



UP NORTH, DOWN SOUTH...

BY DAVID LOWE

Once in discussion with a Brazilian, I was telling him (or her for that matter) that some particularly strange behaviour of the French compared to the English was due to the fact that the French were more Latin than the English. The Brazilian laughed in my face or “at my nose” as the French say, because in general, Latin Americans find both the English and the French extremely northern. A discussion of Anglo-French differences seems from the point of view of this Brazilian, quite a useless and futile exercise. Italians and Germans, Spaniards and Swedes are all the same: northerners. When the French think of the north, or their north, they think of badly insulated terraced brick houses, coal mines, cheerful, resilient people, the salt of the earth. Danny Boons before they get famous – just the right height to walk upright in a mine without bumping their heads. A people who only succeed in surviving the inhuman climate by sucking boiled sweets that go by strange names such as “Cambrai Stupidities”.

In the north everybody lisps, so a quiche Lorraine is a kiss on the German border, which must be a euphemism for something else. An Englishman arriving in Nord Pas de Calais, expects on his journey south to enter Sud Pas de Calais, not just the south of the northern Pas de Calais. The French seem to think that by repeating “Pas de Calais”, the Hundred Years War will somehow be won, since they will succeed in convincing the English that there is and was, after all, no Calais to occupy. This non-Calais has a northern bit, but no southern bit – because it’s in the north. Anyway, if you stand on the Dunes de Slack and look north-north-west towards England (if you see the English coast, it’s going to rain; if you don’t see it, it’s already raining), you will see the southern part of our glorious Kent, the Garden of England, where that brilliant English sunshine ripens the hops that make flat English beer, which is still a bit warm when served. With its mild climate, the town of Ashford is the equivalent for us of your Perpignan. Ashford is a little to the north of Roubaix. The more sophisticated Vikings settled here just for the weather. You have to look at these things in their proper context. Just to

the north of northern France is southern Belgium. Namur is an exotic town for the Flemish with its citadel, *guinguettes* and Walloons sunbathing on the banks of the Meuse. Much more clement than sombre Antwerp, just to the north of which lies the southern border of the Netherlands. Cross this northern border of Belgium into southern Holland, where the golden beaches of Scheveningen contrast with the more austere beaches of the north around Groningen, where shivering but proud Dutchmen share the sands with Scandinavians in bathing costumes soaking up the sun. This continues as you go further north, all the way up to the North Pole, where there’s neither north nor south, because the compass needle points to the centre of the earth, inviting us to suppose that what you thought was in the attic is actually in the cellar.

In a word, if you are heading south while reading this, you are certainly headed for the north of somewhere else and, conversely, if you’re heading south, you’re heading for the north of somewhere else again. So either way – you’re on the right track. Bon Voyage.

