

The Cambrians' Spring Excursion to the Lomagne in Gascony

April 21st - 28th 2018

On a fine Saturday in April 46 Cambrians flew into Toulouse – Blagnac airport from all parts of Britain, eager to join our Gascon colleague, Marie Thérèse Castay who, in 2011, had organised a similar trip to the Condom region. That had been a most enjoyable and memorable event and expectations were high for our stay in Lectoure. They were amply fulfilled in this region of castles and fortified villages, of fine churches and of good food -- and good weather! Marie Thérèse had written a wonderful digest of the history of the region which had been sent out to members beforehand, so we were all well prepared to gain a lot in culture and enjoyment from our visit.

Those who arrived by mid – morning were given a tour of Toulouse city, just as on the return at the end of the week, those leaving late in the afternoon enjoyed the same trip to the centre of this ancient metropolis.

When everyone had safely arrived at the airport our very comfortable coach arrived to take us to Lectoure via picturesque roads which gave us a taster of what was to come in this gently rolling agricultural landscape of cereals, melons and garlic. As we approached Lectoure from the plain we could see it as a well-defined defended hilltop with the great Cathedral tower at one end and the rather reduced chateau of the Counts of Armagnac at the other. The internal roads were so narrow that our bus left us outside the gates and we walked to our hotel close below the Cathedral. We were staying at the Hotel du Bastard – in origin a grand 18th century town house with fine state rooms and bedrooms of variable size as you ascended the floor or occupied the stables. The views over the town walls and countryside beyond the town were splendid from everywhere.



Lectoure is a town renowned for its fine food and drink with many local delicacies (including chocolates in the form of Rugby balls) and the hotel had a high reputation for its food. As the week went by we appreciated it more and more, especially as the Cambrians and the waiters learned to understand each other better. The homemade yoghurt at breakfast was particularly appreciated.

Sunday

Sunday was devoted to exploring Lectoure. Most people had a leisurely morning but those who wanted to go to early Mass went to the small but beautifully restored 17th century chapel of the Carmelite Convent founded in 1623 just inside the walls, only 10 minutes' walk from the hotel. After coffee all the party embarked, with Marie Thérèse as guide, on a rather longer walk around the entire circuit of the defensive walls.

The hilltop was probably originally defended in the Iron Age. When the Romans came in 56 BC the upper citadel seems to have become mainly a religious centre, with the Gallo-Roman town at the foot. As the Roman Empire crumbled under waves of 'barbarian' invasions from the north east, and Vikings and perhaps Irish from the north west, the story becomes obscure. But by the end of the 10th century Gascony begins to emerge as an independent centre of power. In the western half the Plantagenets gain Aquitaine by marriage in the mid-12th century, while in Lomagne the native Armagnacs remain in control.

The town walls are virtually all that is still standing from the medieval town since it was very extensively destroyed after the siege of 1473 in which the counts of Armagnac were defeated by the

resurgent French monarchy under Charles VII who drove the English from Aquitaine and broke the power of their local 'allies' the Counts of Armagnac. It is probable that there were 2 circuits of walls originally, those remaining being the outer ring. We went down from the hotel to Boulevard du Nord to look along the full length of the north wall and examine the north-eastern tower before going up to the spine and the site of an original gateway and bastion, now gone.



There we admired the statue of Marshall Lanne, one of Napoleon's Marshalls who was a native of Lectoure, and looked at the restored chestnut grove on the Promenade de Bastion. The town had recently begun a programme of restoration of the early 19th century gardens of the original Bishop's Palace on the slopes to the south of the Cathedral, the final home of Marshall Lanne and now the Town Hall and Museum, visited later in afternoon. From there we descended the hill and looked at the now deserted Royal Tannery, built in the 18th century by the public-spirited bishop who also converted the ruins of the Armagnac castle to a hospital. Several proposals for its redevelopment had languished. From there we went to the Fountain of Diana, a natural spring with a late Gothic well house which, rather strangely, was only accessible from outside the defensive walls!

From there we walked swiftly to the ruins of the castle at the west end of the hill, appreciating, as we descended to the foot and then climbed through the surviving tower to the top, the military advantage of its position and the extensive view of movement in the countryside that it provided. We then returned to the hotel for lunch. The town, rebuilt in the 16th century under royal encouragement (through a relaxation of taxes for those who resettled there) retained the mediaeval

street plan, but became a centre of Renaissance learning and of Protestantism under the Queen of Navarre, Jeanne d'Albret, mother of Henry IV.

In the afternoon there was a visit to the Cathedral dedicated to St Gervase. Built on a Gallo-Roman temple dedicated to Cybele (the museum contains several altars, found during the 16th century extension to the east end of the Cathedral, which prove this dedication). The first church was built in the 12th century, and in the 15th century after the siege it was largely rebuilt and again after damage in the 16th century Wars of Religion. The current structure, therefore, lacks unity and shows several puzzling juxta positions of walls. The tall square bell tower, originally topped with a steeple, is its most prominent feature, to be seen for miles around.

Our visit to the museum included a very special welcome because Marie Thérèse had helped with the English translation of the notes on the Museum exhibits. The archaeological remains were in the cellar. There were stone and bronze tools from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age, including a fine 'antenna' sword only found in very rich graves in Britain. But the major collection is the group of 20 altars to Cybele showing the sacrifice of the bull — the finest collection of such cult altars in France.

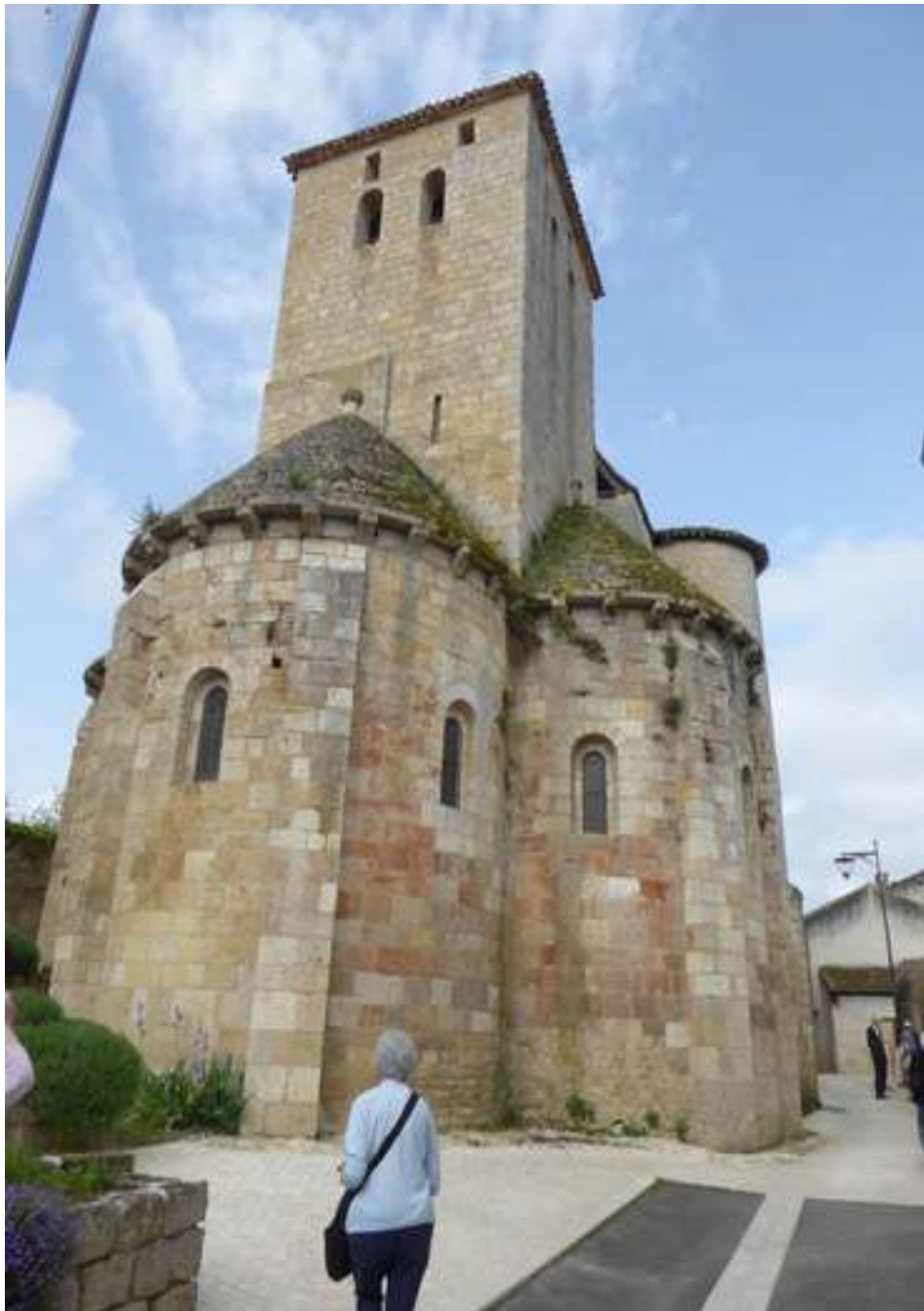


There are also notable Roman funerary monuments and mosaics from Lectoure and the region and some early mediaeval sarcophagi as well as rich finds from local settlement excavations. Upstairs was a very astonishing Renaissance fireplace which one would not have expected a Bishop to have commissioned!

In the evening Marie Thérèse gave a splendid illustrated introduction to the castles, churches and villages that we would be visiting in the coming days.

Monday

We first visited **Aubiac** where we made a through inspection of the outside of the Romanesque church whilst waiting for the key to get inside – well worth waiting for to see the interior of the trefoil shaped chancel and the 16th c frescoes of the Evangelists in the tower.





We next visited **Layrac** – the common -ac ending suggesting an origin in Gallo-Roman times. But we were coming to see the large 12th century church of St Martin and its famous Romanesque mosaic. The large church had been the centre of a monastery, now gone since Layrac was a notable stronghold of Protestantism in the 16th century. The wars and a serious plague left the town devastated in the 17th century but prosperity returned through trade on the Garonne in the 18th century and the church was restored. The rebuilt rose window in the fine, plain 12th century western façade probably dates to that period, as does the canopy of 6 Italian marble columns over the high altar. There is an interesting on-going programme of work in the church today.

The western door has a very good series of sculptures to either side, but the surprise is the size of the single nave within – 7 bays long and 10m wide. The chancel is covered by an octagonal dome and on its floor recent restoration has revealed a mosaic (date a little uncertain) of Samson and the Lion. Marie Thérèse revealed this to us with a bottle of water and a soft cloth brought specially for the purpose!



Leaving the church we retired for lunch to a not very prepossessing looking restaurant, but the salad was delicious – just what we needed on a warm spring day!

In the afternoon we went to **Moirax** a small village on the old Roman road which became part of the celebrated Road to Compostella - a great source of revenue (and interaction and human contact and hope) in the Middle Ages and increasingly so in the 21st century, as pilgrimage revives. Marie Thérèse revealed that she volunteers regularly at the Cathedral in Condom to welcome passing pilgrims and the parish priest at Lectoure provides board and lodging every evening in his presbytery. In the 11th century the land here was given to Cluny to build a monastery. This has disappeared, but the church survives. The well-lit interior is notable for a very fine series of carved capitals in the style of Moissac and an unusual dome over the sanctuary.



From there we drove to **Sainte Mère** to visit one of the best preserved and most typical of the 13th century 'Gascon Castles', a tall rectangular keep with two square towers reaching 27m high at either end. These towers were only accessible from the second floor which was the apartment of the lord with windows and fireplaces. Below were the quarters for the garrison while the ground floor with only narrow slots for air, was used for storage. The castle had been originally built in 1277 by a Bishop of Lectoure as a fortified country residence. Its design was not militarily sophisticated.

We were welcomed to the site by its English owner Piers Killeen. He uses the ground floor of the castle for pop and folk concerts and spends a good deal of his time arguing with the conservation authorities! He was happy for us to visit, and we all posed for a group photograph looking very supportive of his enterprise.



When we returned to Lectoure we met our lecturer for the evening, Dr Anais Comet who spoke to us before dinner on *Village Fortification in the Gers in the Late Middle Ages*. This explained to us the context of the *Castelnau* -- the villages connected to castles and the *Bastides* -- the larger defended market centres, which we would be seeing in the next two days. The Hundred Years War and the struggle of the French king to establish control of the whole of the country lay behind these developments of strategies for living in an intermittent war zone.

Tuesday

The first visit of the day was to **Lagarde-Fimarcon** -- now almost a ghost town which epitomises some the enormous shifts in social history to which France has been subject. Throughout the Middle Ages the Lordship of Fimarcon was one of the largest and most powerful in the region -- held by four families successively until the Revolution when the last Marquis -- Charles-Elizabeth d'Esclignac fled the country leaving his vast estate to be broken up amongst local people and his chateau destroyed.



The 19th century village developed outside the fortified mediaeval one and by 1970 the old houses were all virtually empty. The village then was bought by a single owner who has turned it into a holiday village and venue for special events. Only the castle's 18th century stables and some of the mediaeval curtain wall remain alongside the refurbished cottages. Cambrians wandered in and out of these until chased off by the caretaker, when we went and looked, more dutifully, at the curtain wall!

We then moved on to **Terraube**, another Castelnau, where the ruling family, de Galard, had left at the Revolution but arranged for their lands to be bought by their estate manager. They returned in 1815 and found it rather difficult to get back all their lands, but did regain the castle in which they still live. Hector de Galard was a hero of the Hundred Years War and is immortalised as the Knave of Diamonds in the traditional playing cards. Terraube is a long narrow village with the castle, whose mediaeval origins (1272) are overwhelmed by later rebuilding, at the west end, and the original church at the other. As a Castelnau it is perhaps less remarkable for its architecture than for the detail of the administrative documents which survive: the charter of 1285 and the agreement of 1308 between the Lord and the Consuls of the village about the details of improvements to the defences.

From Terraube we drove across to **Condom** for lunch at the Hotel Continental where the Cambrians had stayed in 2011. We were greeted as old friends and had a wonderful lunch!

In the afternoon we went to **St Orens-Pouy-Petit** where the mediaeval castle at the apex of the triangular defended hilltop village had been rebuilt in the Renaissance, but the church retained its

gothic architecture and a fine 13th century doorway. The curtain wall is almost unrecognisable because houses have been built against it and windows pierce its entire circuit.

We next went to the castle of **Mas D'Auvignon**, another creation of the Lords of Fimarcon, where the building history is rather different to the other Castelnaux. Here the 12th century church is outside the walls of the village and the 13th century castle at the other end predates the defended village which is not recorded until the early 14th century. The builders of the castle, two generations of the Lomagne-Fimarcons, had close ties with the English Dukes of Aquitaine, Kings Edward I and II and there is speculation that their architect, Master James of St George, might have had a hand in its design.



Marie-Thérèse leads us into the castle of Mas D'Auvignon.

We were welcomed to the castle by its current owners, who were keen to get an opinion about the similarities of their architectural details from a group who might be familiar with the castles of North Wales.



After gratefully accepting wonderfully cold cups of water in the shade of the garden within the castle walls, members from the north crowded into the angular south west tower to look at the details of passage roofs and window embrasures. All agreed that they did indeed look very like those of Caernarfon and Conwy and suggested that the Castles Study Group should be invited to visit and give a really informed opinion. Sian Rees was asked to take a look at the exterior stone work of the other towers, fighting her way through quite a jungle in the moat and risking being left behind by the bus.

The lecture that evening was a joint performance by our President, Dr Prys Morgan, and his cousin, Dr Nia Watkin Powell about their uncle Morgan Watkin (1878 – 1970) a scholar of mediaeval languages who is believed to have done some spying around Europe in the 1920s on behalf of Lloyd George – a fascinatingly intriguing and amusing story.

Wednesday

Our tour on Wednesday concentrated on the Bastides – larger 13th century foundations which were designed to encourage trade and usually had a large covered marketplace at the centre. These were defended towns rather than villages, and castles are not as prominent as in the castellaux. The bastide is familiar in Wales because the towns founded by Edward I in North Wales follow this plan and purpose.

We first visited **Monfort**, notable as the birthplace of the Renaissance poet, Salluste de Bartas, who wrote in French and Gascon. His childhood home still stands. This was a Protestant town and there

was a good deal of fighting during the Wars of Religion and in 1585 the four Consuls, the leaders of the town, were hanged in the church bell tower. The Huguenots also stole the bells, and took them to their base at Mauzevin.



We passed through **Mauzevin** and collected our picnic lunch which we were to eat in the park beside the church at Cologne.



Cologne was another bastide built around a central covered market. The one here is 14th century in date and very well-preserved, with an outer stone and wood colonnade around a square two storey timbered tower which housed the meeting place of the 6 Consuls who ran the town. The arcaded galleries around the square are also well preserved, especially on the north and south sides, and the combination of brick, timber and stone in the buildings makes the whole ensemble very attractive. In fact this bastide is little more than a village since it never outgrew its 14th century walls. Consequently the original grid plan and the wide moat on the north side are still clear to see. On the west side the road is exceptionally wide because it was a cattle marketplace and retained an iron framework for restraining cattle while they were shod. A life-size model within it explained how the apparatus worked. This took some puzzling out.

We then moved to **Sarrant** which was a Gallo-Roman settlement on the Roman road from Toulouse to Lectoure. Remains of columns and statues have been found and it is possible that the fountain retains some original Roman work. The 14th century village was a Royal *castrum*, outside the jurisdiction of the local lord, which gave the Consuls a good deal of freedom to run their own affairs. The village is entirely enclosed in its 14th century walls (except for a crude 19th century opening on the north side) and you enter through the original gate tower to follow a curving road around to the large central church -- and a very fine tearoom –cum – bookshop beside it.



You can walk back around the filled-in moat, admiring the gardens which have invaded it and seeing how, as at St Orens – Pouy – Petit, the original defensive wall has been pierced by the windows of houses within.

From Sarrant we went to **Miramont- Latour** and visited the notable agricultural museum which has been developed within the Chateau Latour . The chateau has been occupied by the de Lary family since the 15th century. They left during the Revolution but were able to regain the castle and its land after the fall of Napoleon and are still living there now. The **Museum of Rural Life** spreads through 15 rooms of the castle and stables and contains some remarkable farm implements (including a Roman plough to Sian Rees' delight) black smiths' tools and winemaking equipment. This was a really fascinating collection made even more enjoyable by the knowledge and enthusiasm of our guide, Patrick de Lary de Latour.



We spent so long in the museum that we had little time for the 18th century dovecote, but we did manage a brief visit to the church, to see the remarkably ornate carved stone reredos which covers the whole of the wall behind the high altar. This was originally the chapel of a convent built by the mother of Charles-Louis de Lary who died at the age of 25 in the siege of Dunkirk in 1652.



This had been a long day and there was no lecture that evening, so we could enjoy an extended dinner.

Thursday

Our first visit of the day was to **Saint Clar** a double bastide with a long and complicated history. Set in a countryside of Roman villas it undoubtedly had Gallo- Roman origins but documentation starts in the 11th century when power was shared between the Viscount of Lomagne and the Bishop of Lectoure. From this developed an ecclesiastical fortress (or Castelau) of which the tall thick bell tower of the old Church of St Clar, the 4th century 'Apostle of Gascony', is probably a relic. In 1289 Edward I of England takes over part of the town in an agreement with the Bishop and another market square was built to the south of the older centre. Both were defended with walls and the markets flourished. To this day Saint Clar is the national centre for the production of Garlic and on Thursdays there is a major street market under the 13th century roof of the southern market hall. So most of our time in the town was taken up with the market, which spread beyond garlic to many gastronomic temptations and some interesting craft work. Between the two bastides stood the current parish church, a striking 19th century Gothic revival building. The old church is now an exhibition hall which we visited and saw models of the town's buildings made from garlic skin!



We then drove to **Gramont** where we were booked in at the Auberge Le Petit Feuillant for lunch. This lay just beside the great Renaissance Château de Gramont and was once the Home Farm, but was now a 'destination' in its own right. It was a famous restaurant where people take photos of their food to impress their friends on Facebook -- and several Cambrians did! So this was quite a long lunch.....





The castle of Gramont originates with Simon the Montfort, the father of the Simon de Montfort more familiar to most Cambrians. Of his castle only a tall narrow tower survives. To that was attached an 'Gascon Castle' (as seen at Sainte Mère) built by the Montaut family in the 14th century -- a rectangular tower of rooms with a square tower to either side. This was bare military architecture which faced the village and the church. But the base of the Gascon Castle was later cut by a fine Renaissance archway which gave access to a long courtyard overlooked by an elegant Renaissance château with large windows and classical detail, with impressive staircases and marble floors. This completely different symbol of power was the work of Guillaume de Voisins who married the heiress of the Montauts in 1491. It remained the property of powerful politicians until the Revolution; then through the 19th century the house declined. Towards the end of that century it was bought by M. de la Fontan de Goth, a man with a great knowledge of history and architecture and he began a serious programme of research and restoration. Sadly in the first half of the 20th century it was abandoned again, until in 1961 it was bought by Roger and Marcelle Dichamp who devoted the rest of their lives to restoring the house and filling it with life and furniture. In 1979 they gave it, with all the contents, to the Caisse National des Monuments Historiques.

When we had caught our breath after that tremendous visit we drove to the village of **Lachapelle** not knowing what to expect next. We were visiting what was originally the private chapel of an 11th century castle. It became the parish church in the 15th century. In 1776 two wealthy brothers -- the Abbes Goulard -- were vicar and curate of the parish and they commissioned Mairignon Champaigne, an architect more used to designing theatres, to provide a new interior for the church. It is a riot of baroque woodwork in white and gold. The altar and reredos are what you might expect

in a fine baroque church (but scarcely in a remote rural village), but it is the back wall which is so astonishing and entirely theatrical, with an amazing triple range of arcades, carrying two galleries, convex and concave. The small church has been recently restored and looks amazing!



On leaving Lachappelle we returned to Lectoure via the more sombre bastide of **Dunes** with a very fine central square. A house in this square had a plaque recalling an SS atrocity in June 1944.

In the evening our General Secretary, Heather James, gave us a wide-ranging account of the Gascon wine trade and its impact throughout Europe, not excluding Britain where the green, black and white pottery from Saintonge which spread in its slipstream, is an infallible indicator of 'high status' settlements.

Friday

This was our longest journey away from Lectoure and the high point of our architectural tour since we were going to the great Abbey of **Moissac** on the other side of the Garonne. The abbey claimed to have been founded in the 6th century but a Merovingian 7th century date is more likely. This is the period when it began to accumulate land and wealth and consequently attracted raiding parties, of Arabs in the 8th century and of Vikings in the 9th. In 1047 it became a possession of the Abbey of Cluny and by the beginning of the 12th century there were 100 monks and the cloisters and the church were built, richly decorated by one of the finest ensembles of Romanesque art in France. The Albigensian Crusade and the Hundred Years War both damaged the church, and the upper levels of the nave and sanctuary needed rebuilding in the 15th century, contrasting in both style and material with the original Romanesque work. The monks were replaced by a College of Canons in the 17th century. During the Revolution it was damaged by riots and sold, and it served as a barracks under Napoleon. In the mid-19th century the cloisters were almost demolished to make way for the railway. The closeness of the track was immediately apparent as soon as we descended from the bus to enter the visitor centre and take our tour of this incredible art gallery of biblical imagery.

Most of the day was available for viewing the cathedral with its wonderful tympanum with Christ in majesty surrounded by Prophets and Apostles and scene from His life, and the intriguing animal capitals of the narthex. The nave and the rest of the church contain art of a slightly later date, as well as some features of an earlier period, such as the 5th century Merovingian sarcophagus.

There were also opportunities for spending time on a rather good lunch and strolling through the old town to stand on the banks of the Garonne to admire this immensely important trading river.

On our return we stopped at **Auvillar**. This hilltop town overlooking the Garonne was founded in Gallo-Roman times; later there was a castle and defences on the summit and a large church with its own area of sanctuary which developed to serve the pilgrims heading for Compostella. Subsequent wars have obliterated the castle and most of its defences and left the large parish church with visible wounds from the Revolution since the 19th century restoration reduced its size.

The main object of our visit was to see the two fascinating museums in the town – the museum of river trade, boats and mills near the entrance gate, and the small museum celebrating the local pottery traditions. We were greeted here by an English woman who has been living in Auvillar for many years and is organiser of the rota of volunteers who keep this notable collection of 19th century painted pottery open to the public. The style is floral, exuberant and quintessentially French!

When we returned to the Hotel du Bastard, before our last dinner together, we all gathered on the terrace to thank Marie Thérèse for our wonderful week. We gave her a beautiful plant for her garden and also a tribute which, as a notable translator of Welsh into French -- and someone who

would be inducted into the Gorsedd of Bards this coming Eisteddfod -- we knew she would really appreciate: an *englyn* in her honour written by Nia Watkin Powell and declaimed by our President Dr Prys Morgan. Such a praise poem was a fitting tribute for such a well-planned excursion so enjoyably delivered.

Frances Lynch Llewellyn.