

Friends of Compiègne Exchange Visit to Compiègne, 26th to 29th May 2023

The coach party left Ram Meadow car park soon after 6am to ensure that we would arrive in Dover in plenty of time to negotiate the expected customs problems. Fortunately, we were not significantly delayed and having passed the scrutiny of selected bags from the hold (which included the tins of M&S Coronation shortbread for presentation to the committee in Compiègne), we departed on an earlier ferry than expected. As a result, our travellers were surprised to find that we were pulling into Calais instead of Dunkirk! However, this gave us time to stop on the French side, to enjoy our first real 'café-croissant' and arrive in Compiègne earlier than planned, catching some of our hosts by surprise. All was sorted out, though, and we left to spend the evening with our French friends.

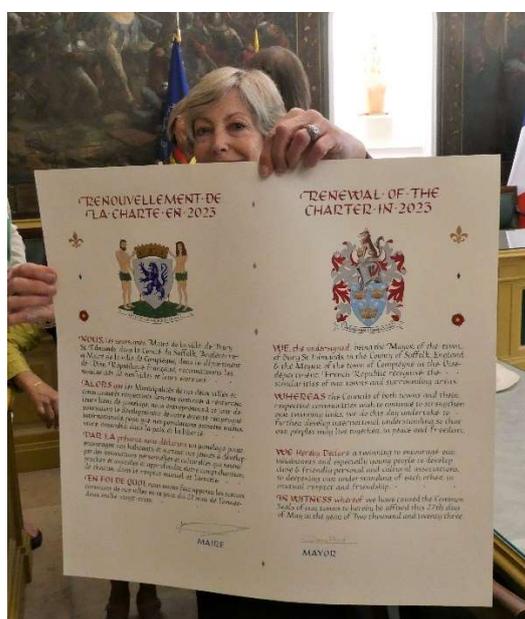
With the addition of three Friends of Compiègne members who travelled independently, our party of 25 with our hosts re-assembled early the next morning at the Town Hall for the most important event of the weekend.



Bury St Edmunds has been twinned with Compiègne since 1967, but the town council took over the mayoral role from the former borough council in 2019. Charter documents, which have been prepared to officially mark this change, were brought to Compiègne to be signed by our Mayor and the Mayor of Compiègne. We were especially proud to have the newly-elected Mayor of Bury St Edmunds, Cllr. Diane Hind, with us as a member of the FoC.



Cllr. Hind jointly signed the charters with Philippe Marini, the Mayor of Compiègne.



The official business was celebrated afterwards by drinks and delicious viennoiserie pastries.

Happily, our visit coincided with the weekend of the 34th annual Foire aux Fromages et aux Vins and many of the party followed Mayor Marini into the Place St-Jacques to see and sample the huge variety of French produce on display.



Saturday afternoon entertainment was organised by our hosts, but many of our group were to be seen at the Musee Antoine Vivenel and the Musee du Cloitre Saint-Corneille in central Compiègne. It was noted that the roses presented previously by the FOC to the town were flowering vigorously in the garden close to the Musee Antoine Vivenel.



Saturday evening saw us meeting up again to enjoy a menu typical of the Picardy region at the restaurant la Ferme du Carendeau. We started with a ficelle de picardie (ham and cheese crepe), followed by waterzooi, a seafood dish with white fish, salmon and mussels. A tasty desert finished the meal which, as usual at these events, was accompanied by local wine.



The warm, sunny, weather continued into Sunday for our official visit to la Maladerie Saint-Lazare in Beauvais. This ancient colony for the care of people with leprosy comprises a church, huge barn and a walled area where the patients used to live. When no longer used as a hospital the site was used to accommodate the poor and was also farmed. Recently having passed to the care of the town of Beauvais it is now a beautifully maintained site for the community and tourism.



Our excellent guide firstly toured the site with the English-speakers, then again with the French contingent. We were surprised to find that, although this was an extensive and well-organised religious site, the large isolation area for patients only housed around 15 people at a time.



The tour took us through the 13th Century barn, now beautifully renovated as an entertainment centre, into formal gardens established in recent times in the style of the original gardens.



After the tour we were fortunate to find several unoccupied tables and chairs in a sheltered corner of the gardens and sat down together to enjoy our picnics.



The official events now over, some members of the group with their French "twins" attended an early evening choral concert at the abbey in the village of St-Jean-aux-Bois. The church with its excellent acoustics was the perfect setting for a superb concert by two choirs- the Madrigal de Compiègne and Cantemus from Germany. Other members enjoyed the remainder of the day with delicious dinners or bbq's prepared by their hosts.

Our return journey schedule on Monday allowed for a stroll through the small and pretty town of Ardres. A boulangerie and the Café du Commerce, everything else being closed, as partly expected due to a bank holiday, provided a welcome break. We could not stay long as we wanted to be on time for our return ferry.



However, delays passing through customs resulted in missing our ferry by the smallest of margins. Being first in the queue for the next one over two hours later was no consolation. However, we were eventually safely delivered back to Ram Meadow by our excellent coach driver, Shane, while still light for the drive home.