

## The Loire Valley 2016

Thirty members of The Brecon and Radnor branch met on the Square in Brecon Barracks on the afternoon of 9th May in order to travel by bus and ferry to Chinon in the Loire Valley. The journey and the crossing were uneventful and we duly left and landed at Caen early the next morning. A proper French breakfast was enjoyed in a nearby hotel and our tour of French gardens began.

The idea of the branch going to France arose after our four-day trip to look at gardens in North Wales in 2014, which had been a huge success. A large number of members had expressed interest and, in the end, we had to limit numbers to thirty because of various restrictions; two further friends from Brussels joined us later, in France. As a precaution my wife, Sue and I had been on a "recce" the year before so we had a good idea of what we were taking on.

Our first garden, visited on our way south, was the Château de Brecy. This was a delightful and relatively small château that had been purchased and then restored by Didier Worth. The restoration work had been beautifully done. It was on several terraces and very well gardened. We then made our way south to the Donjon de Ballon, a medieval keep built on the highest point of a long ridge and now surrounded by extensive gardens. This included a beautiful shady avenue with lots of little gardens to one side plus a parterre garden, rose gardens and borders. We were given drinks in the great hall of the Donjon and then a superb lunch of quail in the dining hall. A magnificent introduction to France, which culminated on us talking to the French owner and his wife and discovering that they lived and worked in London and this, was their second home!! On then to Chinon where we stayed at The Hotel Plantagenet, which proved to be excellent, the rooms were all different and charming and breakfast was superb, although we did rather strain the coffee machine at times! Chinon itself is a very interesting small town on the wide River Vienne, which is a major tributary of the Loire. The very old and partly ruined château dominates the town and was, for a number of years, the home and base for King Arthur and his knights.

On our first full day we visited Château d'Ussé with its very formal decorative gardens below, before going on to have an excellent lunch at Château de Villandry and then a tour of the amazing gardens and the château. They have a Garden School here, training a large number of gardeners who make sure that the whole place looks wonderful at all seasons of the year. You can look down onto their very decorative beds from terraces on three sides. On our way home we squeezed in a quick visit to Château d'Azay-le-Rideau that was surrounded by water, which is such a feature of all these gardens.

On our second full day we had time to explore Chinon, its market and the château before going on to have lunch in a troglodyte restaurant in Turquant. We then had an interesting afternoon visiting a private château and vineyard followed by a wine tasting that had

been organised by Tanners. On our way home we visited the L'Abbaye de Fontevraud for a tour of the magnificent old buildings and grounds of what used to be an abbey and then a prison.

On our last full day we went to visit the Château at Chaumont-sur-Loire where we saw the remarkable Garden Festival. This consists of a huge number of individual gardens each with a different theme. This might seem rather commercial but they were exceedingly interesting. At the other side of the château was a wonderful viewing point to look along the river. We then went around the château and had lunch under huge umbrellas to protect us from the rain. Finally on to Château de Chenonceau, which must rank as the most enchanting and beautiful château of them all. This site, in the centre of the River Cher, is spectacular and the château is beautifully looked after with fresh flowers in all the rooms and huge logs fires burning too. The gardens are again formal but not as inspiring as Villandry and Chaumont.

We had a final dinner at the hotel before an easy drive up to Cherbourg the next morning, the only excitement being that we were telephoned on the way and told that we had taken some extra luggage from the hotel, this was easily resolved when it was discovered that the said luggage was destined to the home town of our driver.

It was, I think, a great success and I must thank our tour guide, Kirsty Fergusson, from Bordeaux, who proved to have endless patience and goodwill together with a huge knowledge of her subject. Mention should also be made of our Tour Organiser, John Grant, who did a lot of the spadework, necessary for such a visit and was only defeated, marginally, by the change of the value of the pound! In actual fact the cost for the whole trip worked out to be roughly half the cost of the much-advertised professional holiday breaks. The only real drama took place after midnight, on our return when I opened my case in my dressing room and it exploded with frilly knickers and glamorous dresses. Has anyone ever noticed how a purple case and a green case look identical in artificial light after midnight? The mistake was easily rectified but I did appear for breakfast unshaven for the first time in sixty years!

Jonathan Reeves