

CHURCH TWINNING ECO WEEKEND 27TH – 31ST OCTOBER 2022



Guests were invited from our five twin towns to participate in an eco-weekend with the theme of Christian Stewardship of the Environment. Just a few days prior to the visit when we had finalised the programme, arranged for host families and Saturday evening meal hosts for 8 visitors from St Niklaas and 8 visitors from Argentan, we were disappointed to hear that due to illness one carfull of 4 from St Niklaas could no longer come and one visitor from Argentan could not get time off work. Our host families were members from several churches and we were pleased to include Saturday evening meal hosts for those who were unable to accommodate guests but wished to participate.

Most of the guests arrived on Thursday afternoon and after tea and cake at 35 Ock Street they went off with their hosts for an evening meal. Later most went to the Loose Cannon Brewery along with some hosts and committee members to enjoy a pub quiz evening and sample Abingdon beer.

Friday 28th began at the Conduit Centre with an illustrated talk by Rev Dr David Gregory who is a Baptist minister and Chair of the John Ray Initiative, connecting Environment, Science and Christianity. The planetary issues he touched on were very thought provoking and sobering. After a coffee break and lots of social mingling, the young ladies Helena Burm and Lara de Beer from St Niklaas gave us another well-prepared illustrated report about what Eco-church means in their diocese. Anne de Gouvillie, wearing a bright Eglise Verte T-shirt, and Marie-Lise Marie from Argentan followed with an equally well thought out report about the French Green Church initiative and the recently celebrated Month of the Creation.

Lunch was provided by the Blue Sky Eco café and everyone enjoyed a choice of hot vegetarian dishes and an unusual selection of salads using ingredients ethically sourced. A talk about this Eco café and the Abingdon Larder were given. The Larder volunteers were setting up their goods for the Friday afternoon customers, ready to serve as soon as we departed so our visitors were able to look at the produce and ask questions of the volunteers and find out where the foods had come from.

Lara from St Niklaas was celebrating her 18th birthday on this day, so we could not help but sing Happy Birthday and share a colourful cake with her.



In the afternoon the group moved on by foot as the weather was warm and sunny to Mill Lane, South Abingdon to take part in tree planting organised and helped by Abingdon Carbon Cutters. Everyone assisted by digging, holding stakes and installing deer-proof cylinders. Ten alder saplings were planted by the edge of the River Ock, being suitable for the wet conditions of the flood area. A plaque was placed nearby to commemorate the planting and to ask passers-by on the adjacent footpath to assist with watering the trees until they took root. This scheme (and the whole theme) had been proposed by our late committee member Rosemary Perrow as a carbon-reducing offset to the carbon footprint of the guests' travel.



A second car from Argentan arrived on Friday afternoon bringing their group leaders, Pierre and Ionie Silliere, and priest Father Pierre-Yves who had never been to Abingdon but could not travel on Thursday with the others as he had an important meeting to attend. Now the group of visitors was complete and everyone spent the evening with their hosts.

On Saturday 29th the visitors along with any Abingdon people who were interested in the theme of the weekend spent the morning in the hall of All Saints' Church to listen to three local environmental groups giving presentations.

Anne Smart brought so much useful information and talked about Carbon Cutters.

David Perrow spoke of the many environmental changes made to All Saints' Church in response to Eco Church initiative.

Patrick Holligan from The Climate Emergency Centre talked about the activities of One Planet.

Again this was another informative session. We then set off to Millets Farm Centre for lunch.

In the afternoon a visit to the Peachcroft Christian Centre meant we could learn from Martin Tillin about the riveting subject of the new type of energy the Centre uses - heat pumps based on groundwater, followed by more tea and cake.

On Saturday evening all the visitors along with many of their hosts went out for a meal with another family in Abingdon. Several dinner hosts joined up to provide a larger group and some invited committee members who were unable to have guests in their homes.

Eric had to leave on Sunday in order to be at work on Monday in Argentan. He had no money as he had forgotten to bring his credit card and had had a sleepless night worrying about having to change trains at Reading and Basingstoke in order to get to Portsmouth. Eric and his host Richard got the bus to Oxford and inadvertently paid with some euros which can look just like pound coins. Fortunately the driver was French and very kind and understanding and their fellow passengers gave them change for £10. Eric arrived at Portsmouth safely!

All the visitors were Roman Catholic but on Sunday they went to many other churches in Abingdon with their hosts. So a variety of Sunday Worship was experienced.

The next part of the day was spent with hosts having lunch then sight-seeing and shopping. In the evening we gathered in St Edmund's Parish Centre for a reflection on the weekend given by Deacon Selina Nisbett of the Methodist Church. Each person was given a leaf-shaped note to write down an ecological change they hoped to make in response to all heard and seen over the weekend. The 'leaves' decorated a potted tree. A short ecumenical service was organised by Anne Dodd and Pat Warren in St Edmund's Church followed by a bring-and-share supper back in the Centre with farewell speeches. Our new Church in Abingdon Twinning Banner was given to Argentan to place in the Abingdon side chapel in St Germain Church in the Centre of the town.



Finally on Monday morning we all assembled at 35 Ock Street to bid our visitors farewell, *bonne voyage de retour* or *goede reis naar huis*!

This whole eco-weekend had been devised in 2019 by the aforementioned Rosemary Perrow. We were able to expand on her ideas 3 years later to produce this well appreciated and stimulating event. We are grateful to all our family and meal hosts, without whom the visit would not have been so personal and friendly. Our thanks go also to the leaders of the Argentan group, Ionie Silliere, and St Niklaas's Chris de Beer for their efforts in gathering visitors to this event.