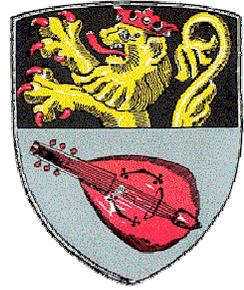


FRIENDS OF ALZEY

HARPENDEN



Reminiscences on the Origins of the Friends of Alzey

The twinning began in 1963, along with other Hertfordshire towns which were linked up with communities in Rheinland-Pfalz. Attempts were made to match communities for size and interests – though Alzey has always been about half the size of Harpenden – and we cannot offer excellent Rheinhessen wines!

The official agreement was between Harpenden Urban District Council and Alzey Stadtrat. Councillors made regular visits and many local groups established exchanges with their opposite numbers, including – rugby, hockey and tennis clubs, choirs and school exchanges with Roundwood Park School. Some councillors became very keenly involved, including Cllrs Colin and Stella Curl, Cllr John and Judy Fryd, Cllr Ned and Doreen Nash, Alfred and Ella Stevens and many others over the years. I am not sure who else was involved from the outset. Alfred Stevens was a German refugee who married and settled locally. He had joined the British Army, and helped interpret at the prisoner of war camp at Batford. He acted as interpreter on official visits. The links with the National Children's Home started, I think, through Ella Stevens who worked there and John Fryd who served on the Management Committee. This developed into generous charitable support for the NCH by the Alzey Workers' Welfare organisation (Arbeiterwohlfahrt).

Our first involvement was in April 1969 (because of being German speakers) in being asked to host a member of the Nicolai Chor, invited by St Nicholas church choir (Alzey and Harpenden share a saint). We gave hospitality to Heinz Becker, and have kept up regular contact since. Our first visit was in June that year with our 2-year old daughter: we arrived at 11 pm after car problems and sat straight down to strawberries and cream. We stayed with them on many occasions after that, on our way through to Switzerland, or when on group visits. We last saw them in 2006 in their hometown of Darmstadt, to which they had retired, shortly before Heinz's death.

In 1974 the formal twinning and civic visits passed to St Albans, which already had a twinning link with Worms. There was discontent – non-Harpenden councillors went on the official visits, to the surprise of the Alzey Stadtrat! However the special interest groups continued links, and Alzey Arbeiterwohlfahrt continued strong support for the NCH (they sent a vanful of clothes and presents for many years at Christmas and took part in summer fetes – but eventually it had to be explained that these were not 'poor orphans'). The NCH choir made annual visits to Alzey, hosted by local families and giving concerts. The people of Alzey felt a great urge to be generous and share their growing prosperity. Under Burgermeister Zuber they extended their twinning links not only to Josselin in France and Rechnitz in Austria, but also to a Polish community to whom they sent lorryloads of medicines and other valued gifts before the Wall came down.

Harpenden Parish Council – with one clerk and a small office in Harpenden Hall – wanted to repatriate the twinning (this took many years). In the late 1970s the Chair of the Parish Council, Cllr Gill Aspinall, and clerk John Fryd were keen to widen the community's involvement in the twinning beyond the school exchanges and the sporting and other groups with a shared interests. Having helped the local Labour Party organise a visit to Alzey in 1978 to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the SPD (which was followed up with a group of 40 SPD members who came to celebrate our 50th anniversary in 1980), I was invited to join the parish twinning sub-committee which was setting up a "Friends of Alzey" – the minutes and my diary record this in late 1979.

After attending a number of meetings, the Friends of Alzey were floated free of the council which did not have the resources to service the committee, and I became the first secretary – probably because I could type (sort of) and duplicate (we had a Rex Rotary duplicator, whose ink dissolved corrections to stencils – so one newsletter went out under the title Fiends of Lazey!).

We started the series of annual exchange visits open to anyone interested in offering hospitality to Alzey visitors and taking part in return visits to stay with Alzey families. In Alzey these were organised by Pamela Thomann, the first secretary of the Freunde von Harpenden. Here we arranged programmes of activities (visits to Cambridge & London standard favourites) and always an official reception from the parish – later the Town Council. Alzey Stadtrat also always laid on receptions for visits of the Friends, and the Freunde put on very full programmes of sightseeing and wine-tasting.

Alzey has been particularly generous in honouring those who have helped in the twinning arrangements. When the Alzey-Harpenden link was 20 years old and the Alzey-Josselin link was 10, I was invited to join the civic delegation from Harpenden in 1983, and received the Alzey silver medal. As a co-driver of Councillor Ray Meldrum's Volvo, I took advantage of the empty autobahn and lack of speed limit to get us to Alzey in time for the welcome reception. Little did I realise that this Volvo had a speed restrictor, which caused overheating, and much anxious time at an Alzey garage for Ray!

News about the twinning link was always included in Harpenden Forum, which Gill Aspinall and John Fryd launched at about the same time in 1979. Support from the council and individual councillors has always been important, particularly once twinning was repatriated to the Town Council. It is still greatly appreciated.

A German conversation group started soon after and still keeps going. It was based on the pattern of French conversation group, which had grown out of an evening class, long before the Cosne link : conversation over a glass of wine.

I remained secretary until the mid 80s I think, and handed all papers on to my successor. I must apologise – I am not sure who that was: it seems that old minutes and newsletters have disappeared over time. But I am so glad that a series of people over the years has kept up the links, and brought in new young families (like we were at the start). Some contacts in the early days were particularly moving, because former combatants in war made friends – and that peace-building pledge remains an important strand of twinning, as of the European Union, to this day.

Rosemary Ross

Founder member and secretary

Based on a short talk to members on 17 October 2009