

Granard Town Twinning Association welcomes 30 visitors from East Rouen.

Following a very successful visit to East Rouen, Northern France, last year, it was the turn of Granard to welcome 30 visitors from France. And welcome them they did! The Céad Míle Fáilte was evident throughout the town, from bunting, French Flags, gaily decorated shop fronts with a French theme, bonfires and art work. It all set the scene for a very successful visit.

At the heart of the Twinning ethos is a sharing of culture, building relationships and working together. The itinerary was built around giving the visitors the real feel of Ireland's Hidden Heartlands and experiencing our rich culture and lifestyle.

The group from East Rouen arrived to burning bonfires, lively Irish music from the Sean Dungan CCE branch and apprehensive hosts. "Bien venue a Granard" rang in the air as hosts welcomed their guest and took them home for their first night in the Granard area.

The following day, Saturday 23rd September, dawned dry and sunny for the first day of a busy itinerary. The visitors arrived at Knights and Conquests at 10:00 am and were given a great tour of the Interpretive Centre by Deirdre and her team. She then brought the group up the Motte to show them where the Normans built their first defensive position in the region. Richard De Tuite, the builder of the Motte in the 12th Century, would have been proud to think that his successors from Normandy received a more friendly welcome. The walk continued down the town where the visitors were overcome by the "Frenchification" of the town. Locals wished the guests well with their visit.

Irish stew in the Bailey restaurant was the visitors first taste of traditional Irish cuisine. The Irish lamb was delicious and cooked to perfection. Tullyally Castle was next on the itinerary and Robert Pakenham led us on an impressive tour of the castle and grounds.

Then...Country Dancing in Creegans. Alan and Olive instructed the group in jiving and line dancing and all took to the floor with enthusiasm and some skill. This teed us up nicely for the BBQ and rugby match, Ireland versus South Africa. The atmosphere was electric, as the French, joined with the locals in shouting the Irish team onto a narrow win against the Southern Hemisphere team.

Day 2 started with a meeting of Irish and French delegations to discuss matters of mutual interest. Sustainable energy, windmills and solar power were on the agenda unsurprisingly. Mass and a craft workshop followed. The Brigitte's from France were delighted to make St Brigid's crosses under the expert tutelage of Deirdre from Knights and Conquests. Lunch in the Community Centre was one of the highlights of the weekend. The hosts, the visitors, and the Committee sat together and enjoyed a beautiful lunch from Nikki and her team. Fr Cadam welcomed the group and thanked Patricia Gettings and her Community Hall team for facilitating the lunch. Unfortunately the weather turned nasty for the Tour of The Rebel Trail but our guide Colm Harte rose to the task and delivered a great bus tour highlighting the historical links between the region and France. Two pikemen met us in Ballinamuck and gave the French a taste of life in 1798. Many of the French were unaware of our historical links and return home to do further research.

John V's in Granard was host for the next event. The Sean Dungan CCE branch gave us a great evening of Irish traditional music and dance. It even enticed the visitors to join in a Siege of Ennis!

Monday 25th. Did you know that Farmers can manage their dairy herd with their phone? Also did you know that clover alleviates the need for using fertilizer? These were some of the interesting facts that we learned on the McGreal farm in Ballinalee. A thoroughly

modern farm with progressive farmers, father and son, and a friendly farm cat. The French were impressed by both! Continuing the theme of farming and related industries, our next visit was to Kiernan Milling. Again a thoroughly modern factory with a view to the future and providing sustainable energy. Mark and his sister Noeleen gave a great welcome to the group and all came away impressed.

A walk in Derrycasson Wood and a short demonstration of Gaelic football in the Laurels finished the trip. A chance for some retail therapy in Granard ended the day and all returned home for Family evening where the Irish hosts entertained and fed their guest. All agreed that this was another highlight and gave "most" an early night. Some however were on a late sojourn in the Granard Mart....

Tuesday dawned bright and sunny as the visitors from East Rouen, local Councillors, students from Cnoc Mhuire, Director of Services from LCC Barbara Heslin, and the Granard Community joined to launch the new signage celebrating the Twinning of Granard and East Rouen. Madame Annie Vidal, an MP in the French Parliament and member of the French Delegation, spoke movingly about the symbolism of a sign linking the two communities. Cathaoirleach of Granard Municipal District Turlough Mc Govern removed the covering on the sign to great applause from the assembled crowd.

The group then divided and some went to our local schools to discuss the future potential of our Town Twinning and the rest went to the bog. Yes, you are right, you did read, the bog! Most of the French visitors had never seen a bog and had never heard of "turf". Stephen Griffin, Mick Dolan, Xaviour Kiernan, Eamon Creamer and Pdraig Mc Gauran treated us to a great display of traditional turf cutting methods. The origin, history and uses of bogs was explained. The flora and fauna of the bog was also examined. I think it was at this point that the visitors began to get an insight into the Irish Psyche.....

The "indoor" picnic followed and then it was off with Pat Donnelly for a trip to Longford. Our guide to the Longford Walking Tour was Eamonn Brennan. He finished in the Cathedral with a great history of its building, the fire, and rebuilding. Another great highlight. Communication between both French and Irish groups was facilitated by Pierre and Daniel. Without these two men to translate, communication would have been very limited.....

The Day was rounded off by the Official Welcome in the Town Hall in Granard. Cathaoirleach of Longford County Council, Colm Murray officially welcomed all to the evening's Reception. Cathaoirleach of Granard Municipal District Turlough Mc Govern followed by praising all groups involved in the Twinning, he mentioned his fellow Councillors, Longford County Council, The Granard Town Twinning Association, the Hosts, The Granard Traders, Granard Tidy Towns Committee, Knights and Conquests, the schools, and most of all the community in Granard. Catherine Kane from the Longford Enterprise Office presented the prizes to the winners of the Shop front competition, 1st Lus Na Greene Preloved Boutique and 2nd Quinn's Supply Stores.

Moira Mahon, Chair of the Town Twinning Association, commented that coming together was a beginning, keeping together is progress and working together is success. In her response Madame Vidal thanked all concerned with the Twinning, she commended LCC on their proactive approach to Town Twinning and she wished all continued success. Daniel Dominique, Chair of East Rouen Town Twinning Delegation congratulated the Granard Committee on doing an "extraordinary job". He recognized the meticulous planning and said that the French participants felt that their welcome and range of events would be "unforgettable". Director of Services of LCC Barbara Heslin commended the range of events and experiences organized by the Granard Town Twinners, she said "the itinerary reflected

a journey through the past, the present and the innovative future with the delegation experiencing what is best about Ireland, Longford and Granard – community and people”. She recognized the wonderful support of local businesses, communities and host families to the visit.

The rain falling on Wednesday reflected the sadness of the impending departure of the delegation back to East Rouen. But there was one final highlight to come, a visit to our Capital City, Dublin. The visitors had a guided bus tour of Medieval Dublin and visited St Auden’s Cathedral, where they found out that the Cathedral had been founded by the Patron Saint of Normandy. Yet more connections! The rain stopped to allow the group some free time for exploring...or some shopping!

At this stage our local TD, Mr Joe Flaherty facilitated a visit for Madame Vidal to visit Dáil Éireann. Madame Vidal was welcomed by the speaker of the Senate. She was clearly moved by the experience and thanked Joe for his kindness. She looked forward to further cooperation between Ireland and its nearest neighbour in the EU, France.

It was on this high note that we returned to the bus and headed for the Airport.

Granard Town Twinning Association wished our guests a bon voyage and waved a final farewell. A job well done! The entire community of Granard coming together to create an unforgettable experience for our visitors but most of all giving the hand of friendship to our delegates from East Rouen.