

A Visit to Arras — W. E. GREENWOOD

SATURDAY 16 September dawned wet and lowering as a coach load of intrepid Dover venturers headed for the Eastern Docks, in one of the intermittent 'dry' spells, to board the ferry for Calais at the start of a visit to the ancient city of Arras.

Most of the joys of the journey were veiled from us as mist and rain showers followed our route, but our arrival in the old city added to our driver's problems. The narrow streets were not designed to take modern coaches, and, to make it worse, all the approaches to the Town Hall were closed by temporary 'No Entry' signs – it was market day!

Undeterred, our driver eased round one of the no entry signs and came to a stop between the Town Hall and a Police car. A potentially explosive situation was averted when one of our French-speaking members negotiated a solution to our dilemma whereupon we thankfully disgorged to sample the delights offered by the many cafés and restaurants and explore the market and surrounding streets. It was raining!

Replete, we re-mustered outside the Town Hall to find that the market had almost gone and the streets and square almost clean, with a band of sweepers and cleansing vehicles

OUR PARTY ATTENTIVELY LISTENING TO OUR GUIDE OUTSIDE THE OUTER GATE TO THE ABBEY OF St. VAAST



diligently applying the finishing touches. We were briefly entertained as we watched a newly-married couple charmingly emerge from the Notary's office and depart in a horse-drawn carriage followed by an excited crowd of well-wishers.

Our guide for the tour of the city was Madame Telletier, an Englishwoman married to a Frenchman and residing in Arras, who provided a non-stop comprehensive introduction to the city, its history and

architecture.

The centre is occupied by the two large squares, the Place des Héros fronting the Town Hall, and the larger Grande Place, both cobbled or of stone setts. Both are surrounded by gabled houses of uniform height, with not more than three upper floors, supported on sandstone pillars at the front, all of which had to be reconstructed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

We had occasion to bless the designers for we were under shelter during the whole of the walk around the squares (it was deluging!)

The Grande Place was not used for market activities for its function or purpose was as a communal gathering place, and for the mustering of armies, etc. Beneath these squares is a maze of three levels of tunnels, accessed from the surrounding buildings. Many thousands of British troops, as well as the inhabitants, were hidden in the tunnels in preparation for the big assaults of the First World War.

The Town Hall is a fascinating building, originally built in 1463, many times damaged, destroyed in the 1914-18 war and completely rebuilt in its original form, including the 250 foot high balconied belfry from the top of which the Gold Lion of Artois gazes across the city.

Occupied by the Romans some 2000 years ago, the city became famous in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries for its tapestries, and later, in the eighteenth century, for industry, manufacture and porcelain. It became a leading trading centre with strong British connections.

Joan of Arc was held prisoner in Arras during October and November 1430. Subsequently, Louis XI cleared out the inhabitants to replace them with his own supporters. Arras thus came under Spanish

THE PLAQUE IN THE CATHEDRAL



114 be seen in some of the architecture, most of which is in the Flemish style. It was not until 1654 that Arras was returned to the Kingdom of France.

As the birthplace of Robespierre, Arras was spared the horrors of the French Revolution, but suffered from severe neglect, necessitating the rebuilding in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1995 only one of the original houses of 1467 is still standing, though much repaired.

Through the narrow streets to the Cathedral, originally built as the Abbey Church of the St. Vaast Benedictine Abbey and given by Napoleon I to the Bishop of Arras to replace the old city cathedral which had been destroyed. Regretfully, it was destroyed during the First World War, rebuilt during the 1920's and 1930's, only to be seriously damaged again in the 1939-45 war. It was reconstructed in a style reminiscent of the Greek temples, but has not yet been completed, as the dome over the transept and the spire are still missing. On one wall of the transept is a very poignant plaque to the memory of the million British killed in the 1914-18 war. The statuary and decoration is mainly white marble, and the altar is a magnificent slab of black marble from Labrador, supported on three bronze cubes.

So much to see, and so little time. A brief look at the huge Abbey of St. Vaast, part of which houses the city museum, then Robespierre's birthplace and a final look at the fine interior of the Town Hall, although we had no time to explore the belfry or the tunnels under the building, which are open to the public.

Then it was back to the coach, with many of our party determined to return for a longer stay to dig deeper into the beauties of Arras at greater leisure.

The cobbled streets of the city are a sight not to be missed when heavy rain turns them into raging torrents three inches deep, and all the roof drains seem to be arranged to gush overflow water at about five feet above ground in a horizontal jet guaranteed to soak the unwary. Yes, it did rain!

Our guide had to be admired for the way she kept going, making herself heard above the roar of fast-moving tyres on the cobbles. At least most of the time!

And finally, our thanks to Joan Liggett for organising a most interesting journey to a lovely old city. It may have rained quite a lot, but that was just the luck of the draw, and we certainly had an eyeful and a lot of fun.

Thank you.



"Singin' in the rain!" ?