 10th the morning again broke to bright sunshine and although the forecast was for more rain and possibly storms later in the day, we decided to drive Anne to see the Gorge du Loup and Gourdon. The River Loup rises about 30 miles inland among the high Alps, winds its way through the valleys of the Alpes Maritimes and then bursts through the steep gorge, cut deep by a glacier melt of an earlier age before reaching the sea.

Our journey took us to La Colle-sur-Loup, past St. Paul, through Vence, on to Tourettes-sur-Loup, a large village perched on the side of mountain above the river, over the bridge at Pont-du-Loup and then up the steep road in the Gorge-du-Loup. Every time we sighted the river we were struck by the spate of flow caused by the heavy rains of the past few days and nights.

Below: A view of the gorge and the river in spate.



We eventually reached Gourdon where clouds were already forming overhead, presaging that the period of unsettled weather had by no means ended. As usual the little town, with its ancient monastery, perched on a ledge at the top of a mountain, was busy with tourists. Here we met an old friend, Josée, who owns the little shop selling silk clothing and accessories. She greeted us effusively with the news that she had agreed to sell the business there, which she had started 30 years previously, to an

English lady. She hoped that the deal would be concluded by early 2006 and intended to stay on to help the new proprietress for a few months. Although she said she was retiring Josée indicated that she would be working to help various other local concerns on an ad hoc basis. Clearly Josée just wanted to be relieved of the burden of owning her business after 30 years. Lyn took the opportunity to buy a few silken items.

Below: Josée showing Anne and Lyn her wares.



Below: Le Bar-sur-Loup from above.



And, back home, once again in the pool.



On Saturday 10th September the post brought us our Cartes Vitales – the official passports to use the French Health Service. Hitherto we had used a provisional entitlement. The Cartes Vitales arrived one year and three days after we had been resident in France and about 18 months after we had commenced applying for them!



By this time we had decided to change our doctor. We had hitherto attended the Valbonne surgery of Dr. Dirk Heerding who was from the Netherlands. The disadvantages had been, that apart from the distance he had no back-up when absent on holiday or for the weekend. He is also a strange character and we both found it difficult to deal with him. We discovered that there was, in Roquefort-les-Pins, another Dutch English-speaking doctor – Doctor Yolanda Weerts. She does have a back-up in the shape of another Dutch, lady doctor, Dr. Colette Van Dooren, who acts as a locum. Doctor Weerts agreed to take us on as patients and on this first visit made us more confident in our future prospects for competent care. We are puzzled that we have found so many Dutch doctors in this small area – perhaps they come here to work because the people in their home country are too healthy!

On Sunday 11th September we took Anne for a walk on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice which is always fascinating with its mixture of walkers, joggers, cyclists and skaters. The sidewalk has lanes for pedestrians as well as those on wheels. Then we went to lunch at La Jarrerrie in Le Bar-sur-Loup. In the morning my Swedish friend, Bo Jonasson had phoned to say that he was back in Nice following his bicycle tour in the Rhone valley and was flying to Stockholm that evening. He suggested that we might meet him at Nice Airport. This we did and once the introductions were completed we retired to a bar for a drink and a very pleasant chat for an hour and a half. We recalled that we had first met in 1977 when I had advertised in Swedish newspapers that I was seeking a reliable supplier of a special type of lumber needed for our manufacturing process. Bo had responded expressing interest and I had travelled out to meet him at Köping. From there we had formed a mutually excellent business relationship as well as a warm friendship. Bo is now semi-retired. At 72 he is fit enough to treat a week's cycling in the hills of France as an enjoyable holiday. The next day, on his return to Sweden, he would be back in his forest tending his 700 hectares of pines and spruce trees. Next page: With Bo Jonasson at Nice Airport.



On the Monday 12th September we decided to take Anne along the Esterel Coast, west of Cannes. This time it was a glorious day and the colour of the sea was breathtakingly beautiful. Anne is a keen photographer and the outing involved numerous stops for snaps to be taken.

Below left: Esterel coast near Theoule.

Right: Looking back at Cannes.



At Miramar we found the Miramar Beach Hotel perched on the edge of the cliff and thought it looked an attractive place to have lunch. It turned out to be so. Although we ordered just one course there came a succession of little “amuse bouche” dishes; firstly some savoury nibbles, then a mushroom soup served in a small dish, then a gaspachio with a little piece of sea bream and finally some sweet petit fours.



Over this period we had been following the progress of the fifth and final test match at the Oval between England and Australia. This had promised to be a key and exciting contest. Of the previous four matches England had won two, Australia one, with one match drawn thanks to rain interruptions. Apart from the decisive win by Australia of the first test at Lords, England had generally been dominant. This had been a refreshing change; the Ashes had not been won by England since 1988 and in only four series in my lifetime.

This fifth test, therefore was proving to be a needle match; the Australians are used to victory and as expected they fought every inch of the way to maintain this record. England batted first and it began to look as if they might falter, scoring only 373 runs, Strauss made a beautiful century and the series hero Flintoff scored 72 valuable runs. Despite centuries by Hayden and Langer Australia made only 369 runs in their first innings, five of their wickets being taken by Andrew Flintoff. Over the weekend the match was interrupted frequently by rain and bad light but England managed to score 335 runs, 158 of which were scored by Kevin Pieterse and a valuable 59 by the bowler Ashley Giles. Now, thanks to time lost the match was bound to end in a draw as time ran out before Australia could score more than 4 runs.

So England ended up winning the series by 2-1 which meant that we had regained the Ashes. This series revived interest in international cricket with the result that hundreds of thousands more people, if not millions, became fans of the game.

Tuesday was a sad day because Anne returned home in the morning. We had enjoyed her brief stay, although we were both tired, particularly Lyn, who had done all of the extensive driving around Provence.

Having dropped Anne off at Nice Airport and said fond goodbyes, we drove to the Ibis Hotel in Nice where Lyn's parents, Harvey and Joan Stoner were staying for three nights. We picked them up and drove them to our home in Roquefort-les-Pins. We all had a nice lunch in the garden and after they had looked over the house and garden – more photography – we drove them up through the mountains, following the River Loup, past St. Paul, through Vence and down to Cagnes-sur-Mer, thence to their hotel in Nice. It had been a busy week and we were glad to look forward to a rest from all that sight-seeing. Below: An alfresco lunch with Harvey and Joan Stoner.



Saturday 17th September marked the anniversary of our purchase of our home in Provence and looking back we marvelled at the changes which we had wrought to the house and garden. In hand was probably the final big project we had planned, namely the re-surfacing and drainage of the front drive. About one third of this was by then completed and short of a disaster should be finished by the time when the heavy autumn rains arrive.

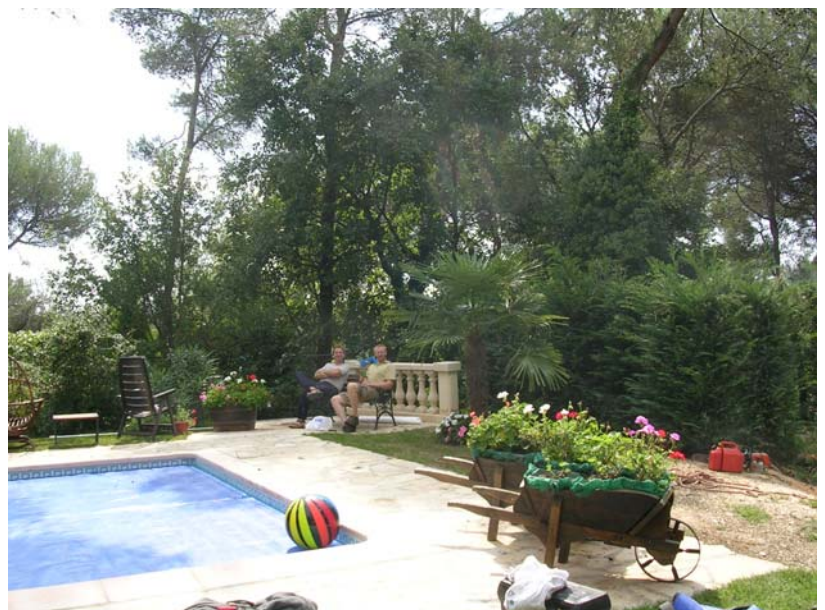
Below: the situation as at the 17th.



Our friend Roland, the owner of the Nova Jardinerie garden centre, had kindly given the name of the tree surgeon whom he used. This was Jonathan Griffiths, who lives in nearby Opio. We had contacted Jonathan and his quote for felling five of our pines was considerably lower than that of Serge Jardins. He suggested that we have five felled and that we then could write to the Mairie asking for permission to fell some more which were endangering the house.

Below left: Men at work.

Below right: Jonathan and Bob taking a break.



We chose the five which we would most like to remove and on the 22nd September Jonathan and a colleague, Vincent, turned up. They spent the Thursday and Friday felling these, plus a Chêne Vert Oak, and a Eucalyptus. They also “topped” the second Eucalyptus which, if left, would grow out of proportion. On the second day Vincent was replaced by Bob, a young man from Berkshire. They tackled the work efficiently and, as the weather was somewhat gloomy, we set about burning the brush and branches. On the second day we had to abandon the burning because the weather brightened up and otherwise the smoke could become a nuisance to neighbours. We may have to postpone the rest of the burning for as much as a few weeks, depending on the weather.

Our reflection, after Jonathan and Bob had finished, was that they were not nearly as good as Serge had been in the matter of clearing up after the work.. Whereas they had agreed to stack the logs along the fences, and to cut up the big branches into handleable sizes, they left us logs piled at random all over the garden and huge heaps of uncut branches.

For some months I had been experiencing abdominal troubles which caused quite a lot of pain and discomfort, particularly at nights. We had consulted Dr. Jolanda Weerts and she had sent me off to the local Analysis Laboratory for a blood test as she suspected that the Pancreas was not behaving properly. Following the result of this I was despatched to a clinic in Mougins to see Dr. Rudolf Gross about an abdominal scan. After questioning me Dr. Gross prescribed a scan to be carried out at Cagnes-sur-mer followed by a Colonoscopic investigation back at his clinic at Mougins.

The scan involved taking nearly 1000 images of the abdomen and the accompanying report revealed that I have a couple of cysts in the liver. We are not presently aware of their significance. The colonoscopy took place on the 26th September. The bad news was that solid food was forbidden for two days prior to this, during which one has to survive on cups of Bovril and quantities of water. On the day before the colonoscopy I was instructed to drink, in addition to several litres of water, half a litre of the most ghastly, nauseous cocktail I have ever tasted, followed at bedtime by another beastly concoction. As with the preceding blood test and the abdominal scan at the Cagnes-sur-mer clinic, the colonoscopy was carried out with extreme efficiency. Most notable at both clinics were the hygiene precautions; everywhere was spotlessly clean in these modern clinics in contrast with the UK where superbugs allegedly rule.

I was escorted to an operating room, given a light anaesthetic and the next thing I remember was being wheeled into a recovery room less than 15 minutes later where I had to wait to come round completely. Then Dr. Gross breezed in to tell me that he had found no cancer. He had found a small polyp in the large intestine which he had “burned” out. The doctor presented me with colour pictures of the polyps. When I was ready to move I was offered “petit déjeuner” which comprised two small biscuits and a cup of coffee. My hopes of bacon and eggs were dashed – not that I particularly felt in want of them! The nurse confirmed that I could go and I was surprised not to have been given the surgeon’s report but presumed that it would be sent on to Dr. Weerts. The next day the clinic telephoned to say that I had “forgotten” to collect the report, so Lyn had to drive to Mougins once again to pick it up. I did not accompany her because I felt very unwell, a condition which prevailed all day. The report indicated that I had Diverticulitis, an infection in the colon. In the afternoon we had an

appointment with Dr. Jolanda Weerts when I was prescribed several medicaments. The next step is a return visit to Mougins so that Dr. Rudolf Gross can review progress. A complication arose when I broke a tooth chewing on some delicious but crusty French bread. Fortunately we both had an appointment with our dentist Dr. Gabriel Albala a couple of days later. On the day of this appointment the side of my face, from the jawbone up, started to swell and the jaw became very sensitive. When Gabriel examined this he postponed the repair of the tooth because he found that there was an abscess in the gum and sent me away with a prescription for an anti-biotic designed to clear the abscess before embarking on the repair.

It is now October 8th and we are anxiously awaiting the 15th when we can legally have a bonfire to clear up all the brush and debris from the tree felling. We do not feel that we dare ignore the rules, being immigrants, as do the local French natives; every day we see columns of smoke rising around us. As usual, in France, the rules are ignored. Meantime we have cut up and stacked it all in neat and accessible heaps ready for the big day. It will be some bonfire as the pictures below indicate .



The next phase will be to summon Vincenti to come and collect all the logs. On the previous occasion we had to pay him to take them away because many of them were old logs which we had inherited. These were apparently less saleable. This time they will all be new timber and hopefully of commercial value to him. We have to wait a week or two before the new drive is in suitable condition to bear the weight of his laden trailer.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HINTS OF AUTUMN.

With the month of October came a few days of autumnal weather interspersed with some glorious days of warm sunshine. Our main dislike is for the shorter days and longer nights; being early risers it means getting up in the dark and not hearing birds singing until the streets (or trees) are aired.

It also meant that we could resume our Sunday walks along the promenades, the tourist season having ended. Instead of choosing most times to go to the Promenade des Anglais we tried the promenade at Cagnes sur Mer. This had undergone a transformation with new, dual carriageways and broad sidewalks set aside for pedestrians, cyclists and rollerskaters. Fronting the promenade is the Hippodrome du Côte d'Azur, the local racecourse, where the events include Pony Trotting. On Sundays one could watch these high-stepping ponies being put through their paces for exercise and training. Looking inland beyond the racecourse provides an attractive view of the Alpes Maritimes, including the “Bald Mountain” under which we live, and the Gorge du Loup. Looking seawards one has the view of the airliners crossing the Baie des Anges on their approach to land at Nice Airport. The airport runways were built out to sea on reclaimed land which means that the city is not disturbed by the noise of the aircraft whose take-off and landing routes are over the water.

Below left: Trotters at the Hippodrome.

Right: Touch-down at Nice Airport.



We had our follow-up visit to the clinic to see Dr. Gross; he confirmed that there was nothing seriously wrong except for the Diverticulitis which treatment should keep under control. Now, after four weeks, the problem causing discomfort and sometimes pain has not gone away, but is certainly bearable. Our night's sleep is disturbed by this discomfort and, worse still, by Lyn's persistent hot flushes, which leave her drained of energy.

October 15, bonfire day, arrived and we didn't lose much time in setting fire to the mountains of brush which we had accumulated from the tree felling. It was noticeable that not many other neighbours in the district did the same – most of them had burned their waste in the preceding weeks! It was explained that the locals use their judgement about this; if there has been rain, reducing the risk of forest fires, they judge that it must be already October 15th. By the time that date comes around they have nothing left to burn!

In October Dominique finished the drive. We were rather disappointed with the result; it is effective, solid enough to last for generations, well drained, which is a big plus, but not at all “aesthetique”. With Dominique things are either “aesthetique” or “practique”. These are his two “virtues”. We can console ourselves that we have got a practical result for our money.

Below: The finished drive. “Practique mais ne pas Aesthetique!”



It was time for us to sort out the need for a permanent safety cover for our pool. We preferred this solution to the alternatives which were either to have a fence built round the pool, or to have an alarm system to give warning should a child, dog, or drunk inadvertently fall into the pool. Using the phone directory we called in a specialist firm from Nice. Their representative, Vincent, duly came, measured up and quoted for an electrically controlled roll-up cover, powered by a battery. The battery is rechargeable by solar power. After the obligatory haggling we got his price down to €900, about £4000. We noticed yet again that the salesman usually kicks off the haggling by quoting a price then, whilst we are absorbing this news, saying that, at the risk of losing his job, he will offer a big reduction. We have learned to greet this offering with reluctance and hesitation. Delivery and installation is due later in November.

As promised, the cover was duly delivered on the 8th November in a van with a Brittany registration. Not surprisingly the driver was not familiar with local geography and telephoned us in the afternoon to say he was near the Mairie in Roquefort-les-Pins and wishing for directions to our house. As he had difficulty to follow our directions Lyn ended up by driving down to the Mairie and escorting him from there. Lyn had also to help him unload the five heavy packages. Vincent and an assistant arrived the next morning to install the cover, which took about four hours. Below: The pool with its new safety cover. Left: rolled up. Right: covering the pool.



We planned one further large outlay for home improvement. We spend more time in the “barn” than indoors and had found it uncomfortable taking the brunt of the cold winds from the mountains during our first winter. We decided to have the barn glazed all round with double glazing in preparation for the coming winter and invited a firm in Cagnes Sur Mer called Fermasud to come and look at the situation. It is a family firm and the owner’s son, Romi, came to talk to us. We explained that we wished to have sliding glass doors covering the two open sides of the barn so that we would not be deprived of our beloved fresh air. Romi measured up and after discussing our needs in detail, sat down and quoted a figure of €6900, immediately announcing that he thought he could offer us a reduction. Haggling ensued and we agreed a price of €6100, all taxes included. We gave Romi a cheque for €3000 as a deposit. He explained that his Daddy would have to come and check his measurements. An hour after he had left us “Daddy”, Monsieur Collin, telephoned and arranged to call the next day at 3.30 pm. At 4.15 Madame Collin telephoned to apologise for Daddy who was tied up with another customer in the showroom. He would leave in 5 minutes and be with us in less than half an hour. We complained vehemently about this tardiness, questioning whether they could be reliable suppliers if they behaved like this. At about 6 Daddy turned up and disarmed our anger with a bottle of champagne and an apology. His measuring took only a few minutes and he left with a promise that delivery and installation would take place in early December.

Early in November a mysterious parcel arrived from Geoff Bowden. He was one of those whom we had left behind in the UK and with whom we spoke frequently on the telephone. During one of these calls we had obviously mentioned that one of the things we missed was good English bacon (which for the UK market is mostly sourced from Denmark or Poland!). The parcel contained 48 rashers of streaky bacon. Needless to say our breakfast next day comprised bacon and eggs!



On the subject of food Lyn is quite an adventurous cook and she decided to produce a Bouef Bourgignon. I was despatched to the butcher's at Shopi to buy some suitable beef and the necessary vegetables. A true Burgundian, Lyn used nearly a whole bottle of red wine in the preparation. It was excellent and caused Lyn to plan to make Coq au Vin on a future occasion.



Friday, November 11th, Armistice Day, was the French equivalent of a Bank Holiday. So we took off via Cannes to the Esterel. This is the Massif bordering the coast for about 20 miles west of Cannes. The beautiful coast is rugged and rocky. We had found a good hotel at Theoule, called The Miramar Beach Hotel, when we had taken Anne Phillips along the coast in September and had decided that it would be a nice place to stay sometime. We called there on this day, had a six course lunch lasting three hours and asked to see one or two guest rooms. We chose a double room with a balcony overlooking the sea and reserved it for Christmas Day in seven weeks time.

During the month of November the Roquefort "Hall of Culture" held an exhibition to commemorate a tragedy which had occurred in September 1913. The then recently built "tramway" line from Cagnes, on the coast, to Grasse, via Roquefort, Le Rouret and Chateaufneuf suffered an accident on the viaduct between Villeneuve Loubet and Roquefort-les-Pins. The railway gauge was too narrow and several of the leading coaches derailed and fell to the ground 30 metres below, killing 19 people and injuring many others. Many of the dead were Chasseurs des Alpes – soldiers returning to their camp at Grasse after a ceremony at Nice. This tragedy spelled the end of the tramway project which was finally abandoned in 1926. Currently only small sections of the viaduct survive.

Over page: pictures of the tramway at the time of its inauguration and some taken after the accident.



Below: Gauge of railway track.



The unusually cold weather in November gave way to even more cold spells in December. Fortunately most days were mainly sunny and providing one was out of the northerly breeze, coming straight off the mountains, the sun provided welcome warmth. But the temperature dropped rapidly as the sun disappeared. We were looking forward to the delivery and installation of the glazing of the barn, due to take place in the third week of December.

We also took a look at the cost of our dependence on electric radiators for internal heating. Currently it did not matter too much because the meter had stopped working. We had reported this weeks ago with no response. A second letter brought the advice that they would come on December 21st to fit a new meter. We decided to explore the cost and feasibility of installing central heating and also of insulating the doors and windows with double glazing. We await visits from companies whom we have asked to quote.....

On the 4th December we spent the morning at the Christmas Fair held in the town square at Le Rouret. This was an enjoyable experience as it was so colourful and interesting; there were stalls selling just about everything and good humour abounded.





We bought four watercolours of the type depicted immediately above which together cost us less than €50. We planned to brighten up the snooker room with them. A few days later we took them along to a picture framing atelier in Opio, run by an English-speaking young lady, named Valerie.. She told us that she had been born in Monaco of Belgian parents. On seeing the pictures she recognised them from the Marché de Noël at Le Rouret, which she had also visited. She proceeded to describe and demonstrate a very attractive project for framing each of the pictures and then costed them out at over €600 for the four. We explained that we had no wish to pay anything like that price. Accommodatingly she then proposed a framing which would cost about €250 for the four pictures, which we accepted.

Our neighbour, a 72 year-old widower, whom we had hitherto referred to a “Le Voisin”, not having so far exchanged names, asked if he could bring an English speaking friend to meet us. His friend was a charming lady called Marisa Thesmar who lives about a kilometre away on the Route de Notre Dame. They spent an hour with us in our garden and a few days later Marisa telephoned and asked us to “tea” at 5pm that afternoon. She has a charming house which had been designed and built by her late husband. “Tea” comprised Champagne and some cream cakes. We all did our best to confine the conversation to French because our voisin, whose name is René Bidault, speaks no other known language. It was a very enjoyable interlude and we have invited the pair of them to a return match at our home for Saturday December 17th.

Meantime Lyn has been busy with decorations for the festive season, the centrepiece being the fireplace in the sitting room.



On Monday December 5th we decided to drive to Fayence about 31 miles away to the west of Grasse. We believed this to be the ceramics town, the source of several pieces of fine china which we had bought in Antibes some years previously. (see below) It reputedly has about a dozen ateliers which produce this type of ceramic which is like porcelain in appearance.



Once arrived at Fayence we realised that we had come to the wrong place as there was nothing to suggest that a ceramics industry existed there. Lyn entered a florists shop and the best the staff could suggest was for us to go to Vallauris which is near Antibes! We just had not done our homework before embarking. As lunchtime was approaching we decided to find a restaurant. In the old part of the town we came across a bistro named “La Strega”, (the local name for a witch), where we had an excellent lunch of Daube de Boeuf, (beef stew on a bed of pasta). The bistro was decorated with a collection of sorceresses.



We made our way home via a little town called Mons and found ourselves in the Gorge de Siagne, near the source of the Siagne river which flows to Cannes. The

scenery was quite spectacular as was the view from that height to Cannes and the Îles de Lerin just offshore about 22 miles away.



Once home we consulted the Internet and recalled that the town which we had sought was in fact Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, not 31 miles but 75 miles from Roquefort-les-Pins! An outing for another day in the future.. Our confusion stemmed from ignorance of language; the name for fine china is Faïence and we had assumed that the industry was located at Fayence.

A local cat has adopted us; she lives opposite where there lives also a very robust Labrador dog. Presumably she comes over to us for peace and quiet. Also we suspect that the owners opposite may both be out at work all day so she seeks company and warmth with us. We do not feed her. We have named her “PK” because she parks herself on one of our Parker Knoll chairs if there is not a lap available. She is a very gentle young cat but, because we attract wild birds to the garden, she is unfortunately a keen hunter, frequently earning a scolding from us.

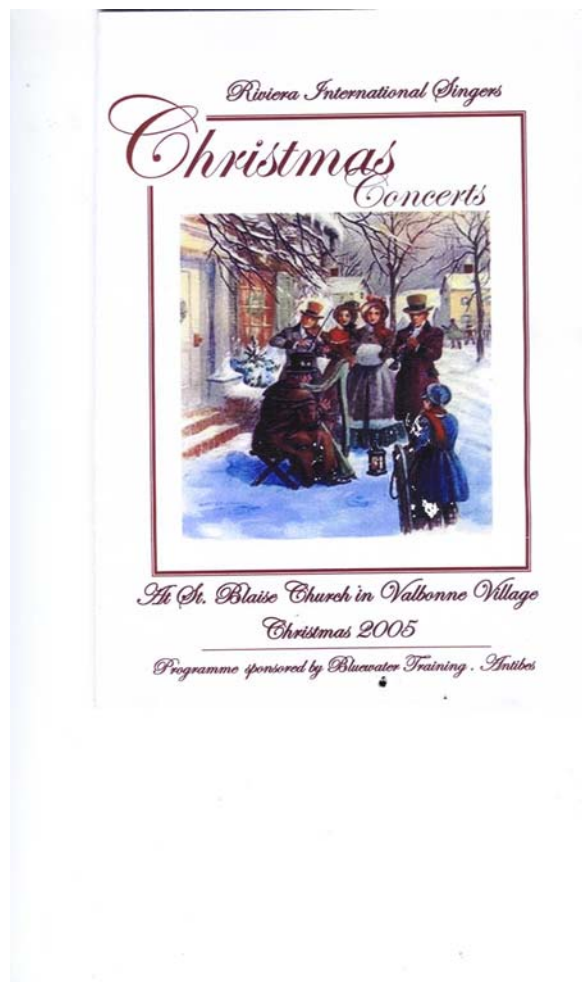


We were due to welcome René Bidault and Marisa Thesmar to tea at 5pm on Saturday December 17th. Marisa telephoned in the morning to suggest that we accompany her to a carol concert at 6pm that evening. She had told us that she was a member of the local choral society. Marisa offered to drive us to the church at Valbonne. We suggested that in that case she and René should come back to our house after the concert was finished, which she had estimated to be an hour long. This put our minds at rest because an hour is acceptable whereas experience of similar concerts had involved a lot more than an hour. Marisa explained that René would stay home because he did not like carol concerts.

Marisa duly picked us up at 5.30 and drove us to St Blaise Church at Valbonne. It turned out that the “choir” was the Riviera International Singers, comprising mainly British people, most of the congregation also being British. The church was full to bursting and we were lucky to get seated – in hard wooden pews.

The concert, scheduled to start at 6pm, began at about 6.30pm and lasted for about two hours, not one. Although it was cold and uncomfortable the singing was excellent, with several fine solo renderings. As so often though there was too much chat by the compere which stretched things out rather a lot. It was one of those experiences, which we enjoyed in retrospect, but which we were relieved to have behind us – a bit like a visit to the dentist.

After being driven home we welcomed Marisa and the crafty René (who had enjoyed a couple of hours in his nice warm home next door) to our house, where we served hot mince pies and champagne. We finally got to bed at about 11pm.

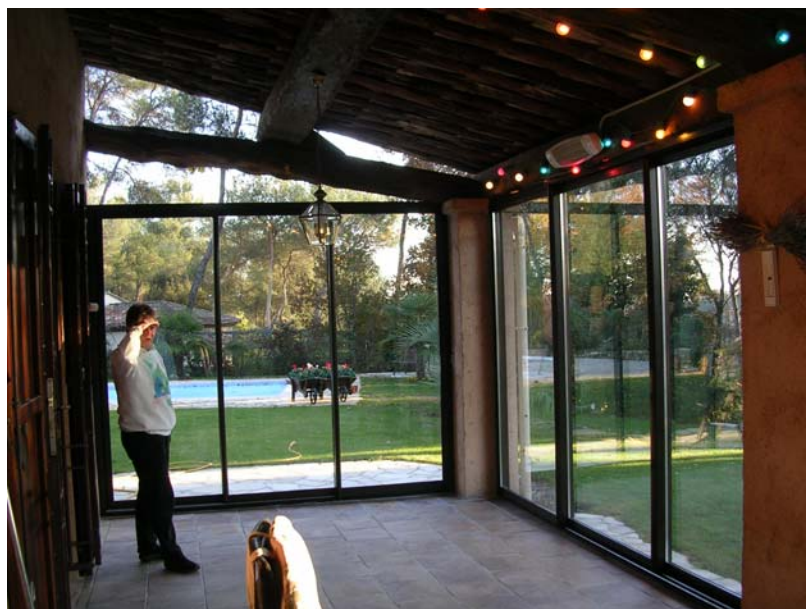


CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

YULETIDE

The run up to Christmas continued very cold and we were impatient for the delivery and installation of the double glazing to the barn, promised for December 21st at the latest. It was also a very hectic week as we had invited two companies to quote us for the installation of central heating. We had also invited Fermasud and another company, Johann Stores of Antibes, to quote for replacing all of our windows and exterior doors, (excluding the front door and the garage door), with double glazed units.

Delivery of the glazing to the barn occurred in bits and pieces over two days. The installation team seemed to comprise young fellows who looked as if they had just left school, or were just about to. They were led by Mathieu Collin, a younger son of the owners of Fermasud, who spoke reasonable English. Another member of the team, Alix, spoke much better English but with a distinctly Irish accent. It turned out that, though born in France, his parents were in fact Irish.



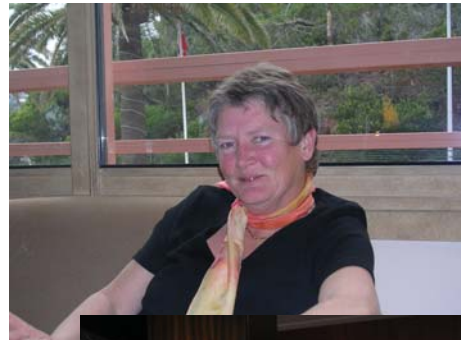
Installation wasn't without drama and when they had completed it on the Thursday 22nd December some of the sliding doors would not close and lock efficiently, they made a perfunctory job of cleaning the glass but wanted to leave it pretty smeared and dirty. Seven of the coloured Christmas lights which they had had to move during installation had been put out of action. A bad impression was given us by their assertion that these had been out of action before they had started. As for the cleaning we had to insist that daddy – Monsieur Collin – should come up from Cagnes sur Mer to resolve that, one of the young puppies commenting that “we are not a shop”. Daddy told them to do the cleaning but then gave us an arrogant lecture about the doors as if he was playing to an audience. We had then to become quite rude and refused to give him the final cheque (5%) until he agreed to put everything right. He promised to send a cleaner up after Christmas to clean the windows properly. We still felt that some of the windows had been installed wrongly because two of them did not lock efficiently. Monsieur Collin promised to come up after Christmas and sort things out. On the next day elder son Roman Collin, who had sold us the package turned up and after inspection agreed that we had reason to be dis-satisfied. He thought that the manufacturers had been at fault. Apart from that contretemps we are quite pleased with the result, although at first we felt as if we were sitting in a goldfish bowl behind all that glass.

We had a wonderful Christmas Day at the Miramar Beach Hotel, arriving there just after 11 am, after driving along the coast through Antibes and Cannes.



Lyn voted it to be the best Christmas she had ever experienced; I was inclined to agree. Our welcome was warm and the suite was very comfortable, though in typical French fashion it was a different suite from that which we had chosen and reserved when we had visited the hotel in November. Regretfully the weather, which had been bright and sunny in the few days running up to Christmas, was grey and overcast. We began proceedings with a Kir Royale in the bar overlooking the wide expanse of Mediterranean below us and then embarked on endless courses of dishes as shown below. The lunch dishes were accompanied by a selection of wines presented by Ali Hedayat, the Chef Sommelier, culminating in a glass of Pink Champagne.

Replete, we retired to the bar and enjoyed glasses of Armagnac (Lyn) and Calvados (Douglas). And so to bed.....



Our fireplace, decorated with Christmas cards, welcomed us home after a very pleasant day at Miramar.



Several years previously we had noticed, particularly around the Esterel Massif, that the Mimosa trees looked well budded up and almost ready to flower. Now, on the 31st December, we saw that a near neighbour's Mimosa was actually flowering despite the zero temperatures of the nights and early mornings



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

2006 – The finishing touches to our home in France.

Having had the “Barn” enclosed with large sliding, double-glazed doors we set about making the new room more habitable. Dominique Méry undertook the painting of the walls in a bright, warm orange colour. We had ordered some matting to carpet the room and were looking around for some suitable furniture. Quite by chance, when we were shopping at Cagnes-sur-Mer at the supermarket “Géant”, we spotted some Rattan/Cane furniture which would fit into the barn perfectly. The suite comprised a two-seater settee, two single easy chairs and a small round occasional table. The price for the suite was €160 (£100). Within a few days after delivery we went back to “Geant” and ordered a second suite, feeling that the second settee would replace the enormous settee which we had brought out to France when we moved. Later on we found and bought a bookcase/convenience stand of the same material when passing through Port Grimaud.



“The Barn” fully furnished and carpeted.

We had simultaneously commissioned two other projects. The first was to instal new, double-glazed windows and doors throughout the house. After our experience with the sliding doors for the Barn we did not even consider Fermasud for the job, but instead invited two other firms to tender. The first candidate came and measured, left, full of assurances, but never got round to submitting a tender. The second was a firm in Antibes called Yohann Stores. Yohann was a likeable character who, with his assistant Claude, came round, measured, took detailed notes of our preferences and quoted promptly. His tender was good and we accepted it immediately. Yohann did not waste any time in getting on with the job and he and his colleagues were constantly cheerful and attentive to our wishes. We were delighted with the results of his work.

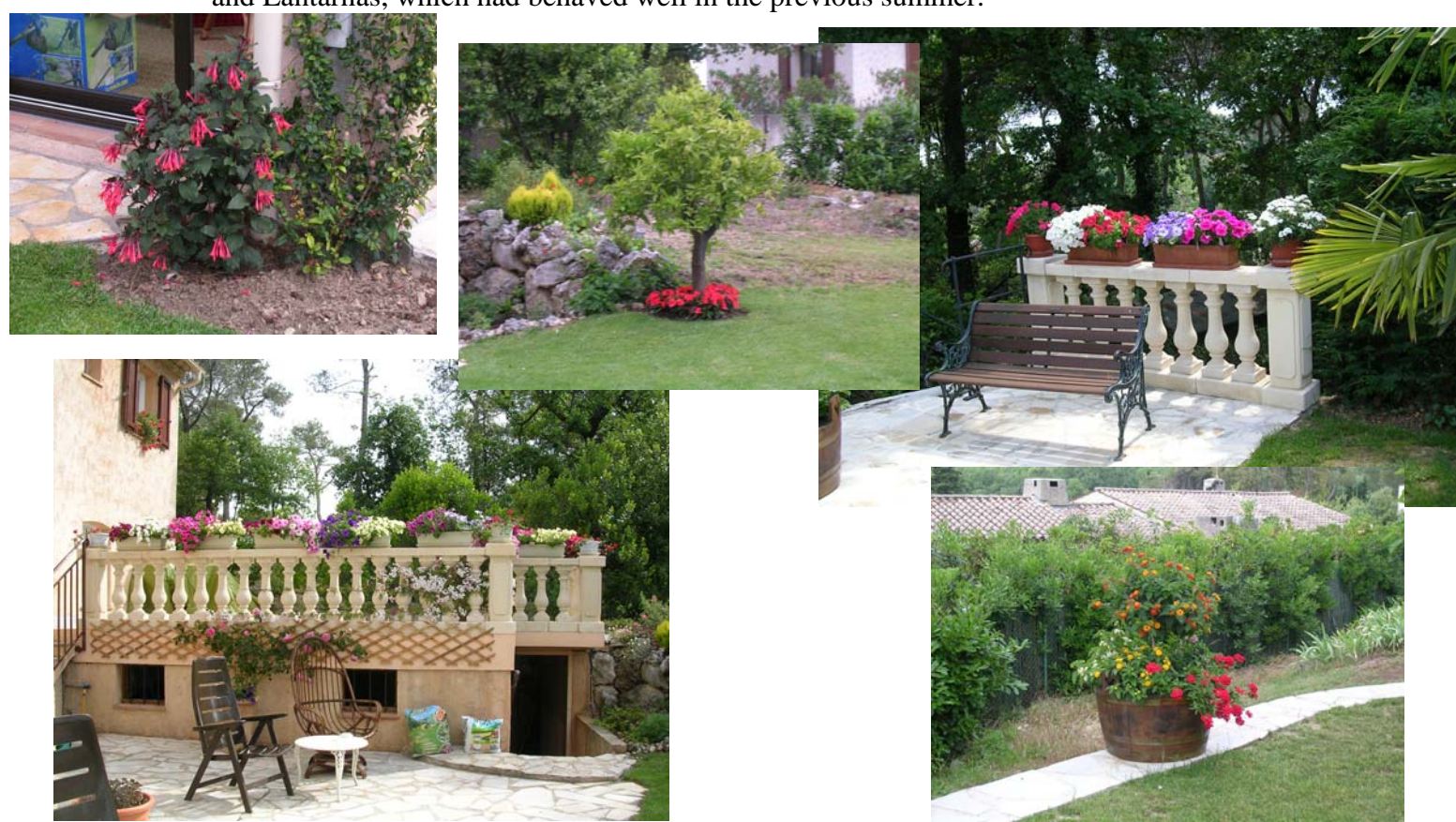


The second project was to instal central heating. We had found the electric heating to be expensive and unpractical, so we invited tenders from one or two contractors advertising locally. The one who seemed most suitable was Stefan from the firm Société d'Exploitation Belladina S.C.C.T. He advised us that if we combined solar

heating for the water with the heating system we would be able to get income tax relief to the value of 40% of the cost of the solar panels and 25% of the cost of the boiler installation. He put us in touch with Gaz de France to find out the cost of having mains gas supplied to the house, but we found that the cost would be far too high. Stefan then brought in Totalgaz to quote for the installation of a tank for Liquid Propane Gas and for the supply of gas. We decided to take that route feeling that although all energy costs, from gas, oil to electricity were rising steeply worldwide, at least there was some competition between suppliers of LPG.

We awarded the contract to Stefan for the total cost of €13,750 to which we had to add the cost of installing the LPG tank. Again we were lucky to find a conscientious operator in Stefan who, with his assistant Joel, got on with the job tidily. All proceeded well with the installation of the tank, the piping round the house, the fixing of the radiators and the installation of the balanced flue boiler. Next was the connection of the gas supply to the cooking hob in the kitchen to replace the separate gas cylinder supplying the cooker. It remains for a new hot water tank to be installed and for it to be connected to the Washing Machine in the Utility Room, for a thermostat to be installed and finally for the Solar Panels to be supplied and fixed on the roof. This latter job was to have been carried out as soon as the winter ended, it being a cold and unpleasant job whilst the weather was chilly. Unfortunately when winter ended Stefan reported that some of the solar panels delivered to him were damaged and he was having to wait for replacements. As at June 6th we are still waiting for the contract to be completed. We were, however, on a cold day on May 31st, able to start up the central heating and to give it a trial run.

Winter turned into Spring although, right into the first week of June the weather oscillated between warm, even hot, sunny days and chilly, overcast ones. Lyn had a couple of swims in the pool in April and again in late May. But as in most of the rest of Europe, the weather remained very capricious. This did not stop us from furnishing the garden with plenty of colour. Because Geraniums seemed to be going through a bad phase we put more concentration into Petunias, New Guinea Impatiens, Fuchsias, and Lantanas, which had behaved well in the previous summer.



Earlier in the year the Walkers had told us that they had booked on a cruise from Southampton to the Mediterranean in May and that the ship, the “Oceana” was calling at Cannes on the 18th. We both looked forward to seeing them for a few hours and duly arranged to meet them at a chosen spot on the promenade at Cannes. Alan and Jean had shrewdly arranged with the shipboard officer that they would be on early launch ashore when they reached Cannes.

Despite a wasted half-hour whilst each party waited, out of sight of the other but only 100 yards apart, we had a joyous reunion then drove Jean and Alan to our home in Roquefort-les-Pins. We enjoyed taking them round the house and garden and after a drink in the Barn we took them down to L’Auberge du Clos des Pins nearby in the village. Here from the welcoming hospitality of the proprietors Yves and Sally we had an enjoyable lunch. Yves then kindly laid on a taxi to take the Walkers back to their ship at Cannes in time for the resumption of their onward cruise to Livorno and Rome later that evening.



We had planned a week’s holiday in Italy for the 17th May but on hearing of the Walker’s itinerary we had postponed it by one week to start on May 24th.

We had booked at a hotel called Albergo Rigoli in Baveno on Lake Maggiore. This is one of the biggest lakes in Italy, about 23 miles long with its northernmost part in Switzerland. A key attraction for choice of this particular lake is its island – Borromee – renowned for its beautiful gardens.

We set off on a sunny morning for the 240 mile drive, virtually all of it by Autostrada, and expected to take about 3 ½ hours. Halfway across Liguria the weather

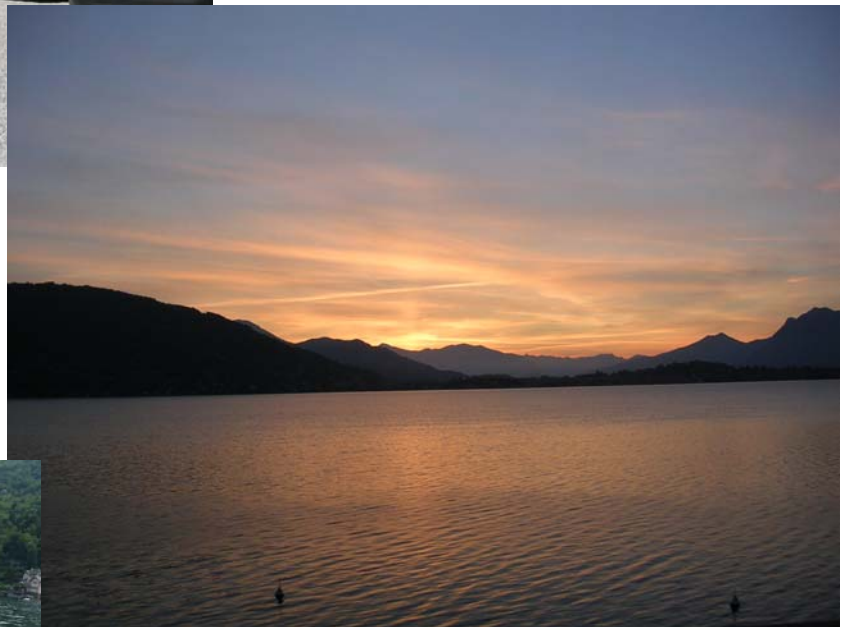
deteriorated, heavy clouds rolled up overhead and we suddenly found ourselves in the middle of a storm complete with thunder, lightning and hailstones the size of marbles. Visibility dropped to a few yards and our speed fell to a crawl. We feared that the stones might smash our windscreen so fierce were they. Driving on the Autostradas in Italy, though fast, is not my favourite pastime at the best of times because one is in and out, constantly, of tunnels which vary in length from 150 yards to over a mile. The eyes are dazzled by sudden darkness followed by brilliant light on emerging from the tunnel. Add to this the storm we encountered I confess we were quite scared for our safety. That endured however, we arrived safely at Baveno, found our hotel and sat down on the balcony overlooking the lake thankfully with glasses of wine.

We liked the hotel, which was clean and modern, with a helpful staff. All we had to do was to change from “Merci” to “Grazie” and to enjoy the beautiful view from our room of the lake and surrounding mountains.



The Albergo Rigoli, Baveno on Lake Maggiore.

Below: Sunset view across the lake from our balcony.



Left: Lyn on boat visiting the islands.

After spending a day exploring we ventured on a package which included a train trip from Baveno station to Domodossola up in the foothills, a change of train for a spectacular ride across the “Centi Valli” (a hundred valleys) to Locarno in Swiss territory at the northern tip of Lake Maggiore to board a boat for the journey down the lake to Baveno. Things did not turn out quite as planned. We got to Domodossola alright, alighted from the train and made for the platform indicating departure for the Centi Valli. After a short wait, when we reflected that Benito Mussolini’s legacy to Italy of making the trains run on time had prevailed to this day, a train duly shunted in to our platform. We boarded it and settled into comfortable seats, looking forward the spectacular journey. Just as the train started to move we heard a tannoy announcement that the train was bound for Milan and Venice. Panic!! A refreshment steward with his wagon of goodies came through the carriage and we quizzed him whether the train made any intermediate stops. He shrugged his shoulders and said he would ask the guard. We had visions of being stuck in Milan for part of our holiday.....

The steward never reappeared but fortunately the train made a stop at Stresa on the lake so we thankfully disembarked and hired a taxi back to Baveno. The tickets we had bought were valid for two days and we did use them for a boat trip on the lake to visit the islands. The boats were full of noisy members of the Master Race which spoiled our enjoyment. Furthermore each of the islands was very crowded with jostling tourists and they were very commercialised with numerous sales stalls. Lyn did explore the gardens on one of the islands, but again there were too many people doing the same.

On one day we drove up the length of the lake to Locarno and then onward across toward Lake Lugano, after which we headed for the eastern side of Lake Maggiore intending to find somewhere quiet for lunch. The roads were very busy and after an interminable wait in a traffic jam near Varese we finally made it to Laveno on Maggiore. We used our normal method of finding a lunch venue – following Lyn’s nose – and again this worked well. Lyn found a restaurant perched up on the hill above the lake and decided to give it a try. The proprietor was very jovial and he introduced us to a very pleasant Piedmontese wine, dry and very light. After lunch we resumed our drive southwards down the east side of the lake, stopping at La Rocca near Angera a medieval castle above the lake, which we explored before moving on round the lake and back to Baveno.



The castle at La Rocca and below the view from its battlements.



On the next day we decided to motor over one of the Alpine passes and we chose the Simplon which is due north of the lake. The drive was quite breathtaking up winding roads and round hairpin bends to the pass at an altitude of over 6000ft. Just over the crest we stopped at a tavern run by a German Swiss. He prepared a lunch of cold meats and cheeses and salad and we ate this on the front terrace of his establishment surrounded by towering snow-covered peaks. We washed it down with an excellent bottle of Swiss Riesling. Before we left we told him that we intended to return to Italy via the St. Gotthard Pass. He said that it was closed to traffic by heavy snow, but that the nearby Nufenen Pass had just been re-opened after clearance of the snow.



On Simplon Pass

Right: The Tavern on crest of Simplon Pass at about 6000ft.



From the Simplon we descended in to the valley below and entered the long glen in the Swiss region of Valais in which the River Rhone rises and begins its long journey down the valley, eventually into Lake Geneva at its eastern end, leaving the lake's western end, proceeding across to Lyon in France before turning south to join the Mediterranean Sea near Marseille.

We followed the valley eastwards and enjoyed many scenes which exemplify Switzerland in our consciousness – lush green valleys with gentle brown cows,

complete with cowbells – evocative of “The Sound of Music”. We eventually reached the turning south for the Nufenen Pass which crests at 2478 metres – an altitude of 8200 ft. It was a beautiful long winding drive up numerous hairpin bends, with, on each side, glorious views of the country below and of the towering snowcapped peaks above. Soon we were driving between banked walls of snow where the snow ploughs had just cleared the highway and as we climbed these banks were in some places up to 10 ft high. The climb was breathtaking, beautiful, and not a little frightening at times as we could peer down just beyond our shoulders and see.....nothing.

Below: The “Roof of the World” or so it seemed at over 8000ft.



Breathtaking is the right word because the air became noticeably thin at 8000 feet!



We descended from the Nufenen Pass and followed the road back to Locarno on Lake Maggiore, then drove down the eastern side of the lake, through the Swiss/Italian border to Baveno. The round trip had involved travelling about 240 miles and had been very exciting.

On the following day we drove eastwards from Maggiore to the Aosta Valley passing many square miles of paddy fields growing rice in the Po Valley. At Aosta we turned right for the Great St. Bernard's Pass, the one reputed to have been used by Hannibal with an army of 10,000, complete with elephants, during his invasion, via Spain and France, of the Roman Empire in the Punic Wars. This pass was only at about 6000 ft and though spectacular, was not nearly as thrilling as either Nufenen or Simplon. Once again we entered the region of Valais in Switzerland and the Rhone, returning to Italy over the Simplon Pass.

Over the next couple of days we did more exploring – to Lake Orta, and we also decided to revisit the restaurant where we had enjoyed lunch near Laveno, in a village called St. Pietro. We had a job to find it but eventually made it only to find that it was closed for the day. So we drove to Laveno and found a place by the waterside for lunch. As we sat down a mighty gale sprang up and all the other diners evacuated their tables and retreated indoors. We endured it al fresco and after a time the gale subsided somewhat.

From this time though, the weather deteriorated steadily and in fact on our last day it became decidedly chilly and unpleasant, forcing us at one stage to spend a few hours inside the Hotel Rigoli in their lounge. So we were not sorry to leave for home on the 31st May as the lake looked inviting. The hotel staff were very kind, presenting us with a complimentary bottle of Piedmontese wine and $\frac{3}{4}$ kilo of Mirtilli Rossi Morbidi – dried cranberries to us – which we had both enjoyed with our breakfast cereals.

The journey home was uneventful, Douglas driving the easy section of autostrada to where it joined the motor road near Genoa for the second, coastal leg of the drive, when Lyn took over. We were both glad to reach home, having thoroughly enjoyed our holiday in Italy. We found that the same weather pattern had affected Provence, (as indeed it seemed to have done to the whole of Europe) – very unseasonal and cold. On the afternoon of our return a noisy storm raged over the Alpes Maritimes, and by five o'clock the nearby mountains up the road from us were capped with snow.....this was 31st May! Our kind neighbours, Monique and Henri Squarciafico had looked after the watering of our beloved plants and we took them a bottle of Champagne as a token of thanks.



Summer arrived with a vengeance. The garden is looking gloriously colourful. We looked forward to more visitors – this time niece Angela and her husband Nick Winter. This restless couple, who have a house near Limoges, have been seeking to move south to the Gers region. They planned also to visit us on their way to Calabria in Italy via Tuscany. They planned to arrive on Saturday the 24th June, to stay the night before proceeding to Italy. We looked forward to this visit. I had always been very fond of Angela and had played a minor role at their wedding celebration in 1970. Lyn and Angela had always got on well, being fairly contemporary in age and sharing a common interest in gardening.

The day before the visit proved to be an eventful one. We experienced two attempted thefts, in broad daylight and whilst we were in our “barn” within two hours of each other. This has double glazed sliding doors on two sides. Whilst sitting there, enjoying a break from work, I noticed a reflection in these doors of a person walking along the back of the house. Thinking momentarily it was one of the workmen possibly to do with the central heating project I then realised that the gates to our property were shut and locked. As we jumped up from our chairs and Lyn shouted a challenge the intruder bolted. We had heard about the cool way in which opportunist thieves, often drug driven, might walk in uninvited and grab anything which might look valuable. We returned to our chairs congratulating ourselves on having frightened the villain off. Half an hour later we heard strange noises but initially thought it was the workmen building a pool in the garden of the house opposite. Shortly afterwards we heard more suspicious noises and we sprang up again. Lyn saw the same man at the back of the house; she made after him and I made for the front of the house to cut him off. We caught up with him halfway up our drive and when challenged he asserted that he was staying next door at René Bidault’s house and he trying to recover his daughter’s lost cat which he had spotted on our window ledge. He then made for the front gate, shinned over the wall alongside it and walked briskly away.

We duly reported the intrusion to the Domaine Neighbourhood Watch and an hour later received a visit by two heavily armed crime officers from the local Gendarmerie – the second visit from police within a week, the earlier one resulting from a complaint by a neighbour about our having had some pine trees felled.

The upshot of these intrusions is that we have had to review our security precautions. Although aware that two upstairs windows were not protected by steel grills we had thought that because this fact was not visible from the road it would not be spotted as a vulnerability. We have now asked the good Dominique to remedy this shortcoming as well as to make it more difficult for would be thieves to vault over the wall alongside our barred and locked front gate. It seems also that our stout front door needs a further review. It is difficult to judge where to stop in considering these precautions; a determined and professional thief will find a way of breaking and entering; it is only possible practically to deter the opportunist villain so that he will seek an easier target.

On the next day, Saturday the 24th June, we welcomed Nick and Angela to our home – a visit which we enjoyed greatly. After a long and hot drive across the south of France they were glad of a dip in our pool and a drink – in that order. We were able to offer them the accommodation for the night of the “upstairs”, which comprises a small bedroom, a bathroom with shower and toilet and our snooker room. They elected to

sleep under the snooker table. In the event it was too hot for much sleep for anyone. We had dinner at the nearby Auberge du Clos des Pins and on return home a dip in the pool was welcome before retiring to bed. Nick and Angela left to continue their journey into Italy at about 8 a.m., promising to stay again on their way back.



Post-script: Now it is 19th July – another day which promises, or threatens, to be hot and sweltering. Yesterday Dominique completed the work required to improve our security from unwelcome intruders.

Firstly, on his recommendation he has beefed up our already substantial front door by fitting a “five star” lock so that only a Tiger Tank could batter it down. He has fabricated and fitted two attractively designed steel grills for the upstairs windows. The design of these enables us still to keep troughs of geraniums on their sills. Finally he has made and erected high steel fencing on either side of our front gate which should serve to deter the opportunist “chancers”.



Left: A new grill upstairs.



Below: Front gate after new fencing.



CHAPTER NINETEEN.

CONCLUSION.

Now, in the middle of July, it is time to wrap up this chronicle and to reflect upon what we have learned and experienced.

Firstly, after an anxious start in which we had to sell up our home in England, find a suitable one in the Riviera, put it into the condition we required, and generally settle into the structure of French life, we feel that we have come through that fairly successfully, albeit with the numerous frustrations on the way.

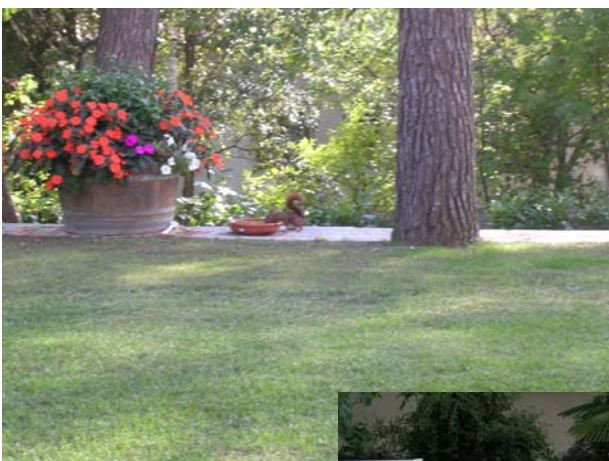
With the French we have learned that when they say they will come and do something for you it is necessary to ask “which day? then “at what time?.” The answer to the latter you need to take with a large pinch of salt, because they do not like to be pinned down. They do not worship our teutonic punctuality. So if they say they will come at 8.30 they may turn up at 9.15 wearing a triumphant smile of accomplishment. Beware, when you have artisans working in the house, of leaving things out which they might find useful for their task. You can leave money around because we have found them to be honest. But we had to replace a new vacuum cleaner because one workman borrowed it to clean up some debris of brick mortar and dust. Two cut glass tumblers disappeared and we found they had been broken carelessly being used to wash down something.

There are various administrative requirements involved in settling in to French life, such as registering the car and obtaining Cartes Vitales for the Health Service. These entail WAITING with lots of patience. This reminds me that we have two more such hurdles to clear:- in January 2007 my driving licence expires and I have to find out the procedure in France for its renewal. At nearly eighty what, if any, medical/optical criteria shall I need to satisfy? Also our Renault Laguna, bought in the UK in January 2003, will need to pass the French equivalent of the MOT test. We wonder what that will entail.

On the bright side we have become accepted in the village as reasonable, even likeable persons and have formed several quite warm friendships. Many times we have been told that the British are not liked in Roquefort-les-Pins because they are regarded as stand-offish. We have done our best to be friendly, and though we do unkindly mutilate their language the French do appreciate the effort to speak it.

We enjoy the ability daily to walk down to the village shops and to choose fresh meat vegetables and fruit for immediate consumption. This is better than the weekly visit to Sainsbury or Tesco which had become our custom in the UK.

We are thrilled with the results of our (mainly Lyn's) gardening since we arrived. There are still large parts of the garden which are unkempt and we are still learning the hard way the lessons of horticulture in this climate and on this rocky soil. But we now have a colourful garden which several neighbours have commented upon. And plants blossom early here and bloom until the late frosts in November or December. So we shall end this with a selection of the sights which we enjoy in Provence.







Above: Christian Cloche
Quincallier (Ironmonger)



Right: Bernard & Monique
Newsagent
Below left:
Gabriel Albala, Dentist.



Below right:
Andrée & Joëlle
The Shoppi ladies.



Left: Philippe, Le Boucher

AFTER ALL THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

NOUS DISONS

OUI!



AND THEY LIVED HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

THE END