

AFB Schools Involvement

Lycée Notre Dame Du Roc & AFB Volunteers combined visit to St Gilles Croix de Vie 21st May 2025

As a follow-on from previous collaborations between Le Lycée Notre Dame Du Roc in La Roche and the AFB, this year's visit was to the sea port of St Gilles Croix de Vie on the Vendean Coast arranged by two Lycée teachers (Mme Laurence ALTHOT and M Richard GUILLOTON) along with twenty two Lycée students.

The aim of the AFB's involvement with the Lycée is for the students to practice speaking English in real-life situations and to gain self confidence in expressing themselves.

This year the programme was three-fold -

- a morning visit to the last sardine cannery in the Vendée (an Atelier De La Sardine called 'La Perle des Dieux')
- a picnic lunch by the side of the river Vie estuary
- an afternoon visit to a family brasserie (Les Brasseurs de la Vie) situated on the edge of St Gilles Croix de Vie.

Coach transport had been arranged from the Lycée to St Gilles for the students and professors. Lynn Scully and Nadine Diez chose to travel on the coach, whilst Karen Taylor and myself chose to car-share, meeting everyone at the Atelier De La Sardine.

The two different transport methods used may be important because in hindsight I wonder whether this may have had an influence on the day. On the bus Lynn and Nadine were immediately absorbed into the Lycée group, joining in with the entertainment that the young people had arranged to pass the time on the journey. When Karen and I arrived at the carpark outside the sardinerie (on time and by no means late) everyone was already standing in the car park, the youngsters dispersed into their separate friendship groups. They were very friendly, polite and interested in us however both Lynn and Nadine later individually commented on the reduction of English spoken once everyone was no longer cocooned together on the bus.

Anyway, onward to the Atelier de la Sardine. It has another seventeen boutiques throughout the Ouest De France and we were visiting the main Atelier which is part museum, part art gallery and part boutique with tasting opportunities. This tourist attraction is tucked away opposite the Casino, entry is free of charge to the public and it is an excellent initiation into the world of canned sardines. At the beginning of the 20th century thirteen canneries existed in the area. By the 1970's there were only two left. Saint Gilles is considered a top place for French sardines, both fresh and canned. This cannery is about 130 years old and is the last one left in the Vendée. The fish are caught by the company boats and then processed by hand by the female employees. The company has been awarded the prestigious "Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant (Living Heritage Company) label".



On arrival we all gathered to watch a professional video detailing the rich history of fishing and canning in Saint Gilles Croix de Vie. Ancient footage of the fishermen's challenging life at sea also illustrated the arduous work of the girls and women on the quay and how females have always dealt with the catch once it was landed. Women who worked in the Atelier factory have historically appeared to benefit from a good working environment as they sorted, processed and packed the product. Most innovations in the factory have been made to increase the comfort of the employees as they work, the processing method remaining the same as always. Everything is still done by hand and new employees must start at entry level and work in all departments before advancement is offered.

Onwards into the museum which has audio guides in most languages. Here the opportunities to chat in English opened up. In my corner these conversations were mainly about where the students chose to live and why (several boarded at the Lycée as they enjoyed the student life during the week, several stayed with their parents in La Roche, one touchingly because he loved his sister and would miss her); what career paths they would like to take if everything was possible; and the sports and social interests that they had. Several of them needed to start speaking in French to answer questions and this quickly removed the shyness block and they would continue in English.

The Atelier staff had to move us through to the boutique as another tourist group was arriving, and there the staff explained about the delicacy of the product, the depth of flavour and difference in quality. The link between the artist who designed the beautiful pictures on the cans and the cannery was revealed. Then tasting started. Two different types of sardines were presented on toast (no butter used) and we all commented on our perceptions. For someone who has been sardine adverse, this was an excellent experience.

With time marching on, hurried purchases were made in the boutique, lunch time arrived and we gathered up our picnics walking to a spot by the estuary to settle down and eat. The students again separated into their individual friendship groups and the six adults huddled down together on seats, discussing food, life for English expats in France and viewpoints about each other's countries of birth. The sun hid, the wind blew, clouds scudded overhead and rain looked imminent. Being an intelligent man, Richard suggested retiring for a coffee in a local cafe so we found a friendly bar, leaving the students at the estuary picnic spot. Over coffee the conversation became animated and intriguing. At one point two English AFB volunteers were continuing a discussion started by Mme Laurent when we realised that they were speaking fluently in French with each other. This is the beauty of lycée trips. The exchange of ideas, the fluency of expression that comes, the pleasure in each other's company.

Eventually we exited the coffee shop and returned to the students back at the picnic site. The boys were playing an animated game of football and the girls were swinging on the playground carousels. The energy and youthfulness was charming to see.

Richard rounded everyone up and herded us back to the transport. Five minutes later we pulled up in front of 'Les Brasseurs De La Vie', a micro brewery unique to La Vendée. This is a family business where Caroline and her son Antoine brew sixteen local beers in a manner that is socially accountable, using only bio ingredients and made with much care and passion.

The brewing process is done at the back of the premises and butts onto a large office overseen by Romy the adored dog. A spacious funky bar-lounge sits in front of a picture window so that the brewing process is on view to the public at all times. The tasting bar and small shop are positioned in front of the entrance door. It is a very attractive place and well worth a visit.



The students spread out on the lounge comfy seating and Caroline started the visit by asking them who they were, what they were studying and what they knew about socially accountable businesses (CSR* in jargon speak). This had been covered in their classes and Caroline now brought the whole concept to life as her business is based on environmental, ethical, philanthropic and economic responsibility. As she detailed the brewing process she emphasised at each point how the practices of the company embodied these values. The students were engrossed and engaged.

The tour then moved into the actual beer brewing rooms at the back, the theory previously explained in the lounge materialising into a series of procedures - metal vats of liquid with tubing, stainless steel beer kegs, small silos. It was clean, functional and well run. Antoine is the master brewer and preforms his magic here.

Caroline is an excellent communicator, everyone warmed to her as she took us clearly through the processes, asking and answering questions with infinite patience and enthusiasm. The impression that she made on me was that she, her family and loved ones truly embodied the concept of social responsibility in their business.

On returning to the lounge the students poured and served tasting samples of several beers. A discussion followed of the aromas, textures and depth of taste, liking or disliking, then moving to the next flavour. The lounge has French traditional bar games scattered around the tables, some of them unknown to the English volunteers.



It was near the end of the visit so again purchases were made, thanks given to Caroline and a return to the lycée was required.

Karen and I drove away well satisfied with the day, whilst Lynn and Nadine joined the professors and students on the bus to return to La Roche Sur Yon. Possibly fortified by the beer tasting, the students launched into French familial songs all of which Nadine knew, singing lustily all the way back to the Lycée. Apparently it was a joyful return.

As an aside I would like to mention how polite, courteous and engaged all the students were with us, the AFB adults. Laurence looked astounded when we commented on this, stating that of course they were as they were all looking to enter hospitality as a career. Whilst this may be true, these were fifteen to sixteen year olds who had no barriers at being with older people. Another delight of France which is not standard in the UK.

Another trip may be arranged in 2026 and if you have any interest in attending this I strongly recommend that you do. Whether the day is at the Lycée or at an outside venue, it has always been inspiring and fun.

The four AFB volunteers on the trip were -

Lynn Scully : Karen Taylor : Nadine Diez : Stephanie Davies (author of this article)

The two Lycée professors were -

Mme ALTHOT Laurence - professeur Sciences et Technologies des Services, with her students from the 2STHR section i.e. 'le bac STHR (sciences et technologies de l'hôtellerie et de la restauration)', which would roughly translate to a baccalauréat in hotel and restaurant sciences and technologies in the UK.

M GUILLOTON Richard - Enseignant Lettres Anglais en section Métiers de La Mode, with his students from the LPEGT section i.e. "Général et Technologique". This is a first year of study at the Lycée in general and technological subjects, allowing the students to specialise in year two.

*CSR is commonly defined as a business model in which companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations

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