

## St Andrews and Loches now officially 'Twinned'!

Most of us had long given up any hope of St Andrews being twinned with Loches, but thanks to the continued efforts and perseverance of John Matthews, Chair of the Alliance, together with his committee, a Twinning Agreement between our towns was finally granted in 2015. This was largely due to a softening of approach by the St Andrews Community Council, hitherto averse to any town twinning, under the leadership and enthusiastic support of Howard Greenwell.

Official celebrations of the momentous event took place in the respective towns. The first of these was in St Andrews during the St Andrews festival in November 2015 followed by a reciprocal celebration in Loches this Easter. The Provost of Fife, who was warmly supportive of the twinning, played a full part in all the celebrations and witnessed the signing of the agreements in both towns.

After watching Madras College Pipe Band 'Beating Retreat' outside the Town Hall on Friday 28 November Anne-Sylvie Vassenaix, founder member of the Alliance, John Matthews, Chair of the Alliance, Marc Angenault, Maire de Loches, Jim Leishman, Provost of Fife and Howard Greenwell, Chair of St Andrews Community Council proceeded to Holy Trinity Church to sign the official 'Twinning Agreement' between our two towns. This proved a very moving experience for those attending the ceremony who had waited for so long for this historic outcome. Reference was made to absent friends, particularly the late Mary Freeborn, who helped establish the St Andrews-Loches Alliance more than twenty years ago.

A fitting reception, generously hosted by the St Andrews Community Council, took place in the church following the ceremony. A dinner was held the following evening to celebrate the official 'Twinning' at the Links Trust Restaurant. Guests of honour included Monsieur Emmanuel Cocher, the French Consul General in Edinburgh and Monsieur Jean Jacques Descamps, former *Maire de Loches* and *Ancien Ministre*.

Over the course of the weekend our guests were able to participate in a host of events taking place in St Andrews during the Festival, including a guided tour of the town. Private visits were also arranged for our guests and host families to Kingsbarns Distillery and the British Golf Museum. On Sunday morning most of the group attended St Salvators, the University Chapel. The University of St Andrews has been associated with the Alliance from the outset, particularly the French Department, the University Chapel Choir and Orchestra, together with numerous individual exchanges. Our guests were given a very warm welcome by the Chaplain of the university, the Rev. Dr. Donald McEwan.

The return visit coincided with the Foïre de Pâques, or Easter fête. This is a big event in the Loches calendar with a funfair and outdoor market selling the best of local produce and fine wines from the region. This year the *Foïre de Pâques* had a particularly strong Scottish theme to mark the occasion of the long awaited 'Twinning'. A Pipe Band from Nantes, resplendent in tartan, played Scottish tunes.

Mini golf with a St Andrews theme was also on offer but the *pièce de résistance* was without doubt the giant 'Nessie' erected in the town square. In the market stalls Scottish produce, specially printed mugs, tea towels, coasters, key rings etc. were all for sale. Bottles of local wines with printed labels commemorating the 'Twinning' were also available to purchase and indeed sold out very quickly! Selling in a similarly quick way from the stall of the *Nouvelle Alliance* were products generously provided by St Andrews merchants and transported to Loches by Judith Harding, David and Izzy Murdoch and Bill and Avril Taylor.

The formalities and signing of the official 'Twinning Agreement' took place in the Marie Stuart room of *le Mairie* or Town Hall. This room had been decorated in the Royal Stewart tartan in the early days of the Alliance in honour of the friendship between the two towns and paid homage to the 'Auld Alliance' and the Stewart Destiny with which France had many connections, particularly Mary Queen of Scots. The ceremony was attended by the same group of officials who had come to St Andrews in November together with the former Presidents of the society. Many local people who had been involved in the 'Alliance' from the very beginning came along to witness the historic signing of the official 'Twinning' documents.

Throughout the weekend the St Andrews members of the 'Alliance' and their hosts participated in a number of events around town, including a tour of the Old Town, visits to the *Logis Royal* and the medieval *Donjon*. Those who visited the *Galerie de Champignons* in the troglodyte caves were given a talk by a local expert. The troglodyte caves are an unusual geological feature of Loches. A number of houses small workshops are indeed built into these rocks.

In the afternoon Virginia Fowler and James and Lindsay Murray were invited to judge the thirty seven entrants in the Window Dressing Competition. This was no mean feat as the displays with a St Andrews or Scottish theme were all of an extremely high standard and several were quite exceptional. It was quite overwhelming to see how the local businesses, shopkeepers and indeed the town had embraced this historical moment and it was a great honour to be part of it.

On the Saturday evening a sumptuous *Gala Diner* was held in the *Logis Royal*. Guests were welcomed into the Royal Palace by players and musicians dressed in mediaeval costumes. We were then ushered into the *Salle Jeanne d'Arc*, where there is a brass plaque on the floor honouring the French heroine. It was here that Joan of Arc was received by Charles VII in 1429 before setting off, with his full authority and the means, to fight the English. After dinner many fine speeches were delivered by officials from Loches, including Anne-Sylvie Vassenaix, Marc Angenault and Jean-Jacques Descamps. Responses were made by the leaders of the St Andrews delegation, with Jim Leishman, Provost of Fife, making a notable contribution in French. It was a truly memorable evening.

On Sunday morning the majority of the group attended Mass at the Collegiate Church of St Ours, which was followed by lunch at the '*Vicariat*', the former vicarage. Guests were then free to enjoy the *Foire de Pâques* and enjoy free time with their host families.

Monday marked the finale of the *Foire de Pâques*. To start the day a hearty Scottish breakfast was served in the large marquee. Joyce Anderson, dance teacher from St Andrews and three of her pupils then performed a number of Scottish dances, including the 'Sword Dance' and the 'Highland Fling', accompanied by our very own Craig McNicol on the bagpipes.

The officials of the respective groups, together with the local Press, then proceeded to the *Jardin Publique* for the ceremonial planting of a Rowan Tree commemorating the continuing friendship and official 'Twinning' between the two towns. The Rowan tree, a pioneer Scottish tree is particularly symbolic, and is believed to guard against evil, witchcraft and enchantment.

Later that day came the presentation of prizes for the best window displays. The winner was the '*Bas Clos*' Brasserie on the outskirts of town, while the *Horlogerie* or Old Clockmaker's shop, with its magnificent mechanical display of St Andrews golfers and university students in kilts was the runner up.

The grand finale of the *Foire de Pâques* and parade took place later in the day and was led by the official delegation from both towns, together with musicians and several pipe bands from other parts of the country. Despite the rather inclement weather large crowds had assembled to watch the parade. At times it was hard to believe that we were in France and not Scotland. What a show the Lochois put on to mark this momentous occasion and what a privilege it was to be there - *Vive le Jumelage Loches-St Andrews! Vive la France!*

*With thanks to Virginia Fowler*