

WEDDING OF RACHEL AND ANTOINE IN FRANCE 2013

Friday 3rd May

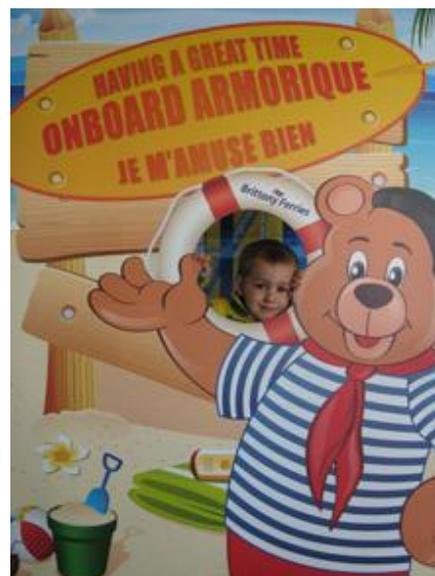
The cases were packed, the weather was fair and we were finally standing on board the *Armorique*, watching Plymouth's historic shoreline recede. 'We' meant Alan and myself, our son Dan, his wife Paula and their children Willow and Piran, plus my mother Irene – all on our way to Angers in the Loire region of France to see our daughter Rachel marry Antoine Gautier the following day at the *Mairie de St-Barthélémy d'Anjou*.

There had been a few hitches prior to this nautical moment, including my mother falling and needing nine stitches in her forehead and the brakes on Dan's car failing on their way to stay overnight with us before the crossing. The most significant event, though, had been the sudden death in February of Alan's brother Douglas, who would have been with us on this happy Anglo-Franco occasion. However, I'm sure he was with us in spirit, not to mention when the champagne and wine flowed the following day.



Au revoir Plymouth

Once we were past the Breakwater, it seemed a good idea to buy some breakfast, or should I say *petit déjeuner*, so we made our way inside for refreshment. The ferry wasn't at all crowded and we occupied some comfortable seats by the window, where we could see it was such a fine, calm day that the horizon was staying remarkably level – in fact we couldn't have asked for a better day if we'd tried and the forecast for the next few days was excellent too ☺



It was more a case of other people amusing them *bien* if you ask me!

The following five hours or so were variously spent – Dan and I helped Alan to prepare his wedding speech, as the preceding days hadn't been at all conducive to this. Great Grandma

Irene was fully engaged for ages with Willow's colouring book (sometimes with Willow too) and Paula went to the play area (with Willow and Piran for company). Alan had booked a cabin on embarkation and so at lunchtime we were able to eat our tuna rolls and crisps in private, while availing ourselves of the small kettle and drink sachets provided, not to mention the small but perfectly formed toilet, sink and shower cubicle. Half an hour before arrival at Roscoff, we had to vacate the cabin, so went outside to watch the ferry arriving under a still mostly blue sky.



Bonjour Roscoff

Before we knew it, we were on real French soil and I had to speak my first real French words to a real French person – but they were only "Bonjour" and "Merci" at the passport control booth, through the car window. Small steps! The drive to Angers then began, while Alan and Dan became accustomed to driving on the right and we all became accustomed to the road signs. Alan's and my first trip from Plymouth to Roscoff had been in 1974 and I was happy to recognise some of the place names from that first trip, including Morlaix, Guincamp and Dinan.

The French roads were good and the speed limits reasonable, so apart from one 'comfort stop' and a longer stop in the early evening to eat cheese sandwiches and cake bars, we enjoyed a smooth journey of about 4.5 hours to the *Hotel du Cavier* in Avrillé near Angers, where Rachel and Antoine met us. It turned out to be hello and goodbye, as a surprise evening meal had been arranged for Rachel and her friends who'd arrived for the wedding, but we had plenty to sort out at the hotel and arranged to meet them at Antoine's parents' house the next morning.

After we'd settled in our rooms, Alan and I decided to locate the hotel bar, but Mum was *très fatiguée* and decided to stay in her room. Dan, Paula, Willow and Piran joined us at the bar, where we sat outside on a still very fine evening, sipping some rather pleasant beer called *Affligem* while Willow and Piran played on a climbing frame. We were all amazed at how well the children had kept up with the day's events and yet still had enough energy to run around like mad ... children. Finally though, we headed to our rooms and the oblivion of sleep.

Saturday 4th May

I think sleep was a little unsettled for most of us, but it was Wedding Day - May the 4th (and the force was happily with us, along with the sunshine). After a pleasant *petit déjeuner* of freshly squeezed orange juice, a bowl of fruit, a croissant and some tea, we whiled away the morning in the hotel until it was time to drive to Antoine's parents' house for a pre-wedding lunch – and to meet Antoine's family for the first time.

Although this was an anxiety provoking situation for an out and out introvert like me, we were met with the utmost friendliness in a lovely house with a beautiful garden. Antoine's father Jean spoke really good English and Antoine's mother Françoise was endearing because she was clearly both excited and a little nervous at meeting us. It seemed she was on a par with Dan and me for understanding the foreign language, but not having the confidence to speak it. She had also unfortunately had an accident with the tuna she'd been cooking especially for non-meat eaters Alan and me, resulting in a hot exploding dish, a piece of which had flown up and scratched her glasses (but at least they had protected her eye).

On our way through the house into the garden, we came across a somewhat lonely Rachel sitting in a room having her make-up and hair done. I was sorry that she was thus unable to join us for lunch and scary conversation with the strange French people, but needs must!

We also met Antoine's brother Julien, his wife Toni and their baby son Jérémie – and slightly later Toni's two friendly and effusive sisters, who'd experienced their own problems (something to do with arriving at their hotel to find everyone outside because of a fire alarm and the news that there was no water at the hotel, so they were unable to stay there and had to find another hotel). It was turning out to be an eventful wedding on several fronts, I'll give it that.

We all sat at two long tables on the patio under a sun shade amid plates of food, bottles of water and bottles of wine, while the Anglo-French conversation flowed (although perhaps a little faltering at times). I did manage to volunteer three French words when Alan was talking about our garden: "Un petit jardin" – a small garden – it was a start! The weather was perfect and despite the forthcoming nuptials, the atmosphere was most conducive to relaxation – even Antoine seemed very laid back for a bridegroom only a few hours before his wedding.

Eventually though, it was time to leave the house and take Rachel back with us to the hotel, where she would change into her wedding dress. There was an interesting development in the car after Alan obeyed the Sat Nav's seeming desire that we should go towards Le Mans and Paris, but it only took about 10 full minutes or so of non-stop panic before Alan was able to turn the car around and head back to the hotel.

We had lost a little time and so the three of us burst into our not exactly large hotel room and set about preparing ourselves for one of the biggest occasions of our lives. There was the usual hectic losing of small items, sudden doubt about clothing and helping each other out with decisions such as whether to wear a petticoat (Rachel, not Alan) and whether to try to do anything about a strand of Rachel's hair that had decided to uncurl itself. It didn't matter – she looked so lovely that I almost had a maternal moment, right there in the hotel room 😊

No time for that, though, we had to move and so we left the room, called for Mum and walked down the stairs and along the corridor in our wedding finery. Mum was a little tottery on her heeled shoes, so Rachel gave her a helping arm, which resulted in a rather special photo:



Tiptoe through the corridor...

At the foyer of the hotel, I could see some of the staff looking at Rachel and smiling – she was smiling, Alan was smiling, I was smiling – lots of people were smiling, it was just one of those very smiley times! Frankly though, it was time to stop the smiling and transport ourselves to the *Hôtel de Ville*. As the father of the bride, Alan rode with Rachel in Julien's white car, while Dan drove Mum and me in Alan's car and Paula drove Willow and Piran in Dan's car – sorted.

There was uncertainty about where to park, but Dan found a place close by. There was also some uncertainty why there was a crowd of people wearing black and all gazing in the same direction as if waiting for something – for a moment Mum and I wondered if it was *de rigueur* to wear black for French weddings, but it turned out to be a funeral at the church opposite. We then thankfully spotted some of our UK compatriots (I have to say UK rather than English at this point, as Dan and family live in Wales and Willow and Piran are both of Welsh nationality).

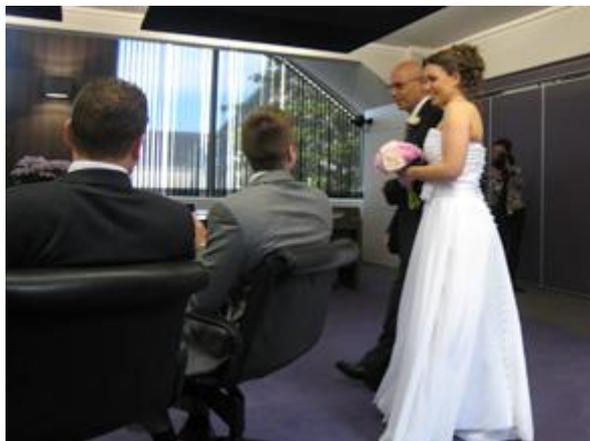
It was good to meet our friends Maureen and David, as well as Paula's family (mother Carol, father John and brother Ian). It's safe to say that the French guests greatly outnumbered the UK guests, but everyone was so happy and friendly that nothing seemed to matter, except smiling – the smiling was in full swing again. However, it was soon superseded by more uncertainty about why everyone was still milling around outside the *Hôtel de Ville* when the bride must soon be due to arrive. In fact, the uncertainty continued when Julien's white car drew up and Alan got out to open Rachel's door, but then got back in the car.



"Hold it, we need to get the mob inside!"

It transpired that this was because Antoine's friend Thibaut had rushed over to impart the news that we should indeed all have been inside waiting for the bride. So, the car doors remained firmly shut while there was a refined rush into the *Hôtel de Ville*, up the stairs to the *Salle des Mariages* and finally to our comfortable seats. Already seated in front of the large official table were Antoine with his two witnesses (brother Julien and friend Thibaut) and next to the place where Rachel would sit, her two witnesses (brother Dan and friend Sarah).

The English people were given a translated copy of the proceedings, which was a thoughtful touch. It was also sensible, as otherwise we wouldn't have understood much of either the legal content of the marriage or the "History of Rachel and Antoine" comprising a short account of Rachel and Antoine and their ancestors. We were perusing this, when there was an expectant hush and we saw Alan leading his beautiful daughter into the room where she would be married. She's mine as well, don't forget! I think it was a heart moving moment for both of us.



"Over to you, Antoine!"

Kay Santillo, 2013.

The ceremony began and although the key players were sitting with their backs to us, the atmosphere throughout was light, friendly and happy. There were three main speakers, the leading one being the Deputy Mayor who had taught Antoine at school. There was another lady who read out some of the legal sounding material and then another lady from the 'congregation' who came forward and read out the family histories. They were all lovely people (the ladies rather endearingly uncertain about reading out our English names and addresses) and there was much smiling in the *Salle des Mariages*.

Unlike the English wedding ceremony, Rachel only had to say one word in response to the question: "Rachel Kay Santillo, do you consent to take Antoine Henri Bernard Gautier present here for your husband?" The answer was "Oui." Yes! I clearly heard Rachel say "Oui" but whether for humorous effect or not, the Deputy Mayor asked her to repeat it a bit louder (more smiling). Next, Antoine answered his corresponding question with a firm "Oui!" The Deputy Mayor then announced: "In the name of the law I declare Antoine Henri Bernard Gautier and Rachel Kay Santillo to be united in marriage." The deed was done!

I found myself smiling not only because I was happy for Rachel and Antoine, but also because Rachel had given her bouquet to Dan in order to have her hands free and I had a good view of him throughout the ceremony looking very fetching as he nonchalantly sat there dutifully holding his sister's bouquet. I also smiled when it was time for Willow and Piran to walk up to the table taking a small posy of flowers that contained the wedding rings. Willow led the way clutching the posy in one hand, while Piran held firmly and resolutely onto her other hand. They both stood there very patiently while Rachel untied the rings from the posy.



Willow and Piran take part in the ceremony

The smiling continued when part of our family history was read out: "It is also of note that the maternal great grandfather of Rachel, William Frederick Goodman, served in the army during the First World War and was wounded in France." At this point the Deputy Mayor stood to one side and indicated (smiling) that behind him was a memorial plaque to the fallen.

I also smiled when after the ceremony, the Deputy Mayor came forward to shake Alan's hand and then mine, but when he came to Mum, he asked if this was Rachel's grandmother. Fortunately I understood and said "Oui", whereupon I suspect to her secret delight, he kissed her soundly on both cheeks. I had been prepared for the cheek kissing in France, but was unsure as to the protocol of who should kiss who, who should initiate and whether it should be just two alternate cheeks, an extra third kiss, or even an overkill fourth. I'm still unsure...

Anyway, it was time to leave the *Salle des Mariages*, trip down the staircase (not literally) and congregate outside the *Hôtel de Ville*. In due course, a lady in a pink trouser suit and the lady who'd read out some of the legal words in the ceremony appeared, each carrying a basket containing rose petals. They walked around asking people to take some of the petals – it was interesting how the English people were very conservative in the few petals they took, while the French people just delved in the basket and took a fistful.

The smiling took off in full flood again when Piran became fascinated with the glass doors of the *Hôtel de Ville* and looked really quite adorable in his grown up suit, tie and buttonhole flower, while behaving exactly like the small boy he is. I was just fishing out my camera from my bag to take his photo, when Rachel and Antoine appeared and the rose petals flew around like ... well, like confetti. The smiling stepped up a notch!



Bombarded with low flying rose petals

There was more post-marital milling around until the Deputy Mayor shut the glass doors (fortunately not with Piran still attached) as if to drop a gentle hint. It worked and the crowd melted away to drive to the reception that was to be held at the evocatively named *Château de la Perrière*. It may have been evocatively named, but we had a bit of bother getting there!

Alan asked Dan to drive his car and we set off following Julien's car, which seemed a safe bet. However, there was confusion about which lane to take at a junction – the same junction that had caused Alan earlier to drive towards Le Mans and Paris. Dan was in the right lane but Julien took the other lane, whereupon Alan became highly agitated (to put it kindly) and Dan obeyed his father's ... agitation. At this juncture, or should I say junction, Julien must have realised his mistake and changed lanes, but it was too late for Dan and we were heading towards Le Mans and Paris again. At least this time we knew we could turn around fairly soon and head in the right direction! After that, it was a smooth ride to the *château*, where we joined the merry throng and wandered around the grounds while many photos were taken.



Monsieur et Madame Gautier

The official photographer was called Delphine and as she darted around artistically with her camera, she did actually remind me of the fey creature Delphine in one of my favourite books, *Cold Comfort Farm*, which caused me to smile yet again. As I stood there, though, gratuitously

Kay Santillo, 2013.

smiling with the immediate members of our family and Antoine's family while Delphine clicked away, I succumbed to a moment or two of unease about the dress I'd chosen to wear – an upbeat little number with a background of pale jade that sported a pattern of many large butterflies in various sizes and colours. I seriously wondered if I should have opted for the more traditional mother-of-bride wedding look, rather than run the risk of appearing to be a closet lepidopterist, but it was a bit too late for such qualms.

Anyway, the *château* itself seemed to lend itself to the somewhat unusual, dating from the 17th century and built on the original site of a 13th century edifice. By 1981 the main building was falling apart, but after 26 years of restoration, it is now used for accommodation and leisure, as well as hosting seminars and artistic events, including the *Festival d'Anjou*. It certainly was in a beautiful setting and the early evening weather remained warm and serene as we were shown into the courtyard and plied with champagne and canapés.



Mum drinks champagne between Maureen & Carol

Antoine's father continued to be as friendly as he'd been at lunchtime, with the halting but excellent Franco-English on his part, the clearly enunciated English on our part and the nodding and smiling on both parts. I don't normally appreciate champagne, but it was perfect for such an uplifting occasion in such a lovely place. I even lived dangerously for a few seconds and accepted a canapé of unknown ingredients. However, as I took one infinitesimal nibble before secretly abandoning it on a secluded place on the unattended table, I realised I was probably still one of the most cowardly food consumers in the entire Western Hemisphere.

No worries, I knew there would be several courses when the food consumption began in earnest – or inside the actual *château*. It seemed quite a long time before we were ushered inside and up the stairs into the *Orangerie* with its atmospheric but cosy wooden vaulted ceiling, but the evening was still young. By the door, Rachel and Antoine had gathered together some old family photos of them both in a heart shaped frame, which lent a familiar touch to a day that had otherwise been far outside my comfort zone.

There were several round tables with predestined place settings and I was unashamedly relieved to be among familiar people – Alan, Dan, Paula, Mum, Maureen and David. Willow and Piran had been assigned a small table to themselves that was just behind ours, while Rachel and Antoine were at a table with friends. As well as our named wedding favours (a strange new custom to the ancient uninformed of the parental generation, imported like so many other strange customs from the USA), there were a lot of glasses on the table, bottles of water and a bread roll each that it was hard not to devour with undisguised hunger.

Willow and Piran were happy to discover that their favours consisted of several items of interest for children, including some bubbles (later enjoyed by a few of the adults) while our intriguing little box of delights contained sugared almonds and some other sweet local delicacy. I should here mention the table number holders that Antoine had fashioned with his own bare hands, afterwards painted to within an inch of their lives by Rachel. They were fantastic table number holders ... yes, fantastic ... well done, you two ☺



A familiar face or two under the vaulted ceiling

We amused ourselves with witty conversation and water until the culinary experience began, the wine flowed and the first course was served. Interestingly, the waiter came along to enquire who were the two vegetarians at our table (Alan and me) before placing before us a large langoustine complete with all body parts, including eyes, reclining on a bed of curried semolina cooked in coconut milk. To be honest, it could have been reclining on a designer bed with a memory foam mattress for all I could eat the poor creature that for its sins had apparently been poached in vanilla!



It's trying to crawl off the plate!

No worries, the next course was poached bass with champagne sauce, accompanied by fondue of fennel, salicornia and fried leek. To this day I'm unsure what the salicornia was, although an internet search reveals it was a herb. I ate the bass, but toyed like the culinary philistine I am with the fondue of fennel and fried leek. I wasn't sure about the champagne sauce, either...

The wine was very good, though, both the *Anjou blanc* and the *Bordeaux rouge*. Alan was certainly enjoying the wine, presumably because of his forthcoming fatherly speech ... which sadly didn't happen, as Rachel came over to tell us that Julien had been feeling rather unwell all day and had decided he wasn't up to making his brotherly speech. In order not to cause awkwardness for Julien, Alan backed out of making public the masterpiece he'd concocted on the ferry, aided and abetted by Dan and me. Well perhaps it wasn't exactly a masterpiece, but it was short, sincere and hopefully humorous (Alan later gave Rachel a copy, so she at least didn't miss out!)

The carnivore course was next (tournedos of beef and potato fondant with *périgueux* sauce), so Alan and I wondered with more than a little anticipation what the French cuisine would conjure up for the two tricky vegetarians. It turned out to be ... vegetables! Yes, a plate of various vegetables that appeared to have been fried. I know the French seem to have a little trouble understanding that some people just don't want to eat meat (for my part, I've simply never liked it) but ... but I somehow didn't expect just vegetables!

It mattered not, the whole atmosphere was so relaxed and happy that the smiling had never really stopped (except when eating, which would have been unadvisable). OK, so I may have looked over a little enviously for a second or two at firstly the melon balls and secondly the *pommes frites* that Willow and Piran were brought, but it passed. Besides, the tabletop party poppers were being popped, the wine was still being poured and the bubbles were being blown. Ian in particular seemed to enjoy bubble blowing, as did David on our table. They did an admirable job at entertaining the children, it didn't go unnoticed ☺



Uncle Ian gets down to the bubble blowing

In their turn, Willow and Piran did an admirable job of entertaining themselves, so that I'm sure their doting mother and father were both massively relieved and secretly proud. As the evening progressed, Willow spent quite a while at Rachel and Antoine's table, chatting away to various people as if she was at least twice her age. Rachel's friend Sarah who had been a witness at the wedding was the friend of Willow's teacher, so there was an instant rapport (which is yet another Anglicised French word). Piran seemed fascinated by the structural wooden posts amongst many other things and although he must have been rather warm, steadfastly refused to remove either his jacket or tie!



"A fine example of French architecture..."

The next course was a plate each of various French cheeses that Dan beside me, being a bit of a *fromage* freak, fell upon with the gusto that the cheeses themselves fully deserved. However, for me the hour was just a bit too late and I was afraid to risk it. I was also holding out for the *pièce de résistance*, in the form of the long awaited profiterole tower. I was a little sad that Rachel hadn't ended up with the *macaron* tower she'd originally desired, but a tower is a tower and to my mind it was far preferable and far more palatable than the traditional English fruit wedding cake.

The lights dimmed and a sense of anticipation descended ... and suddenly there was the profiterole tower, resplendent amid some fireworks that literally sent sparks and also a *frisson* of excitement into the darkened room.



After the fireworks ... and before demolition

Concerning the profiterole tower – and I think it's safe to say that most people were concerned they would be served their fair share – I have discovered it was actually a *croquembouche* (*croque en bouche*, translated as 'melts in the mouth'). This French dessert consisted of choux pastry balls fashioned into a cone shape and bound with threads of caramel. The filling of the balls was *crème pâtissière*, a light vanilla pastry cream, similar to custard. We were allotted three balls each and they were delicious, never mind the late hour!

I have to say that I'm a little unclear about the sequence of events at around this time, which was absolutely nothing to do with the wine. Absolutely nothing. *Mais non*. I recall there was champagne and I recall Antoine taking hold of a microphone and saying French words that sounded really great, if not impossible for my addled English brain to understand. At various times during the evening, Rachel and Antoine had been doing the customary social round of visiting tables – they also spoke to the people sitting at the tables, which was friendly.



Madame Santillo et Madame Gautier

Soon there was an announcement in English that coffee would be served upstairs, which caused puzzled glances at the vaulted ceiling – but the previous announcement in French had been that coffee would be served downstairs, so no cause for alarm or unadvisable athletics. I didn't fancy coffee so close before midnight, so took some refreshing water instead.

In view of the time and the fact that Willow and Piran were incredibly still on their feet, it was decided to take them back to the hotel before they keeled over like zombies – they had been absolutely brilliant and must have been exhausted. I knew Mum was exhausted, but she

womanfully stayed with us when Dan, Paula, Willow, Piran, Carol, John, Ian, Maureen and David all returned to the hotel. I missed them – the English presence had suddenly been reduced by over 50% and I'd secretly wanted to see if Dan would actually dance! I totally understood, though, and was simply happy to be there as the disco lights began to do their discoey thing, Rachel and Antoine moved out to the middle of the floor and their song began: "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" (I find I'm unable to write the grammatically incorrect common rendition of "Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You", as it causes me too much distress).



"You're just too good to be true..."

Despite the fact that they apparently hadn't practised, they looked really natural and confident and people couldn't take their eyes off of them, I mean off them. The dance seemed to last for a long time and all credit to them for keeping up the pace and the grace all the way through. The song eventually ended, though, whereupon Rachel came resolutely up to her dearest father (the only one, actually) and claimed him for the next dance. Now Alan doesn't dance – he really doesn't dance – but for Rachel he did and they both looked fine. I have to say I can't remember what the song was, I was too entranced at the unusual sight of Alan dancing.

I was also interested at the sight of Antoine dancing with his mother and I must say that Françoise definitely threw herself into the spirit of the moment – good for her! I looked across the room and caught the glance of Antoine's father Jean looking a trifle speculatively at me before we each looked away in sudden embarrassment. I did dance with Alan after his success with Rachel, before we both needed to stop and refresh the ageing parts with some cool water.

I'd just finished my glass of water when Rachel came up to me and led me to the dance floor, saying that it was my turn and she'd chosen this song for me. It was Abba's "Dancing Queen" to my astonishment, as many years have passed (many, many years) since I've strutted my funky stuff on a dance floor. It didn't actually matter what the song was, because as I moved to the groove, I was aware of Rachel looking at me and smiling almost continuously and for those few precious, happy moments, everything in the world was right 😊

Abba finished their song and as I looked across at Mum, I saw that she was just about finished too, after an extremely long day. So it must have been at around 01.00 in the morning that we said our goodbyes and left the *château* to ride home in the taxi that had been called for us.

There was a spot of Anglo-French confusion on arrival at the hotel when the taxi driver asked Alan a question, as we didn't have a clue what the poor man was asking. After a lot of puzzled frowns and failed attempts at different words that resulted in Alan putting his head in his hands, the light dawned (but not literally, it wasn't that late). The question turned out to be simply whether Alan wanted a receipt or not. He said yes for the sheer hell of it after all that work and we fled gratefully into the hotel and flopped into bed after an incredibly special day.

Sunday 5th May

It wasn't over – there was to be a post wedding brunch for both immediate families back at the *Château de la Perrière* at midday. I don't think any of us felt particularly immediate as we surfaced after a short night and prepared for yet more socialising – unless you count the fact that Mum was still asleep when Alan knocked on her bedroom door at the pre-arranged time of 09.00 and her ensuing silence for a while caused us both immediate alarm.

Dan, Paula, Willow and Piran were finishing their *petit déjeuner* in the dining area when we arrived for a bowl of fresh fruit, a croissant with jam and a most welcome cup of tea. There was unfortunately no kettle in the bedrooms, so we'd been unable to make ourselves a life saving brew. *Quelle horreur!*

We met up with Dan and family later in the grounds of the hotel to while away the hour or two before Rachel and Antoine were due to call by the hotel to collect Alan, Mum and me (as our car was still at the *château*). It turned out to be closer to two hours, as an incoming text mentioned a "GPS malfunction" concerning Antoine's confused Sat Nav and the notorious junction to Le Mans and Paris.

It felt a bit odd to greet the French family members all over again at the same venue as the day before and I must confess to feeling it was a step too far, but I realise I'm a very reserved specimen of an English woman and I fully concede that somebody more extrovert would really appreciate the fact that the French clearly know how to make the most of a celebration!

The brunch was a buffet (another French word, originally referring to the sideboard on which the food was served) and was excellent, with a wide range of salad, cheeses, meat for carnivores, quiches (French!) and many other delights. There was a choice of wine, fruit juice or water at each table, although it didn't appear that many people took advantage of the wine.

The atmosphere was once again very relaxed, with laughter and smiling amid the comestibles. Some people had to leave early, including Dan, Paula, Willow and Piran, who were on their way to spend the rest of the week on holiday in a *gîte*. They unfortunately missed the desserts, one of which there was no way I could resist – because I was able to achieve an ambition of many years by eating *gâteau* in the *château*, in honour of the brilliant "'Allo 'Allo" television series.

Rachel had come to sit with us at our table and I was intrigued when a lady from Antoine's family approached to speak with Rachel, because she referred to Mum as Rachel's *mamie* (grandma in English, whereas *grand-mère* is the more formal grandmother). After the brunch had lasted for about three hours, we were undeniably flagging and Rachel herself confessed to being tired, so we decided it was time to take our leave.

I never really like saying goodbye, although in this case it actually was *au revoir*. I perceived that Antoine's father Jean was a little uncertain how to say *au revoir* to me and so I aimed my right cheek at his right cheek and we managed a decent two-cheeked farewell. Antoine's mother Françoise kindly attempted to thrust a flower bouquet from the wedding into our hands, but it would have been too awkward on the journey back. She seemed intent on giving the flowers to us, so I was driven to explain in French: "Trop difficile!" Too difficult - at which she smiled encouragingly and nodded her head to indicate I'd done well. *Pas mal peut-être...*

Rachel and Antoine walked outside with us to say *au revoir* at the car and so we left the new Monsieur et Madame Gautier on a beautifully sunny Sunday afternoon in France and headed towards the city of Angers. The plan was to park somewhere and stroll slowly (with Mum) perhaps by the river or just somewhere pleasant. I was excited to drive past the huge castle that Rachel had mentioned, as I was beginning to realise that Angers has a fascinating history.

Before the French Revolution, it was the capital of the province of Anjou and for centuries was an important stronghold in the north west of France. It was the cradle of the Plantagenet dynasty and the old medieval centre is still dominated by the massive *château* of the *Plantagenêts*, which houses the famous Apocalypse Tapestry, the biggest medieval tapestry ensemble in the world. Impressive!

I wasn't surprised that we had a little trouble finding somewhere to park, but Alan managed to locate a spot along the roadside where I noticed the parking meter said: "sauf dimanche" – except Sunday. Alan and I thus set off in high spirits, but it was soon very obvious that Mum was struggling – she'd worn her heeled wedding shoes to the brunch and hadn't thought to put her more comfortable flat shoes in the boot of the car. It was impossible to walk anywhere with her limping painfully, so we had no recourse but to go back to the car and return to the comfort of the hotel.

After supplying her with plasters, we just stayed in our rooms and sadly wasted the beautiful afternoon and early evening. I consoled myself with reading some brochures I'd picked up from the hotel foyer and vowed that we'd return to Angers by ourselves to fully investigate the wonderful castle and the other significant places of such a historically important city.

To stave off any hunger, we ate some leftover rolls and other food from Friday, before walking (in flat shoes) to the bar, where we sat outside while Alan and I had an *Affligem* beer and Mum had a coffee. Soon afterwards Maureen and David appeared and sat with us to chat before going inside to eat a meal they took more than a little time and deliberation to order – I'm not casting aspersions (if anyone still does that these days) as none of us were completely sure what delights the French menu was offering!

As we all sat there in the slowly cooling evening air, Maureen and David told us how they'd spent the day in Angers walking around and visiting various places of interest, including the castle, complete with its Apocalypse Tapestry. I tried not to be envious and in fact I was genuinely pleased that they'd made the most of the day – and even more determined to visit Angers properly ourselves later on.

We finished our drinks, Maureen and David disappeared inside the bar and it was time to call it a day, or *un jour* since we were still in France. The sky remained a tranquil shade of blue as we meandered back to the main hotel building and up the stairs to our rooms. Before we'd left home, I knew the long weekend would soon pass by, but I was still surprised at just how quickly it had managed to do so.

Monday 6th May

We arose at 07.00 on another sunny morning and went downstairs to the dining area for our final *petit déjeuner*, where Maureen popped in on her way out (?) to the car to say they were heading off already and perhaps we would see each other on the ferry.

We soon left the hotel ourselves and began the drive back to Roscoff, which was a little tedious but went quite smoothly on the whole. After a short while Alan stopped for petrol at a roadside *aire*, one of the regular stopping places vaguely akin to English motorway service stations and then later at another *aire*, where we had a *café au lait* and used the dodgy toilet facilities. Enough said...

At our third *aire* stop at lunch time, we sat outside at a wooden bench to eat some leftovers from Friday (except that I wasn't feeling strong, so gave the leftovers a miss) and to have a cold drink bought from the shop there. I walked up to the toilet block with Alan, looked inside and walked out again – obviously not that desperate!

After that it wasn't all that far to Roscoff, where we stopped to buy some wine, as you do. Dan had told us that WBS (Wine Beer Supermarket) was a good place, easily recognised by a red double decker bus outside the store. I was pleased when I caught sight of the bus and was able to stop Alan from driving straight past it – nobody likes to miss a bus.

Mum stayed in the car while Alan and I went inside and wandered slightly dazed amid the racks and boxes. In the end Alan asked for help, which was freely given and very ... helpful. We bought four boxes of wine and felt undeniably pleased with ourselves as Alan set about packing them into the car boot. Mum asked how long all that would last us – I thought of replying: "Oh, about a week," but bottled out.

We were in plenty of time, but instead of parking somewhere pleasant for a while, Alan felt he would rather go straight to the ferry terminal. I suppose we weren't sitting there for all that long in a queue in the glaring heat, with not a lot to gaze at except Brittany Ferries' recurring message sign wishing us a pleasant voyage in English and French. There was a bit of excitement when a group of three uniformed people approached, opened the boot, my door to look inside the glove compartment and all the other doors to look inside the car – it was a good job we'd realised they were customs officials, as they weren't especially communicative.

Not long afterwards we were allowed to drive onto the *Armorique* and Alan again booked a cabin. We stood outside to watch the ferry leave, but soon went inside and bought a hot drink. The weather was fine and dry, but there was a bit of a breeze and Mum seemed tired. There were more passengers on the ferry this time because it was a Bank Holiday, but it still wasn't horribly overcrowded – I really was most favourably impressed with the *Armorique*.



Au revoir Roscoff

After a visit to the shop, we retired to the cabin for the rest of the voyage and thus didn't see Maureen and David, although we weren't deliberately trying to avoid them! The bunks were quite comfortable and Alan actually fell asleep. Indeed, I found it quite soporific reading my book with the gentle rhythmic swaying of the ferry, although I didn't succumb – I never like to succumb in public. We used the small kettle for another hot drink as the coastline appeared and we could gradually make out familiar landmarks.

The rest of the time until we docked passed quickly enough and we were soon driving off the *Armorique* and on to Plymouth soil – or Plymouth concrete to be pedantic. There was just a perfunctory checking of passports before we left the ferry port and were free to return home after what had been a unique few days.

I can't honestly say I ever imagined Rachel would be married to a French man in a French *Hôtel de Ville*, followed by a reception in a French *château*, but that only goes to show how life can be full of unexpected surprises. It was wonderful to see her so happy and looking so beautiful and it felt like a privilege to be welcomed so warmly by the Gautier family. I feel as if I will look back on "The French Wedding" for many years to come and will always remember it as a truly magical experience!