



The BMW Club
United Kingdom & Ireland



The BMW Club Southern Section

D-Day and a Week's Bike Holiday in Normandy

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D-Day and a week's Bike holiday in Normandy. ***Part holiday, part history lesson. Discovering the story of D-Day***

This is not the normal travel blog; I didn't want to just share holiday snaps (don't we all hate the holiday snaps?) and routes with colleagues. I wanted to do something different.

So as our trip was based around the sites and poignant memories surrounding D-Day, ("D" stands for nothing more complicated than "Day". In France, it is known as "Jour-J"), this is both an account of our week away, coupled with a short history lesson on D-Day and a few lesser known facts, most of which we learned whilst we were in Normandy.

The whole venture started with an off-the-cuff comment at a natter lunch at the Departure or "Dementia" Lounge. A joint interest in the twentieth century's global conflicts led Adrian Oldfield and me on a very poignant and heart-wrenching week in Normandy. The week left both of us deeply impressed, both with the planning for the operation but, above all, with the immense sacrifice of the airmen, soldiers and sailors, both merchant and Royal Navy.

Bearing in mind that the week leading up to our week away had brought record breaking sunshine and temperatures across the UK, Adrian and I set out on an overnight ferry from Portsmouth to Ouistreham, with a weather forecast foreboding wall-to-wall rain; for the entire week.

On this occasion, Adrian had chosen to ride his Honda Transalp (or "transgender" as it has become known) and I rode my R1250 GS. Both very capable machines but, as you will see, were not exactly 'tested' during this week. We were booked in for the week at *Hotel Campanile* in Bayeux, the town of the tapestry, (which is actually absent, being prepared for loan to the British Museum). Bayeux is pretty central for the invasion beaches and the hotel is pretty central for Bayeux. Hotel Campanile is a budget motel-style hotel but was warm, dry and clean, with a restaurant on-site.

Before travelling to France, Adrian and I made a couple of visits to sites on this side of the channel, setting the scene for the history lessons to come.

The first visit was to Southwick House on Portsdown Hill, where the allied Supreme Commander, Ike Eisenhower had his headquarters. It was here where the immortal words "let's go" were uttered on the 5th June 1944, triggering the largest ever sea-born invasion the world has ever seen.

That order was given following a weather briefing by meteorologist Group Captain Stag, whose chain of observer stations had fed reports back to his office, deep under the chalk of Portsdown hill. The intelligence helped Stag firstly advise a delay of the invasion and then predict a short window of opportunity in the unseasonal storms in the English Channel 24 hours later.

If you haven't seen the recent film "Pressure", it is the story of Group Captain Stag and this famous weather forecast. It really is well worth a watch!

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Channel, it was these same storms which had convinced the German high-command and their leader, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, that the expected invasion would not occur until the weather eased. In fact, Rommel was so convinced that the Allies were

weather-bound in Blighty, he went back to Germany for his wife's birthday. Ironically, many other senior German commanders travelled to Paris for 'war games', to practice for a potential invasion of France.

When, as President, Eisenhower was later asked how the Allies were so successful on "D Day", he responded "We had better meteorologists than the Germans!"



In Southwick House, the famous map of the Channel, outlining the maritime route of the massive invasion flotilla, can be seen on the wall in the map room. A visit here is fabulous for anyone, either interested in D-Day or otherwise but, as it is within a Royal Navy base, visits are by joining an organised tour only¹. The presentation by the curator of the RMP museum (also on this site) is both informative and entertaining; and is highly recommended.

Geographically, between Southwick House and Portsmouth Harbour, stands the huge chalk edifice which is Portsdown Hill. Since Napoleonic times, the British military has tunnelled through the chalk to keep personnel safe from actual or perceived threats from over the Channel, or further afield.

In 1942, long before D-Day was planned, it was clear to the allies that a 'second front' was inevitable and that a secret and secure UK Headquarters for such an operation, in whatever guise it should take, would be necessary. Thus, it was that the Royal Engineers burrowed a mile and a quarter of tunnels into the chalk near the Napoleonic fort, Fort Nelson. All achieved in 10 months! To hide the excavated chalk from aerial reconnaissance, they actually painted the spoil green! The tunnels can be visited now. Although their former glory has been largely erased, stripped out entirely in the interests of national secrecy, what remains is a fascinating insight into the environment within which D-Day was planned.



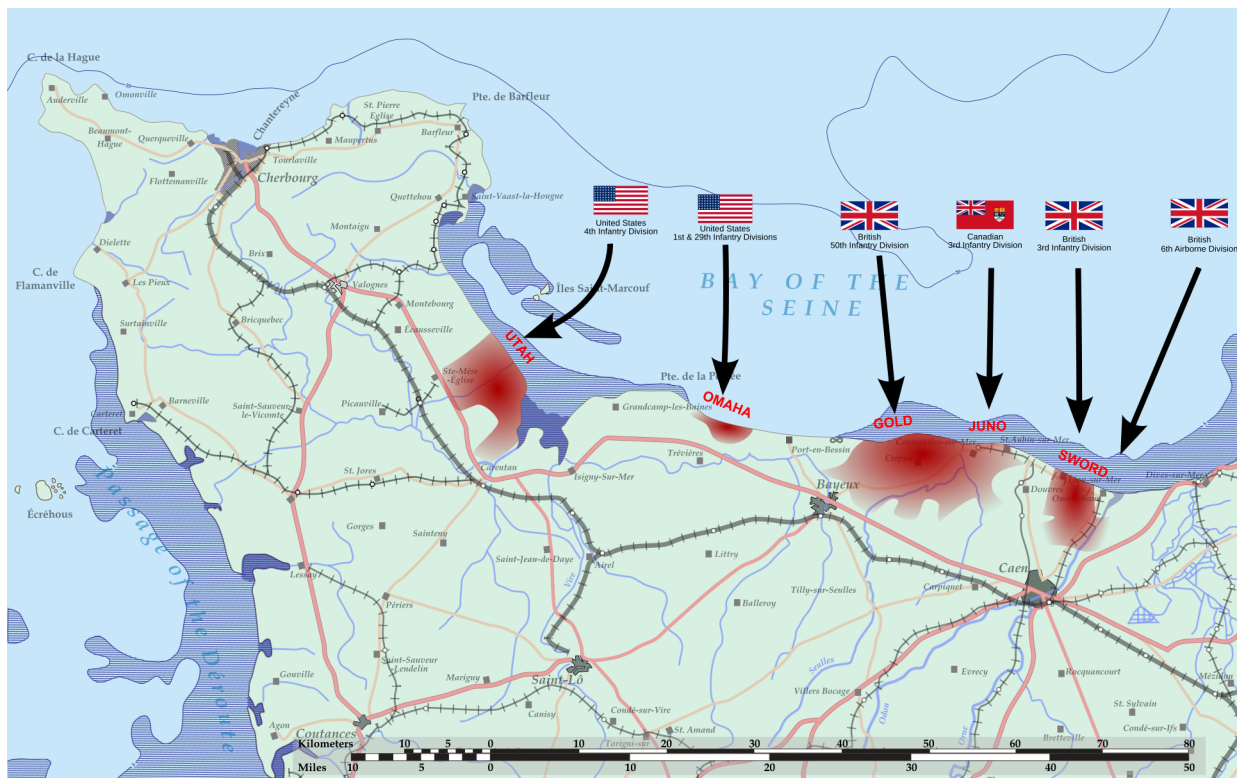
Try <https://southwickrevival.co.uk/map-room-tours/> or Hidden History Tours.

Operations Neptune and Overlord were British Operations

Despite what Hollywood would have you believe, Operations Neptune (getting the services to Normandy) and Overlord were both British operations. There were far more British and Canadian troops, ships and aircraft on the beaches than American and, apart from the Supreme Commander, all of the top brass for the threeservices (four if you count the merchant marine) were British.

So, on 5th June 1944 approximately 73,000 American troops and 83,000 British, Canadian and other allied troops, both airborne (parachute and glider) and amphibious, embarked for a 6th June invasion. Also involved were 195,000 naval personnel.

The operation to get the troops to the beaches was code-named Operation Neptune, the operation, once the troops were ashore, was as Operation Overlord.



The destination of these troops was the beaches of Normandy. The most well-known of the beaches are Omaha and Utah, for the American troops; Gold, Sword and Juno for the British and Canadian. There was actually a sixth beach – not widely known - ‘Band’. Band Beach was a contingency beach, with troops to be landed there had the airborne troops, landing overnight, failed to silence the Merville battery¹.

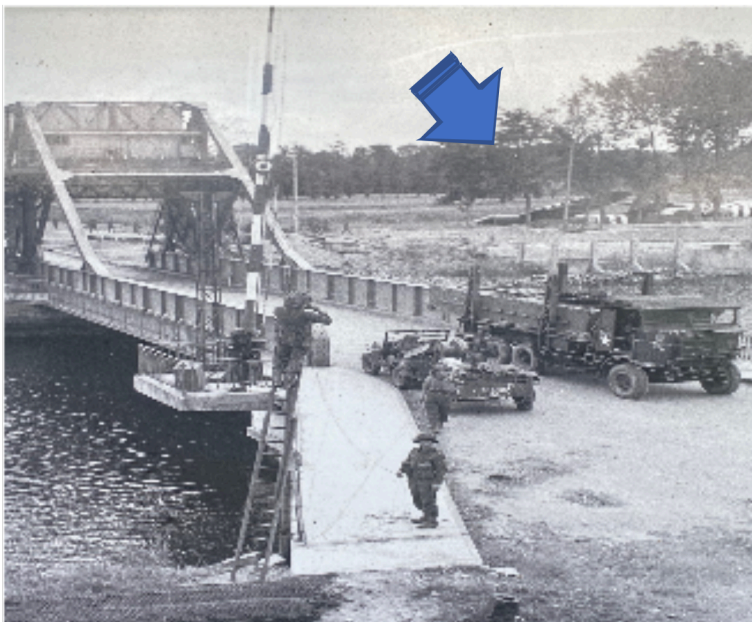
Merville Battery overlooked the eastern beaches and could have devastated troops on Gold Beach. Despite only 150 of the 750 paratroopers which had been dropped to destroy Merville Battery reaching their intended target, and most of their equipment also having gone astray, the remainder of the 9th Parachute Brigade heroically pressed home the attack and silenced the guns, thereby saving the lives of hundreds of troops on the beaches underneath.

<https://www.batterie-merville.com/en/merville-battery/>

The four British beaches were named after sea creatures. Goldfish, Swordfish and Jellyfish. Yes, Juno Beach was originally named ‘Jelly’, but the commander of the Canadian forces who were to land there rejected the name outright, as he (probably rightly) thought that it would be undignified for his troops to die liberating a jelly!

With not a huge amount of sleep (the on-board safety announcements seemed to go on interminably), our intrepid bike explorers were landed at Ouistreham at 06:45 in the morning, at a similar time, but with a rather more dignity and a friendlier welcome than our forebears in 1944. We had just a passport control rather than an entire army shooting at us (in the words of Monty Python, “we had it easy”). Breakfast was a challenge as nothing much in France opens before 10am. We grabbed a couple of croissants in the terminal café and set off for Pegasus Bridge – only a couple of miles down the canal. But wait... *it’s not raining!*

The 6th Airborne landed at Pegasus Bridge, by glider, in the early hours of the 6th June 1944. With incredible precision, three gliders landed, silently, within yards of the bridge. The Bridge was taken and, incredibly, held until they were relieved later in the morning.



What is now known as `Pegasus Bridge, was originally Bénouville Bridge (Pont du Bénouville). It was officially renamed Pegasus Bridge on 26 June 1944 to honour the British 6th Airborne Division, whose shoulder emblem featured the mythical winged horse, Pegasus.

The relief column was heralded by the bagpipes of Bill Millen. Known as "Mad" Bill Millin. He was serving as the personal piper to Brigadier Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat (commander of the British 1st Special Service Brigade). Millin famously marched unprotected through heavy enemy fire on Sword Beach to rally the invading Commandos. Millin was the only man to wear a kilt during the landings, specifically wearing the same Cameron tartan kilt his father had worn in

Flanders during WWI. When reminded beforehand by Lord Lovat that pipers had been banned from front-line duties because it was too dangerous, (health and safety even in those days) Millin was said to have replied "Och, but that's the English War Office. You and I are both Scottish, and that doesn't apply." It is said that the Germans actually had Millin in their gunsights but decided not to shoot as they were convinced he had lost his mind! Millin's pipes were finally silenced by shrapnel some days later. Millin survived his pipes and died in 2010. He is commemorated with a statue, which we visited later in the week.

Lord Lovat arrived at the bridge only a few minutes after midday, the scheduled time that he and his column would hope to relieve the 6th Airborne. He apparently apologised for 'being late'

As an aside, my Father-in-law, an RAF pilot, actually spent a lot of his service teaching Army pilots to fly the Horsa and other gliders, the same as those which landed at Pegasus.

After visiting Melville Battery, Adrian and I withdrew to Café Gondré for a spot of lunch. Café Gondré sits alongside the canal and Pegasus Bridge and was the first building in France to be liberated on D-Day. Adrian was delighted to learn that Madame Arlette Gondré, who was aged just 6 when the airborne troops arrived, was not only still alive but still serving food alongside at least two further generations of La Famille Gondré. Adrian had met Arlette Gondré years earlier and learned the café was saved for her by donations from the UK. A collection was made to enable Arlette to retain the café when it became known to British servicemen that, on the death of their parents, the café was in danger of being sold by her two sisters, against Arlette's wishes. Arlette came out to speak (in perfect English) with Adrian but whether she remembered him from their previous encounter decades earlier is rather doubtful, to say the least!

From here we visited the 'Grand Bunker' museum at Ouistreham.

When the Allied troops arrived, they found the bunker was sealed from the inside. The British thought they had neutralised the range-finding capabilities, having cut the communication wires, however they were not aware of the radio communications, which remained intact. Nor were the allies aware of the celebrations going on inside the bunker, celebrating the end of the war. The celebrations were courtesy of wine plundered from nearby estates. Once the Commandos finally got inside, the 53 rather inebriated Germans surrendered without any resistance.

We then trundled across to Bayeux and the hotel. As mentioned, it was a motel style establishment and they had reserved an upstairs room for us, to ensure we got our daily exercise by lugging laden panniers up the stairs.

Still no rain and quite warm temperatures too. When it did rain, however, it came down in sheets. Armed with a plethora of weather and rain prediction apps, we plotted our week to try and avoid the worst of the rain. I am pleased to report that we were entirely successful and not once did we have to ride in the rain. On wet roads, yes, but never in the rain.

That night we ate in the hotel, all washed down with a bottle of *cidre bouché*, the local cider.

The next day was fine so we headed off for Sainte-Mère-Église, at the foot of the Cotentin Peninsular.



Sainte-Mère-Église was the first major objective for the American airborne troops. The Airborne were to be backed up by infantry troops, once they had fought their way off of Utah Beach. The paratroopers were all dropped wildly off-target, many of them landing on the heavily garrisoned town itself, others sadly drowned in areas outside the town which had been deliberately flooded by the German,. Trooper John Steele was unlucky enough to land on the church, getting his parachute caught on the steeple. He was forced to hang there, playing dead, watching his colleagues get shot and captured in the town square below.

A plaque in the church states that a German soldier was about to shoot Steele but was stopped from doing so by his colleague as Steele 'was on consecrated ground'. Steele was eventually cut down and taken prisoner, but escaped his captors 4 hours later and made his way back to his unit later the same day. He survived the war, became an honorary citizen of Sainte-Mère-Église and died in 1969. To this day, an effigy of a paratrooper and his parachute still hangs from the steeple of the church.



The memory of the American Airborne troops is served by a museum, situated opposite the church. It is an amazing 'museum', albeit in danger of missing the point, by being a rather Disney-esque 'attraction', with light and sound shows to illustrate the operation. Well worth a visit though.

After a baguette and cider lunch, we visited the Pointe du Hoc.

The Germans had built a huge battery on this cliff promontory, from where the guns could be brought to bear over the landing beaches. Having fought their way onto the beach below, and under heavy fire, the American Rangers had to scale the cliffs in order to storm the guns... only to suffer many casualties and then find that the guns, badly damaged by air-raids, had been removed by the Germans only days before.

Pointe du Hoc was pretty much overrun by thousands of American visitors and it was rather warm in wet-weather biking gear, so we made a tactical withdrawal.



The panoramic view over the Channel from Pointe du Hoc

We returned to the hotel via the American memorial and cemetery. The row-upon-row of stately white crosses, marching serenely across beautifully manicured lawns, was a stark and very poignant reminder of the sacrifices the troops, of all nations, made. It was a very moving place with thousands of tourists. Fabulous that so many had travelled from their homeland so far away, to remember their fallen countrymen.



The following day was set to be showery and, with heavy showers forecast around lunch-time, we headed for the museum at Arromanches. The beach here is the site of one of two temporary harbours, towed across the channel, one for the British and Canadians, one to serve the American Utah and Omaha Beaches

It was evident from the start of planning for the invasion, that logistics, and thus occupation of a port, was imperative but capturing a port was just about impossible. The Germans were waiting in ports for the invasion in enormous numbers and actually totally devastated the port at Cherbourg before it was captured. Churchill resurrected an idea he had floated (sorry for the pun) in the First World War, to take a harbour with the troops. The museum at Arromanches commemorates the immense achievement of designing and building the huge concrete harbour sections, code-named 'Mulberry'. The individual caissons and pontoons were manufactured all along the coast of England and floated across the Channel. However, the primary sea defence, implemented within days, was a row of old ships, sailed to Arromanches and scuttled in a line as a sea-wall. Then a ring of concrete caissons on the landward

side of the ships and finally, within the breakwater, were the floating moles, against which ships docked to load and unload. Fuel was brought across the Channel in flexible pipelines, PLUTO (pipeline under the ocean) one of which started at a pumping station in Shanklin Chine on the Isle of Wight.

The harbour started to unload ships just 7 days after D-Day, with it being complete and replicating the capacity of Dover by early July. The wrecked remains of some of the caissons and moles are still visible at low-water.



The museum recounts that, unfortunately, the Americans apparently did not quite grasp the importance of anchoring the caissons correctly, as a result of which the next fierce storm to sweep along the Channel badly damaged the British harbour but almost completely destroyed the American one. The American Mulberry had to be abandoned but parts of it were re-purposed to repair the British harbour.

With heavy rain predicted, Adrian and I sheltered in the 360-degree cinema at Arromanches. We had to wait for the torrential downpour to clear but, at least, we had a coffee machine. Mission successful: we had still managed to dodge riding in the rain. When we returned to the hotel, Adrian was 'disgusted' to learn that he had ridden a total of just 18 miles this day - on a biking holiday!

The next day was also forecast to be a bit showery, so we decamped to *le Mémorial*, the major museum at Caen dealing with World War 2. Anyone in the area should seriously consider a visit to this graphic depiction of WW2- as a memorial to peace.

Following the French insistence in 1919, at the Treaty of Versailles after World War one, the allies imposed swingeing reparations on Germany. Many were convinced the financial demands on Germany would destabilise European economies and that the Second World War was actually inevitable. One notable, and scarily accurate prediction, was made by Ferdinand Foch, the Supreme Allied Commander in WW1, who famously critiqued the treaty of Versailles, "*This is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.*" His prediction proved incredibly precise, as World War II broke out almost exactly 20 years and two months later.



After *Le Mémorial*, Adrian and I rode back to Pegasus Bridge and the excellent museum alongside the canal. The current bridge is a replacement for the original, which can now be seen in the museum.

The following day we rode to the British Memorial. This is not the British graveyard, which can actually be found at Bayeux, and to which we walked later.

The memorial is an incredibly moving tribute to the soldiers, sailors and airmen who fell at D-Day. Every summer, it is also home to the “Walking with Giants” silhouettes. Each of these sculptures is hand-cut by jig-saw from recycled hoarding panels and each one represents a group of those who fell. We learned that the charity is currently making a group of civilian silhouettes, which will be placed in the woodland alongside, and representing the sacrifices of French Résistance fighters. Each winter, the “Giants” return to different sites in the UK.



The actual invasion had been expected by the German High Command. In the UK, Operation Fortitude had been designed to confuse the Germans as to the actual location. Even as the invasion fleet approached Normandy and the troops were coming ashore, Berlin was still convinced that the attack would come in the vicinity of Calais — and that the now obvious landings in Normandy were a diversionary tactic.

A component of Operation Fortitude was to deliberately leave two Normandy located radar stations functional, while the others were destroyed by the RAF.

The British intelligence was aware of the functionality of these radar stations as the very first operation by Special Airborne Forces (Op Biting) had landed in 1942, near an “electronic dish” which had appeared on aerial reconnaissance photos near the village of Bruneval in northern France. The paratroopers not only landed by parachute, they dismantled the Würzburg radar and escaped with the device, they also kidnapped the radar technician who was on duty. With strategic components of the radar, the troops brought both the radar parts, and the rather surprised technician, back to the UK by landing craft towed by fast patrol boat.

On the 6th June, whilst the fleet approached the beaches, the RAF dropped tons of metal foil strips in the Channel, much further north along the coast. This cloud of foil “window” was picked up by German radar, in fact by the two radar stations deliberately left intact - for this purpose! As a result of this, and other Op Fortitude deceptions, the Germans were even more convinced the Normandy fleet was merely a diversionary tactic and the invasion was to be further north. The Germans did not, therefore, deploy their major Panzer Divisions towards the invasion troops but kept them in reserve for the actual invasion.

This major reserve Panzer Division was the jewel in the crown of the forces repelling invasion troops and commanders squabbled over who could deploy it. Ultimately Hitler decided that only he, personally, could deploy the force. When the Allies arrived, however, this decision proved very advantageous to the Allies as Hitler had taken a sleeping pill and left instructions not to be disturbed. With his incandescent rages being well known, not one of his generals was prepared to wake him up to get his authorisation, buying the allies many hours of grace!

One of the spared radar stations, Station 44, was visited. This includes an intact bunker and a comprehensive history of the development of radar.

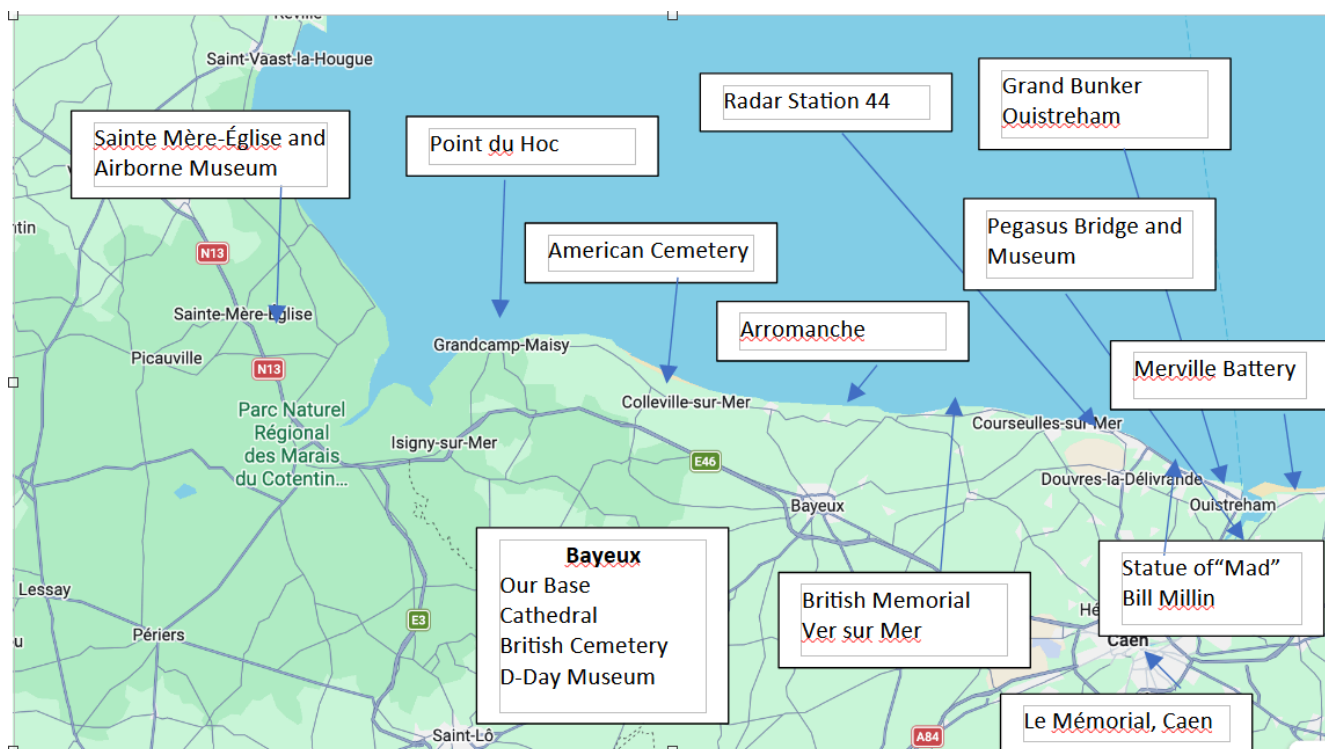
The next day we walked from our hotel to the D-Day museum in Bayeux, which explained the day itself and providing the military history of the main players on both sides.

From the museum we walked to the British Cemetery, near the site of a wartime allied hospital, now impeccably maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). The cemetery contains 4,648 graves, including the graves of 504 ‘other’ nationals, mainly German.



We were confused by one grave with two headstones, both commemorating unknown soldiers of the Warwickshire Regiment. An enquiry with CWGC revealed that this practice occurs where they know they have the remains of two people but are unable to segregate the remains accurately – most common with RAF personnel. Also buried here is Corporal Sidney Bates VC, awarded for a machine-gun charge which reversed a dangerous attack by an SS Panzer Division on 6th August.

And thus it was that our week holiday drew to an all-too-soon close. The next day we packed up and headed back to Ouistreham via Colville-Montgomery, where stands a statue to Bill Millin, the piper who piped the Scots troops ashore at Sword Beach. We stopped here for a coffee at a beachside restaurant. When the rain came through, we decided to eat lunch here and we were presented with a first-class meal, washed down with a great Norman *cidre*. A fitting *au revoir* to Normandy.



The sites we visited during our week

