

AUTUMN MEETING

Paris and its environs

The meeting was meticulously planned by Rory O'Farrell, ably assisted by Dermot Keogh. Lawrence Butler gave on-site talks at a number of locations. On Saturday, 22 September, members and friends (including a significant Irish contingent) made their way, mostly by Eurostar, to Paris and then on to the small town of Melun, where we were comfortably housed in an excellent Ibis hotel and which proved a very good centre for the first excursions.

SUNDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER

The day began with a visit to the chateau of Vaux Le Vicomte, built by Louis XIV's finance minister, Nicholas Fouquet. Cambrians were charmed by its elegant symmetry and its (comparatively) modest size. After Colbert secured Fouquet's disgrace, Louis XIV transferred the leading men who had worked at Vaux, notably Louis Le Vau, the architect, Charles Le Brun, the interior designer and Andre Le Notre, the landscape gardener, to design his new palace at Versailles. Cambrians were able to assess the similarities for themselves later in the week. Most intrepidly toured the extensive gardens in the 'buggies', driven (after some very basic instruction) by fellow Cambrians, trying to determine the location of the 'whale', which had sailed on the canal spewing fireworks to celebrate the opening of the chateau in 1661.

From Vaux Le Vicomte the Cambrians went to the recently restored medieval chateau of Blandy les Tours. The local authority, responsible for the restoration, had celebrated its completion by opening the chateau for free that weekend. It was not timidity which prevented most Cambrians from climbing its impressive battlements and gaining extensive views of the countryside but the huge queues of locals enjoying their freebie.

MONDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER

Today the main visit was to the chateau of Fontainebleau. Originally, in medieval times, a royal hunting lodge, it was enlarged by successive kings, notably by Henry IV. It is, however, now principally associated with Napoleon I, who chose to keep his court here rather than at Versailles and bade farewell to the Old Guard, as he departed for his first exile in Elba, in the main courtyard, now generally known as the 'Courtyard of the Farewells'.

From Fontainebleau our coach took us on the Chartres and another excellent Ibis hotel by the river.

TUESDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER

Cambrians walked up to the Cathedral and first took the *Petit Train* (a land train) for a tour of the city, seeing medieval houses and churches and (perhaps the most interesting of all) running alongside the river to obtain an excellent view of the (restored) washing houses and drying houses, where the housewives of Chartres were accustomed to do their laundry. On our return we had a guided tour of the magnificent

cathedral itself [Malcolm Millar.] and were introduced to the marvels of modern technology, which enable the guide to speak, very quietly, into a microphone and the group to hear it through simple earphones.

In the afternoon we proceeded to Paris, where we said good-bye to our coach.

WEDNESDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER

Here the Cambrians stayed in a, very clean, but rather austere *Mercure* hotel, with excellent views of the *Gare d L 'est* (fortunately, the sound proofing was good). The organisers had decided that it would be too difficult to use a coach in the traffic of central Paris so all movements were by bus, metro or R.E.R. Taxis were secured for the less mobile, despite the complications of an intermittent taxi strike. Since the hotel did not provide an evening meal, different restaurants were visited each night. Various cuisines were sampled, including Greek (Cretan? Armenian? - opinions differed) and Alsatian.

Wednesday was largely dedicated to a visit to Versailles. Members were left free to tour at their own pace. Most managed to see the, recently restored, Hall of Mirrors, where the German empire was proclaimed in 1871 and the treaty of Versailles signed in 1919, as well as other parts of the palatial State Apartments. The majority then took another *Petit Train* to see something of the gardens and to visit the Grand and Petit Trianons and the 'hamlet', where Marie Antoinette played at being a shepherdess, a delightful little group of mock village and agricultural buildings.

Those with sufficient stamina then proceeded to *La Defense* a remarkable construction of modern architecture including commercial premises, shops and apartments, rising high into the sky and providing those who could manage a very large number of stairs in addition to the express lifts, extraordinary views of Paris.

THURSDAY, 27 SEPTEMBER

The Cambrians this morning visited St Denis, quite unrecognisable to those who remember it as a down-at-heel industrial town now, at least round the basilica, a smart, even trendy, little town. Perhaps its reputation lingers on, however. Certain venerable Cambrians were decanted a considerable distance from the basilica, by a disgruntled taxi driver who seemed to think they might be rugby hooligans connected with the World Cup, then in progress. The sight of the crypt, with the tombs of the kings of France, dating back to Merovingian times, cannot however be anything but impressive. We also paid due attention to the importance of the building itself, marking the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic style of architecture. Later in the day the *Crypte Archaeologique* under *the Parvis* in front of Notre Dame Cathedral proved fascinating, despite the complications associated with power failures. Fairly recent excavations have revealed much new information about Roman as well as medieval Paris and the foundations of buildings can be seen *in situ*. The party then proceeded to the Museum of the Middle Ages in the *Hotel de Cluny*. Many Cambrians regard this among their favourite places in Paris and most regretted that we did not have more time to see the extraordinary collections of stained glass, medieval ivories and tapestries among many others. Most however did manage to see the famous tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn

FRIDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER

The first visit was to the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Arriving early, the Cambrians secured immediate admission and a comparatively peaceful visit to this most over-crowded of Paris monuments. It has witnessed great events from the coronation of Henry VI as king of England and the marriage of Mary Queen of Scots to the Dauphin to the coronation of Napoleon 1. It was badly damaged during the Revolution and much of its present appearance is due to Viollet-le-Duc's restoration in the middle of the 19th century but it escaped much harm during the Commune or the Second World War.

From Notre Dame the Cambrians proceeded to take the Batobus which gave us an excellent view of city from the river.

Finally the Cambrians went to the *Musee d'Orsay*, once a railway station, but a fine building converted into a museum of modern art, predominantly but not exclusively of the Impressionists

SATURDAY, 26 SEPTEMBER

Some Cambrians stayed on to visit or revisit places that they had not had time to see earlier in the week but most began to make their way home after breakfast, feeling they had enjoyed a very varied programme, which had introduced them to, or reminded them of, the richness of French history and civilisation. Our thanks are due particularly to Rory O'Farrell (but also to his assistants) for their work in setting up the excursion and for providing a detailed guide book (with maps and illustrations) to help us to appreciate what we were seeing.

Muriel E. Chamberlain