

BIENNIAL TRIP TO LOCHES

Report by Virginia Fowler.

At the end of October twenty-one members of the St Andrews – Loches Alliance made the biennial pilgrimage to the town of Loches en Touraine in France, with whom St Andrews shares a “Cultural Partnership”. For fifteen of the group, this was their first visit to Loches.

The group was warmly welcomed on the Friday evening at the former Chancellerie, now an art gallery, by Pascal Dubrisay, deputy of Culture and Heritage for the Loches area, and one of the founding members of the Alliance. There they were introduced to their hosts for the weekend.

One of the highlights of the trip was a day trip on the Saturday to Aubigny-sur-Nère, a small market town in the Berry region with strong historical links to Scotland, dating back to the signing of the Auld Alliance Treaty in 1295. The town and lands surrounding Aubigny-sur-Nère were given as recompense to the John Stuart Darnley in 1423 for coming to the aid of the future King of France during the Hundred Years War with the English. Henceforth Aubigny became the city of the Stuarts in France. The Stuarts continued to play an important role in the history of France, significantly in their capacity as personal bodyguards, la Garde Écossaise to the French Monarchy. Scottish soldiers under the Stuarts were granted French citizenship, and many of them stayed on in France : a good number of their descendants still live in Aubigny (the town boasts its own Pipe Band and celebrates, les Grandes Fêtes Franco-Écossaise every year on 13th and 14th July). The town of Aubigny-sur-Nère also has a very contemporary link with Scotland, as it has been twinned with Haddington in East Lothian for more than forty years.

Our group were very warmly received in the Town Hall of Aubigny, situated in the precinct of the Chateau des Stuarts, by the cultural attaché and the deputy mayor. A number of the Fife group, the “Location Reelers” then danced the strathspey Queen Mary of Scotland in the Chateau forecourt. The Scottish contingent were then given a tour of the town, with a visit to the museum dedicated to the Auld Alliance and the town’s Scottish connections, followed by a visit to the Memorial of the Auld Alliance. The Location Reelers had an opportunity to demonstrate their dancing skills, dancing the Scottish Reel The Auld Alliance in the marketplace to the great delight of the local townsfolk who gathered round to watch.

The medieval town was completely rebuilt after a fire in 1512 and the Municipalité have gone to great lengths to protect the architectural style of the buildings, which are mainly wooden structures with beamed ceilings and slate roofs. Our party enjoyed a delightful lunch with regional wines and local specialities in the restaurant of la Chaumière, a charming hotel near the town centre also built in the vernacular. After lunch the group proceeded by coach to the Château de la Verrerie, the ancestral home of le comte Béraud de Vogüé, a descendant of the Stuart Dynasty. We were graciously received by le comte, who naturally spoke perfect English, and then given a guided tour of the château by a group of actors who regularly perform there. Although the château remains a family home much of it is now open to the

public. It takes its name from a glass factory, which once stood at the edge of the lake bordering the château.

On Sunday morning a number of options had been arranged by our hosts, including a visit to a local artist's studio in Loches, a visit to the School of Horticulture or a guided tour of the town. The group was then reunited at le Mairie or Town Hall for a reception with the Mayor of Loches, Jean-Jacques Descamps, his wife Milène, and his deputy Marc Angenault. Jean-Jacques Descamps has been involved with the "Cultural Partnership" since its inception and both he and his wife, until very recently an MEP, have been extremely supportive of the exchange between the two towns and are frequent visitors to St Andrews.

The reception was followed by lunch in nearby Beaulieu-lès-Loches. The Loches area boasts a Scottish Country dance group known as La Gigue Ecossaise, and after lunch the Scottish and French dancers joined forces to dance the appropriately named Joie de Vivre. The entire group then joined in for an afternoon of lively dancing and singing of French and Scottish dances and folk songs.

Later that evening, the office bearers of the Alliance from both towns met to discuss future plans. The discussions included the successful exchange between pupils of Madras College and the College Georges Besse, the possible placement of a student from the horticultural college at Verneuil, near Loches, at the Cambo Estate in the Spring of 2014, an exhibition in St Andrews of the work of contemporary Loches artist Jean-Philippe Constant, entente between the Photography Societies of the two towns and a new project to continue the successful links between the Primary Schools. The Renaissance Choir from the University of St Andrews hopes to make a visit to Loches in the not too distant future.

Everyone had a thoroughly enjoyable time, new friendships were forged and the bonds between the two towns were reinforced.

Footnote:

Location Reelers are a group who have been dancing Scottish Country Dances in the appropriate locations for a number of years. It started with Schiehallion in walking boots at the top of Schiehallion, followed by Fife Ness, on the rocks at Fife Ness in a storm, Autumn in Appin in Appin in the autumn, and so on. The dancers started their trip to France with a rendition of Well Met in Paris in the baggage handling area of Charles de Gaulle airport, without so much as raising an official eyebrow, before continuing to Loches.