**Awoingt /Elford : a friendship**

Some five years ago a French lady accompanied her Staffordshire based daughter house hunting and had lunch in the Crown at Elford. That was the unlikely beginning for the building of a friendship between her home village of Awoingt, in the north of France, and Elford. To Olga Leriche, tasked by her Parish Council to find a village with which they could connect, Elford appeared the perfect partner being of a similar size, location and social mix with, most importantly, a village school.

 Unsurprisingly Elford’s first reaction was probably best described as incredulity but with Olga’s unsurpassed combination of enthusiasm and determination gradually Elford was persuaded that this project was feasible. In April 2014 a first visit to Awoingt was made by the enthusiastic Head Teacher from the Howard School and members of the village French conversation group. From this stemmed the liaison between the two village schools which despite the constraints of time, curriculums and technical hitches has flourished with pupils making friends via skype and letter; further, three French teachers have visited the Howard School on several occasions to cement the connection.

In the Autumn of 2014 Elford commemorated the beginnings of the First World war with an impressive Service; with so many of the significant events of the Great War having occurred in the countryside around Awoingt, the participation of visitors from Awoingt including the Mayor, was particularly poignant. This service and the many activities arranged for them over the weekend was an opportunity to increase their knowledge of Elford and Elfordians and ours of them! The following summer a group of 8 Elfordians were welcomed enthusiastically to Awoingt. Firm friendships were established and much enjoyment had in exploring the cultural similarities and differences between us. The subsequent reciprocal visits in 2016 and 2017 saw the numbers involved increase significantly with 23 Awoingtaise visiting Elford (over a hundred people enjoyed the two evening events) and Elford’s return visit in 2017 comprised both returning and new members.

Although the “Village” visits are inevitably widely spaced the monthly news-letters sent between the two villages keep us all abreast of life in both villages and the growing number of individual visits between now good friends strengthen the connection and involvement in each other’s lives.

To ensure continuity and confirm that this is a “whole village” project, it has always been the aim to gain the approval from the Parish Council for the two villages to be officially twinned. Having proved that this is not a “flash-in-the-pan” idea as well as bringing benefits to the village: not only giving the opportunity to discover more about our European neighbours (without needing to speak French!) but also the chance to make new friends within Elford and find out more about our own surroundings, this September the Parish Council gave its consent to an official twinning. This does not involve a great deal: a letter in both French and English declaring the willingness of both Villages to enter into a long-term friendship for our mutual benefit, signed, in each village, by a council representative and someone representing the group of Elford/Awoingt Friends preferably in the presence of a large number of village residents. This letter is then archived in the parish files. Our friends from Awoingt have long declared a fascination with the Scarecrow Festival and it is proposed that as well as participating in the Scarecrow weekend, creating their own Scarecrows, that the Elford letters would be signed during the event. Representatives and friends from Elford will be invited to Awoingt to perform a similar ceremony there.

From very small beginnings this project has grown impressively and wants to involve everyone of all ages: there is no need to speak French (or indeed to travel to France) to join in, make friends and expand an experience of a different lifestyle. For further information and or to join the monthly newsletter circulation contact Chris at billrckf@aol.com