In January 1951, 50 mayors from different towns in Europe introduced the concept of Town Twinning. The idea was to bring populations closer together, separated until that time by national rivalries, which had given rise to many centuries of prejudice. They wanted to form a new relationship between towns and people in Europe. The main aim was to ensure continuity regardless of local political changes. The essence of twinning was to remain “non-political”.

In 1958 Vitry-sur-Seine close to Paris, was chosen as Burnley’s twinned town and a delegation from Vitry visited Burnley to sign a twinning agreement. The agreement stated that Burnley and Vitry would work together to bring “linguistic, tourist, economic and social exchanges,” building together peaceful relationships between our two towns.

Trips were arranged involving school children, swimming clubs, rugby teams and Girl Guides and in 1995 a new “Twinning Charter” was signed between Vitry and Burnley. Since then there has been a resurgence of interest concerning the twinning activities.

A cycle trip took place in 1999 followed by visits from college students, pensioners, historical society and ramblers, as well as biennial visits from members of both twinning groups. On each visit from Vitry, we receive a selection of French books to be placed in Burnley Central Library. This is an excellent example of the strong links between our two towns, and the books can be borrowed at any time.

Lilacs, lilies and entente cordial in Vitry.

Members of Burnley Twinning joined an official delegation visiting Vitry last May for the 50th Anniversary Celebrations of their Lilac Festival. A wonderful exhibition was prepared by Burnley Town Hall which was exhibited in their Hotel de Ville in the centre of their town. Photographs of Burnley’s heritage, architecture, education, industries, leisure and twinning were exhibited along with display cabinets filled with Burnley Football Club memorabilia, items from Burnley’s mining past, its industries past and present, and even bottles of beer from Moorhouses Brewery went on display!!

The sunshine particularly showed off well a piece of artwork on the lake in the park in Vitry created by local Todmorden artists, “Space Cadets”. A series of coloured stars reached out of the water like huge water lilies and were admired by everyone.

A truly uplifting experience was a classical concert on the Friday night which was followed by an outdoor concert with a wonderful firework display on the Saturday. During Sunday we all joined a great communal lunch, with everyone eating together on long tables in warm sunshine in the park. Later we were treated to a spectacular Carnival Parade through the streets of Vitry with groups taking part from all over Europe. Hospitality in Vitry is second to none and a wonderful weekend was enjoyed by all who took part.
At the end of last September our friends from Vitry landed in glorious sunshine at Burnley Football Club for a delicious Lancashire hot pot lunch and a comprehensive guided tour. One of the players even greeted us in French and our guests were given a signed Football Shirt to take back home with them. Later they were treated to tea and biscuits in the Mayor’s Parlour and a tour of the Town Hall and Council Chamber.

Our Mayor again greeted our friends from over the sea for an evening buffet on the Friday. They were most impressed with the beautiful surroundings of Burnley’s Jewel in the Crown, Towneley Hall.

Another sunlit day was spent at, appropriately, “Port Sunlight” on the Wirral. We all enjoyed the delightful surroundings and time was free to discover the Lady Lever Art Gallery. Many of us however, just sat in the sunshine and enjoyed an ice-cream!

Peter Pike – an ex MP of Burnley – took time to show us round the Burnley Emmaus Project on the last day of the visit. An equally warm welcome awaited us at the Burnley Campus and French and English alike were most impressed with the presentations given in both languages from students from the College.

After lunch we arrived in Padiham for a short walk round the heritage trail, led by one of our members; then onto afternoon tea at Nazareth Unitarian Church. We were also treated to a recital of English songs by the church organist, but I will never forget the fantastic rendition of la Marseillaise in the church! Members of Burnley Twinning went home very tired but very happy indeed that the visit had gone so well.

At the end of March it is our turn for a return visit to Vitry. 28 members, ages ranging from 12 to 70 – along with four students from Thomas Whitham Sixth Form College – are looking forward to the varied programme arranged for us. Visits in and around Vitry, trips into Paris, boat rides on the Seine……...let’s hope the sun shines for us too.

If the objectives of Burnley Twinning Association are to continue, and strengthen, we must build on existing links. We must also try to develop links, not only between the citizens of Burnley and Vitry but with organisations, clubs, schools and industry. We are confident that we can continue to build on the successes of the past and look to a future of strengthening twinning links which make us a part of a developing Europe.

Kay Smith, Secretary B.T.A.

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