

## And so to Vannes

Sunday, June 11

So here we are in Vannes, which we haven't explored yet beyond a brief mosey out yesterday afternoon to find a supermarket and stock up for our week in our new home. And what a lovely home it is. A one bedroom apartment in the heart of old Vannes, in an old building up three flights of creaky stairs, but with a decor that looks like it is the 'after' shot in a magazine article covering one of those 'do-up' telly programmes. Very comfortable and what a relief to have a table to sit and write at.

We're taking it easy on this Sunday morning. We'll venture out later, I'm sure, but for now it is writing (me), dozing (him), and getting the washing done. Yay for a place with a lave-linge. Incidentally I'm thrilled at being able to try my French out. Had lots of opportunities so far, and am managing far better than I'd anticipated. I'm even understanding some of the train announcements. Very happy with the decision to switch from the car-camping tour of England to travelling Bretagne by train. And also to be spending a week at a time in one place.

View from our apartment window in Vannes (LEFT, TOP).

Mediaeval buildings lining the streets of Vannes (LEFT, BELOW).

The inner yacht basin on the river Marle at Vannes (BELOW).

Later . . . We did go for a walk this evening for a couple of hours, down to the river port see the yachts and check out the ferries. Vannes is lovely. It has a charming historic centre, our flat is comfortable, and the sun continues to shine.

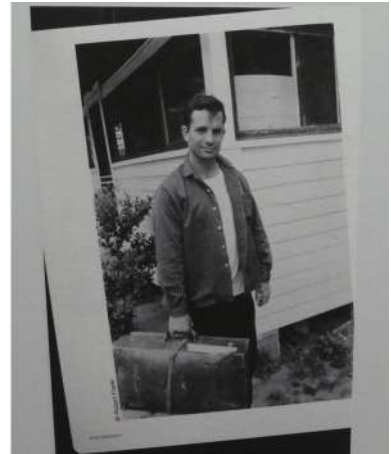


## Finding Jack in Vannes

Monday, June 12

Travel always throws up surprises and today it was an exhibition at the Vannes art gallery about beat generation poet and novelist Jack Kerouac. So of course we had to go. It was called 'Sad Paradise', and comprised excerpts of Kerouac's correspondence with a Breton poet, interpreted through photographs by Breton photographer René Tanguy, all from Tanguy's book of the same name. I hadn't realised that Kerouac had Breton ancestry.

In the last three years of his life, Kerouac was friends with US-based Breton poet Youenn Gwernig, and he (Kerouac) was obsessed with finding out about his Breton roots. Tanguy has used previously unpublished letters between Kerouac and Gwernig as inspiration for photographs taken in Bretagne and America. It was a bit hard to work it all out as there was little explanatory information in French, and none in English. But it's whetted my appetite to do a bit more research.









## Île d'Arz: Another perfect île

Tuesday, June 13

We spent today on the Île d'Arz in the Golfe du Morbihan. It was another perfect day, both in terms of warmth (and no wind) and the escape to another world. Like Sark, this island is criss-crossed with roads and tracks, perfect for walking—of which we did heaps. So much so that I'm so tuckered out I barely have energy for writing. So I expect this will be short. Lots of photo opportunities of flowers and landscapes. The ferry trip over was about half an hour, so Île d'Arz feels less remote than Sark did. Never out of sight of the mainland. There's lots more islands in the gulf so maybe we'll get to more before our week in lovely Vannes is up.

Île d'Arz—an island criss-crossed with roads and tracks, perfect for walking (THESE PAGES, PREVIOUS PAGE).











## Citron meringue: the new salted caramel

Thursday, June 15

We returned to our apartment late-ish this evening to an enveloping warmth, so we know it's been another stunningly hot day in Vannes. We had escaped to a less scorching but still pleasant temperature with a day trip to Quiberon and the Belle Île-en-Mer. Not complaining. This is the summer we never had (have never had?) in Wellington, so we are enjoying it while we can. But yesterday (Wednesday) was sufficiently hot to ensure we ventured out only briefly, to the ramparts and the formal gardens in front of them, before we admitted defeat and went hop skippety to an ice cream vendor. And there I discovered a new favourite flavour: citron meringue. Yes, it has displaced my so far all time favourite salted caramel, and made it straight to the top of my personal ice cream hit parade.

So yesterday was a home day, but to be fair, not just because of the heat but also because of the mileage we did on Tuesday, which left our four legs collectively protesting. And today, in a way we continued the rest-day theme by letting trains and buses do the miles for us. All the places we stopped at briefly today—Auray, Quiberon, and the Belle Île—are places I'd like to spend more time at.

Beautiful Quiberon beaches—as viewed from the bus on the sand spit connecting the mainland to Presqu'île de Quiberon.



## Art space

Friday, June 16

We went back to the art gallery today. We'd bought tickets the other day to see the Musée de Préhistoire—housed in the 15th-century Château Gaillard, and definitely worth the visit—and the tickets also included entry to the permanent exhibitions in La Cohue, the Vannes Musée des Beaux-Arts. And what a lovely art space it is. La Cohue is where we earlier saw the Jack Kerouac-related photo and letters exhibition, but that part was free. Today we saw the 'pay-for' bits.

The section that most caught my eye was upstairs in an amazing space housing a permanent collection by the artist Geneviève Asse. I'd not heard of her but apparently she has family roots in Vannes. An abstract painter, she is a contemporary of Nicolas de Staël, and, I learnt, shared his artistic vision. We saw an exhibition of de Staël's work in Le Havre in 2014, and I was captivated by both his work and the space it was exhibited in. And the same today with the work by Geneviève and the exhibition space. I'm not going to try and describe her work. I've taken a few photos they don't do the works justice. The gallery was in an old building, the interior of which has been made into a space perfect for the work. To walk through the door and see these works . . . well, it was breathtaking. We both loved it.



The section that most caught my eye was upstairs in an amazing space housing a permanent collection by the artist Geneviève Asse.



## I love my Osprey

Saturday, June 17

We're indulging in coffee, croissants and pain au chocolat at the Vannes station while waiting for the train to our next Bretagne stop, Quimper. It seems timely to reflect on my choice of travel bag.

I wouldn't go so far as to say my Osprey Farpoint 70 is the perfect travel bag. That would mean I would no longer have the pleasure of checking out bags for future trips, in case they are better than the one I've got. But so far the Osprey is top of the pops, as near to perfect as I've had.

So what do I like about it? It's big enough but not too big. Granted I could pare down a little more and make it easier for the walks to and from train stations and up flights of stairs. But that's for me to correct, and not a fault of the bag. In fact, even at the weight it is, it is manageable for up to about an hour's walking—which is about the longest station-to-accommodation walk we've had to do (and that partly because we inadvertently took the long way round—are you surprised?) Also, the hip belt works well to balance the weight.

I don't know what the packed bags (main and detachable day bag) currently weigh, but on check-in at Wellington all those weeks ago, the total was 11.4 kg. That was 8.1 kg for the main bag and 3.3 kg for the detachable. I've sent a few things packing but have also accumulated stuff, so it's probably about the same or perhaps marginally lighter now. And as L has already noted, we've finally learned that everything goes in the big bag on travel days except for laptop, money, and tickets. That way, the day bag attaches more easily to the main bag, and doesn't make me feel quite so much a turtle.

A few technical notes. My Farpoint 70 is in fact 67 litres, as I have the shorter length version. The main pack is 54 litres and the detachable 13. At first the little bag seemed way too small to be useful but I'm now finding it just right. A Goldilocks size, you could say. The main bag works well too. I like the way the straps can be put away and the whole turned into an easy-to-carry bag. So to date, yes, my Osprey is near enough to the perfect bag.









## Muddling dragons and damsels

Monday, June 19

I've been muddling my dragonflies with my damselflies. The question was put to me by brother, which prompted me to check with Mr Google. And yes, although I've not yet checked photos, it seems that what I've been thinking all these past years were dragonflies are, in fact, damselflies. Who knew? It made me think I perhaps needed to change the blog name. But then I thought, well it doesn't really matter. It simply means I've yet to find a dragonfly on this trip. For the record, a damselfly has wings closed at rest, and its eyes do not touch at top of head. A dragonfly has wings open at rest, with eyes touching at top of the head. So the search continues. Incidentally, the French word for dragonfly is la libellule, and for damselfly, la demoiselle. The French for dandelion is le pissenlit.

And now a recap of the past couple of days. Yesterday, our first full day in Quimper, was a total rest day because L had a bad attack of hay fever. I was happy to have a day blobbing in the comfort of this apartment with its amazing balcony, and give the knee a good rest. And get the washing done.

Today was low key too, getting to know our way round town and trying to find places of shade as the spring heat wave continues. The walk across town beside the river is pleasant—there's something about river cities that makes them special. There's a number of pedestrian bridges across the river, with hanging baskets in full flower along bridges and sidewalk. French towns and cities certainly have the knack when it comes to planting small public gardens: hanging baskets, container plantings, roundabouts. . .

We haven't found a 'go back to' café as yet but the coffee was decent enough at the place we went to this morning. The chocolate, instead of the more usual biscuit, was, for me, the best accompaniment possible for a short black.

We've worked out the bus system and hope to do a few trips later in the week, timetables permitting, and we've organised our travel to Roscoff on Saturday. Tomorrow, tides permitting, it will be the river-to-sea trip.

This afternoon we visited the Breton museum, which covers the history of the region from pre-history to modern times. The exhibits were impressive, as was the collection of five buildings that housed them.

Quimper has great public space plantings, such as these hanging container gardens on the footbridges across the River Odet (LEFT, TOP), and the small formal gardens outside the wall of the Cathédrale de Saint-Corentin (LEFT).

## Streetscapes and a river trip

Tuesday, June 20

A friend has requested some photos of the towns we've stayed in, so, photographically speaking, it's been a day of street shots. But as well as taking photos of the shops and streets of Quimper today, we've also discovered a wonderful garden here in Quimper and taken the vedette trip down the River Odet to Bénodet at the river mouth, and back again. The journey there and back was a bit ho hum—non-stop commentary but nothing much to see except wooded river banks and the occasional grand manor house. We thought we'd be able to get off the boat for the 45 minute stopover and have at least a small walk around Bénodet, but no, not allowed. At least it was cooler on the river than it was in town.





## Today, a dragonfly

Wednesday, June 21

Today I did see what I'm sure is a dragonfly. It was devilishly hard to photograph as it zoomed to and from across a small spring, occasionally stopping to hover. One moment it was there, next it had disappeared in the blink of an eye. Too fast for me, except for one photo where you can see the body and the eyes with a faint blur of wing. The eyes are definitely together. So, it must be a dragonfly.

We saw the dragonfly as we were walking along the River Aven, in Pont-Aven—our destination for the day. It is an exceptionally picturesque town with what must be one of the highest densities of art galleries to head of population in all of France—Pont-Aven and its art relationship dates back to Gauguin's time there.

Unlike Wellington, no need for anything other than short sleeves in Quimper—it was a week of hot and fine (LEFT).

The poster that enticed us to Pont-Aven, and of which we now have a copy to grace our walls at home. The original would have been nice, but was beyond our budget (BELOW).



Pont-Aven has a river port for yachts, beautiful old buildings, and pleasant riverside walking track, and as well as the galleries, all the eating establishments, biscuiteries, chocolatiers, and jewellery and souvenir shops you'd ever want or need (though not a good coffee). We had a thoroughly enjoyable day trip. Well, afternoon trip, as we didn't leave till about midday. When we arrived back, Quimper was alive in the late evening sun—it's the Fete de la Musique, with temporary stages set up around the city, and something musical to suit everyone's taste. As we walked home from the bus stop, we came across a male choir in full voice singing sea shanties. I'm no particular fan of sea shanties, but this was impressive.

In keeping with the somewhat arty theme of the day, this morning we visited the Musée des Beaux Arts in Quimper. So we now have three stamps on our cultural passport, which means the next public art gallery visit will be free.

The heatwave continues, but, if the forecast is correct, not for much longer. We may be in for a dull week, weather-wise, in Roscoff.







## La Pointe de Penmarc'h

Thursday, June 22

Up and away early this morning to catch the 8.10 a.m. bus to the Pointe de Penmarc'h on the southwestern corner of Finistère. We've found day trips by public transport take a bit of planning—not something we excel at. I recall the time we set out to find the Med back in 2012. By the time we'd arrived at Narbonne and worked out the buses to the beach, we'd left it too late—we could have made it to the beach okay, but not back in time to catch our train home to Toulouse. And, planning-wise, we've mostly muddled along in that fashion ever since.

Except for today, when finally we had it sorted the day before, the aller and the retour. Even so, there were a few anxious moments. On the journey there, I didn't recognise any places along the way and convinced myself we'd caught the wrong bus. Nor were we totally certain we were waiting at the right stop for the return trip—the bus was late and, given it has an A and a B route, we were thinking we'd muddled our A stops with our Bs.

The day itself was a boomer, as L would say. Entirely different from yesterday, but equally as good. Mostly it involved walking along the coast, first one way from the point to Saint-Guérolé, then back in the other direction, with a few streets added in here and there. So good to be by the sea. So good to stretch the legs out. And so good to be there early in the season with few other tourists about. Love that seaside vegetation.

It is very tidal. And very much a working fishing port at Saint-Guérolé. The day was cooler than recent days (though still warm), partly because the cloud didn't burn off till later in the day and partly from the sea breeze. Refreshing. Though I bet it can be inhospitable at times.

We initially thought we'd have a go at climbing the lighthouse but sense soon prevailed. Climbing up would have been hard enough, but the real tricky bit for me would have been the descent. I was slow enough going down three flights of stairs at the flat in Vannes. The lighthouse spiral descent would have taken me so long I'd have been in grave danger of missing the last bus.

La Pointe de Penmarc'h in Finistère (LEFT AND OVERLEAF) was one of my all-time favourite places on our trip.

















## Le Jardin de la Retraite

Friday, June 23

Today we went back to the Jardin de la Retraite, behind the Cathedral de Saint-Corentin, a garden on different levels with separate walled rooms. We'd first happened upon this garden when out walking and looking for a shop that would print our ferry tickets back to England. The garden has three main spaces: a palm garden, a sub-tropical garden, and a Mediterranean garden. The planting includes cabbage trees and flax bushes which clearly like their sheltered spots. It is a particularly tranquil garden, as befits a former monastery garden—as its name suggests, a garden of retreat for contemplation and rest. And just the spot for L to have a quiet read while waiting for me to finish wandering around the garden.

More images from Pointe de Penmarc'h (LEFT) and a beautiful *Romneya coulteri* (Californian tree poppy) in the Jardin de la Retraite, Quimper (BELOW).

I've probably already mentioned this, but Quimper has great public space plantings, both container gardens along the rivers and across the bridges, and small formal gardens such as those alongside the cathedral walls.









## And so to Roscoff

Saturday, June 24

Travel day today, from Quimper to Roscoff. Our train (which was in fact a bus for the first part) didn't leave till early afternoon so we spent the morning in a sports bar in Quimper watching the All Blacks beat the Lions. A good way to start the day.

First impressions are that Roscoff will be a great place for our last week in France. We didn't arrive till about five-ish so have only had a cursory look around. There's a main street with the shops, plus a street or two either side, and then there's sea on both sides. Our flat is clean and comfortable and spacious. It's above the owner's creperie, which no doubt we'll try at some time. At the moment he is on holiday in Corsica but has been easily contactable by text and email—luckily for us, as we had a moment where we couldn't find the key.

But there's a whole week ahead to explore and describe Roscoff. For the moment, some reflections on the outside the cathedral at Quimper that I mentioned in the previous posting. They are super formal gardens, superbly maintained, and just right for the setting. The River Odet is on the other side of the road, and it's along this road that we walked to and from the railway and bus stations. So we've passed the gardens a number of times, and every time I stop and admire them. As I do with the containers hanging over the bridge railings. The other day the Odet was filled with shoals of fish swirling around. Amazing. Everyone passing was stopping to look at them.



Roscoff—first impressions are that it will be a great place to spend our final week in France. There's a main street with the shops, plus a street or two either side, and then there's sea on both sides.





## A kind of ballet

Wednesday, June 28

A little rain overnight but this morning all fine again, though overcast for the morning. Still warm enough to venture out without a jersey. And this morning we ventured out to the open-air market, held every Wednesday morning along by the lighthouse. And a good market it was too, though I didn't buy anything. L sampled some of the food and pronounced it good, and bought a new bumbag. And here's me being touted at the one who gets obsessed about finding the perfect bag. Me, who's stuck with the little black, unreliable zippered worn-out wallet-y purse right through this trip and which has (so far, touch wood) done its job admirably. The zip only fails if I try to put both cell phone and glasses in the wallet. Anyway, it was a good market, and there was lots I could have bought but didn't, being mindful that anything I buy, I have to carry.

What did catch my eye most this morning, though, was watching the Ile de Batz freight ferry—a roll-on roll-off barge capable of beach landings—unload and load up again. First about five large trucks were driven off. Then two men, a tractor each, loaded the barge for the return journey with trailers filled with supplies of various sorts. It was like watching a synchronised tractor ballet. Those guys had it down to a fine art, swooping and turning, one each end of the ramp, preparing to back up the ramp and off-load the trailer. One would back up first and while he was positioning his load, the other would be starting to back his load up. I thought at times they couldn't possibly have enough room to manoeuvre past each other, but of course they were giving a master class.

So market over, ballet over, and it was time for a coffee and pain au chocolat (croissant for L) at what's become our 'regular'—a small salon du thé which we used on Saturday last while we were waiting for instructions on finding the keys to our accommodation. We liked it so much—and it is just across the road—that we've back every day since.

The afternoon was a trip to Morlaix, which is a 45-minute bus trip and a place we both enjoyed spending a couple of hours in. But I'll tell you about that next time. Sunday and Monday were walking-around-Roscoff days, including a longish walk to the supermarket on the outskirts of town. My movement's been a bit limited thanks to a crook back, so Tuesday was spent resting up at the flat.

The extreme tidal range at Roscoff leaves boats on the mud at low tide (LEFT, TOP); the loading of the ferry to Ile de Batz—like watching a synchronised tractor ballet as the guys manoeuvred in the freight into position (LEFT).





## Morlaix and the viaduct

Thursday, June 29

We went to Morlaix yesterday afternoon. It's about a three-quarter hour bus trip from Roscoff and is where we changed from the train to the bus for the final stage of our trip to Roscoff last Saturday. That was a bit hectic and stressful, getting off the train and working out where the temporary bus station was. Of course it was quite obvious when you knew, but it wasn't well signposted.

Anyway, yesterday we didn't get off the SNCF stop but carried on to the viaduct stop in the centre of town. It's so named because there is a 60m high railway viaduct, built in the 1860s, that towers above the town. We would have known this if we'd bothered to read the guide book beforehand, but we hadn't so the viaduct came as a surprise. Usually our choice of destination is dependent on whatever bus route we can work out and find the stop for. But the viaduct—it's lovely. We were able to walk up to the pedestrian bit below the railway line, which gives fabulous views of both sides of the town. Sadly I didn't get a good shot of walking through the arches because randoms kept getting in the way. However as two of them were workmen with a ladder fixing stuff, there was no way I could wait it out till they moved.

The other surprise was that the town has a substantial river port for yachts and other small pleasure craft. So of course we walked along to the lock and back the other side. After that, time for a bite to eat and time to buy half a dozen macarons. Surprisingly, these are the first macarons I've bought on the trip. Worth the wait. Of the ones I've tasted so far, the citron vert is the best. There was a nice sharp tangy taste to the filling that cuts the sweetness. Still two more flavours to try, but I think the citron will be the favourite.

So that was yesterday. Today it was a trip to the island off Roscoff, the Île de Batz, which is worth a separate entry.

The viaduct dominates the Morlaix skyline (LEFT, TOP). The path leading up to the viaduct starts behind the skinny house (LEFT).







## The dandelion tree

Thursday, June 29

The Île de Batz, which we visited by ferry today, is yet another wonderful island. The day threatened rain, but luckily held off until just before it was time to catch the ferry back. Again, we criss-crossed the island on the many tracks and paths, and finished the day with a visit to the Jardin Georges Delaselle, in which two-thirds of the species in the garden are from the southern hemisphere, so lots of flax and cabbage trees and even a pohutukawa in flower. And, much to my surprise, I came upon a dandelion tree. Truly, it was a dandelion tree. Well that's the translation I'm giving to the French label of *Pissenlit en arbre*.

It was the flowers of the dandelion tree that caught my attention first, and had me thinking how similar they looked to those of the dandelion. Except this plant was maybe a metre or more in height, so nothing like the growth habit of the humble dandelion we know as a weed. And then I looked more closely at the leaves, and again I thought, that looks bigger, but similar, to those of the dandelion. So that had me searching for a label, and, voilà, there it was: *Pissenlit en arbre*. Who knew? The botanical name is *Sonchus congestus* and it is a shrub endemic to the Canary Islands.

That said, I also think I am doing a bit of muddling reminiscent of damselflies and dragonflies here, and mistaking sow thistles for dandelions. Mr Google tells me the dandelion is *Taraxacum officinale*, while *Sonchus* is a sow thistle. And yes, when I look now, those leaves and branching heads of flowers do look rather like sow thistles. Whichever, I was nevertheless chuffed to happen upon a shrub on the Île de Batz looking like an overgrown dandelion and labelled *Pissenlit en arbre*.

In the Jardin Georges Delasalle, a garden of exotics from the southern hemisphere, the bumble bees couldn't get enough of the dandelion tree flowers; there were a dozen or more buzzing around (LEFT).

While large parts of the Île de Batz are agricultural (mostly potatoes), there are also wonderful swathes of grasses and poppies, and expansive views back to Roscoff (OVERLEAF).

















## The sun is out again

Saturday, July 1

This has been our last full day in Roscoff and the sun came out for the occasion. The rain started on Thursday afternoon, just as we were leaving the garden on the Île de Batz. By the time we'd walked the 20 minutes to the Île de Batz ferry terminal, we were drenched, at least in the front from rain jacket hem down. There was a brisk wind worthy of Wellington which drove the rain against us. When we arrived at Roscoff, we had to disembark at the end of a very long pier, as the tide was out. This time the rain was driven on to our backs and we were drenched on the other side. Wet jeans are not comfortable.

The rain continued on and off yesterday, and it was the coldest it has been since we've been in France and colder even than the occasional wet day we had in England. However, it has passed today, though the wind was still a bit Wellington-like in exposed places. We started the day following the test match. We couldn't find a sports bar so had to follow live update comments, which we did on the UK *Telegraph's* site. Disappointed the ABs couldn't hold out for the draw, but hey, it makes for a good final test.

Coffee and croissant/pain au chocolat at the salon du thé across the road, as has been our habit this week, and then off to another garden of exotic plants, this one just past the Brittany ferry terminal. It always surprises me for a moment to see flax and cabbage trees classified as exotics but of course that is exactly what they are in the northern hemisphere. Though you don't need to go to a garden of exotic plants to see them over here because they are everywhere. Still, it gives me a buzz to see them this side of the world.

Later this afternoon we went for a walk along the sandy beaches on the west coast of Roscoff. The tide was out so we were able to walk as far as we wanted along the beach. There's no continuous promenade because private properties jut out every so often, blocking off access by path above high tide. We finished the day with dinner at the crêperie below our flat—both are owned by Jean Luc, who as well as a crêpe chef is also an established artist, selling in Paris and New York. Tomorrow we leave Roscoff by ferry for Plymouth and so the end of the holiday starts.

Our accommodation above Jean-Luc's creperie in Roscoff (LEFT, TOP). The sandy beaches, tide out, on the western side of Roscoff (LEFT).







## A night in Plymouth and a day trip to Oxford

Tuesday, July 4

Here we are at the Ibis Styles, Heathrow. We arrived last night after the five-hour bus trip from Plymouth, where we had stayed overnight Sunday after the five-hour ferry trip from Roscoff. We didn't have a chance to see much of Plymouth, though we did manage a walk along the Hoe for a ways, and along Armada Way to check out the route for the morning from our very nice guest house to the bus station. But given the number of ferry and river trips on offer, I suspect Plymouth will be on our re-visit list should we get back to the UK. Oh and I found a dragonfly sculpture.

We also had an excellent meal on the Sunday night, right up there with the other 'best meals out' of our trip, which include the fish and chip meal at a pub in Bugbrooke, two Italian meals—one in Poole and one in St Malo—and the meal in Guernsey (Italian again for me, and sirloin for L).

Sadly the food at the Ibis is not up to much (reminds me of the Baltic container ship cooking), though the room is comfortable enough and we are enjoying watching Wimbledon and the Tour de France on the telly.

Today we did a day trip to Oxford. A lovely day, though it was by far the most tourist-filled place we've been to on this trip. So not a lot of photos because it was impossible to avoid the randoms. It was a bit of a nostalgia trip for me as I was lucky enough to spend three months there nearly 20 years ago, and it was fun checking out the places I remembered. We were also lucky enough to talk to the Bodleian chief librarian (maps) about a most amazing tapestry on display, the Sheldon tapestry of Worcestershire, created about 1590. We finished the day by walking along the canal towpath, which seemed fitting given we started this holiday on a narrowboat. Then it was back on the bus to Heathrow.

Tomorrow we start the long flight home.

We spent our last day on a trip to Oxford, visiting old haunts from 20 years ago, including a look round the grounds at Green College (LEFT).



*Dandelions and dragonflies*  
*and the occasional bumblebee*  
A TRAVEL JOURNAL

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