

Normandy Blog 2024



This blog recounts the intrepid adventures of the Margaret Roper Catholic Primary School Y6 Journey Party as we visit Normandy during the 80th Anniversary of D-Day

Day 1

Dear Friends,

Well, what an amazing day we've had! It's been a long one, but I'm sure one nobody will forget – and for all the right reasons!

Thanks so much for meeting us at school so early this morning – most of us rose at a time that wasn't a time – it was a noise – something like -urrrgh o'clock! Our families arrived at 5.15am and the staff were there before that. Massive kudos to Miss Middleton, our Office Manager and Director of First Impressions (as I call her) for cycling in to school (I'd told her not to) to see us off. Toni does so much organisation on the logistics of the journey, but never is able to come with us, so just want to register my appreciation of her.

Thanks for being so good-humoured and supportive so early in the morning. It made a big difference. We left Purley at 5.45am and reached Dover in good time with no hold ups. Passport control was seamless and we were very lucky to catch the 9.10 ferry – 90 minutes ahead of schedule. Another plus was that we were issued with complimentary meal vouchers for the ferry. I'm not sure if this was fast thinking on the part of Rob, our lovely obliging driver, or DFDS trying to attract custom, but what it meant was that we were all able to have a full English buffet breakfast on the ferry on the crossing! Bonus! Especially as we'd risen so early that probably none of us were ready for breakfast initially.

Fully fortified, we reached Calais with no hitch – the sun beamed down on us and the crossing was like a millpond.

We set our sights on Honfleur, about 2h45m south of Calais. A traffic free journey saw us arrive there in the early afternoon (local time) so we stopped to eat some of our delicious packed lunches before spending 40 minutes taking in the sights of this delightful place.



Honfleur was originally a fishing village at the southern bank of the estuary of the river Seine (just across the massive bridge system at Le Pont de Normandie) and has a charming old port that dates back hundreds of years – William of Normandy set sail with his fleet of ships from there in 1066 to invade England. We'll learn more about this tomorrow when we visit the World Heritage site at of the Bayeux Tapestry. It is so picturesque, with yachts bobbing at their moorings in the small harbour, almost entirely surrounded by tall narrow houses dating back to the 15th century or before. If you haven't visited – I recommend it – a wonderful place to sit and sip a coffee or quaff a glass of wine whilst enjoying the view. Stunning!



No vin for us – back on the coach for the final leg to St Aubin Sur Mer, with our hotel a stone's throw from Juno Beach. Settled in to our rooms and dinner (pate, salad, meatballs, lashings of chips and fruit compote) before dashing down to the beach to run off some energy – dabbling in the sand and the ripples of the waves in the stunning sunset, football, frisbee, collecting shells, etc, etc.



The beach and seafront at St Aubin-sur-Mer.

It's Santi's 11th birthday today, so we finished (not that any of us were starving hungry) with a cupcake sitting on the seafront as we sang happy birthday to him again. A day to remember! Happy children, tired children, all now settled and safe in bed after night prayers.

Tomorrow we rise at 6.45am for breakfast at 7.30 and off to Bayeux at 8am to visit the cathedral, the tapestry and the D Day cemeteries at Bayeux and Omaha Beach. You'll have seen it on the news over the last few days. A full day and new adventures beckon!

Best get some sleep. Normandy is so wonderful and beautiful. The children are having a ball! We're so lucky!

God bless and sweet dreams.
Bonsoir. A bientot.

The Y6 Residential Party.

Day 2

Dear Friends,

It has been a very moving, busy and delightful day today.

We woke to lovely sunshine; not boiling hot, but pleasant, with cornflower blue skies, which made the sandy-coloured stone houses gleam. It is so clean here – all the villages are kept beautifully, with flower-festooned verges and roundabouts and everywhere is decked out with bunting to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day.

After breakfast, to Bayeux. We visited the Cathedral first. Commissioned by William of Normandy for his half-brother, Bishop Odo, it took about 50 years to construct in the mid-11th century. It towers above the town, over 70m high and is a Norman masterpiece. It's impressive enough now; just think how it must have appeared to the people then, who were seldom accustomed to buildings larger than a wood-framed clunch (look it up) house

with a couple of rooms. As it reaches for the heavens, built to the greater glory of God by the faith of the people, it must have seemed awe-inspiring! We spent some time wandering around in awe ourselves, before settling for 30 minutes to choose a specific aspect of the myriad of architectural features to draw. A cathedral of this size is quite overwhelming, so 'zooming in' on one particular feature helps cement (pun intended) the memories and the understanding of the gargantuan effort of its' construction.



We gathered at the side chapel dedicated to peace and spent a short time in reflection and prayer for peace in the world as we lit a candle to this intention.

Onward to the Bayeux Tapestry, a World Heritage site. It is believed that the tapestry was ordered by Matilda, William of Normandy's wife, and sewn some time just after the Norman Conquest in 1066. The children toured the 70m long tapestry with an audio guide first, before exploring the museum which shows artefacts from the time, as well as a very informative film. Great learning.

After lunch, we drove just a short way to the Allied WW2 cemetery in Bayeux. This is where the academic learning switches to a more emotional and thoughtful register.

Touring the 4,648 graves (over 22 times the pupil population of Margaret Roper – which gave us pause for thought) in ones and twos, we looked at the inscriptions and the ages of the occupants. So many young men! So many that died on the 6th, 7th, 8th June! Many inscriptions touched us as well as messages left on wreaths and memorials. One read: 'Sir,

your sacrifice bought our freedom. We commit to living our lives to the full, and to help make our world a better place’.

That sentiment is one of the main reasons we are here. We must never forget. A few tears may have been shed.

We gathered at the main memorial in the cemetery to conduct our own brief remembrance service. The wreath

from the Royal Family – laid there by Princess Anne, and other wreaths from heads of state and VIP’s were there to view. We laid our memorial there.



A couple of our children read the very moving poems they had written during our remembrance week in November, we also listened to a couple of verses from the poem ‘For the Fallen’ by Lawrence Binyon:

*They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted:
They fell with their faces to the foe.*

*They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*



We prayed for the fallen, their families, and for world peace and understanding. Some staff from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission were there, manning the cemetery owing to the importance of this period. They were blown away by the way the children walked quietly to observe the graves, their reverence, their understanding, their prayerfulness. The staff sought Miss Holloway out specifically to tell her this. It is what we expect, but it still makes us proud to hear it, unsolicited.



We drove on to the American cemetery at Omaha Beach. This is on an even larger scale, with nearly 9,400 graves. If you've seen the opening scene of 'Saving Private Ryan', then you will know what we were experiencing. It was extraordinarily busy, which was to be expected, and the main memorial was fenced off; as this was where King Charles and Queen Camilla, our PM, Mr Sunak, President Biden and over 20 other world leaders, as well as many D-Day veterans, were hosted by President Macron on Thursday.



Omaha Beach was a particularly bloody and difficult assault on D-Day and so many men fell before they even reached the cliffs under very heavy gunfire. The graves seem to stretch on

to the horizon in straight lines wherever you look. Very emotionally impactful. At the end of the long boulevard that round from the main memorial to the rotunda, we laid our own memorial, read more poems and said our prayers. There were quite a few observers, who joined us silently and appreciated the children's profound respect, although that wasn't the purpose of what we were doing. I think it is always more powerful when the children clearly know what the significance is, and how they show this to anyone who happens to be there. After dinner tonight, we played on the beach for an hour. Our hotel's beach at St Aubin sur Mer, where the Canadian forces landed on D-Day, and the fact that our children are able to play in the warm sunshine tonight, on the same beach, 80 years later, without fear of tyranny, and in freedom, was not lost on us.



Tomorrow we travel to Lisieux, to the Basilica of St Therese, for 11am Mass and then, as the weather forecast looks really good, we'll spend an extended time on one of the beaches nearby. The children have earned it. We are so proud of them.

We are having just the most amazing time.

Until tomorrow,
Bonsoir,
The Y6 Journey Party.

Day 3

Dear Friends,

Another instalment from the Normandy Journey Party. We've had a fantastic day! It has been sunny and warm all day with almost no breeze and has been around 23 degrees for much of the time.

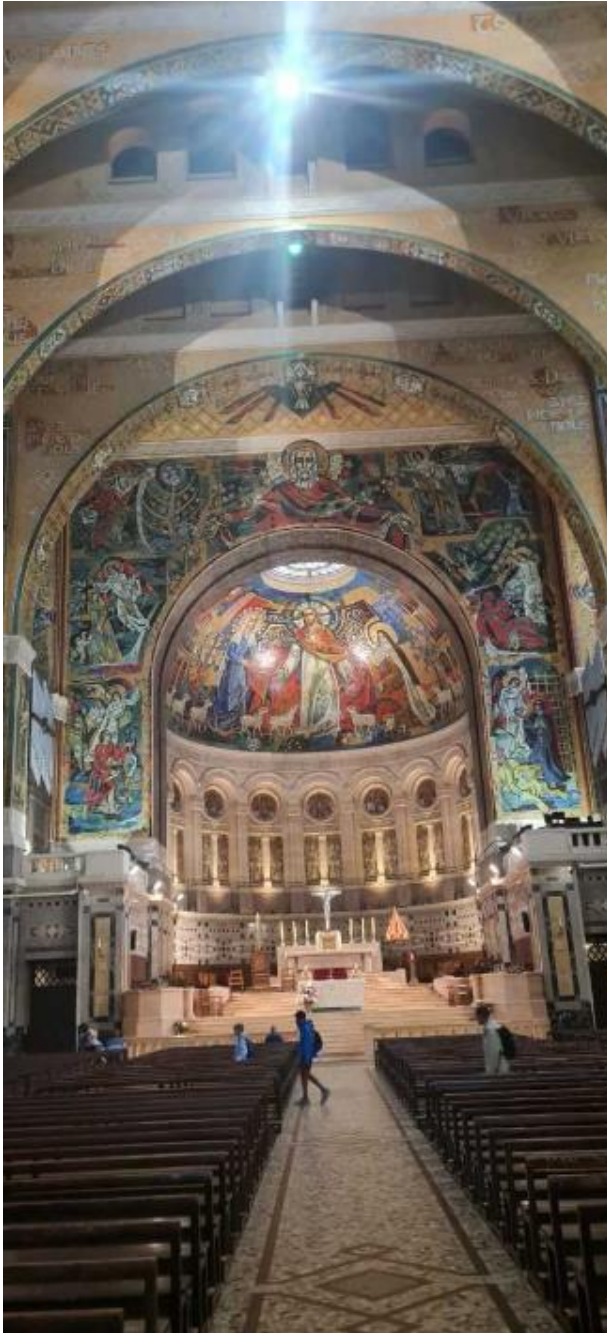
After breakfast, we departed for Lisieux, about 90 minutes' drive away. We first visited the Basilica of St Therese, which sits atop the hill in a commanding position over the town. It is the second largest place of Pilgrimage in France after Lourdes, and attracts over 2 million

visitors each year. As St Theresa is one of our four school houses, the visit had particular relevance for us. We're not normally here on a Sunday, so the opportunity to celebrate Sunday mass somewhere as important as the basilica was a real bonus.

St Therese was born in Lisieux in 1873, and wished to be a nun from a very early age. Her two sisters had entered the cloistered Carmelite convent in Lisieux and she asked to join at the early age of fifteen. Initially refused, she appealed to the Bishop and was granted entry. Therese, also known as the 'Little flower', wrote about the 'Little Way' which, roughly summarised, emphasises the adoration of Our Lord through small actions that anyone can perform to demonstrate God's love for us and ours for Him. Small acts of kindness, love and devotion, without expectation of recognition, and not intended to 'score points' with God to gain entry to heaven, but rather carried out in the certainty of God's love and divine mercy that we can all be more like Him and with Him in Heaven in our time. Please forgive me if this summary is simplistic, but surely the philosophy is one we can all ascribe to – certainly the way we try to live our lives in school and home. St Therese died of consumption in 1897, aged just 24 and was canonised in 1925 by Pope Pius XI.



Before mass, we were fortunate to meet with the celebrant, who then welcomed us from the pulpit – *'Welcome to a group of primary children from Margaret Roper Catholic School in London'* in front of a large congregation, which brought many welcoming smiles. While there were probably 400 in the congregation, we were dwarfed by the immensity of the Basilica, which can seat 4000! It is difficult to describe because of its beauty and complexity of decoration. The Basilica was built between 1929 and 1954, with a pause during the war, when there was only minor damage through bombing, despite two thirds of the surrounding town being destroyed. Because it is relatively modern, we were able to draw contrasts between the Basilica and Bayeux Cathedral which we had seen the previous day. Entering the vast church, all the children drew in their breath – the interior is completely covered in highly-coloured mosaics, showing a variety of saints and scenes from the gospel. My poor description does not come close to explaining the experience – go and visit if ever you can.



Mass was conducted in French, but as we understand the order and pattern of mass, it was not difficult to participate. The children were, of course, superb, and were wonderfully reverent and prayerful for the full hour-plus of the celebration. It was a unique experience.

Emerging into the bright sunlight, we walked the 10 minutes down the hill to the centre of town to where we know of a lovely park, beside the town hall. We picnicked there, and let off some steam in the playground before re-joining Rob on the coach.

We thought we deserved some 'down time' and the weather was glorious, so we drove to a favourite sandy beach at Asnielles (which was Gold beach during the landings in 1944). The tide was going out, exposing ankle-deep pools and flat, soft sand. We had the terrible hardship of spending 2+ hours there, playing games, throwing frisbee, digging complex fortifications, splashing and screaming and having the time of our lives!



Cross of Lorraine, Courseulles-sur-mer

Returning to the hotel, we paused at a huge memorial cross of Lorraine, about 20m tall, which surmounts a hill overlooking Gold Beach. There was time to give this a quick inspection and grab some excellent photo opportunities before making a beeline back to the

hotel for dinner. Our post-prandial activity was a visit to the pretty park, right beside our hotel, which has a playground, ornamental gardens, a bandstand and the venue for tonight's important international football fixture – England V France, which I am pleased to report was won 13-4 by the visiting team. To be fair, we did outnumber the hosts by about 3 to 1, but that's football!

The children are all asleep now. They are tired. We can see quite a few 'droopy' faces, when they think we're not looking. We are honest with each other about how we are feeling – it's ok to say 'I'm tired' and this goes for all of us, children and adults alike. I expect that we will have to wake them again at 6.45am, as we have done every morning – we are trying to ensure that we make the very most of each day we have together in this wonderful place.

Tomorrow, Arromanches. But that's another story.
Until then,
Bonsoir

The Y6 residential party.

Day 4

Dear Parents, Carers and Friends,

We come to the end of the fourth day of our wonderful residential in Normandy, extremely happy, a little tired, looking forward to re-joining you tomorrow, and full of memories of what we have learned and experienced.



Today, we visited Arromanches, where we learned about how the Allied effort to liberate France was supported by the construction of the Mulberry Harbour. The problem was, that the Allies could not capture a harbour to reinforce the invasion army without appalling loss of life, and therefore it was decided that an artificial harbour would be built at Arromanches, a small village next to Gold Beach. This would offer the capability to continue to supply the Allied army as it continued its push inland. The remnants of the caissons that formed the harbour are still to be seen out to sea. The D-Day Museum at Arromanches was totally

refurbished during the pandemic, and it is a really excellent opportunity to learn and see all that this entailed.



Following this, we drove up the hill to the cliff surmounting the village, where we visited the 360 Cinema. As its name suggests, this is an IMAX experience which offers a totally different perspective on the D-Day Landings. Through contemporary footage from the 1944 and later testimony, it presents the story of the D-Day landings in a way that connects the viewer to the human reality of the war, and encourages us to consider the individuals concerned. It provokes an extremely powerful emotional response to the history we have been learning, especially when we consider the events of 80 years ago against the current context of world events in Europe; where the free world responds to invasion of a nation and our response to tyranny. We couched it in the context of standing up to a bully who has no right to act as they do. A lot of big thinking here.

After lunch, we visited the large Carrefour in Bayeux, where the children had opportunities to flex their consumer muscles and purchase a few souvenirs to bring back home to families. This is always an interesting exercise with 11-year-olds, as they try to decide what is appropriate to purchase, made more challenging, in my opinion, by the lack of experience that children have nowadays in actually using cash! I know full well that Miss Holloway has prepared the children extraordinarily well in maths lessons for mental calculation, however the till experience was one where I was asking at the end where I could get the last 40 minutes of my life back, and the cashier looked like she needed a tea break! Miss Holloway and Mrs Cormican kindly purchased everyone an ice lolly after our retail therapy, so we sat outside the coach on a grassy verge to enjoy these when the General Manager of the Carrefour appeared. Anxiously, we observed his approach across the car park, fearful he was coming to complain about the trauma his cashier had experienced. In contrast, he had come over to tell us that our children were excellent, courteous, and so well managed by the staff team compared to other school groups they had seen that he felt he had to speak to us. He then presented each pupil with a special D-Day 80 badge, which delighted them no end! We even took a photo with him! #proudfmargaretroperagain.

We returned to the hotel for 3pm. The weather, which had been squally and overcast in the morning, began to change and sun broke through so it was pleasantly warm, although still breezy.

We hit the beach for the last time. We dug, flew the school power kite, played beach cricket, gahooned and gallivanted from 3.30 until 6.15, when we returned to the hotel for showers and packing our cases.

This has been such a memorable trip. You need to see the photos. Please see the photos.

This evening, some of the children asked me why we organise the trip, and instructed me that we must keep planning it for future classes. I responded that we intended to create memories that would last, to help the children to grow in independence, self-belief and maturity, to deepen learning, and most importantly of all, to appreciate that not all (or even many) children will ever have this amazing opportunity. I truly believe that for our children, the residential is transformational, and arrives at a time when they are moving on to new high schools and new challenges, where what they gain from this week is going to help them to thrive. So much learning is not able to be experienced in the classroom. I am, and I know that the whole team share this view, inordinately proud of what we strive to provide. It is something that makes us special. It is a real joy to share with the children and the colleagues involved. Long may it continue.

After dinner, we decided that we should round off the trip by taking a constitutional on the seafront at St Aubin. Purely by 'chance' we happened upon the very posh 'Clos de Normand' Hotel and restaurant, about 5 minutes away, and by some 'miracle' they were able to open their ice cream bar to us. Really posh gelato! The restaurant had about 40 flavours. My absolute favourite was mango sorbet (really unbelievably mango-ey) although I did quite like the 'unicorn' flavour too! We consumed these on the seafront, while the sun set, like a mango sorbet, scattering its fractals of light across the calm sea.

All in bed. Very happy children. Quite tired children. Slightly sandy children. Very full days and evenings. It is worth it. They deserve it. We are proud of them.

Now. Thank yous and logistics. It's 11.45pm local time as I write this, so I assume you'll read this in the morning.

We rise early at 6.15am for departure at 8am latest. We've decided to try to catch an earlier ferry, as this is better for the children as it makes the day shorter. They can sleep on the coach while we drive to Calais. Once I've confirmed what ferry we are on, I'll send a parentmail with an ETA in Purley. Please note that this is estimated, and I'll continue to update, probably through WhatsApp as the journey progresses and if our ETA is wildly different. I'll update again as we pass through Whyteleaf, so you will know to the nearest 20 minutes when we are due to arrive in Highfield Road, the same place we set off from on Friday. That seems like ages ago now! PLEASE try to be there to meet us. It is really hard for one or two children to be left when everyone else has been collected and they are still there waiting for their family to arrive. It also helps with the bags. Please leave the space the coach was parked in clear for us. Please make sure that we hand your children safely over to you when you meet them and that you've spoken to at least one member of staff. It is a busy time for us, at the end of a long journey. Thanks so much for your support.

None of this would be possible without the outstanding (yes, I am using that word) work, commitment and extraordinary care shown by the staff team.

Miss Middleton – Logistics – I've already mentioned her in a past blog, but without her background work, I don't think the journey could take place. So grateful.

Rob, our coach driver from Kingsferry Travel. I don't think we could have hoped for more. Rob has been consummately professional and a great safe driver who has delivered us and collected us door to door spot on time and every day. More than that though, Rob is a terrific guy, great sense of humour, wonderful with the children, and going the extra mile – suggesting side visits to make the trip more fun, anticipating and providing whatever we needed before we even knew we needed it, eating with us and joining us for evening walks etc, and even sitting on the coach while we were somewhere else devising music playlists that he thought would appeal to the children! It makes such a difference. We're very grateful.

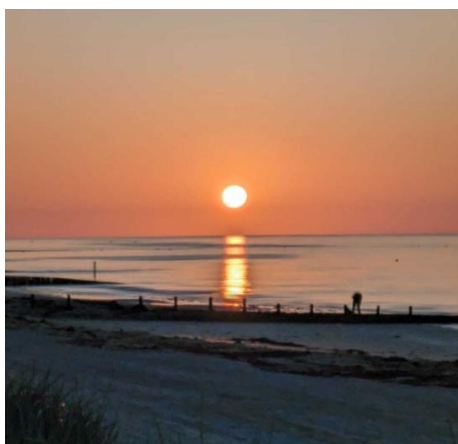
Mr Kieron Mooney - Knowledgeable, calm, unfailingly obliging, always cheerful, totally reliable. An absolute gentleman. Not being paid (bonus!). Thanks again Kieron.

Mrs Cormican – extraordinary care for the children, always thinks of others first - no fuss – it's just done before you know it. Such fun. So kind and unselfish (it was her wedding anniversary on Monday while she was away) You are a star, Karen.

Miss Holloway – how could we do without her the relationships she has nurtured through the year with the children, and the wonderful care she shows them, which is so evident on residential this week – the children love and trust her – this doesn't happen by accident. Bless you, Emma.

I am truly fortunate to have a team such as this on Y6 Journey. I'm proud and grateful to them all. I know you are too.

Crikey! It's well after midnight!
I'll message tomorrow with time of arrival.
Until then,
Bonsoir
The Y6 Journey Party.



The Journey Party arrived safely back in Purley at 5pm on the following day, after a pleasant drive and ferry crossing home.

We'd like to thank everyone involved in the residential for all their hard work to create such lasting memories. Bless you all.

The Saint Vincent De Paul Conference, St John the Baptist Parish, Purley, for assisting with funding disadvantaged pupils, who otherwise would not be able to afford the residential.

NST School Travel

The owners and staff at the Hotel de Normandie, St-Aubin-sur-Mer

The staff and volunteers at Margaret Roper Catholic Primary School

All of the parents at Margaret Roper

And, of course, our incredible children!