

Cruising the French Canal du Bourgogne

by Jules Dussek

1st to 15th July 2013

At the Bar du Centre in a small village deep in the countryside of Burgundy an old man, alone at the bar stares into his glass of red wine and grumbles. Across the street a pretty young girl waves and smiles at someone she knows. You look to see, and there is nearly always a grey haired, portly man in grubby working clothes. She crosses the road to kiss him on both cheeks.

Along the canal towpath there is a flash of black Lycra and a whirr of wheels as a peloton of brightly coloured cyclists pours past.

We were sad to leave Auxonne where we had been made so welcome at Port Royal by Roy and Carol. Beside the marina the swan was still sitting on her nest, built high above the previous month's flood level. Six weeks she will sit whilst at night a loud chorus of frogs will keep her company.



Auxonne



The marina

The diesel station at St. Jean de Losne, our first stop, had broken down and would be *en panne* at least until after the weekend; so we went without.

The first lock of the fifty five that we would have to do during the week was a little daunting. We remembered the routine of slipping the rope over the bollard that is six feet above your head whilst the skipper is positioning Pluto so as not to scrape her or knock into the walls of the lock dripping with water and mud. We rewarded ourselves with a beer and before we had finished it the next lock was in sight. In fact locks would be in sight until we got to Dijon, twenty-one locks away. It's a dismal canal here, straight, weed infested and running parallel to a motorway. The lock keepers, *éclusiers*, were nearly all students and even the females managed an uninterested nonchalant pout.

Apparently there is huge demand for these temporary summer jobs as lock keepers and as a consequence successful applicants are only allowed a four week stint which means they are

very inexperienced. We asked one girl what the speed limit for the canal was. She did not know. "Why should I?" she said.



A typical lock

Dijon! What images it conjures. Moutarde de Dijon, so French. M F K Fisher the eccentric and brilliant American food writer spent formative years there with her husband studying at the university. The Dukes of Burgundy had their palace there. We had eaten at a two rosetted restaurant there. Canals however have their own way. They lead you in through the back door, the seamy side, through the industrial complexes, miles of desolate industry, as depressing as Manchester or Genoa. There are towering silos of mustard, we're told from Canada, ready to be reduced to pretty pots.

Sadly the so called marina did little to raise spirits. It was weed ridden, the pontoons rickety and sharp pointed, the captainery closed presumably because it was a Sunday.

In our past Mediterranean life we have always noticed how families take their children and babies out in the evenings and walk along the marina area long after our English children would have been in bed. They smile at us and we smile at them and exchange a good evening greeting in the appropriate language. In Dijon we were by the municipal park and next to the tow path. As usual there was a constant stream of families out walking. Few spoke to us, except one American and one Armenian family with baby. The young wife spoke perfect English, unlike her husband, and was clearly enjoying using her English. We couldn't quite work out why they had come to France. She did not enjoy living in down town Dijon and spoke rapturously about how lovely Armenia was and that we should go there. The park was full of children playing until 10pm at night.

We were happy to leave. Or, more precisely, we would have been happy to have left. Due to a 'failure of communication' between the lock keepers and between us and them we sat in an empty lock for an hour and a half waiting for someone to arrive. The problem is that there is no way of asking for help. The lock keepers' cottages have largely been sold off as holiday homes and the keepers, the *éclusiers* are only contacted by mobile phone, *portables*

as they are called in France and nowhere in the lock is there any indication of a number to call. So you wait, have coffee, read a book and eventually someone will arrive. Nowadays an *éclusier* will have several locks to look after and rushes from one to another along the towpath on a scooter. In this case 'our' *éclusier* had gone up three locks to bring some boats down. It is just no use being in a hurry on the canals. We weren't anyway and the skipper is now totally relaxed. He knew too that once through this lock it would be nearly midday when there is an obligatory closure for an hour. In France the lunch hour is sacrosanct, and in the heat it is very welcome.

And then there was another problem. The canal around Dijon is weed infested, *herbe* they romantically call it, but this weed clogs the cooling water on the boat. We check our *herbe* filters every few hours but unfortunately some Germans on a very expensive power boat, a Linssen, a Rolls Royce (BMW?) of boats had been less diligent and the *éclusier* told us their motor was blocked with the *herbe*. (Did he have a slight smile as he spoke?) It was pulled ignominiously out of the lock it had been blocking and parked in the rushes at the side of the canal. There was much German shouting, of which the *éclusier* seemed oblivious.

Gradually the canal became more and more attractive. Flat fields became wooded hills, straight lengths became twisty, tiny villages flanked the waterway. Alongside, the tow path had become a cycleway, smooth, tarmacked, similar to the one we had met on the Canal du Centre, the one from Nantes to the Black Sea. Cyclists in racing (racy?) gear tore past, oddly to us often followed by roller bladers, like speed skaters, arms folded behind their backs, head down and going shatteringly fast. It seemed mad to us, we travel at five miles an hour.



Our maximum was 13 locks per day after which we were very hot and bothered. At Velars we were even rather pleased to get into the cool refreshing supermarket to cool off.

A charming Dutch couple with their daughter moored behind us in the lock. In the lock we were handed two perfect cups of cappuccino coffee in a china cup. Inevitably we struck up a conversation with them and met up with them at the next stop. The husband was living in Germany, but in the Dutch air force working with NATO. His wife was a nurse and both spoke perfect English. They had chartered yachts in the Ionian and had sailed a lot in Holland. We invited them on board for a drink and to see a sailing boat and then we parted company. These brief encounters are memorable even though you know that you will never see them again.

The next encounter was at Gisse with a Swiss couple who were on a seven week tour of the canals of France in a large hire boat, one with eight berths. And there were only two of them. This was also a memorable encounter. They were looking to fill up with fresh water but it seemed there was no water from Dijon to Pont d'Ouche, our destination, several days away. Madame was particularly loud and demanding with the lock keepers and we were pleased that they went on ahead and we would not see them again.

At Gisse we moored in the most tranquil spot a long way from any village. We were told that we were the only boat on that stretch of canal. That is, after the Swiss had passed through. We didn't hear their engine as they approached but Madame could be heard shouting from the bows. No boats passed for the rest of the day. Here we were totally out of contact with telephone and radio reception, more isolated than being at sea off the coast of Albania. A strange sensation. How have we become so dependent on communication every minute of the day?



Below Gisse lock

We were nearing our summer resting place, Pont d'Ouche just a few miles away but there was one more important stop to be made. The Abbaye de la Bussière had a Michelin Rosette, was said to be sumptuous and we had already booked supper there.

La Bussière is a tiny village with two locks and the *éclusière* had suggested that we moor just below the upper lock, above which is an actual mooring place with bollards. In fact we had rendez-vous'd with our friends the Banburys there twelve years ago. (We had forgotten this, they reminded us when we got back to England.) The *éclusier* in the upper lock concurred. He spoke excellent English having been in the French Navy and described to us the flooding that had occurred this winter. We were thus surprised to be shouted at by the skipper of a barge coming downstream out of the lock. He was very agitated and said that where we were moored made us invisible to him coming out of the lock and he had nearly hit us. We mentioned this to the English speaking lock keeper. 'Yes,' he said, 'they can't see you as they come out of the lock.'



The mooring where we were invisible

But this was all inconsequential compared to the forthcoming visit to the Abbey. We cycled there in the afternoon to find where it was. Gastronomic events require planning. It was further than we thought. The almost mountainous countryside of the valley of the river Ouche is glorious and the drive up to the abbey looked imposing. Not having a Ferrari we hid our bikes in some bushes and walked up. Entering the abbey itself we were met by a man in gardening clothes who asked what we were doing. When we said we were dining there he welcomed us and suggested we wander round the glorious abbey which was now a hotel. We did. He was the owner. We also realised that the Cistercian monks had lived in an astoundingly affluent way.



The Abbaye de la Bussière

The meal was memorable. We sat on the terrace and drank Puligny Montrachet, we wouldn't have done if we had known the price, and watched a Ferrari growl up the long drive beyond which were two Shetland ponies grazing freely. The seven course meal was well worthy of the Michelin rosette and when we had finished the owner again met us and chatted informally about his family and his development of the Abbey; truly memorable, as was the bike ride back. We eventually pushed the bikes rather than wobble into the canal.

Finally we arrived at Pont d'Ouche, a tiny marina about five miles away. It is owned and run by Bryony, an Englishwoman who has made her home in France; it consists of a café and about twenty berths. Bryony is as large as life and has an infectious laugh. She does everything herself. She's café manager, cook, berthing master (mistress?). She's wonderful and legendary along the canal. We were amused to hear that the owner of the Abbaye de La Bussière brings his family up for a Sunday roast along with a mountain of Bryony's chips.



Pont d'Ouche



The view from the boat

And that is where we are leaving Pluto for the summer.

Canal de Bourgogne

4th September – 25th September 2013

The medieval town of Troyes is a gem. We always pass by on the motorway but this time we stopped for the night. It has many timber framed houses with overhanging eaves on the top floor like eyebrows. The roof tiles were wooden and we were delighted by the humorous, eccentric woodcarving on the beams. The Hotel Arlequin was a typical small French hotel in the centre of the city. Our hotel room had a large marble fireplace, ornate mirror and creaking wooden floorboards. Hidden in a small alley between overhanging buildings is the restaurant Valentino, recommended in the Guide Michelin and as it was the time of our wedding anniversary it was the obvious place to dine. It was difficult to find, even knowing where it was supposed to be. We found out why. It is September and it was shut for that month. France Fermée .



Typical Troyes



The Hotel



The summer heat was still with us as we left Troyes the next day. Pont d'Ouche is a haven deep in the Burgundy country side with a view of woods and fields of grazing, creamy coloured Charolais bullocks, the breed that makes the delicious fillet steaks. We could hear Bryony's infectious laughter before we were out of the car and Pluto was moored where we had left her and all was well. She had not played any tricks on us.

We had already decided that we would not cook that night as there was a nice little restaurant only two miles away along the canal. It was though shut on Thursdays, this being of course a Thursday. The hotel/restaurant at Pont d'Ouche which had closed earlier this year because of flooding had still not re-opened and probably never will. Further along at Crugey there was yet another restaurant, also apparently closed. Bryony said that it was under new ownership but after being open a few months the owners had gone on holiday. She said the French have no idea of real work. President Bush famously said the 'The trouble with the French is they don't have a word for Entrepreneurism.' They do, they just don't understand what it means.

On the last day of summer we drove to Migennes, our winter destination for Pluto, left the car and came back by train to Dijon and then the bus to Pont d'Ouche, a fifty minute journey which cost 1.5 Euros. It was packed with college students who did not appear to understand queuing. Competitive boarding is the system. They sat crammed, not talking to each other but absorbed by their mobile phones. We sat in the back seat, it was fun.

At last Pluto was on her way. It was autumn and raining a little as we left Pont d'Ouche. We did eight locks with the itinerant lock keepers who man the locks for you and accompany you from lock to lock on their scooters tearing along the tow path to the next lock. This is because the attractive lock side houses are now rented out or sold. We are controlled by the lock keepers who need to know what time you will leave each morning and where you are going to stop for the night each evening. There is the obligatory one hour lunch stop from 12 to 1. This suits us fine as we are usually hungry and tired after three hours of travelling. There is so little distance between the locks on this canal that we do not even have time to make, let alone drink, a cup of coffee before arriving at the next lock.

There are lady lock keepers too, some young lock dollies and some jolly plump ones.

At Vandenesse en Auxois we spent the night. We had been here fifteen years before with friends on their boat. Nothing had changed. We had dinner at the local restaurant, open, fortifying ourselves for the next day's challenge. We had specific instructions to follow behind the *bateau promenade* through the next section of locks starting at 2.30 and we must not be late and we must behave ourselves. We would have an audience of promenaders and we were the cabaret. However this gave us time for a walk in the morning to visit famous Chateauneuf. The castle towers spectacularly on the hill above, looking like a French Colditz. The village and chateau rival Carcassonne on the Canal du Midi but remain unspoilt, unlike Carcassonne which has been 'Disneyfied' and totally ruined.



Vandenesse en Auxois



Chateauneuf

We were sad to see so few shops in each of the villages and this was the case throughout this canal. As usual, either they were closed for an annual holiday or more often had closed forever. Luckily we had stocked up before we left but we were pining for those fresh croissants and warm baguettes that we remembered.

We acquitted ourselves well following the *bateau promenade*, perhaps to the promenaders' dismay and the next challenge on the following day was to go into the three kilometre tunnel. Our lights were checked, we were given instructions and a VHF radio to call for help in case of engine trouble in the tunnel and with our life jackets on we entered the long cut into the eerie twilight of the tunnel underworld. Sections of the tunnel were lighted and some were dark. It took nearly an hour of intense concentration for the skipper to steer a straight course for such a long time but finally we were flushed out of the underworld into a sunlit haven of green trees.





The sun was shining a few locks later as we were moored at a pretty quay in the village of Pont Royal. Painted large over the door of a house by the quay was *Boulangerie* but sadly it was now a house, the *boulangerie* long gone. The restaurant though was open, and this was a Monday. It did a fixed price, twelve euro meal, these are few and far between. Salivating and not able to believe our luck we went for an early supper but it had closed, being only open for lunch. Then the lock keeper came to tell us that there was a strike the next day. We had a flight of fifteen locks to do and the young man was on his own. In order to see us through each lock the lock keeper may have to walk around the lock up to six times to open and shut the four gates. Nevertheless he valiantly promised to get us to the next stopping place by lunch time and then we would wait and see if we could go any further. It would be a tour de force.

We travelled in company with a charter boat and it rained, and rained. There were two people on the charter boat, Germans, both much younger than us. They went into each lock first and then having dropped a mooring line over a bollard the wife would run back, put the mate's bow line on a bollard and continue running to close one of the lock gates. We offered to help but she said she enjoyed the exercise. She did this for all fifteen locks. We were all exhausted when the lunchtime stop came and our lock keeper who had had to do all the locks himself said that he would do no more either. Remember that he had to 'do' our lock, set it up for the next boats, if any, coming after us and then rush on his moped to the next lock to try and get there before us and get that lock ready. For fifteen locks! And it rained all the time. We were quite relieved to have a forced halt at midday. The cruising guide said that there was an excellent restaurant at the last lock we had passed before stopping, so good that we really needed to book. However, this is France Fermée. It had shut, it would never reopen, it was now a sad decrepit café.

We had a restful afternoon in preparation for the next day to Venarey, only ten kilometres, but, there were twenty nine locks. Venarey should have been the ideal stop. The quay was owned by a charter company and there was electricity and water plus showers in the charter company offices. However, there was a goose who thought she really owned the quay and she had marked her territory with goose droppings all along the quay. It was impossible to step ashore without treading

in her offerings. We washed them all away but when we returned she had defaecated with increased vigour. We later found her marking her territory on the office steps of the charter company.

How different France is. Despite French law that there is no smoking in the workplace the office reeked of stale cigarettes. We were given a key to turn on the water and electricity but it didn't work because it was the key to the clerk's BMW. Although there were no shops nearby there was a supermarket 500m away, or so the hoarding said. In continuous rain, after the twenty nine locks, fighting the goose and not driving a BMW we set off very weary. Half an hour later we found the supermarket. A recommended restaurant on the way was of course shut and there was no bar to rest in all along the way, France Fermée again. Nor surprisingly was there a café within the supermarket, but, there was a Macdonalds.

The next day was a day of rest.

As may be apparent, we were becoming a bit disillusioned with Burgundy, not at all like the tourist descriptions. Where were the bars and restaurants we expected? The rough old town of Montbard produced an answer. The Calypso pizza bar/restaurant was marvellous. It was thrumming as families poured in, children, grannies, tracksuit bottoms and anoraks, merry banter, good and cheap food and even cheaper wine. At last France was alive.



Ancy-le-Franc

Ancy-le-Franc has an excellent chateau, 1544-1550, of great importance because it is one of the first chateaux in France in the style of the Italian Renaissance and it has magnificent paintings on the

walls of nearly all the rooms. But, as we went round, we realised that they were all of awful scenes, battles, decapitation, blood and gore; even the bedrooms had ghastly scenes on the wall. Given that this was a renaissance building, where were the cherubs with lovely bottoms, the bathukolpian beauties, the men in scrotal exaggerating tights, the angels? Nowhere, but the anal dilatation and genitalia of frightened horses were exquisitely portrayed in vivid battle scenes.

But, it was open on a Sunday, as was the recommended restaurant in the hotel where we had Sunday lunch. Fortunately we had booked as it was full, enjoyable because it was typical of Sunday Lunch in France. Full of families in their Sunday best, quiet, discrete, but typical of middle range, middle price restaurants. It reinforced our impressions of travelling over a thousand miles in France. The good restaurants are very good and expensive and the cheap ones are often excellent, serving well cooked regional dishes, quite frequently better cooked than the more posh ones.

But the middle of the road restaurants, the ones not in the Michelin guide are all similar. And they are not cheap. The 'starters', delicious patés and terrines, could, and probably are, all bought from the local boucherie. The 'mains' are cooked in house but the desserts are also mostly bought in. We had a classic crème brûlée. A few days later we had an identical one in a café, identical right down to the glazed brown bowl. Crème brûlée, crème caramel, tarte au pommes, glacés, probably none made by the restaurant. In Burgundy though, you can be sure the cheese selection will be fantastic. Trying to limit the choice we asked for local cheeses only, the waiter showed us a dozen, all perfect; and you are unlikely to find a poor wine on the wine list, as long as you stick to Burgundy.

Next stop Tanlay, another most beautiful chateau in France, also Italianate, but unlike its sister nearby which was even open on Sunday, Tanlay was closed on Tuesday and inevitably we were there on Tuesday. The surrounding restaurants and shops closed in sympathy. Who would want to do anything in Tanlay when the chateau itself is closed?



Tanlay Chateau

It's a beautiful chateau with a mile long drive up to it, a gatehouse almost a mini chateau in itself and a glorious symmetrical front with rounded turrets and an ornamental moat. These fortified chateaux weren't meant for fighting. The Duc de Tanlay's family, Coligny, still live there. They survived the revolution apparently having been such good landlords to the villagers that the villagers ganged up and defended their lords. Sumptuously decorated with not a disembowelling in sight it is still a desirable residence though in one turret, hidden away, there was a painting in the cupola on the ceiling. Not a painting but a scurrilous cartoon depicting the king as a Greek god wearing nothing but a laurel wreath on his head. His mistress Diane de Poitiers was a nymph, also lightly clad. The ministers and courtiers were also caricatured mercilessly in the style of a Greek myth. Perhaps it had been considered offensive, since it had been painted over and later discovered again during renovation.



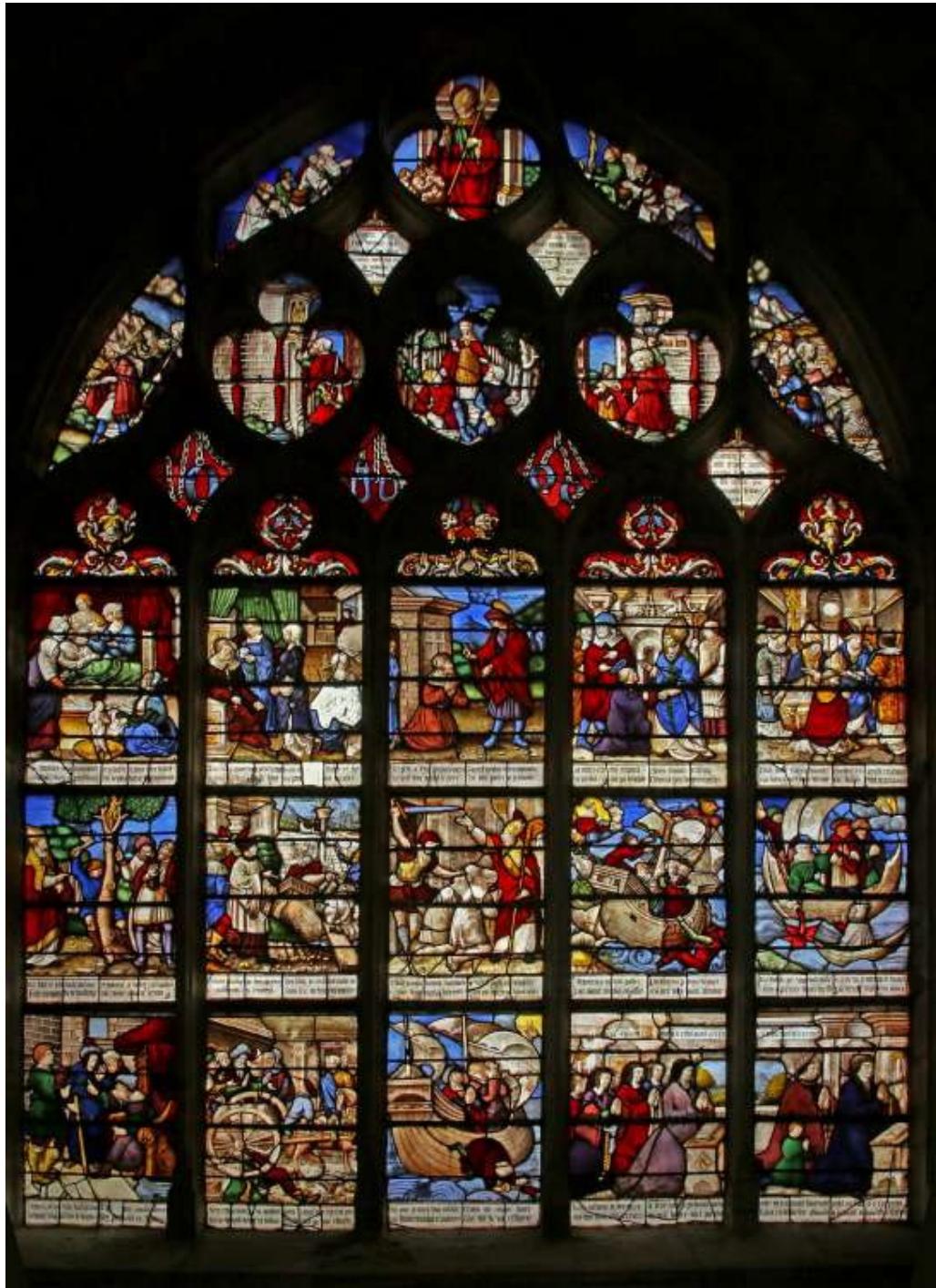
The naughty cupola.

On the quay there was a simple café with a basic menu of freshly cooked typical French food. It was packed full in the evening. There was cheerful banter at the bar, a carafe of wine was 3 Euros and the food was very good. Faith in France was restored. Sod the chateau. In Croatia a mooring with water and electricity would be 60 Euros, here it was free.

We were now very near our destination and hops between overnight stops were getting shorter. We had only nine kilometres and six locks to go to Tonnerre. But it was to be an interesting journey. We found ourselves travelling with a charter boat. The blokes were huge and, well, blokey. The females stayed in the cabin, it was raining '*comme une vache qui pisse*'. There were tiny children, even a baby. The inside of the cabin looked like a rowdy bar at closing time with loads of spirit bottles, half open wine bottles, empty beer bottles. The females seemed to be trying to empty the remains. And this was breakfast time. The blokes spoke a little English with a very thick foreign accent and appeared reluctant to come out of the wheel-house and get wet in the locks, perhaps unsurprising as they had no wet weather clothes, just jeans and tee shirts. Half, or completely, pissed they were happy for us to take their lines round the bollards but as the day went on they too started to take an active part in locking. They were just jolly Poles on holiday.

Mooring rings or posts at Tonnerre are sparse and we, having found a good place indicated to the Poles there was space for them. 'Thank you, but no.' they said, 'We will go the other end of the quay as we are very noisy at night.' We understood, we had been moored alongside other middle Europeans in the Mediterranean and had not been able to sleep as they drank all night. Later we saw them troop ashore, blokes, women, children and a baby in a pram as they went in search of a bar.

We arrived at Saint Florentin with the jolly Poles. They said that they would again moor on the other side of the canal as they were a noisy lot. We part walked, part cycled into the town and found the church. You could see it from the canal. It looked a bit odd, as if they had never got round to building a nave. In it we found six huge stained glass windows from the school of Troyes dated 1525, some of the best medieval glass we have ever seen.



A Saint Florentin window.



Details of a panel.

While on the quay we met up with the elderly French couple who had been our neighbours at Pont d'Ouche. We later found out that he was nearly 80 and that they had spent many years each summer for two months on the canals in their small canal boat that looked travel worn.

We were on our own for the last and very weedy stretch to Migennes. There is a long public quay but we had difficulty finding space to moor due to a large number of boats that seemed to be permanent residents, as were the ducks and swans. We were right next to the railway line where we were entertained with the frequent bing, bong, bing announcing the arrival of the trains. However, the following day we were welcomed to a berth on the Le Boat charter company quay further along as we needed water and electricity. Yet again we encountered typical French hospitality. All the charter boats are moored at right angles to the quay, 'stern to'. Because we are a sailing boat we have a rather pointy stern and have to moor alongside, which takes up a lot of room, about fifteen metres. The hire company moved their moored boats and bunched them up so we could come and moor. There was no charge, it is a town quay. They were however grateful for some strong Belgian beer. No chauvinistic problems there.

One of the pleasures of canal cruising is that you have no control over where you go. You go where the canal takes you, and it took us to Migennes. You would never ordinarily go there. Migennes' raison d'être is the railway marshalling yard. There is no hotel there. Our first impression of the main bar in town was that it was an Arab stronghold but on a Saturday morning it filled with all that you would expect to find in a French bar. Elderly couples staggered in with their sticks and shopping bags to their usual tables and were brought their regular coffees, there were plenty of dogs, youths huddled in corners and the whole place bustled. There was no smell of Gauloise or Gitanes though. Not only is smoking banned in cafés but Gauloise are now made of Virginia tobacco, in America I think, and Gitanes, the last of the true black tobacco French cigarettes are made in Belgium. Sacré Bleu.

There was a good restaurant by the quay, no Michelin stars, not even in the guide, but it served excellent meals. The skipper had a real Boeuf Bourguignon. This shouldn't be surprising in Burgundy but it is.

Sunday in Migennes was like Sunday in any other French town. There were good natured queues at the butcher; as in Auxonne we had to order our spit roasted chicken in advance. A long queue extended out of the boulangerie as people waited for their exquisite tarts and enough bread to last until tomorrow. A bent old lady with bow legs looked at the queue, muttered and barged her way to the front. No-one demurred, she probably did it every Sunday.

On Saturday afternoon there was an Arab wedding and hundreds of Algerians drove round and round the town, revving, spinning wheels, shouting, and hooting. Leaning out of the car doors we felt they ought to be firing Kalashnikovs into the air. The town was paralysed for an hour, to the displeasure of an old man who said he'd spent part of his life fighting them and now he's supporting them. If we hadn't been on Pluto, on the canal, we would probably not experience this aspect of France.

We were lifted out of the water at Evans Boatyard and did our final packing in the hot sun. The boatyard was between the sewage works and the abattoir, the largest we have ever seen and the worst smell we have ever encountered, a truly gut wrenching nauseating stench. We were relieved to get away to Troyes for the night and thence home.



Our destination, Evans' Boatyard with sewage works in the background.



The giant abattoir with stench to match.

But, we did go for a last meal at the excellent restaurant in Migennes before we left. But it was shut.



