

BRIDLINGTON-MILLAU

A bit of history

The East Riding's twinning links with Bad Salzuflen provided the starting point for the twinning with Millau, when Cllr. Margaret Chapman as Mayor was in Bad Salzuflen at the same time as the Mayor of Millau. Millau and Bad Salzuflen had been twinned for many years and this meeting was to be the spark which ignited the interest in Twinning Bridlington with Millau.

In 1990, a small group of interested people which included Margaret Chapman, Bob Owen and Bill Ellyard, three of the major figures in the early days of the twinning arrangements in Millau made the first step towards a twinning agreement with Millau. This visit was to set the scene for what was to follow.

Eager to capitalise on this early visit, the current chairman, Chris Myers organised a meeting for all interested parties who would be interested in taking part in a trip to celebrate the signing of the Twinning agreement between our two towns. This meeting was attended by over 90 people and surprised by the interest, the first trip was born.

The first visit

In October 1991, during Half-Term, 2 coaches set off for Millau along with a group of pupils from Bridlington and Headlands Schools not knowing what to expect or what kind of welcome would await us in this town with which we were about to twin.

In those days it was a long journey, no channel tunnel, no motorway down to the South of France in the direction of Millau, it was a gruelling 24 hour journey. But spirits were high, most of the passengers would be staying with families, many of them didn't speak any French at all and sales of French-English dictionaries in Bridlington more than trebled in the week prior to the visit. The coach had a great mix of people on board from all walks of life and representing all age groups. But no matter what the age group as we approached Millau the coach began to fall silent, the realisation that they were about to meet people they had only had information on paper about and they had to share a house with for a week. Fortunately, the beauty of the view of the town of Millau somewhat calmed the nerves and as the coach turned in to the station car park, wave upon wave of smiling, sunburnt, happy families waited to greet us, their friendliness was immediately obvious from stepping off the coach and the traditional 3 kisses on the cheeks became the order of the night as people disappeared one by one with their host families, safe in the knowledge that we would all be meeting up the next day.

From that moment, we never looked back. The Twinning week was full of dancing, laughing happy people who really enjoyed their experiences in their host families. The language differences never really caused too many problems as our visitors became very skilled in the art of mime, drawing and learning very important vocabulary. Of course there were misunderstandings, all the usual ones – sleeping until midday because you are waiting for it to get light because no one has told you that the windows have shutters on them; feeling like a large juicy steak and ordering steak tartare; the French too confusing the words teeth and teats or buttons and bottoms, all were greeted with much fun and laughter on both sides. As were the range of new experiences – a two hour lunch, collecting snails for the table, collecting wild mushrooms and sitting outside a café in October in a Tshirt drinking cold beer!

Hands across the sea

Twenty years on and many groups and individuals have travelled independently to Millau. There have been school and college visits with Bridlington School's exchange thriving with the College Marcel Aymard. The local Rotary group twinned their two groups too.

Groups of Adult learners of French have made study visit exchanges and worked on language projects to develop their linguistic skills; the tennis club joined the Millau tennis club for a tournament; the Beaconsfield football team made a trip to challenge a Millau eleven; and music has also been well represented with a local Jazz group "Bejazzled" taking part in the annual Millau Jazz Festival and a group of Morris Dancers joining their Millau counterparts for a local festival. Local farmers, archers, swimmers, table tennis players, environmental groups, philatelists, conservationists and journalists have all taken part in visits to meet their Millau counterparts over the past years.

The highlights

The unforgettable journey with a group of 50 pupils from Bridlington and Headlands at the time of the French Lorry Drivers' strike was memorable for all the wrong reasons. We managed to get through but with major detours through the last 100 miles of the journey in torrential rain and dreadful weather conditions. On a more positive note, spending Bastille day on 14th July in Millau was an unforgettable day (and night), whole families out dancing in the main square until very late (or early in the morning) with fireworks and much celebration. With a group of adult students, skiing in February just to the North of Millau as part of a study visit and then watching them perform their presentations in French to a large audience of delighted Millau spectators. Finding over 100 families in Bridlington to host the very first large visit from Millau at the time of the signing in Bridlington in April 1992 was an enormous challenge and really called on all our skills of persuasion. Receiving the Millau-Bridlington "milestone" which now sits directly outside the former Town Hall was a very heavy experience – it took 8 people to move it from the coach to the stage of Bridlington Leisure World for the presentation!! And we couldn't forget the singing of POLYSONGS, a group of 25 jazz, folk and gospel singers who entertained in the Priory and opened the Bridlington Choral Festival. Walking on the "Millau Bridge" on the day before it officially opened along with thousands of people from all over the world. Our 20th anniversary visits in 2011 and 2012 were very special too with over 80 Bridlingtonians heading to Millau for an unforgettable week. So many great memories.

Not so different after all

What have we learnt? Well, we do have a lot in common in spite of the distance between us. Both towns were in the past heavily reliant on an industry which has gone into decline. Millau was the centre of the leather industry in the South of France and concentrated on the manufacture of gloves. The influx of cheap leather goods from the East, saw the downfall of the industry, but such is the quality of the work, that a few leather workers still remain making high quality goods for the great French fashion houses like Dior, Chanel and Balmain. Both towns have diversified and tourism now plays a major part in the life of Millau and its people. The campsites and opportunities for walking and extreme sports like white water rafting, paragliding, free climbing, mountain biking, hang-gliding, bungee and many other less active pastimes attract those who are in the know from all over Europe. Both towns are surrounded by beautiful scenery and countryside, with Millau nestling in the confluence of three rivers, the Tarn, Dourbie and the Jonte and surrounded by the most spectacular, awe inspiring Gorges and Causses (like the moors).

Both towns are looking forward to a rosy future in terms of development, Millau blends brilliantly the modern and the ancient and with the motorway now extending through Millau this makes the trip towards Spain that much easier. A huge bridge has been built to take the motorway past Millau which spectacularly spans the distance between two Causses at a height greater than that of the Eiffel Tower. It has become a tourist attraction in its own right by the sheer magnitude of the construction.

We have learnt plenty from each other and I'd like to think that our palates are more refined thanks to our mutual visits. They can offer Roquefort cheese, the beautiful blue veined cheese which is made exclusively in the village of the same name only 10 miles from Millau. We have offered Fish and Chips and the mystery of mushy peas. They have brought us "Petanque" the game of bowls played with metal "boules" now with its own very successful here in Bridlington. We have introduced them to the "pub night" with a warm open fire, darts, bitter and mild. They have taught us the "Marseillaise" and we have taught them "On Ilkley Moor Bah't At" with such success that the POLYSONGS group from Millau had translated a version sung in French and dedicated to Bridlington (A Bridlington Nu Tete – In Bridlington Bah't At).

The Bridlington Millau Twinning Association

Since the beginning, we have firmly believed that a strong twinning relies on its members and that everyone in Bridlington should have access to the opportunity to travel to Millau.

With this aim in mind, we have been successful over the past twenty years to encourage over 2000 Bridlington people of all ages and backgrounds to join us on our visits and also attracting many more by the wide range of annual activities. Membership is just £7.50 per person per year and includes Newsletters and discounted Social events. Everybody is welcome, whether you can speak French or not, of any age and there is always a great demand from Millau for families to come and join us.

The Committee meets on the first Monday of every month and discusses arrangements for visits and social activities. The current post holders of the committee are Shelagh Finlay, President, Chris Myers, Chairman; Barbara Hall, Secretary; Daphne Ford, Vice-Chair; John Ford, Treasurer. Our Constitution is updated every year following the Annual General Meeting in January.

There is a trip to Millau every odd year and in the even years, Millau comes to visit Bridlington. Twinning has also brought together many people from each town who previously didn't know each other. Both Committees are constantly busy organising social events for their members throughout the year. This year the Bridlington Millau Twinning Association are organising Wine my Bluff, a Walking Treasure Hunt through Bridlington a Gourmet Night and a Music Night to bring together our members. anyone from 5 to 95 can join the Association and receive information about all these activities by contacting Chris Myers (chrismyers@tinyworld.co.uk).