

The Legacy of the French Circle

by Ruth Hazeldine and Paul Guest

With all the excitement of our plans for this year, I am aware that there will be one significant member missing – our irreplaceable co-founder, Mat Schwitzer. When 27 years ago I had the idea to start a French-speaking group I asked Mat, who was then Chairman of Highgate Society, if we might use 10a for our meetings. With the enthusiasm, warmth and passion which typified this remarkable man, he immediately agreed. It is thanks largely to him that we have been able to flourish as we have done. His charm, kindness and generosity will be sorely missed, even his terrible jokes at our annual dinner. *Dormez-bien, cher maître, nous ne vous oublierons jamais.*

Further down this page you will read about Elizabeth Woodman's experience of organising our meetings for 15 years, and here we still are, on the first Wednesday of the month, from September through until May, always in 10a. At our first reunion in September, there was healthy competition for our two quizzes but it was all in good fun, although the winners looked a bit quizzical when the prizes turned out to be very smelly Camembert cheeses!

I came down with a horrible chest and throat infection in October and missed the session for the first time in years but I was told it went very smoothly without me. However, I was able to contribute in absentia, thanks to Jane Campbell reading out my script about French jazz, accompanied by one of my favourite Django Rheinhardt recordings.

I had recovered by November in time to hear Thérèse Delbarry explain the remarkable life and accomplishments of Jean-François Champollion, who grasped the meaning of the engravings on the Rosetta Stone and so enabled us to comprehend the subtleties and historical significance of Egyptian culture which until then had baffled researchers and archaeologists. I am frequently amazed by the depth of knowledge our members bring to our meetings and the efforts they put into sharing their knowledge with us.

En ce moment nous préparons notre fête de Noël – la Sainte-Nicolas. Noël n'est pas seulement une fête destinée aux enfants, elle nous rappelle également l'excitation avec laquelle nous l'attendions lors de notre propre enfance. Une fois encore, c'est Christine Knight qui organisera cette manifestation: Ceci n'est pas mince affaire car il faut qu'elle coordonne les répétitions de nos choristes bénévoles et de Margaret, pianiste fort patiente, qui nous rend visite. Pourrons-nous également compter sur la visite de Saint Nicolas en personne? Les rennes arriveront-ils à trouver leur chemin entre Richmond et Highgate? Espérons qu'il n'y ait pas trop de neige.

A peine de nos réjouissances, nous devons préparer la version française de l'épiphanie, c'est à dire La Fête des Rois du 7 janvier. Où sont passées les couronnes du roi et de la reine? Pourrai-je me rappeler de la recette de la galette?

The Weaving of the French Circle Tapestry – Part 1

by Elizabeth Woodman

Imagine yourself in a large luxurious leafy garden with gently sloping lawn and a sylphlike creature flitting about with bare feet and flowing long blonde hair. This was the late '60s and my introduction to Joan Schwitzer, local historian and socialite, and I was accompanying a friend to her party. I bumped into her family again two decades later and from then on the Schwitzers run like a golden thread through Highgate life and the French Circle. Highgate could almost have been called "Schwitzerland"!

Now it is 1988 and I find myself chatting to Mat Schwitzer and son Steven at one of the first French Circle meetings. Mat was Chairman of the Highgate Society then and, prodded into action by Ruth Hazeldine, he had asked David Weight, of Highgate School, to start up a French group. Only about seven or eight members attended in those days and the hall at 10a was badly lit and needed a lick of paint. Nevertheless we happily chatted away over our coffee and biscuits. To me, living in Tufnell Park, it was all magical. I only had to walk up the hill and, for a mere 50p, I could find myself in a new exotic world, speaking another language and immersed in another culture.

The shape of our French Circle was now set for the future, meeting on the first Wednesday of the month, with festivities at Christmas and Epiphany and a

summer meal held at the tiny restaurant, "Le Moulin" in Archway Road. Occasionally David would press his pianist wife to play for us, or William Molesworth, his former pupil, to sing for us. Equally rarely a member, like Françoise Lowden, would talk about her work.

When David retired from the Circle in 1996 Mat took over and the Circle took off! Attendance was now about 12 or 13 a night and growing, and we often had wine now instead of coffee. Mat was arranging events of real quality and interest such as outside speakers, cookery demos and concerts.

At a coffee morning in 1999 Mat declared that, at over 80, he should really retire from running the Circle, so I agreed to take over. I was very excited. Now I could experiment with all sorts of entertainments and pursuits. I had ideas for treasure hunts, quizzes, discussions, contributory evenings with members bringing a favourite picture, poem or possession etc. Members were waiting to talk to us: Ruth about jazz, Christine Knight about Jacques Brel, Mat about Slovakia, Adrian Mayer about Hindu temples – and so on. The topic did not necessarily have to be French but everything had to be IN French. One word of English and the "spell" would be broken.

The tapestry of the French Circle was now becoming intricate and intriguing.