

Vive le Jumelage - thirty successful years of twinning celebrated as Abergavenny and Beaupréau come together

THE 30th anniversary of our twinning with Beaupréau was a memorable occasion brought about by the dedicated teamwork of many local people writes JUDITH VICARY.

Firstly, the challenge of finding accommodation for seventy band members, many of whom were teenagers, we believed would be impossible. Then, amazingly, we found the Bunkhouse (the former Primary school in Govilon) which could accommodate the majority.

Secondly, there was the need for diversity, yet coordination within our programme, for such a large group of different ages and interests. This started to come together with our French counterparts at the end of last year.

Thirdly, we needed accommodation for the remainder of our hopeful visitors – the singers, the footballers, the long term twinningers and the councillors; the task seemed insurmountable, but the response from local people, without whose help this visit could never have taken place, was remarkable.

Fourthly, the commissioning of a celebratory commemorative work of art that we could both afford and, that would do justice to our Twinned towns seemed remote. However, with the inspirational advice, generosity and creativity of local businessman Ben Jones, who is also a well-known sculptor, we now have a beautiful sculpture in an area of the town which we hope will soon be further enhanced with new planting.

Fifthly, an elegant civic dinner for such a large gathering within the town would truly be a challenge, but with the help of the leisure centre manager and superb catering provision, this became a reality.

Sixthly, we needed entertainment that would cross the barriers of language and appeal to everyone. The new Borough Theatre manager was most accommodating, and we found a compère and programme organiser in the incomparable John Prosser.

I half-jokingly mooted the possibility of a concert in the Borough Theatre many months ago. Within days, we were hopeful that a dream would become reality, and finally, on the evening of Good Friday, five diverse groups of both French and Welsh musicians and singers gave breath-taking performances.

There was the eccentric young band called Burlesca, some of whom sashayed across the stage playing wind and percussion instruments, dressed in bizarre outfits of red, black and white. Each costume was unique, and they describe themselves as a musical collective, combining street arts with circus, theatricality, visual and sound performance.

In the interval, after trundling their electrical equipment in big black boxes on wheels down Market Street, followed by a slow convoy of mystified motorists, they decamped to the Market Street Fish and Chip Shop, which opened specially for them.

They had already tucked into shepherd's pie shortly upon arrival at midday, courtesy of the Park Street Community Centre, which also had opened their doors for them, out of respect and thanks for the warm welcomes we have received over the years in Beaupréau.

Back in the theatre, we heard Junior AAODS sing songs from "Oliver". This talented group of eight to 18-year olds should never be missed when they perform in shows at the Borough Theatre. They were followed by Synergy, the well-known close harmony acapella (unaccompanied) male voice choir who both charmed and amused with their truly beautiful music.



Then there was Jabolique, a most creative group of theatrical enthusiasts, whose shows cover every aspect of comedy, mime, opera and much more, and whose current performances are custom made. They presented us with an amusing musical potted history of the twinning from the beginning. Finally, we listened to the beautiful singing of Coup d'Choeur, choristers of the Beaupréau Music School in Mauges, with their mix of light-hearted, then more serious songs.

Saturday morning saw us in Gabb Square, complete with bunting, freshly painted benches and newly planted hanging baskets, where we enjoyed musical performances, including the prize-winning ladies of Hen Adar y Fenni (the Old Birds of Abergavenny) choir singing in recently learned Welsh.

This was followed by the unveiling of a slate sculpture, underpinned by an old millstone, with chiselled commemorative wording in French and English encircling the edge. The slate, from North Wales, shows hues of rusts, oranges and bluish greys, upon which are sculpted, one either side, two red kites to represent Abergavenny, and for Beaupréau, two French cockerels.

The sculpture is to remind us of those who have worked for the twinning with untiring dedication in the past, some of whom are no longer be with us, to celebrate what is happening between our two towns right now, and to be a symbol for future generations of Twinners in the hope they will continue our strong relationship that no politics can undermine.

In a sunny St John's Square, Burlesca stole the limelight with another stunning display of their unique type of musical presentation, swapping sandwiches for saxophones, and making passers-by stop in their tracks as a boy, one of the band, jumped out from a box, or a lad in plaid pantaloons swayed about playing his saxophone.

The French visitors saw Abergavenny at its best, bathed in sunlight, with a free and easy atmosphere. Many of the shop windows were decked with French themes and there were French flags flying outside the Angel Hotel and the town hall.

At the same time, the young Rhinos were playing football matches with their French friends in Llanfoist, where they enjoyed a picnic, and plenty of outdoor entertainment.

In the evening, a civic dinner was held in the Sports Hall, the only place large enough in the town to host almost four hundred guests. Sugarloaf Catering produced an outstanding meal with the help of some local students.

After speeches from the mayor Councillor Teslin Davies, the French Mayor Claudine, and a German representative Birgit from Münsingen, the German twinned town of Beaupréau, the evening terminated with a ceilidh band.

On Easter Sunday morning, there was a huge diversity of activities. The young French footballers departed for Cardiff to watch a match between Liverpool and the home team.

Burlesca left for Big Pit, having been told they needed to arrive early if they wanted a chance of going down the pit, as it was the busiest day of the year. Their intention was to play for the other visitors after their descent into the mine, but the expected crowds did not materialise, because, as one local commented, "Who wants to go down a black hole when the sun is shining?"

Disappointed, they returned to the bus station in another attempt to entertain the crowds, but the noise from the dozens of motorbikes told them it was a lost cause.

The French choir was that same morning singing to the congregation of St Mary's Church in the Priory Centre, after the Easter Sunday service which was attended by Nick Ramsay AM, the mayors and representatives of Abergavenny, Beaupréau and Münsingen. The choir was filmed singing bi ITV Wales and later seen on the evening news.

As the coaches left for Portsmouth and home, many hosts commented on how much they had enjoyed the rich variation of the weekend and how they had made new friends and hoped to visit Beaupréau very soon. That's what twinning is all about.

Without mentioning names, for it would be impossible to include everyone, I would like to thank in particular the support we received from the mayor, the town and county councils, the manager of the Borough Theatre and his staff, and the town clerk Jane. Grateful thanks also go to Ben the sculptor, the stone mason and the team organised by Alun Griffiths in placing the sculpture in Gabb Square; the twinning committee who worked above and beyond the call of duty to ensure an unforgettable weekend; the caterers, the bar provider, the lady who painted the benches in the square, the gardeners, the volunteer drivers, the staff at the Bunkhouse and the host families. The list is endless. We should truly be proud of our town on this occasion. Vive le jumelage!