

This year's odyssey was much the same as last, with intrepid Britannia members Sean Gridley, Nigel Page (1), Chris Reeves-Croft (2) and Martin Tomes (3) piling into planes, trains and automobiles for a weekend of table tennis in north west France. It is all Sylvain Floury's fault really, as this is the third such trip back to his old TT stomping grounds, staying at his parents house. See the reports on the BTTC website for previous years for evidence...

However, Sylvain having moved back to France, we were instructed to go all by ourselves, so we did. Stansted parking and flight negotiated without issue, Sean picked up the car and off we went for the 30 minute drive to sleepy Thouare sur Loire, where we arrived some 90 minutes later due mainly to not realising that French postcodes can be identical in towns 3 miles apart. Doh! However, once there, we got changed, practised and were ready for the Hardbat tournoi with refreshments (large table with food and drink). Lovely.

Thouare club turned 40 years old this year, so there was a presentation to previous Club Presidents, who may have wondered why there were 3 Union flags present (4), two knotted on heads and one as a dodgy bandana. The 12 table event plays out to a close, and on a very creditable 5/6 is Sean, losing only to France's female no.90. Sylvain, on the other hand, manages to lose 6/6, so now he knows how the rest of us feel.

At the end of the evening we present an official gift to the Thouare club, two mugs with both BTTC and their logos printed on them, and the friendly atmosphere carries on to 01:30 before we set off on the hour's drive to our beds for the night. We had to sort out sleeping arrangements - two rooms with two beds. Without naming names, one person cheerfully admitted to being a snorer, another said he'd brought earplugs. Bingo! That left Chris and Martin to sleep in peace... Other than this, the main topic of conversation en route is the length of time Chris spent chatting in Franglais with the lovely Joanne (pronounced Zhoanne of course). Smooth talker that Chris.

Getting to sleep at 3am, rising at 8am in response to hubbub downstairs, in preparation for another 12 hour event? Yep. These things have got to be done. After Petit-dejeuner sur l'herbe (5), a veritable feast bathed in sunshine, the team from Le Mans arrive with tents, we assemble ourselves (6) and amble off on the short walk to the venue. This year Sylvain's son Loic, and father Claude are playing. Claude last played 44 years ago - some break between games. It is the same format as usual, teams of 3 (suitably handicapped), 8 rounds over 12 hours, winning team each round buys the losers a drink at the bar so socialising is easy and plentiful. There are whole families there, kids running around, barbecue outside, cakes and all manner of refreshments.

By this time we have adopted local names for ourselves, Chrees, Shoan, Neezhel and Martan, to be exact, made us feel quite at home. We get recognised by several from last year, some ask where the German girl is (our Miriam, sadly unavailable) so we must be doing something right. the playing standard is extremely high, without any prima donna behaviour. We get some good thrashings, but with smiles and apologies (adding up what we saw, there were about 20 players over the weekend's events who would get into Suffolk's top 10...). The Le Mans team won the event last year, playing in scuba suits, caps and goggles (bonkers) and they repeat the feat but this time in gowns and crowns as Kings and Queens (one queen to be precise, a bald bloke with wig, skirt and a generous female shape).

We presented the organisers with two mugs as well, complete with respective club logos, and come the presentations / prize giving, they make a special award to us of a cured sausage with a bottle of local wine (7). Hands are shaken all round, photo taken for the local paper, with the only problem being that the wine can't be taken home in our cabin baggage, so is donated to Claude for hosting us. Hey ho.

Britannia TTC on tour - France June 2019 Bracketed numbers refer to photos

In the morning we drift around, then time for farewells and the drive back to Nantes for the plane. Due to the wonders of RyanAir, the 4 of us checked in at the same time but are all 8 rows apart, an impressive achievement. At Stansted Chris shoots off to get his flight to Krakow to join his family, and as the remains of our party approach customs, Martin is stopped by a member of Border Security. Can he take part in a sniffer dog training exercise? He has perfect pockets, apparently, nose high to a spaniel, and a substance is placed in them before we shuffle down a special exit. The others make great decoys, Sean looking "naturally guilty", as the dog hoovers us from crotch to floor and then sits wagging, staring at Martin, job done. Finally back home, for an early night.

Postscripts

Both Thoare and Avrille are small towns-cum-suburbs, combined population less than 25,000 people. Their memberships total to about the same as Britannia's and they have municipal (school) facilities to play and train in. The people we meet don't understand why we can't get access to similar facilities in Ipswich, if sports halls exist and lie empty out of school hours?

At a couple of points we were asked, given our annual adoption of their events in France, when we had similar events in England that they could send a team or two to join in?

The B word (Brexit) only cropped up a couple of times over the weekend. Everyone was getting on so well, it was almost as if our french friends didn't want to embarrass us by mentioning it. How easy will it be to go back next year?

Answers on a postcard please.....