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Welcome to another Newsletter and may I start by wishing you all a belated, but very happy and healthy New Year. This year AOUG is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Before AOUG was founded there was no organization or official contact for the Open University graduates so AOUG filled a very important gap. I remember receiving my Open University final degree results and, as I did not intend to continue any studies, I was very relieved to see that there was an organization I could join in order to keep in touch with my Alma Mater. That was 24 years ago!

You may be interested to know where our members are in Europe. At the moment we have members in 18 countries and they are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canary Islands, Cyprus, France, Finland, Germany, Gibraltar, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland. I apologize if I have missed out your country. If you know of any Open University graduates in your country and they are not a member perhaps you can persuade them to join. It is very easy these days with modern technology, they can join on the AOUG web site, www.aoug.org.uk membership subscriptions and follow the directions. For us in Europe the easiest way to pay is by credit card unless you have a UK bank account.

Thank you to those who responded to my article about hobbies in the last Newsletter. It would appear, no surprise, that each of us have sufficient hobbies to keep us out of mischief! Reading and gardening appear to be the most popular.

Following on from where we all live in Europe, and the last Newsletter articles by Geoffrey Mitchell about the Costa Brava and Robert Girling about his home in Gozo, I thought it would interest members to know more about where we live. I shall start the ball rolling. If you would like to share a description of where you live and the surrounding area I am sure other members would enjoy reading about it.

Tracy sur Mer

This is a very small village in Calvados, Normandy, France. The inhabitants, known as Traciens, total approximately 350. The village is so small that we do not have a boulangerie which is most unusual for France. A neighbour once told me that she would happily move to Bayeux so that she could walk to the boulangerie in the morning to buy her croissants. She was definitely joking but that shows the importance of a boulangerie for the traditional French breakfast. If we ever need our early morning croissant, we jump in the car and speed off just 2 kilometres to Arromanches. Problem solved!

The village has a 13th century Gothic church but its Norman tower was not built until after the 2nd World War. We also, like all villages and towns in France, have our own Maire who has an office (the Mairie) in the village which is open twice a week, so if we need any information or want to discuss anything, it is possible to talk directly with the Maire. When we put in a planning application for a new garage in our garden, all we had to do was deliver the plans to the Maire who then put it through to the various departments for approval. Imagine my amazement when he hand delivered the consent forms and unlike the popular myth that everything takes a life time in France, this was all sorted out in 3 weeks.



There is also a Château in the village. When we first moved here, the then Maire lived at the Château and when he died the name of our road, in true French fashion, changed from “Chemin de L’Eglise” to “rue Philippe de Bourgoing”. Monsieur Bourgoing had been Maire

for over 50 years and in recognition of work he had done for the British and French governments for the reunification of Germany after the war, he had been awarded the British honour Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, (CBE) a rare honour for a Frenchman.

The countryside around us is given over to agriculture and the important sites of the Normandy D Day landings on June 6th 1944. This is the Gold Beach and apparently our garden, which was a field in 1944, was the site for the British Officers' mess. We can take a variety of walks from our house but my favourite is to go down our lane and within 10 minutes I am on the cliff top overlooking the artificial harbour, built by the British army after D Day, at Arromanches.

The whole area has very close links with William the Conqueror. Just 8 kilometres away is Bayeux, a gem of a town. The Bayeux tapestry, a world heritage site, is one of the main attractions, along with the narrow streets, the Cathedral and medieval buildings, all are a delight to see. We are also within 8 kilometres of Port-en-Bessin-Huppain, an important fishing harbour, where fresh fish are on sale every day. Further afield is the Department's administrative town Caen, which has been rebuilt following the destruction after D Day. However there are still many old buildings, which blend in well with the 20th century buildings.



Well, that is where I live. Have I tempted you to come and visit this beautiful area? On another subject I would really be interested in what your favourite books are. Mine are as follows.

Books – the More the Merrier!

I love a good read. As a child, if there was silence in the house, rather than worrying about what I was up to, my mother knew I was in my bedroom, stretched out on the bed with a good book. Enid Blyton was a favourite, along with Elinor Brent Dyer, who lived just a few doors away from us in Hereford. Into my teens my tastes developed to such authors as, Tolstoy, the Brontës, Charles Dickens and Nevil Shute amongst others.

Now that we live in France it is not so easy to get to an English book shop, so Amazon is doing a roaring trade from me! Being a little old fashioned for such things I prefer to hold a book rather than a tablette Kindle to read, so the book shelves are becoming more and more crowded as time goes on. When travelling to England on Brittany Ferries, I usually take the opportunity to buy yet another book. However the selection is not usually to my taste. I have on several occasions bought a book by a modern author, finished it by the time we sail into Portsmouth, and if you were to ask me the next day for details of the story, I would have to think very hard. Many are too shallow for my liking and contain far too many coincidences.

There are however a couple of modern authors who, for me, stand out as exceptional. They are John Le Carré and Hilary Mantel. They both have the style of storytelling which I find engrossing, I cannot put the books down, what will the next page bring? At such times I should be wearing a notice which says, 'DO NOT DISTURB'. Getting to know the main characters being brought to life by the authors is just what I like about a good book. Both Le Carré and Mantel do this superbly.

I have been re-reading Nevil Shute and am pleased to say that he is still a very good read. His 'Pied Piper', which is set in the year it was published (1944) and 'On the Beach', are two contrasting stories which highlight his ability to understand human nature. I have also returned to Charlotte Brontë's 'Villette' and 'The Professor', both beautiful stories told with her personal understanding of lost love.

They say, all authors should have a very good first page in order to persuade the reader to read on. I am sure this is true because I once glanced at the first page of 'The Girl in Times Square' by Pauline Simons and did not read on, although I had bought the book. Fortunately, one day, being without another book to read, I picked it up again and read beyond the first page. Well, it was wonderful, I have now read it twice!

When we lived in England I taught English on a one to one basis, visiting my pupils once a week in their homes. Consequently, for my GCSE pupils, I had to teach the selected book they were studying at school. John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men' was a great favourite for many schools and I longed for the day when they chose 'The Grapes of Wrath' instead. In my time it did not happen so last year I made up for lost time and bought the book. I fully appreciate how Steinbeck won the Pulitzer Prize but wonder how many pupils would cope with his use of dialect and accent?

I have yet to read many books in French but when we first moved to France I bought an Enid Blyton book in French. I hoped that it would help with my French which I am pleased to say it did. However I have been reading several French authors, in English, and I am sure that nothing has been lost in translation. So far Zola's 'The Land', Gustave Flaubert's 'Madame Bovary' and Guy de Maupassant's 'Bel-Ami' have been devoured along with 'The Count of Monte Cristo' by Dumas, which I must admit I found rather over the top with sensation.

I have weekly conversation with a young French lady. Our time is shared between English for her and French for me. She wanted to buy me a present for Christmas, Maupassant's Selected Short Stories. She particularly wanted it to be in English because she was sure that I would be able to appreciate the French view on infidelity, love and marriage and the subtleties of French life in the mid to late 1800s. She eventually found a second hand version at a book shop in Canterbury when on a visit!

One thing I definitely prefer and that is to read a book before I see a film version. Then I can make up my own mind how the characters look, what they wear, their surroundings etc. Although I appreciate that filmmakers need to adapt the story to suit the wider audience I sometimes wonder what the authors have to say about it. I know that J K Rowling kept a very tight hold on the Harry Potter films, which reminds me, I have yet to read any of the Harry Potter books. I understand my education in literature is not complete!

Patricia Cowling