

## Côte à Coast Twinning Marsilly - Baltimore 3 - 6th October, 2024

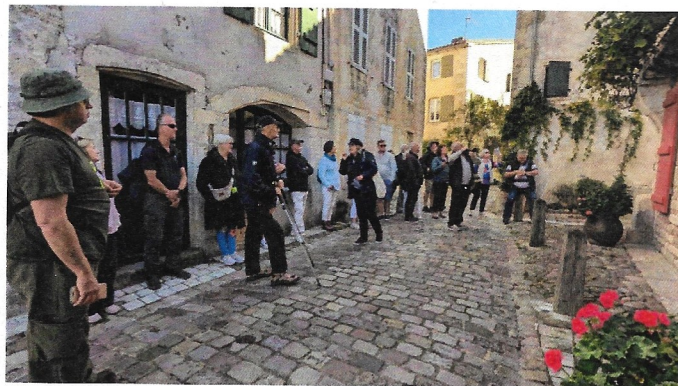
The twinning between these two seaside communities was set up in 2016 after a conversation between Colin Whooley of Roaring Water Mussels and Benoit Durivaud of the Moules Brothers from Marsilly. Last year in June a group of 25 from Marsilly spent a very short weekend in Baltimore as part of a week's tour around Ireland and this was Baltimore's turn to visit their twin town. Marsilly lies just north of La Rochelle in Charente Maritime on the west coast of France and a handy 20 mins drive from the airport.

On landing after the 90 min flight direct from Cork to La Rochelle, our party of 20 was welcomed in the sunshine at the airport by our hosts. No time was wasted in driving us all to the Hôtel de Ville in Marsilly for a reception hosted by the Mayor, Hervé Pineau, offering us brioche, cake and champagne. Didier played accordion and Henri guitar as we were regaled with French and Irish songs. Dick Roycroft sang a couple for our side. After this we were taken to our accommodation, some in private homes with hosts and others in hotels and apartments in La Rochelle.



On Friday, the group split up with some visiting Le Grand Pavois and others enjoyed a guided tour of the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall).

Rianne writes about Le Grand Pavois: "The annual boat show is aimed at sailing and leisure boating enthusiasts with more than 750 boats and 800 international brands. A water taxi took us from the Old Town to Les Minimes which passed the beautiful Saint Nicholas tower, the Chain Tower and the Lantern Tower. La Rochelle boasts more berths than all of Ireland's marinas combined and is a popular stop for Irish sailors too. A strategic port on the Bay of Biscay which was granted a free port in 1130, it is the biggest port in Europe and has a long boat-building tradition. La Rochelle (translates to "Little Rock" or "Crest") was famous for its trade in salt and wine. We made sure to visit a Cognac and Pineau distillery and saw the salt marshes still in use today, dating from the early 12th century".



The rest of us hung out around the Marché Central in the continuing sunshine. There were plenty of opportunities for a coffee in the many street cafes. While sitting in the square, we were a little puzzled by the array of pink umbrellas swaying gently above our heads, but it turns out October is breast cancer awareness month, and this was part of the publicity. The indoor market itself was a smaller version of Cork City's English Market, with a huge variety of fromage and saucisson, every kind of fish and shellfish, meat, cakes and bread you could imagine and more, the outdoor canopied stalls reserved for an eye boggling selection of fresh fruit and veg. I stuffed my bag with figs, nuts, cheese and saucisson, hoping the airport sniffer dogs would be elsewhere on their hols. Les huitres et le vin blanc was lunch for us, eaten standing convivially around elbow-high tables, followed by yet another coffee in the sun.





### A bit of history:

A very knowledgeable guide took us around the Hôtel de Ville (the Town Hall) and filled us in with the story of La Rochelle in impeccable English. The city was historically a strongly fortified town built on trade. Sometimes English, sometimes French, Catholic, then Calvinist, and attacked by one or the other according to events and the whims of princes, its military power and walls had maintained the city's autonomy for decades. Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu besieged the city in 1627. A third wall was built around it and the port blockaded. With its starving population, diminished from 25,000 to 5,000, La Rochelle capitulated after a year. Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu enforced Catholicism upon the city, abolished all the former benefits that La Rochelle enjoyed and established the king's absolute authority.

The Hôtel de Ville building itself was burnt down in 2013. Only a mammoth effort by fire brigade and volunteers saved much of the art and furniture before the roof collapsed. In 2016, restoration began and in 2019 it was opened to the public again - part of the building's original features of stone and wood being faithfully reproduced, and other areas modernised completely to provide up to date accommodation for the City Council. What was achieved in that timescale was extraordinary; funding and expertise seemed to have appeared by magic and the result is stunning.



### Impressions of La Rochelle:

Our experience was based around the old part of the city (Le Vieux Port) and the harbour. Built of pale cut limestone blocks, it feels light and open, clean and well cared for. It is not a city of supermarkets and chain stores, but of welcoming little shops of every kind, a huge variety of lovely clothes on offer and a multitude of cafés and restaurants.

In fact, pretty much what you might expect - it's French! Two defensive towers mark the entrance to the inner harbour, and the very best is made of the surrounding area with an expanse of promenades, streets lined with restaurants and the harbour not unexpectedly lined with boats.

Sitting in the sun by the harbour, entertainment which began as street music changed to a jazz band playing in a boat moseying slowly around the harbour. This attracted a crowd of appreciative onlookers and a couple of very enthusiastic dancers. Later, we gathered for a drink at the Dock Café as a preamble to being treated by our French hosts to an amazing meal round the corner in the restaurant 'Le Prao'.



Saturday morning we bundled into cars for a short drive to Ile de Ré across 3km of bridge (completed in 1988) with great views of the coastline on the way. We all met up in front of the Police Municipal in Saint Martin de Ré. Another enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide took us around the town, explaining the island's geography and history in excellent English, after which we finished up in a café by the harbour for some galettes and crêpes, and a glass or two... and the sun still shone!

Back in the cars afterwards for a hop across the island to the distillery at Coopérative des Vignerons de l'Île de Ré, we had a tour booked to hear about the Cognac and Pineau (a fortified wine aperitif) to see the store rooms with oak containers still in use after 50 years, each holding a huge quantity of maturing Pineau, and taste some of the produce. The presentation was in French, but with the help of Rosaleen's translation skills, a few English language booklets and generous samples, I think we got the gist!



The day finished up with a festive evening in Salle Simeon, named after the author Georges Simeon (of Maigret fame) who lived for a time here in Marsilly. With music from a great jazz band, *Méfie-toi du Chat* (Beware of the Cat), a bit of singing and an incredible selection of wonderful food and wines prepared by our hosts, it was a lovely celebration. The Town Mayor joined us for the whole of the evening, Baltimore presented the slate drawings of Baltimore and we were each given a commemorative framed print of Marsilly.



Sunday saw a change in the weather. Some did a quick damp walk to the coast to pay homage to the Moules Brothers shed where the Twinning story began. Apart from the oyster and mussel beds there were wooden piers leading out over the water where people could fish using wide square nets called *carrelets*.

Some went to visit the *Église Saint-Pierre de Marsilly*. The church was opened especially for us for a quick yomp up to the top for a view over the countryside. After this, it was back to Place des Carrelets in Marsilly town centre for coffee, and another wee drop of wine - to celebrate Rosaleen's birthday, and pizza for lunch to round off the weekend before we were driven by our hosts back to La Rochelle airport to head home with bags full of goodies and heads full of memories.

*"From the minute we arrived at La Rochelle airport - to a large welcome sign held by Marsilly twinning committee, - the warmth and sincerity of those involved was always evident. The natural connection between the people of both twin towns is remarkable, and to have such a bond to these people and their village is special. We look forward to welcoming our Marsilly friends to Baltimore in 2025".* Renate

*"A heartfelt welcome from the Côte a Coast committee made our arrival in La Rochelle truly unforgettable."* Bernie

*"Our French "twins" in Marsilly welcomed us with open arms and provided an amazing programme and above all "amitié et accueil chaleureux" enjoyed by everyone".* Rianne

I echo all of that!

Sekeeta Crowley

