

EuCAN Trip to the Aveyron Region of France
Conservation & Small Scale Mixed Farming

25th October to the 7th November, 2009.

Organisers: Sarah Rodgers and Melvyn Jones

Report by Tim Beecher

Day 1: Sunday 25/10/2009

The group rendezvous point was The Norfolk Arms pub, 28 Leigh Street, London at 12:30 pm. Lots of happy, smiling faces with large baggage, excitement and anticipation in the air. Many of us were already familiar with each other from an inspiring preparatory weekend away at the Kingcombe Centre, Dorset. I had the opportunity to attend a 1 day brush-cutter course during this weekend which proved to be widely useful for this working, conservation trip. Tours of various West Country orchards, local community projects, educational orchard conservation management activities, was helped along by friendly, interesting, passionate people eager to learn and exchange ideas on a diet of delicious local, organic food and, of course, cider.



After a very tasty, seasonal organic vegetarian lunch at the pub and a free pint, courtesy of EuCAN, the whole group had arrived and were ready to travel en masse to St. Pancras for the 14:30 check-in

time. Sarah and Mel organised our tickets, which were promptly handed out in time and we were ready for the 15:29 Eurostar to Paris Gare du Nord. After dragging our baggage, and struggling through customs checks with assorted tools for our work, we finally managed to unload on the train for a comfortable journey under the English Channel.

We arrived Paris Gare du Nord at 18:56 where we then had to organise Metro tickets for our journey from Gare du Nord to Paris d'Austerlitz, for our overnight sleeper train to Montauban in Southern France. We had enough time to eat supper before our train ride so we dropped our baggage at Gare d'Austerlitz Restaurant. I had a very traditional French onion soup, bread, wine and took a brief walk with some of my fellow travellers along the River Seine.



We then headed for our sleeper train, got our tickets distributed to us by Sarah and Mel, squeezed onto our designated carriage before our 22:56 departure, organised ourselves into our cabins and triple deck bunks and performed necessary ablutions. The French rail service had kindly provided

ear plugs, disposable wet wipes, tissue and a bottle of mineral water in the net pocket beside each bunk. Finally, not forgetting to set my alarm before our 06:10 arrival at Montaubon on Monday morning, I promptly fell asleep on the top bunk, being rocked from head to toe whilst travelling across the tracks.

Day 2: Monday 26/10/2009

My alarm woke me at 05:30, my head thudded on the cabin roof, reminding me I was on the top bunk and a long way to descend to the floor without stepping on anyone. Luckily I had arranged all the things I needed for freshening up and our quick exit at Montaubon (we did not want to end up in Toulouse!).

Bleary eyed we struggled with our baggage off the carriage, helping each other before the train departed again. We headed straight for the station cafe, demolished croissants and I sipped much needed coffee. Mel and Sarah then had to arrange the collection of our 2 hire vans for the next leg of our journey to our gites in Najac.

We split ourselves into 2 groups and piled into each van, miraculously stacking all our baggage behind the back seats. Front seat passengers became map readers and we began our road trip to Najac. The journey progressively got more beautiful, the countryside in this part of France is undeniably stunning.

On arrival we were greeted by our gite hosts, Bernard and Jacqui, a very warm and welcoming retired couple who could not speak a word of English and an English ex-pat retired couple, Clive and Marie. Clive and Marie live here part of the year and became our translators and advisers, though we did make the effort to speak pigeon French. I am sure this was accepted with some humour and puzzlement, but we generally got each others messages across.

The gites were situated in a valley beside a beautiful river with an amazing view of Najac castle on top of a very tall hill. We were divided up between 4 gites, each having several bathrooms, a kitchen and best of all a wood burner for gathering around in the cold evenings. Most of us shared rooms. We unpacked our stuff and I grabbed a much needed shower – my room conveniently had an en

suite bathroom.



We then gathered ourselves for a trip up the winding roads into Najac to meet our farming hosts. We were welcomed at Thierry Dubosson 's restaurant, who also ran a small organic mixed farm just outside Najac. It was there we would spend most of our time working. We were also greeted by Frederick, the representative from Solagro (the French equivalent to Britain's Natural England: an environmental government agency), along with Romarique and Thomas, members of Marigot, the organic mixed farm, co-operative, and educational establishment, where we would also work. Thomas was an agricultural student on work placement at the farm, studying the benefits of organic farming methods.



Thierry passed around aperitifs, local roasted sweet chestnuts, tomato-herb, bread and hummus and local apple juice. The Mayor of Najac was also there to meet us and after much chatting we went into the restaurant for local, organic beef bourguignon, potatoes, roast pumpkin and much regional wine. This was followed by wild plum tarte with wild plum sorbet, produced on Thierry's farm, and a pick-me-up coffee. A very delicious way to round off the afternoon.



We were then free to explore Najac and gather a food shopping list, as we all took turns to cook our own food in the evenings. That evening Sarah and Mel prepared a very welcome meal of vegetable pasta accompanied by yet more lovely red wine (as it turned out, an important part of our every day consumption throughout our stay). We had this in gite number 4 which had the largest cooking area. This became the group's communal social area, mainly for shared meals.



Day 3: Tuesday 27/10/2009

We were up early for french bread, nutella, conserve and coffee to get to Thierry's farm for our first work day around 09:00. It was a gorgeous sunny morning and as we got closer to the farm, distant views of Najac castle surrounded by early morning mist added to already spectacular views. Thierry and his wife provided us with coffee and cake to get us started. He explained that he was trying to create a self-sufficient, organic farm and he acquired it only a couple of years ago.



Our task for the morning was to harvest sweet chestnuts, a thriving business in this part of France, particularly to make sweet chestnut puree/jam for crepes. The sweet chestnut species (*Castanea sativa*) was of a local variety suited to the climate in this region. The trees were grown on a north facing slope, because south facing slopes in this area are too hot and dry for this species. We collected bucket-fulls as we started at the bottom of the slope and worked our way up in a line. We were informed to reject chestnuts with small holes, as a result of boring insects inserting eggs, or

mould, which will have rendered them unusable.



We emptied the buckets of chestnuts into rectangular baskets that packed together nicely on the back of Thierry's open-top tractor. After spending all morning doing this we followed Thierry in his tractor back to the farm house for a 3 course lunch and, of course, wine! His wife, had prepared a fantastic spread in the kitchen and living room.



In the afternoon we started to clear some young woodland, which had been allowed to encroach up to the farm, to make way for a grey water system Thierry was going to build. We cleared a substantial portion of young trees, bramble and scrub using loppers, pruning saws of various sizes, chainsaws, and I got to use one of several brush-cutters for the first time, which was actually quite enjoyable.

After an afternoon of this satisfyingly hot and sweaty work we were presented with the farm's fruit sorbets in a cone. We had a choice of raspberry, prune, blackcurrant, redcurrant – all fruit grown on Thierry's farm. Thierry also mentioned he had peach trees growing on the farm and planned to plant more fruit trees and that their fruit sorbet is sold in tubs in the regional markets, with clearly marked labels, detailing where the product is from and the method of production, eg. organic or “biologique” in French.



After the very much appreciated sorbet cones we all piled in the vans and headed back to the gites for much needed showers and the anticipation of a hearty supper. The evening got chilly when the

sun went down so we collected some wood for the wood burners and warmed ourselves in front of these before dinner. We had pumpkin soup for starters and Jacqui wanted to make us a traditional garlic pork dish, but vegetarians were also catered for with a delicious veg/bean stew. Marie helped prepare the meal as well and she served us with apple pie and crème fraiche for desert. It was enthusiastically consumed and washed down with plenty of wine. This was followed by further socialising, drinking and playing music, in front of the fire .



Day 4: Wednesday 28/10/2009

After our usual morning ritual, aiming to be ready for work at 9am, we headed for Marigot, the organic, self-sufficient farm and co-operative. We were supplied with coffee and cake on arrival and then we were directed to another part of the farm to collect more sweet chestnuts. The trees were growing in more of a uniform, almost wood-pasture-like arrangement on a slope. This slope was not as high as Thierry's chestnut wood, but certainly as wide. We were used to the drill by now and arranged ourselves in a stretched line at the bottom and spread out.

We were told we could pick a wider range of chestnuts as they had an automated sorter and any unsuitable chestnuts would be fed to the pigs. As we were collecting these chestnuts, hundreds of wolf spiders and field crickets, at various developmental stages, tried to scuttle over the fallen leaves in the wake of the giant human tidal wave crashing up the hill behind them.



After a morning collecting we then broke for a fantastic picnic laid on by our employers which included various local organic sausages, pigs head pate, local cheese, bread, salad, their organic apple juice and, of course, plenty of the local red wine.

We then returned to work collecting more chestnuts. Later Romarique and Thomas showed us around their organically cultivated fields. They were managed on a 6 year grazing pasture, followed by a 2 year cereal rotation. They add no artificial fertiliser, just the compost from their farming practices. They also grow crops of oil seed rape to feed their cattle, but also to use as a biofuel mix to power their tractors, and use as a cooking ingredient for human consumption. The other crops they grow include cabbage and the apples they grow are the Rene variety. They showed us their young orchard and how they gave the trees plenty of space and surrounded them with protection from grazing mammals. The other livestock they manage include chickens, rabbits and goats and their aim is to be completely self-sufficient.



Romarique showed us how they separated the the chestnuts in a large vat of water. A portion are poured into the vat and any that float to the top are considered unsuitable – likely to be infested with insect larvae. They were then dried on a rack followed by an automated sorter which was a rotating sheet of metal with holes of varying diameter for gradation of chestnut size.



Day 5: Thursday 29/10/2009

Our new employers for today were Raymonde and Sabine (Sabine was also present at Thierry's on our 1st day). They had a meat and dairy farm in a very beautiful part of the countryside. We were taken to a grove of quite mature chestnut trees in the midst of grazing pasture.

We employed the full range of equipment for the many tasks ahead. We were required to lop off superfluous dead and unproductive branches of the sweet chestnut trees using loppers, saws, and chainsaws for the larger branches. In the morning I was employed with using a brushcutter on bramble and other scrub in a large hollow which had several ponds containing small populations of frogs and tadpoles.

We broke for lunch when Raymonde had collected enough branches from our cutting and lopping to start a bonfire and cook the very large spiral sausage, known as the Toulouse Sausage, fatty bacon and roast some chestnuts. Sabine brought a very large loaf of bread, various local cheeses, blue cheese dressed waldorf salad, local apple juice, as well as obligatory red and white wine. Luckily we were also provided with a large pot of coffee.





After this very well received lunch and much wine drinking we somehow got back to work! I teamed up with some others sawing away thick strands of ivy strangling the trees and pruning branches. We were also required to chop down suckers (new growth stems) of about 20 cm in diameter and then cut them into 2m lengths for fence posts. Chestnuts were collected for jams and purees. We were informed that the larger chestnuts are best for jams and purees, whereas the smaller, sweeter ones are best for roasting.

As the work drew to a close we started clearing up, collecting the tools and last buckets of chestnuts and traipsed back to the vans. We then followed Raymonde in his tractor back towards the farm, stopping off for a demo in grafting of sweet chestnut trees. After we took photos of the fantastic sunset over the beautiful Southern French countryside we then followed Raymonde and Sabine whilst they rounded up the dairy herd for milking. After witnessing the herd being ushered into the milking shed, numerous large bats were darting around the farm yard pursuing the dusk's flying insects. She then kindly gave us all a free jar of local, organic chestnut puree. I had been seriously

contemplating buying a jar in Najac, being very curious as to what it would taste like. So I was well pleased.

Day 6: Friday 30/10/2009

After our usual breakfast, including that vital bowl of coffee, we headed to Thierry's farm for another day of work. We carried on where we had left before and started clearing ash trees, bramble and hawthorn in preparation for Thierry's planned grey water system. Some of us were also required to clear a large circular clump of blackthorn, bramble and other scrub. Some of us were also required to trim some hedges.



We then broke for another lovely long lunch in the farm house finishing with that lovely and very welcome iced fruit sorbet in a cone. I carried on with brushcutter, getting rid of scrub in the wooded area we had started on Tuesday. Then used saws to cut down young stands of ash trees. I was then

required to help get rid of the stumps of blackthorn with the brushcutters, using the rather intimidating large blade which mashes up small trees and scrub. This area turned out to be either an old water cress bed or well.



Day 7: Saturday 31/10/2009

It was the start of the weekend and we were free from work obligations. So we were free to explore wherever we wanted. It was also Hallowe'en and the locals were preparing for the event, especially the children. Excitement and fun was in the Najac air. Most of us tagged along for a tour round Najac castle – rumour has it that it was the castle used in one of the scenes of Monty Python's Holy Grail where the French were hurling insults, and other things, at the English knights. The tourist literature also stated several scenes from different films were shot here. The castle and surrounds were also the site of many struggles and the heartland of the Southern French Occitan culture. The dominant Northern French tried to undermine and impose their French language and culture here.



This was partly due to the Cathar beliefs of the people in this region. The Cathars were a Christian sect, one the Roman Catholic Church did not approve of. The anti-Cathar crusade known as the Albigensian crusade brought on by the Northern French and German knights under the command of Louis VII of France and Conrad III of Germany, was more about political power and control than about heresy against the Roman Catholic Church.

The original castle built in 1100 AD was used by the infamous Simon de Montfort during the

Albigensian Crusade to defend the Cathars. The design of the current, traditional 13th century castle, rebuilt under the command of Alphonse de Poitiers, is defensive, with narrow passages and staircases and low doors to prevent the enemy advancing within the castle. The narrow slits for archers to shoot through are the tallest in the world, at 6.8 metres, and significantly increased the defensive capabilities of the castle by enabling up to three archers to fire at the same time.

There were also some spectacular views of Najac and the surrounding countryside from the top of the main keep (donjon), including the large curve in the river below - the 'boucle de l'Aveyron' - which passes around the village and castle. Following the course of the river far into the deep valley, from the entrance side of the castle, lead to our gites and the railway track running behind them.



As the day progressed to late afternoon some of us headed back into Najac, where the children were gathering in their Hallowe'en costumes and the adults were roasting chestnuts, and generally eating, drinking and being merry. The adults were preparing the local children with ghoulish face-painting

and a huge cylindrical cage was used to roast a load of chestnuts of course. In the high street the local farmers' co-operative, including Romarique and Thomas, were demonstrating their hydraulic apple press, with multi-layered 'cheeses' for pressing the apple pulp into fresh apple juice. It was an all-in-one mobile apple shredder, press and juicer. The juice was directed in a pipe from the press to a wide muslin filter covering a large rectangle container and the juice pumped from this into pasteurisers or collected as fresh, unpasteurised apple juice. The local farmers and general public brought crates full of different apple varieties, including quince which was blended in to make a very pleasant fruit juice.



It was the centre-piece of the market, centred in the high street, amongst the stalls selling all sorts of local produce and Hallowe'en related things.

Many of us returned to the gites to freshen up, but in the evening we decided to walk up the hillside across the railway tracks and up the winding hillside through trees, wildflowers and other assorted wildlife, on the way to Thierry's restaurant for our evening meal. Part of the track ran alongside a stream and we were amazed to spot 10s of brightly coloured yellow and black salamanders at various points along the stream bank. It was very unexpected and exotic and something quite unforgettable.



When we arrived we were warmly welcomed by our hosts, still covered in Hallowe'en face paint. Our meal included a delicious nettle tart au gratin, local lamb and a choice of local fruit crumble or bread and cheeses. Need I mention, the red wine flowed like rivers.



Day 8: Sunday 01/11/2009

Before leaving for today's destination, Paul and I spotted a wood mouse which seemed to set up residence in a little hole in the wall next to our gite. It was very indifferent to our presence but was keen to pose for plenty of photo opportunities in the midst of its daily business.



Most of today was spent visiting the market at St Antonin, a large, historic Romanesque town. After wandering around the large market I escaped to the surrounding hills and captured some great views. I bumped into cross-country joggers and the French army practising some Duke of Edinburgh skills. Today was the first time we experienced rain in S. France and we were informed that it would be likely to stay for the rest of the week. Luckily I managed to shelter under some trees between showers.





I was on cooking duty along with, Debbie and Erica's this evening. However, I managed to fit in a bit of rapid surfing down the river with Sarah, Mel and Paul, got thoroughly soaked, but thankfully nicely showered before I lent a hand. We provided field mushroom risotto (the mushrooms were gathered from fields on Thierry's farm), roast veg and bread followed by a very delicious, if we said so ourselves, apple crumble (with almonds and cinnamon) and Greek yoghurt.

Day 9: Monday 02/11/2009

It was back to work day today and rain was still a threat. The temperature was a lot cooler than last week, plus we had to get up extra early. We were off to a farm which produced goats cheese from their herd of goats and it was their early morning milking we had come to see. We had also come for horse riding, as horse riding for tourists was another attraction here. However, after the milking and mugs of coffee we had to offer our help in dismantling old fencing surrounding their herd of pigs. These pigs were bred from a large black-haired male pig and a boar sow. These parents were still present in the field with their many piglets whilst we began dismantling the fencing. It was hard work digging up the wire fencing buried in the soil and the deeply rooted wooden posts. Luckily we had a good variety of tools to do the job.





After a long morning mixed with rain showers and wind we retired for lunch at the farm where we had a selection of 8 goats cheeses (unsurprisingly) of various ages with bread and wine, water and apple juice. This was followed by a kind of paella and goats milk yoghurt with various fruit purees



for desert.



We then proceeded to the stables for the horse riding. It was military precision organisation on behalf of the Madame and her horsey helpers. First of all we had to fetch horses from the field, harness them and were each assigned a horse according to our horse riding experience (mine was virtually zero). Once paired with our horse we then had to fetch our own brush and proceed to groom its coat and generally 'bond' with it. Then we had to get kitted out with horse riding gear, including helmets, saddles and other paraphernalia.

The amusing part was watching each other mount the horses and get the stirrups properly positioned, so our knees were quite bent. The most experienced trotted ahead first, whilst us, less experienced were trying not to fall off and hold onto the reins! Madame told us to grasp great bundles of hairy main and cling on for dear life whilst trotting/galloping and trying to stand up at the same time. This felt more precarious to me than grasping the reins and not being able to steer left to right. We were taken on a long cross country trail starting with country road, which quickly narrowed to slender woodland tracks, with steep banks below and above on either side. These tracks crossed streams, turned very stony and uneven, and often twisted dramatically uphill and downhill, with the occasional tree fallen across it, just below head height so we had to duck or risk decapitation. It all added excitement and provided a slight adrenaline rush whilst maintaining our

position on the horse and enjoying the variety of landscapes as we rode. We were also encouraged to break off young, slim, whipping branches from trees to strike the horse on the shoulders and prod with the stirrups to help make it gallop from time to time.

After returning to our starting point by dusk we were told to dismount and remove our saddles and other equipment, taking them back to where we had found them. We said our fond farewells to our hosts, piled in to the vans and headed back to our welcome gites for long-awaited showers, beer, wine, food and bed. Rain forecast rest of the week.

Day 10: Tuesday 03/11/2009

We were back on the Marigot Farm today, and were taken by Francis to a piece of land where we dug holes 0.8 metres squared and dug up dying chestnut tree saplings. The lack of new growth indicated generally unhealthy trees and these were removed. During this process it rained on and off continuously – luckily the rain was not too heavy! Other large chestnut trees had pruning and chainsaw treatment in the surrounding fields.



Found some interesting invertebrates in the freshly dug holes, including a very well camouflaged black and white moth amongst the earth and a vivid green spider camouflaged amongst the grass, which I believe was a female *Micromatta virescens*. These spiders belong to the Heteropodidae

family and catch prey in low vegetation, waiting and grabbing prey rather than engaging in active pursuit.



After our hard morning's work digging in the rain, we were treated to a tour of the surrounding area, including the lake and young apple tree varieties planted.

It was shortly after this some of us went to secretly gather some Euros for some small gifts of thanks for our hard working group leaders and travel organisers, Mel and Sarah.

Later on in the day I visited the Najac patisserie and bought the most amazing hot cheese roll, wrapped in pastry. Some of us even might have ventured to the local bar from some very welcome pre-dinner Leffe beers.

Day 11: Wednesday 04/11/2009

This morning started off with glorious sunshine and we set off in the vans to Najac's community orchard which was planted in a field next to one of the main roads out of Najac. These trees were planted by the local school children and included 50 varieties of apple.

I was tasked with destroying the scrub that had built up around the old fence posts with the large brushcutters. New fencing was then erected around the perimeter of the field. During this process the rain clouds gathered, but we stopped around 12:30 to be taken to the Mairie de l'Aveyron's (Mayor of Aveyron) HQ for a very extravagant lunch.

We were treated to an aperitif of creme de cassis liquer mixed with sparkling white wine and various snacks. We then had to pose for various photo opportunities with the Mayor. We attempted to converse between us and the Mayor and his civil servant colleagues in pigeon French and English. We sat down to long tables in a very large room with large carafes of wine so by the time the starters arrived we were already quite merry. We had a very nicely dressed blue cheese salad with bread. The main dish was a very rich local one, known as Aligo, made from huge amounts of melted tome cheese and pureed potato, served over delicious slabs of roast pork meat. By the time the desert came all we could remember was it was very nice – I think it was a fruit pie with ice cream! We were all getting very used to drinking wine at lunchtimes by now, but this particular time it went down very well!





After a typically long 2 hour French lunch break and feeling very satiated we were brought back to the task in hand: putting barbed wire around the new fence posts at the community orchard. It was during this time the heavens decided to open and our waterproofs were trying their best to keep the moisture out but not always succeeding. We managed to complete most of the tasks in hand, including helping to unroll the barbed wire as it was nailed to the wooden posts, keeping the wire taut with tractor. At the end of our work a local English photo-journalist came to take our photos for the local paper. All very interesting cultural exchanges were taking place this day. Sarah also had to attend an interview with the local journalists later on that day.



We managed to get back to the gites just in time to get showered and ready for our Solagro host, Frederic, to give us a presentation on what Solagro does and how to prune trees. This all had to be done before our celebratory meal and party at the Marigot farm. This party was for all of us and our hosts to celebrate our cultural exchange as our stay in France was drawing to an end.

The pruning demonstration involved using one of Bernard's trees outside the gite we stayed in (and drunkenly decorated with balloons on Hallowe'en). It needed a good pruning according to Frederic. He told us it was not good to cut more than 37% of the branches, then it is best to wait 2-3 years before pruning again. We were advised to prune away the thinner, unproductive branches as all the energy is then used to go into the remaining productive branches. It is necessary to prune young trees annually. The golden rule, as we learnt from our recent tree cutting work experience, was to undercut large branches or risk stripping the bark from the main trunk and allowing tree pathogens easy access.



As it started to rain again we retreated to the main gite for Frederic's presentation. We were

informed that Solagro was a government organisation similar to Natural England in the U.K., which worked in energy, agriculture and the environment. There are 200-300 Solagro members in France and 20 employees.

The organisation works in the agricultural sector to provide low level inputs, increase water and soil biodiversity and reduce petroleum consumption. It also works towards renewables for housing, industry, agriculture and agroforestry, as well as projects on solitary trees, hedges and pastures. They advise and assist farmers on how to restore and maintain hedges, such as using circular saws rather than flails to prune hedges. They work with communities on landscapes projects to prevent erosion, plant hedges (about 200 km so far) and prevent water pollution, for example. Marigot is one of the farms assisted by Solagro.

Other examples include planting Whitebeam (*Sorbus* spp) tree strips in fields to protect crops and prevent erosion. In the past, circa 1955, many fields in west France had hedges and trees grown as strips in fields, now there are very few fields like this.

With regard to orchards, they encourage preservation of holes and cavities in old, traditional apple orchards to conserve Little Owls. In Normandy orchards are important habitat for Redstarts and plum trees/traditional orchards, specifically, are also important for the Eurasian Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*). Cherry trees are favoured by Hawfinches and Red-backed Shrikes prefer all traditional orchards.

Invertebrates, such as the beetle, *Osmoderma eremita*, like Chestnut trees, but have a preference for apple trees, especially trees 70-80 years old with large holes and cavities filled with loose dead wood. “The loss of trees with suitable hollows is the greatest threat to this Vulnerable beetle. In managed forests, trees are cut down before any hollows are formed. Therefore, most sites where hermit beetles live today are situated in agricultural and even urban landscapes. Even in these habitats, hollow trees are cut down because they are no longer used (for example, pollarded trees and in plantations of fruit trees or chestnut trees), or to protect humans from accidents”, Arkive online, 2004.

Traditional orchards are managed in a way that makes it difficult to meet the same level of production each year. The mobile apple shredder and presser that was demonstrated over the weekend is shared between 30 farmers in the Aveyron region and this has helped maintain, or even increase, production levels.

Their research also suggests that it is important to plant local, and several different varieties of tree, as they are very resistant to disease in the area. Increasing the planting of several different varieties also increases cross pollination and biodiversity. The kind of disease to watch out for in chestnut and fruit trees include “onchre” which results in bare branches from the top down, whereas “canchre” (canker) is a disease from the bottom up. We were also informed that the traditional tree grafting point is 2 m above the soil.

We were then shown the production levels and corresponding social benefits of these methods. In 2007, 2.2 tonnes of apples produced 1100 L of juice, providing more than 1800 Euros (2kg of fruit produce 1L of juice). 500 kg of chestnuts was equivalent to more than 3500 Euros. The general social objective is to have small farms maintained by many farmers on an extensive production scale and create a community where farmers and non-farmers mix and share knowledge. Apple juice and chestnut consumption is very local and not nationwide in France. It is not popular in the big cities, but large, intensive production results in the loss of quality, as is the case with chestnuts.

After this talk we bundled into the vans and headed to Marigot Farm. We had several long tables laid in their large converted farm building. Most of the farm hosts we spent the last week and a half with were there, including Bernard and Jacqui. We began the evening with more wine and were served with a delicious spread including pumpkin soup from pumpkins – all very lovely and served to us at the table. After a little more drinking and completion of the meal we were asked to clear the tables and chairs and make way for some cultural exchange. This began with traditional folk music performed by a local man with an accordion. We were then given a demonstration by Francis and his wife how to do the various dance moves to this music. It was like a sort of Elizabethan-folk-barn dance. We then all had to gather in lines, exchange partners and generally repeat the dance moves with each partner, getting faster and faster – it was all good fun. After this shenanigans we then had a warm down with demonstrations of didgeridoo playing by one of the young farm hands. We were then asked if we had anything to offer and a twee English song was sung by 1 daring soul, the rest of us were either too tired, shy or embarrassed to volunteer anything. Then it was time to say goodbye and thanks to most of our hosts over the last 2 weeks. It was raining lightly outside and time for bed.



Day 12: Thursday 05/11/2009

Today was our last work day, it was justifiably spent on Thierry's Farm. It was wet and rained on and off all day. We did the best we could to chop, saw, hack down as many of the trees as possible and stack them in large wooden piles.

We broke for lunch in Thierry's farm house and removed all our wet things, leaving our boots in an outside porch. Luckily Thierry had a large open farm house fire where we gathered round to warm up with glasses of wine and dry off. We had a very nice 3 course lunch as always at Thierry's farm house, rounded off with some of their fruit sorbet and coffee. It was then an opportunity for Thierry and his wife to ask each of us which part of the UK we were from and what our day jobs/general backgrounds were.



Many of us returned to the tasks at hand after our last long, French lunch break. It was tough going: slippery mud slopes, wet trees and branches to be moved, but those of us who stayed felt thoroughly satisfied, though wished we could have done a bit more for completeness sake as well as help our kind host. We then said our fond farewells and headed off back to our gites.



We were looking forward to tonight as Bernard was going to show us how to roast chestnuts and let us in on his, ageing, lethal chestnut and walnut wines (more like fortified spirits). Despite the rain Bernard managed to get a fire going in a secluded corner next to my gite and our local, friendly wood mouse. Needless to say the chestnuts were delicious.



Bernard then unlocked the old mill across the drive from the gites. He showed us how it used to work and how the water turned the huge grinding stones. His family owned this mill from as early as 1750 and he is the last in the family line to inherit this property. He also showed us another disused grinding stone which was used to grind walnuts for walnut oil. He then let us into the locked up ground floor under 2 of the gites. Inside was a bar with all the old beer mats, and various other bar paraphernalia and trinkets – it was a lost treasure trove. It was here he revealed the ageing spirits and gave us several tastes of his very quaffable and potent chestnut “wine”. He even revealed some of the secret recipe, but unfortunately I have now, tragically lost my hastily scrawled notes!

At our final evening meal at the gites Bernard and Jacqui and our English hosts were invited. I also presented Mel and Sarah with our collective gifts from the local region, in appreciation for managing us rabble. They seemed very pleased with the gifts, though probably secretly cursing at the extra weight they would have to carry all the way back to the UK.

Day 13: Friday 06/11/2009

I think many of us woke up nursing hangovers. It was time to get going and clear out the dregs from the night before as well as have all our stuff packed and loaded into the van for the start of our trip back home. Bernard came round promptly and I was roped into helping him collect and load the never ending empty glass bottles of booze into the van for the bottle bank. Travelling to the recycling bins in the van with Bernard really challenged my universal sign language skills, let alone my limited French! Bernard could not speak a word of English, but amazingly we managed to have some understanding of what each other was saying – it was almost a real bonding moment.

As soon as Bernard dropped me off back to the gites, everyone else was packed apart from my bags. I had to quickly shove my stuff in the back of a van as we planned to have a cultural day trip to Cordes and Albi on the way back to Montauban. We said our fond farewells and thanks to Bernard and started our trek back through Aveyron.



We had a pleasant walk around the historic towns of Cordes and Albi, sampling more French cuisine, such as crepes filled with chestnut puree, and buying last minute presents or souvenirs. We also discovered an amazing old convent garden and managed to spot a Hummingbird hawk-moth. Towards the end of the afternoon we even managed to squeeze in a bit of wine tasting at a vineyard. I bought a nice bottle of red for a family Christmas present before we departed for Montauban. We arrived at our destination, grabbed our belongings, after parking the hire vans back with their owners, and headed towards a North African restaurant for our last meal together. Afterwards we caught our overnight sleeper train and I think we all collapsed unconscious till Paris.





Day 14: Saturday 07/11/2010

Waking bleary-eyed at some ungodly hour in Paris we stumbled out of the train with our baggage and reversed our journey across the city at the beginning of our trip. We arrived at Paris Gare du Nord in need of a stiff black coffee, whilst waiting for the Eurostar boarding time. We flopped on board with all our baggage intact, including the remains of our precious communal wine which we proceeded to drink as a last celebratory tribute to Southern France and some giddy relief that we were on the last leg. The thought of soon arriving to my welcome, familiar home comforts was most pleasing.

We arrived in London and before we knew it we were saying our goodbyes to each other as we had pre-booked transport to our various destinations across the U.K. I had travelled all the way across France using public transport without a hitch, but on arrival in London there was travel chaos, with crowds of queueing people trying to jostle through the ticket barriers. Far too many tube lines were closed due to weekend repair works, and typically my direct line to Victoria was too. I was due to catch my Brighton train at 12:06 but when I arrived at London Victoria to pick up my pre-booked

tickets for the machine just before 11:30, there were huge queues. To rub salt in the stress wound, when I finally got to the machine it would not recognise the card I purchased it with! I was livid, especially as I noticed at least 5 ticket machines out of order. Once I had queued for the staffed ticket kiosks I had missed my train. When I explained, I was faced with indifference and told I had to buy another full-priced ticket. The card reader at the kiosk had no trouble purchasing my extortionately priced single ticket back to Brighton using my 'unrecognisable' debit card. Needless to say I wanted to complain and managed to tell Southern Trains what I thought of their ticket machines and customer service! Still, it was good to get home, sweet home and savour the memories of a very successful, educational, conservation exchange with our French comrades.....and it didn't end on a sour note: I got a full refund.