

COMBERTON TWINNING ASSOCIATION

Chairman's Report for AGM - Wednesday 7th June 2017

Introduction

This is my first report as chairman, and it has been a somewhat challenging year, with the eventual cancellation of our visit to France that had been planned for this Spring (more on that later).

We are nearing the 20th anniversary of the twinning - The Wrights and Browns first visited Le Vaudreuil in 1998, and the first official visit and twinning charter were in 1999. However, 18 years on, we have a close rapport with our twin village, reinforced recently by the several messages of support after the Manchester and London attacks, and the many friendships that have developed between English and French families.

It is unavoidable though, to note that the twinning association is struggling to recruit and maintain enough members to keep the twinning viable into the future. This is due to several factors – the association is by no means alone among village clubs and associations in seeing falling numbers and less interest from the younger generations in this type of voluntary community events.

The biggest long-term factor against us is probably the decision by the Village College to drop French as its primary foreign language. It changed to teaching Spanish as initial language, with French as secondary language. This was subsequently adopted by feeder schools also. It was compounded by the college then deciding to set up a new relationship with a different French school after trying with a school in Le Vaudreuil and encountering “different expectations”.

The French do not have this problem, as English (despite Brexit) is still seen as a world language, and they have many families who wish their children to improve their English and to understand English culture.

Twinning Visits to France

We had a successful visit to Le Vaudreuil in October 2016. The coach left the Village College at 08.30 on Friday 28th October and included a stop at Boulogne to visit Nausicaa sea centre to break the journey. We arrived in Le Vaudreuil around 7.30 pm (much better than gone midnight!). The cost of travel was £50 per adult and £25 for children under 16 years (rather less than the €80/€40 that the French charge). In Le Vaudreuil we spent the Saturday with our host families, then met for a communal lunch at the Cotton Club before returning on Sunday afternoon.

In the past, every five years or so, we have reversed the sequence of visits, so that each country gets some Spring and some Autumn. Hence, we planned to do a second visit to France in the Easter 2017 school holidays, so as to be able to travel during the day rather than after school. In hindsight, we had not factored in the higher costs and reduced availability of cross-channel travel at such times. Combining this with the fact that some members had family holiday trips booked then, and the short time since the previous visit, the numbers were well down. In the end, we failed to get enough people to cover the costs, even given the usual subsidy from club funds (raised by the quiz etc).

We then tried two different dates, but in the end decided to cancel the trip. A shame, but probably the right decision. Thanks to Brian McCabe for taking over from Peter the organisation of our trips, and particularly for his efforts in trying to find a solution.

We have a proposal from the French that we go next to France in June next year, when they are having a special celebration on 8-10 June 2018 for the millennium of the Notre-Dame du Vaudreuil church. However, we need to weigh that against possible conflicts with school terms and exams??

Twining Visits from France

As a result of the sequence reversal, we haven't had a visit from France this (AGM) year. However, we are still expecting a contingent from Le Vaudreuil on October 27-29. We therefore will soon be canvassing for local families to be hosts. The Village Hall is not available that Sunday lunchtime, so options are either an event at the Village hall on the Saturday evening, or somewhere else on the Sunday – Current suggestion from the committee is a ceilidh at Meridian School on the Saturday evening, but ideas will be welcomed at the AGM.

Social Events

Our annual barbeque was hosted at Manor Farm by Godfrey and Pauline, and organised by Peter and Barbara Mitton – thanks to all. Our main fund raiser was the quiz, again ably organised in November by Peter Mitton. We had our annual dinner again at The Park on the 2nd February, and feedback on the food and ambiance was positive.

Publicity

On the publicity front, I've submitted adverts for the twinning in the village magazines of all the 11 surrounding villages which feed Comberton Village College. We had a stand at the Meridian fair. I've also set up a simple web site – see <http://CombertonTwinning.org.uk>, with information and downloadable posters – a resource for all of you to point your friends at. Personal recommendation is by far the best way of getting new members.

Future of the Twining

There is an item on the agenda for a discussion of the future of the twinning, and your thoughts and ideas are very much welcomed. I'd hate to see it die, but if current membership trends continue, it is a distinct possibility.

Should we change to one visit a year, with us going to France alternate years? Should we go in school holidays or in term-time. Go in the morning, or at 4pm? Go in Spring or in Autumn? Increase membership cost or trip cost? Can we get any grants to support the association?

I have some comments from members who can't attend the AGM which I'll raise then.

Thanks

A big thank you to all my committee – nothing would happen without them! Thanks also to all of you members, for hosting visitors and supporting the twinning association.

Paul Hardy, 5-May-2017