



## In her latest communiqué, Maggie Smales showcases Cardiff and south Wales to the visiting French contingent

If you had been around in Cardiff Bay on the last Wednesday in April, you might have seen a group of what appeared to be tourists being followed around by a TV reporter and a cameraman. The French were in town!

Every year, the Association for the Cardiff Nantes Exchange hosts a group of around 25 people from Nantes. They stay with our members, they practise their English, and we try to show them a side of Cardiff and of this part of South Wales that they would be unlikely to experience if they just flew into Cardiff or Bristol, hired a car, and stayed in an AirBnB.

So, in Cardiff Bay we, of course, took them on a tour of the Senedd. We also showed them the inscription commemorating the French chef Abel Magneron, who ran one of the best French restaurants in Britain in the immediate post-war period, frequented by showbiz stars like Richard Burton, here in what was the Big Windsor Hotel.

We went into Butetown and used the census of 1911 to explain just how multi-cultural Cardiff already was a century ago. In the same street cheek by jowl, lived a family of Russian Jewish emigres, a Turkish boarding housekeeper with an English wife, and a Greek cook, and lodgers from Turkey, Greece and India, all sailors. Down the road was a Chinese-run boarding house, housing mainly Chinese shop workers. And, of course, there were a good sprinkling of Irish and Scots as well as native Welsh.

That's before we get to the

Greeks, of whom more anon, and the Norwegians, whose church on Harbour Drive is now an arts centre and café, and whose most famous son, the children's author, Roald Dahl, gave his name to Roald Dahl Plass, the public plaza in front of the Millennium Centre.

Speaking of the Millennium Centre, many of the French group went there on their first Sunday evening to a wonderful concert given by the Welsh National Opera and chorus, whose future is now under threat because of drastic funding cuts. We were told this would never happen in France! On Monday night, they went bowling in Whitchurch rugby union club.

For most, the highlight of the week was the celebratory dinner on Wednesday evening, attended by the Right Honourable The Lord Mayor of Cardiff, Councillor Bablin Malik and her consort. 120 people from various associations in Cardiff with links with France gathered together to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the formal twinning between Cardiff and Nantes. It was a chance for people to meet up with old friends, to listen to some excellent musicians, including a rendering of "We'll Gather Lilacs in the Spring" as a tribute to another of Cardiff's famous sons, Ivor Novello, and to eat and drink of course.

The evening was finished with a singsong in English, French, and Welsh. And yes, despite everything, the links between Cardiff and Nantes are still strong: "Ry'n ni yma o hyd".

Day trips included Margam Abbey, the National Botanical Gardens,

Penderyn Distillery, and Brecon. Did you know that there were 120,000 French prisoners of war in Britain during the Napoleonic wars and that one of them ended up being buried in the churchyard of Brecon cathedral? There are links with France everywhere if you know where to look.

The finale was a visit to Cardiff's wonderful Greek Orthodox Church – more than a hundred years old and like a little corner of Thessaloniki or the Peloponnese in Butetown. Many Cardiffians don't know it is there. And we finished with a lovely Greek meze lunch prepared by the ladies of the congregation, even though, as the Orthodox Calendar is different, they themselves were still fasting for Lent.

And leaving the best bit till last – in June a similar number of us Cardiffians headed off to Nantes to follow a similarly varied and interesting programme.

