

TRAVELS WITHOUT A DONKEY IN THE CÉVENNES

An Account of Following the Chemin Robert LouisStevenson in June 2018



Photo: R.L. STEVENSON

By Robert Stevenson. October 2018

Preface

I had not read Robert Louis Stevenson's book 'Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes' myself although I had heard of it. It was suggested to me that it would be a good walk to do since my name is Robert Stevenson, and it would make a change from walking in Spain and Portugal. I took up the idea, thinking it would be fun to follow in his footsteps, and set about planning it.

My relationship with Robert Louis Stevenson is of the most tenuous. Since he was an only child with no children it is very difficult to be close to him. However his father Thomas had three brothers, and a sister, so he had uncles and an aunt and several cousins. Just for the record my 'relationship', if you can call it that, with him was 'third cousin 3 times removed'.

Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes is an account of Robert Louis Stevenson's walk with his donkey through the Velay, Gévaudan and Cévennes mountain regions of the Massif Central in southern France. Robert Louis Stevenson was known to his wife and friends as Louis. However I shall refer to him as Robert Louis, or as RLS after quotations.

I have inserted portions of the text from 'Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes' where it seemed relevant. I have taken the liberty of shortening some of the quotes by removing not strictly relevant sentences. For those who would like to read the account, with the full text, I recommend the Penguin paperback edition. ISBN 978-0-141-43946-4. It has a good introduction and includes 'The Amateur Emigrant', the story of his journey in an emigrant ship to New York and his travels across America to California to find Fanny Osbourne.

Nowadays the 'Robert Louis Stevenson Trail', or 'Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson' or GR70 (GR for Grande Route) is a popular walking trail with the French. The path follows closely, but not exactly, the route taken by Robert Louis. He was accompanied by Modestine, the donkey he bought in Monastier, who became in many ways the focus of his story in 'Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes'; his first successful book.

Everyone in the region now knows the story of the Scottish writer who, early one morning on 22nd September 1878, set out from the sleepy village of Monastier with a donkey as sole companion, to walk through the Velay and Cévennes to the small town of Saint-Jean du Gard in the south. He intended to camp most of the time but this only partially worked out. Undoubtedly his time camping at high altitude with Autumn closing in made his poor health considerably worse and he spent some time afterwards in the south of France recovering.

The following are my personal comments on and recollections of the journey. I now agree with the guide book description of the trail as 'quite challenging'. It was much harder than I anticipated, and my perception of Robert Louis has much changed. In spite of his ill health he was much tougher than I had thought.

INTRODUCTION

The Route



The classic GR70 (Grande Route 70), the Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson, starts at Monestier and ends at St Jean du Garde. It's a long distance walk of approximately 225 Kilometres (140 miles) going through the regions of Velay, Gevaudan and Cevennes in the Massif Central in southern France. In doing so it crosses some of the most remote areas in rural France.

I did the route in 12 days, as did Robert Louis. I would have preferred to take longer, both for the sake of my legs and to have the time to enjoy some of the places on the way where I had little time to linger. Robert Louis took mornings off to write up his notes while the experience was fresh in his mind. I wish I had managed to do the same. However this resulted in Robert Louis on some occasions lost in darkness trying to find somewhere to camp. Not an event that appeals to me.

If you choose to get a company to arrange your walk 12 days seem to be the maximum they allow. Ten days is offered as an option. I suppose if you see the walk as a challenge, an endurance test, or are younger and fitter than I was, then ten days is fine.

I found some stretches very 'challenging'. Rough ground,

descents in particular, and steep climbs were a factor.

It's mountainous country cut by deep river valleys and the weather is unpredictable. I went in early June expecting it to be hot. I took sun cream and was concerned about walking all day in the heat. I never used the sun cream but was drenched in torrential rain and alarmed at appalling thunder storms with the most vivid jagged forked lightning I had ever encountered. Fortunately I had learned from bitter experience walking the Camino Francoise in 2014 to take warm clothes, so I didn't suffer from the periodic low temperatures.

Robert Louis Stevenson – (1850-1894)

Robert Louis Stevenson was a Scottish author, essayist and poet.

Amongst his best known books were *Treasure Island*, *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* and *Kidnapped*.

The personal appearance of Stevenson has often been described: 'he was tall, extremely thin, dark haired and restless, compelling attention with the direct gaze of his brown eyes.'



He was born in Edinburgh on the 13th of November 1850, the only child of Thomas and Margaret Stevenson. Thomas Stevenson was an engineer and one of the Stevenson lighthouse family who built most of the lighthouses around Scotland's coast. Thomas and Margaret were both deeply religious protestants, tough and hardworking. Robert Louis had been expected to follow in his father's footsteps. He nearly died at the age of eight from gastric fever and his health never recovered. He had travelled extensively around the Scottish coast with his father gaining a deep practical knowledge of sailing and perilous waters. He went to study engineering at Edinburgh University, but showed little interest and soon abandoned the course. He studied law, completing the course and qualifying as a barrister, but never practised. However, Robert Louis was determined to be an artist. Even worse he announced that he was not religious, that he did not believe in god.

In April 1871, Stevenson notified his father of his decision to pursue a life of letters. Though the elder Stevenson was naturally disappointed, the surprise cannot have been great, and Stevenson's mother reported that he was "wonderfully resigned" to his son's choice. Robert Louis mixed with the literati of Edinburgh then moved on to London and Paris.

A small allowance from his father, enabled him to spend much of the period between 1873 and 1879 in France, although money was a constant problem. Consequently; he spoke fluent French.

In Paris he fell deeply in love with an American woman ten years his senior, Mrs Francis (or Fanny) Matilda Osborne. This was to be the defining event in his life. She was separated from her husband, a serial adulterer, and living with her two children in Europe. She too wanted to be an artist. In early 1878 Fanny Osborne returned to California in pursuit of a reconciliation with her husband, or possibly a divorce, leaving Stevenson distraught in France. His family had been appalled by this affair and his friends were against it, he was urged by all to sever connections with Fanny.

Perhaps partly to console himself for his loss, partly to get some time to himself to think and partly to provide material for a book to earn some much needed cash, he decided in 1878 to undertake a walk in the Cévennes districts of Frances' Massive Central. It was at the time a little known, very poor and backward area. Maps were few and unhelpful.

Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes

Robert Louis Stevenson was 28 when he started his walk on the 22nd of September 1878. The resulting book, Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes, was his first commercial success, he received £30 for it. It aroused most interest in France where the French were fascinated with the young Scotsman's account of a remote and little visited area and the peasants who lived there. Some 7,000 people, predominantly French, now walk the route every year.

He spent four weeks in Monastier equipping himself for his walk. He travelled by cart to Le Puy several times and had a sleeping bag made of his own design. A clumsy heavy thing it sounds. He expected to camp out and was keenly aware that supplies of any kind including food and drink, were going to be few and far between.

He had been strongly advised not to sleep out in the forests because of the danger from wolves and locals bent on theft.

Amongst the items he took with him were:-

- A revolver for protection against wolves and thieving peasants.
- A spirit lamp.
- A pan.
- A lantern.
- Brandy
- Tobacco.
- Black bread
- White bread
- A basket full of meats
- Two entire of warm clothing, his travelling wear of country velveteen
- A pilot-coat, and knitted spencer, a railway-rug
- Some books
- A cane
- Large sleeping Bag
- Cakes of chocolate and tins of Bologna sausage.
- A leg of cold mutton
- A bottle of Beaujolais
- An empty bottle to carry milk.
- An egg-beater.

To carry all this baggage he decided on a pack animal and so purchased, a small mouse coloured female donkey, who he named Modestine. She was to become the core of his story.

The black bread was for Modestine, the white bread for himself.

“It will readily be conceived that I could not carry this huge package on my own, merely human, shoulders. It remained to choose a beast of burden. Now, a horse is a

fine lady among animals, flighty, timid, delicate in eating, of tender health; he is too valuable and too restive to be left alone, so that you are chained to your brute as to a fellow galley-slave; a dangerous road puts him out of his wits; in short, he's an uncertain and exacting ally, and adds thirty-fold to the troubles of the voyager. What I required was something cheap and small and hardy, and of a stolid and peaceful temper; and all these requisites pointed to a donkey." RLS

The French

Practically all the other walkers were French. The only exceptions I met were a German couple with a donkey. My outstanding personal impression of the French walkers was how friendly they were. What their impression of me was I cannot say. It seems to me in England that the French are often perceived as mildly hostile, but this was absolutely not my experience.

My little French was appreciated. The fact that I had taken French lessons from a local French woman, Stephanie, before setting out was greeted with amusement and pleasure. I suppose the average age of the walkers was between fifty and sixty. Some had a few words of English, about as many as I had of French. Some spoke no English. I did meet three people who spoke English well, two were under 30 and the other was an English teacher in France. When I got to sit down with a French couple on my own we could converse, slowly, which was really good. Many of the dinners however were communal and I was really out of it. this was aggravated by my poor hearing.

Through the rest of the walk the pleasure it gave people to be able to say they had walked with Robert Stevenson was amazing. I would be stopped on the trail and asked for selfies. My hand was endlessly shaken. Word had got around.

French Two Strokes

The French are keen motorcyclists and there are more motor-bikers per head of population in France than in any other European country. I had thought that two strokes were illegal in the EU but it seems I'm wrong. These horrid noisy smoky bikes travel in groups and it seems you can drive as young as fourteen. Apparently removing the baffle plates from the exhaust is 'cool'. Only the Chinese have addressed the problem I think with a ban on motor bikes in the cities resulting in silent electric scooters and bikes with no fumes.

Since light, convenient 2 stroke outboard motors have been banned in the European Union, how on earth are these horrid bikes legal in France?

French Taxis

French taxi drivers are the free spirits of the road. I found my three rides quite frightening! The first two were on narrow country roads. On both occasions a mobile was handheld to the driver's ear. Driving with one hand they would swerve around blind corners on narrow country roads talking incessantly. These were not even business calls but private chat. New numbers would be selected and dialled. On the next taxi ride I couldn't secure my seat belt as we dashed along, the driver's phone clamped to his ear. He interrupted his call long enough to re-assure me. "Pas Gendarmes" he said cheerfully. So I was not to worry!

The third time in a taxi from St Jean du Garde to Avignon airport it was the same. A lovely guy, a nice Mercedes taxi, but when we got to the dual carriageway to my

horror he took the phone away from his ear and dropped it onto his lap so that he could use both hands to dial new people and converse using the speaker. He abandoned the steering wheel and relied entirely on the 'safety feature' which keeps you in lane and brakes if necessary. He did not look up for extended periods his head being bowed over his phone. I understand the French government is worried about the high accident rate in France, up 15.4% in a year, and is lowering speed limits. I suggest they might clamp down on mobile use first.

French Dark Corridors

The French have a thing about plunging you into darkness. I had met it before in toilets, where the light is timed to go out just as you reach for the toilet paper, but on this walk it was corridors. Walkers always seem to be on the third floor, and only one hotel in the twelve days I walked had a lift. So, having after a long day, clambered up three flights of stairs with your luggage, you enter a corridor. A fire door shuts behind you and you are in pitch darkness. I soon learn that somewhere at random along the corridor is a time switch. Press it and you get a few minutes of light. So you fumble along and up and down the wall until you locate this hidden switch, then bathe yourself in a few minutes of precious light, enough to locate your room and fit the key in the lock. Yes, the French seem very short of electricity, odd with all these atomic power stations.

Comments on Modern Walking

Modern walking is organised. It is now very difficult to set out and stop as the whim takes you at some friendly bunkhouse or hotel. They are all block booked way ahead by travel companies. Searches on the internet advised against relying on finding a place to stay each day and it was right. Even in early June, unless you carried a tent, you would be unlikely to find a place to sleep. The other change is you don't carry your backpack. Hardly anyone does. Well organised vans collect your luggage and deliver it ahead of you. Most people now bring a suitcase with just a light pack for waterproofs and sandwiches for the day.

Walking Poles

I had never ever used walking poles, or 'batons' as the French call them. I associated them with old age and infirmity. Now ninety percent of people do. After a truly frightening steep descent in torrential rain I gave in and bought a pair. I carried them for a day making little use of them. The next day I was an hour into my walk before I realised I'd left them behind in my room. Go back? No, I decided to manage somehow without them.

Comparisons with the Camino

I find the walks difficult to compare. On the Camino I was aware that I was on a pilgrimage and wished to, as far as possible, emulate the pilgrims. I carried my sack the whole way, quietly scorning those who sent their luggage ahead by taxi.

The Camino (500 miles) was much longer but distance between possible halts were less. The multitude of places to stay, provided you were happy to sometimes sleep on the floor, meant that you could set out in the morning without booking a room or a bunk. I loved this. If I came across an attractive lodging or a pretty village, or I was

just tired, I could stop. My daily distances varied between five and thirty miles. Due to the lack of accommodation this was just not feasible on the GR70. Nowhere on the Camino was as remote as some of the parts of the GR70. The highest altitudes on both walks were around six thousand feet, 1,829 metres, so both involved long climbs and descents, but some of the ground on the GR70, particularly on the descents, was a lot rougher than any on the Camino. The Camino was harder, a longer haul and I carried my belongings on my back every inch of the way. Cumulative physical exhaustion caused me to rest in some places for a day or two. With everything pre planned, accommodation booked and luggage taken on ahead by van, walking is easier but you are gripped in an iron schedule.

On the Camino I only met only one Frenchman and he spoke no English so conversation was very limited. The pilgrims were of many different nationalities. British, German, Dutch, Korean, Australian, American and Swedish come to mind. But practically all pilgrims spoke English. English, like it or not, is now the international language. Also quite a high percentage of people, male and female, walk the Camino on their own. So for me it was more companionable. I made friends who I am still in touch with on the Camino but the lack of my ability to speak French more or less precluded this on the GR70.

The Donkey - Modestine

The Donkey Robert Louis had bought in Monastier for 65 francs and a glass of brandy was ‘a diminutive she-ass, not much bigger than a dog, the colour of a mouse, with a kindly eye and a determined under jaw’. He promptly named Modestine.

Having read Robert Louis’ descriptions of his problems with Modestine I decided not to add the extra hassle of a donkey. Thank goodness I did as these people who had one had a hard time. Robert Louis’ exasperation with Modestine was a warning.

“What that pace was there is no word mean enough to describe; it was something as much slower than a walk is slower than a run; it kept me hanging on each foot for an incredible length of time; in five minutes it exhausted the spirit and set up a fever in all the muscles of the leg. And yet I had to keep close at hand and measure my advance exactly upon hers; for if I dropped a few yards into the rear or went on a few yards ahead, Modestine came instantly to a halt and began to browse. The thought that this was to last from here to Ales nearly broke my heart.”

You can hire a donkey from a stable in Monastier if you wish to. They will give you instruction in driving, loading and feeding as well as a list of donkey stables on the way and book them ahead for you. Then they will collect your donkey in St Jean Du Garde and take him back to Monastier for you.

Finding My Way

I had no useful maps with me and was reliant on the waymarking and the excellent notes supplied by The Enlightened Traveller.

This worked well enough though did leave me quite lost at times. The signs were nearly all on trees and in some areas forestry work had left gaps with no clue as to which way to go because they'd chopped the trees down. I wished I had got a decent GPS map of the trail on my iPhone.



The Enlightened Traveller.

I booked my walk through The Enlightened Traveller. Due to the lack of accommodation and the distances between places, particularly if you wanted a room with an ensuite bathroom as I did, makes pre-booking almost essential. Unless you want to do it properly and camp like Robert Louis. Camping had occurred to me but, fortunately, I dropped the idea. Having experienced a couple of thunderstorms the idea of trying to pitch a tent on a flooded plain was nightmarish. I'd tried to pre-book some accommodation on my own but they wanted a deposit cheque in Euros, and with my limited French it was hard work. As part of the package breakfast and dinner were included as was transport ahead for luggage. The luggage transport was most efficient. The Enlightened Traveller were very good but you were hardly a free spirit.

Walking the Trail

Le Puy en Velay

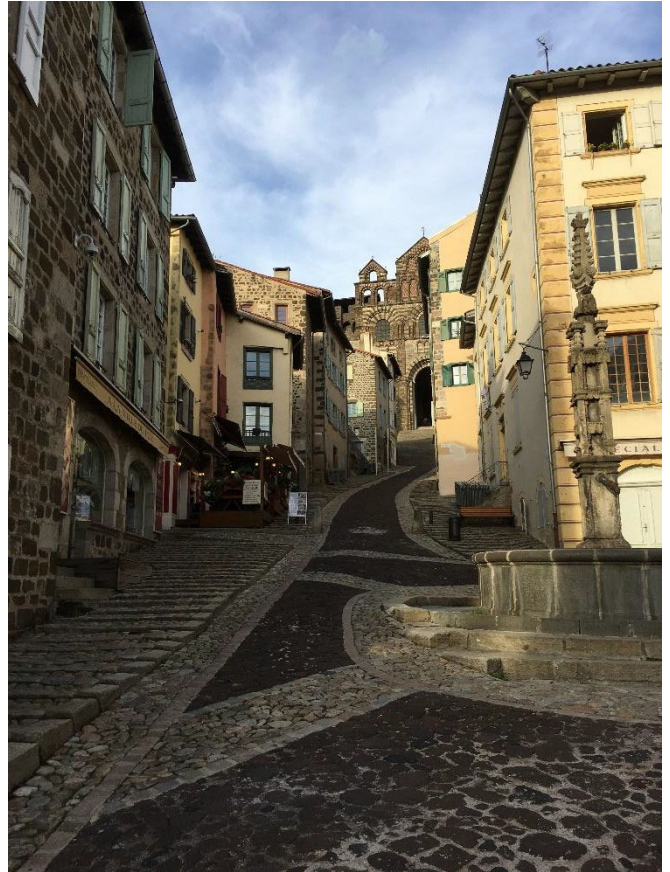
Le Puy is the northern gateway to GR70, and the nearest town to Le Puy is Lyon. My notes recommended a day in Le Puy and I'm glad I took the advice, it's well worth a visit. Apparently a 'puy' is an old volcanic hill or pillar from an extinct volcano, and there are many in the Velay region.

Le Puy is on the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella if you set out from Geneva, also the departure point for a number of other walks and pilgrimages. I had booked accommodation on the internet, in the old city of Le Puy, in the Gite de la Prévôté, 12 Rue Saint-Georges. My experience of booking obscure accommodation on the internet had taken me to very interesting places and this was to be no exception.

I climbed the steep narrow cobbled street up through the old town to the Cathedral Notre Dame but could find no sign of my accommodation. Nobody had any idea

where it was. In the end I asked a woman who I realised was some sort of cathedral tourist guide. She identified the tiny Rue Saint-Georges which was inside the cathedral complex but number 12 seemed not to exist. Finally she found a very faint 'twelve' (well can you see it?) on a stone wall beside a huge bolted wooden door. Of course I had to tip her. There was no way of getting in, no doorbell, no knocker, so I rang Sebastian, the owner. He told me to wait while he came down to unbolt the door.

The Gite de la Prévôté was one small flat, on the third floor, of a long abandoned nunnery. Sebastian had this bought this 'flat' unseen as a bargain the internet and spent a year making it habitable. He had three bedrooms for rent. He was from Paris but wanted to escape, and he spoke excellent English. I learned at breakfast that he had checked me out being doubtful about



The Gite de la Prévôté

my name. He had previously had a problem with somebody who booked under the name of Michael Jackson. This turned out to be a weird alarming character and he wanted no more lodgers who thought they were somebody they were not. He advised me that I would meet disbelief on the walk as well. How right he was.

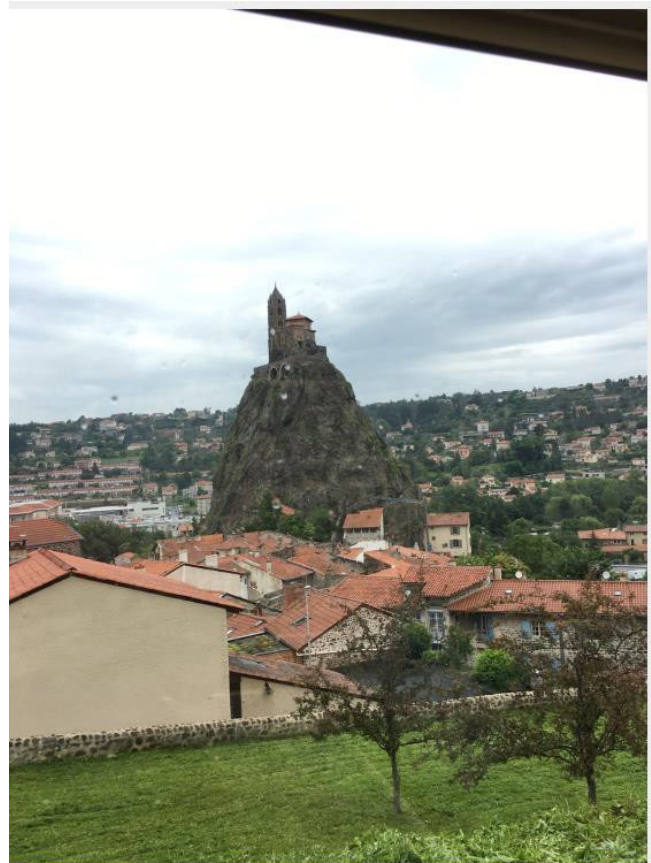
Monastier – Le Bouchet. Day 1. Tuesday 5th June. 15 Miles.

“In a little place called Le Monastier, in a pleasant highland valley fifteen miles from Le Puy, I spent about a month of fine days. Monastier is notable for the making of lace, for drunkenness, for freedom of language, and for unparalleled political dissension.” RLS

The taxi collected me from Le Puy at 9 o’clock and drove me to Monastier. The driver was friendly enough but then dropped me in the wrong place so that my notes for the day did not relate to where I was.

After a few minutes I sorted myself out and stood in the Place Francois Estaing. I had a coffee in the Bar de Commerce and set off, passing almost immediately the ‘Club Stevenson’ which seemed a good omen.

A short walk took me to the post office square by the church, now a car park. There is an, easily overlooked, modest monument which marks the departure point of Robert Louis and Modestine.



St Michael of the Aiguille Rock & Chapel in Le Puy



Club Stevenson in Monastier



Memorial at the point in Monastier from which Robert Louis started with Modestine

The inscription reads:

D'ICI PARTIT JE 22 SEPTEMBRE 1878 Robert Louis STEVEN- SON Pour son VOYAGE A TRAVERS LES-CEVENNES AVEC UN ANE	FROM HERE DEPARTED ON 22 SEPTEMBER 1878 Robert Louis STEVEN- SON For his JOURNEY TO CROSS THE CEVENNES WITH A DONKEY
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I stood there for a few minutes imagining the tall gaunt figure with his drooping moustache and heavily loaded donkey, and then set off. The badly loaded platform on Modestine's back was to cause them both constant trouble. To my delight, just as I left the monument, a couple appeared leading a donkey! It looked just as Modestine was described – small and mouse coloured. I exchanged a few words, enough to identify them as German, and walked thoughtfully on. I was to meet them again on several occasions. Ahead lay 140 miles of unknown country. The short stretch of tarred road has been re-named 'Esplanade Stevenson' in his memory.

The tarmac stopped abruptly and I climbed a steep rutted mud path, cut by gullies, between tall trees. The weather had been very wet and the going was not easy, but eventually I got clear of the woods. My notes said that I would be on a volcanic plateau but that the walking was 'anything but flat', for the upper Loire has gouged deep



German couple with their donkey on Esplanade Stevenson, Monastier



Flooded path having climbed out of Monastier

into the plateau, and I walked happily on skirting giant puddles. I walked carefully, looking for the way markers, and found the first red and white bars a few miles on. My destination that night was Le Bouchet, 15 miles or about 7 hours walking.

My notes warned me the descent down to Goudet on the Loire was ‘quite steep’. Well I’d hate to have to do ‘very steep’! I was due at Goudet in 2½ hours, around 12 midday. I got there at 1:30 PM! I had not understood fully the implications of the note about the descent into the valley. They said ‘tread with care as this section was badly damaged in storms in the spring of 2017’.

The descent was about 140 metres, 460 feet. It was appalling, it was desperately cut up with drops onto small loose boulders and exposed tree roots. I was without walking poles and I really needed them. The narrow path was steeply banked and enclosed closely on each side with barbed wire.



The storm damaged descent to Goudet gets worse

What a horrible invention that is. I had to keep warning myself that, if I fell, I must not reach out for support, unless I wanted a handful of barbed wire. I was never good on steep descents and it took me around an hour to pick my way down. At the bottom, quite shaken, I met the German couple again. They also had had a very hard time and wondered how I had done it at all without walking poles. Their donkey had not seemed to have any trouble, though he had taken it very, very slowly.

“On all sides, Goudet is shut in by mountains; rocky footpaths, practicable at best for donkeys, join it to the outer world of France; and the men and women drink and swear, in their green corner, or look up at the snow-clad peaks in winter from the threshold of their homes, in an isolation, you would think, like that of Homer’s Cyclops.” RLS

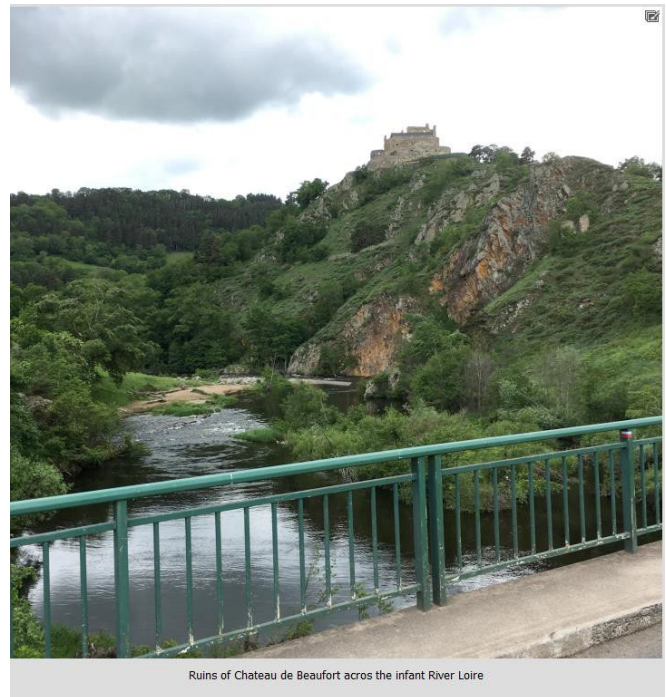
In Goudet I found the Hotel Loire on the banks of the Raisseau des Fouragettes, a tributary of the infant river Loire. Robert Louis had stopped for lunch here on his first day though, it was then the Hotel Senac, and sketched the Chateau de Beaufort. There was no sign of life, and I’m useless at sketching, so I walked through the gate into the garden and looked around.

A window opened, a man’s head appeared and I was asked gruffly what I wanted, then told me to come round to the front door. He met me as I studied the menu outside. ‘No hot food’ he said, but he agreed to do me a ham baguette and a coke. I was then directed to the garden I’d just been in and he brought the food out to me. He now seemed a little more amiable.

I ate my lunch and wondered if Robert Louis felt as tired as I did. I wearily contemplated the long climb up to Le Bouchet.

At least I didn’t have a donkey!

“I hurried over my midday meal, and was early forth again. But, alas, as we climbed the interminable hill upon the other side, she held doggedly to her pace; nothing but a blow would move her, and that only for a second. I must follow at her heels, incessantly be-labouring. A moment’s pause



Ruins of Chateau de Beaufort across the infant River Loire



in this ignoble toil, and she relapsed into her own private gait. I think I never heard of any one in as mean a situation. I must reach the lake of Bouchet, where I meant to camp, before sundown, and, to have even a hope of this, I must instantly maltreat this uncomplaining animal. The sound of my own blows sickened me. Once, when I looked at her, she had a faint resemblance to a lady of my acquaintance who formerly loaded me with kindness; and this increased my horror of my cruelty". RLS

I crossed the beautiful infant Loire, which is joined by several tributaries in Goudet, and slowly climbed up towards the castle, Chateau de Beaufort, above Goudet. From there the rough path dropped again into another valley where I found again the Raisseau des Fouragettes tributary stream of the Loire, higher up it's descent.

There I found my German friends with their donkey.

He didn't like the river and stood there with a truly donkey expression refusing to move. They had taken off his load and got it across themselves. He had crossed to the other side to offer verbal encouragement, she had stayed with the donkey, trying to persuade it to walk through the stream.



German lady being reasonable with her donkey who doesn't want to cross Loire tributary Raisseau des Fouragettes

She explained to me that the donkey, was afraid of the water. I suggested to her that he was just being a donkey as he had surely done this journey a number of times before and it wasn't deep. I took some pictures and watched with interest.

Eventually I asked if she would like me to get the donkey across for her. 'Oh, do you think you can do that?' she asked. I said I thought I could. I tugged ineffectively at his rope. Waste of time. I spoke to him severely making it clear I was not to be messed with.

Total lack of interest. I snarled threateningly from behind him and he was sufficiently stirred to turn his head and look at me. I had read of Robert Louis' donkey problems and the only solution. So I picked up a convenient stick and hit him, not hard on his behind. He looked at me once more, but didn't move. So I gave him the full treatment. I yelled loud threats and walloped him twice on the backside. Without even looking round he trotted unhesitatingly through the river. She thanked me profusely repeating that he had been frightened of the water. They started re-loading his burden but, I thought as I walked on, looked somewhat askance at this apparently quiet solitary man who had suddenly turned into a fierce shouting donkey whacker.

The bridge mentioned in the guide book had been swept away in last year's storms. Although it wasn't that deep, getting across without wet feet was a problem. Someone had placed a couple of lengths of black plastic drainage pipe across the stream, about 18 inches in diameter. I crawled across them on my hands and knees not wanting to lose my balance and fall in.

My notes warned that 'the long climb via Montagnac and Ussel to Le Bouchet is 'quite challenging'. I began to realise the writers of my notes and guide book were very strong on the understatement. Robert Louis had problems here too. Modestine refused the climb. Nothing but a blow with a stick would move her. It was late in the day and he had to get to Lac de Bouchet before dark as he intended to camp. He had no choice but to 'maltreat this uncomplaining animal'. Every five minutes the pack on Modestine's back would tilt to one side or the other and he had to stop to tug, push and readjust the load.

"To make matters worse, we encountered another donkey, ranging at will upon the roadside; and this other donkey chanced to be a gentleman. He and Modestine met nickering for joy, and I had to separate the pair and beat down their young romance with a renewed and feverish bastinado. If the other donkey had had the heart of a male under his hide, he would have fallen upon me tooth and hoof." RLS

So I started the long weary climb up to Le Bouchet-St-Nicolas. The notes said 3½ hours to go from Goudet with a climb of about 280 metres, 918 feet. The first 328 feet were just as steep as the descent to Goudet though with a much better path. It was a hard slog and I was mightily relieved when I regained the plateau. I passed through various 'villages' which generally were no more than a couple of farms. Robert Louis also found it difficult. At Ussel Modestine's entire load, saddle and all, turned round and hung under her belly. He had no sooner got her re-loaded than it toppled down the other side. In desperation he loaded half the packages on his own back and, with one hand supporting the load on Modestine, trudged on.

“She tried, as was indeed her invariable habit, to enter every house and every courtyard in the whole length (of Ussel); and, encumbered as I was, without a hand to help myself, no words can render an idea of my difficulties. A priest, with six or seven others, was examining a church in process of repair, and he and his acolytes laughed loudly as they saw my plight.” RLS

Further on the load again fell. Robert Louis in despair started to throw away his possessions, I remembered doing exactly that on the Camino Francais. He dumped his white bread, a bottle of wine, a leg of mutton, eggs and his egg whisk. He had intended to camp by Lac de Bouchet but exhausted and lost he staggered into a village, Le Bouchet St Nicholas, and asked for the auberge.

“The Auberge of Bouchet St. Nicolas was among the least pretentious I have ever visited. Imagine a cottage of two stories, with a bench before the door; the stable and kitchen in a suite, so that Modestine and I could hear each other dining earthen floors, a single bedchamber for travellers. In the kitchen cooking and eating go forward side by side, and the family sleep there at night. Any one who has a fancy to wash must do so in public at the common table. The food is sometimes spare; hard fish and omelette; the wine is of the smallest, the brandy abominable to man; and the visit of a fat sow, grouting under the table and rubbing against your legs, is an accompaniment to dinner.

It had been a very full and tiring day for me but as I trudged into Le Bouchet I felt I was very fortunate as compared with him.

It was a small village and I noticed nothing distinctive about it, but then I was not in sightseeing mode. A restaurant bar, inviting looking, the Auberge de Couvige, came in sight. Robert Louis had spent the night there though I expect it is much changed now. The guidebook mentioned an interesting old carving of a hunter with dogs but I couldn't raise a flicker of interest. I just wanted to sit down. I had expected to get there about five o'clock but it was six thirty and my lodgings were further on, the Chambres d'hotes 'Bon Accueil'. It was not far and the proprietor rushed out the door to welcome the only person on the street, his missing lodger. I had a small room with two beds, a toilet and a shower in which I thankfully dumped my backpack. My backpack proper was waiting for me as promised.

He explained I didn't eat dinner there but had to go back, past the Stevenson monument to the Auberge. It was now seven so I hurried back with an image of a cold beer in front of me. I got my beer and found I was sitting at a communal table for walkers, some of whom stayed where I did. The food was good, there was no 'earth floor with a fat sow grouting under the table and rubbing against your legs' and I'm sure their brandy was not 'abominable to man' as he found it. Very little English was spoken. Realising that this would be the case I had been taking French lessons and struggled to remember what I had learned. Some limited conversation was possible with those close to me and I was made very welcome. Asked my name I told them. This was greeted with laughter and disbelief. I produced my passport to prove I was not an imposter which was greeted with delight.

To my alarm the passport was passed around and people took pictures of it. A man texted his family with fantastic news – he had that day walked with Robert Stevenson.

Pictures were taken of me with various walkers. It was the first time I realised just how well known and popular Robert Louis was.

I slept badly, racked constantly by painful cramps in both legs. I suppose they were, very reasonably, complaining of the unfamiliar ascents and descents.

Le Bouchet – Pradelles. Day 2. Wed 6th June. 13 Miles.

The zip on my light walking trousers, veterans of the Camino, totally failed when I had got dressed that morning. A bad start to the day as I had no other long trousers.

I tried to conceal this fact by tightening my belt as much as possible and wearing my waterproof jacket when in company. But the solution I realised was a safety pin. So what is the French for a safety pin? According to Google translate it is ‘épingles de sûreté’.



The Robert Louis Stevenson wooden statue with Modestine

I set out refreshed, only 13 miles today. At the corner, a few yards back towards the auberge, was a huge crude wooden carving of Robert Louis and Modestine. There he sits while Modestine peers around the base. In its way it is really quite impressive. The Chemin Stevenson has become an important source of income to the whole region and every village is now keen to claim the connection.

The only place of any significance on the way to Pradelles is Landos which has a square with a Pharmacy and the Bar de Bascule. I took a coffee and a roll in the bar and went to see if the Pharmacy stocked safety pins.

However the woman in the chemist looked at me somewhat strangely. They did not have them she told me.

I walked on through pleasant well signed country. The signs were necessary as innumerable paths strayed off and the correct ones were not obvious. At Arquejols village I started yet another descent into a gorge crossed by a magnificent railway

viaduct, no longer in use. What labour went into the construction of these railways, intended to open up remote regions and bring prosperity. Now abandoned to be replaced by skeleton bus services and making a car almost essential. So, a long descent and a climb up the other side. But not to be compared with earlier valleys. Then a descent to the D40 road into Pradelles where I was able to pick up the 'Rue RL Stevenson' and follow it into town. It was a long day but not such difficult ground so I was in better condition.

"Pradelles stands on a hillside, high above the Allier. For I was now upon the limit of Velay, and all that I beheld lay in another county - wild Gevaudan, mountainous, uncultivated, and but recently disforested from terror of the wolves. It was five in the morning, and four thousand feet above the sea; and I had to bury my hands in my pockets and trot. For this was the land of the ever-memorable BEAST, the Napoleon Bonaparte of wolves. What a career was his! He lived ten months at free quarters in Gevaudan and Vivarais; he ate women and children and 'shepherdesses celebrated for their beauty'; he pursued armed horsemen; he has been seen at broad noonday chasing a post-chaise and outrider along the king's high-road, and chaise and outrider fleeing before him at the gallop. He was placarded like a political offender, and ten thousand francs were offered for his head." RLS

I was booked into the Hotel le Ponant, I passed an old building with a semi abandoned look, it could have been a hotel but I could see no name on it, so I walked on. A girl rushed out calling to me. 'Monsieur, Monsieur, Hotel Ponant?' So I went back and booked in. I identified my backpack waiting for me and climbed up three floors of narrow staircase to go through a heavy fire door and find myself in a pitch dark corridor. The glimmer of light had shown me my room number two doors down. The door had swung shut so I was on my knees trying to get the key into the lock by touch. Failing in this I went back and jammed the fire door open with my backpack. I then got the room door open and located the push button for the time switch.

I went down in search of a beer and found two other walkers and the reception girl. I asked her if there was anywhere in Pradelles I could buy a safety pin, un épinglé de sûreté. The girl, being a girl anxious to help, of course she must know why monsieur wished such a thing. The other two walkers, a man and his wife, were drawn into the conversation. They were unclear what it was I wanted and earnestly keen to help. An increasingly hilarious group discussion took place. I tried to explain my zip had failed. What zip, where? When the seriousness of my situation became clear to them they advised me that I would find no such thing in Pradelles and that épinglé de sûreté referred to pins for a child's nappies, hence their curiosity. By this time they were all thoroughly enjoying them selves and it was even more difficult for me to understand them through their laughter. I could see the news about Robert Stevenson would spread. 'et il n'a pas de zip pour son pantalon'. They advised me it would be better if I asked for épinglé anglaise, or was it ongles?

When I escaped from the discussion I wandered down to the town centre and found a nice bar. I bought some postcards and settled down to write them with a beer.

And in came Roget and Babette who I had met previously. So we had a few beers together and I found they had both worked for Michelin at Clermont and recently retired.

Pradelles – Cheylard-L'Eveque. Day 3. Thursday 7th June. 11 miles.

This is the district of the Beast of Gevaudan. The Beast killed 120 women and children during a three year rampage commencing in 1764, but no men. It was thought to have been a vampire, a werewolf, or a giant wolf. The King put up a bounty but the killings continued even after many wolves had been killed. In a 1765 local woodsman, Jean Chastel visited his local priest and had some bullets blessed before killing a large wolf. An entire thighbone of a child was supposedly found in the wolf's stomach. The killings stopped and he became a national hero but there were many unanswered questions.

Chastel's son, Antoine, suddenly disappeared after the wolf was killed. And men were never attacked. One theory surmises that Antoine Chastel was a serial killer and his father had the bullets blessed because he was about to kill his son. Then Chastel killed a wolf and placed a child's thigh bone in its stomach as a cover up to protect his family from retribution. There is a wolf reserve not far from there today.

I awoke in the morning and looked out my third floor window, I was on top of the world. I could see nothing but a gleaming white blanket stretching to the horizon all around me. The sun shone brightly on this marvellous surface. I was above the highest cloud. By breakfast the cloud was fast burning off revealing the green world below.

I set off in high spirits. Pradelles is an ancient fortified market town and walking around its tiny cobbled streets was a delight. I met Roget and Babette who had been staying in the chambres d'hôte. I looked at the splendid war memorial. It was, typical of the French memorials I saw, in the shape of an angel. Her wings were half open to protect the souls of those who had fallen.



1The view from my bedroom window at Hotel Ponant



Pradelles

The appalling list of dead chilled the heart. I thought of all the tiny places in Britain with their memorials. From our village in the New Forest to tiny settlements in the north of Scotland. The French lost far more soldiers than we did in World War 1, but very few in the second war.

As I left Pradelles I was in high spirits played the Beatles from my iPhone.

‘When I get older losing my hair
Many years from now
Will you still be sending me a Valentine
Birthday greetings bottle of wine

-

Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I’m 64’.

I fairly danced along and when I next met Roget and Babette they asked me why I was running until they lost sight of me.

“I was goading Modestine down the steep descent that leads to Langogne on the Allier. I had crossed the Loire the day before; now I was to cross the Allier; so near are these two confluent in their youth. Just at the bridge of Langogne, I crossed the bridge and entered the county of Gevaudan.” RLS

Langogne was the biggest place I passed through on the trail, another old fortified town. In the middle, I found the tourist office and asked them as to where I might find my safety pin. They directed me to a little shop which sold sewing things and I asked for some épingles. Triumph, she produced a box of safety pins. I headed to the nearest café for a cup of coffee and secluded myself in their tiny toilet to pin myself together.

Leaving Langogne with a baguette for lunch I headed for Cheylard. The waymarks were few and vague. They did not tie in with my walking notes. At several pathway junctions in mixed fields and heavily wooded country a small party of walkers gathered, puzzling over their notes which conflicted with way signs.

“I set out for Le Cheylard l’Eveque, a place on the borders of the forest of Mercoire. A man, I was told, should walk there in an hour and a half; and I thought it scarce too ambitious to suppose that a man encumbered with a donkey might cover the same distance in four hours.” RLS

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“All the way up the long hill from Langogne it rained and hailed alternately; the wind kept freshening steadily. Moor, heathery marsh, tracts of rock and pines, woods of birch all jewelled with the autumn yellow, here and there a few naked cottages and bleak fields.” RLS

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“There was no direct road to Cheylard, and it was no easy affair to make a passage in this uneven country and through this intermittent labyrinth of tracks. It must have been about four when I struck Sagnerousse, and went on my way rejoicing in a sure point of departure. Two hours afterwards, the dusk rapidly falling, in a lull of the wind, I issued from a fir-wood where I had long been wandering, and found, not the looked-for

village, but another marshy bottom among rough-and-tumble hills. For some time past I had heard the ringing of cattle-bells ahead; and now I was pricking Modestine forward. The tendency of lost travellers to go round in a circle was developed in her to the degree of passion, and it took all the steering I had in me to keep even a decently straight course through a single field. Cheylard seemed little worthy of all this searching. A few broken ends of village, with no particular street, but a succession of open places heaped with logs and fagots; a couple of tilted crosses, a shrine to Our Lady of all Graces on the summit of a little hill; and all this, upon a rattling highland river, in the corner of a naked valley". RLS

Robert Louis found the peasants surly and resistant to giving any help to lost strangers.

"Another, having given me a direction which, as I found afterwards, I had misunderstood, complacently watched me going wrong without adding a sign. He did not care a stalk of parsley if I wandered all night upon the hills! As for these two girls, they were a pair of impudent sly sluts, with not a thought but mischief. One put out her tongue at me, the other bade me follow the cows; and they both giggled and jogged each other's elbows. The Beast of Gevaudan ate about a hundred children of this district; I began to think of him with sympathy" RLS.

Eventually I arrived at tiny Cheylard, there are no shops, and I found the very pleasant Refuge de Moure. However it had been fully booked and I had to wait a couple of hours for a taxi to collect me and take me ten miles to the Hotel de France in Chaud-eyrac. The taxi was to drop me back here in the morning to continue on.

I sat peacefully sipping a cold beer outside the Refuge de Moure. Then up came Roget & Babette who cheerfully greeted me and then we took some pictures. They told the Master of the House that I was Robert Stevenson and I was immediately taken to the inside bar at the back to meet another crowd of walkers and we all had a few more beers and many pictures were taken.

I left with regrets when the taxi arrived. After a hair raising ride around narrow mountain roads I arrived at Hotel Restaurant de France in Chaud-eyrac. A small single en-suite bedroom with a single bed and synthetic slippery sheets which slid off in the night. In view of the difficulty of language I took a single table and read Travels with a Donkey, then to bed.

Robert Louis was less fortunate.

"The rain had stopped, and the wind, which still kept rising, began to dry my coat and trousers. 'Very well,' thought I, 'water or no water, I must camp.' But the first thing was to return to Modestine. I am pretty sure I was twenty minutes groping for my lady in the dark; and if it had not been for the unkindly services of the bog, into which I once more stumbled, I might have still been groping for her at the dawn. My next business was to gain the shelter of a wood, for the wind was cold as well as boisterous. I felt about until my hand encountered a stout branch, and to this I tied Modestine, a haggard, drenched, desponding donkey". RLS

Le Cheylard L'Eveque – La Bastide. Day 4. Friday 8th June 12 miles

It was suggested to Robert Louis that the weight of his possessions was too much for Modestine and that the heavy awkward six foot by six foot sleeping bag/mattress would be better cut in half.

“I explained that I wanted no more weight; and for no donkey hitherto created would I cut my sleeping-bag in two. ‘It fatigues her, however,’ said the innkeeper; ‘it fatigues her greatly on the march. Look.’ Alas, there were her two forelegs no better than raw beef on the inside, and blood was running from under her tail. They told me when I started, and I was ready to believe it, that before a few days I should come to love Modestine like a dog. Three days had passed, we had shared some misadventures, and my heart was still as cold as a potato towards my beast of burden. She was pretty enough to look at; but then she had given proof of dead stupidity, redeemed indeed by patience, but aggravated by flashes of sorry and ill-judged light-heartedness. And I own this new discovery seemed another point against her. What the devil was the good of a she-ass if she could not carry a sleeping-bag and a few necessities? I saw the end of the fable rapidly approaching, when I should have to carry Modestine. RLS

Robert Louis was correct, the country between Cheylard and Luc was indeed hilly and bleak, reminiscent of Scotland. However I was a lot luckier with the weather and greatly enjoyed it.

“It was not only heavy thoughts about Modestine that weighted me upon the way; it was a leaden business altogether. For first, the wind blew so rudely that I had to hold on the pack with one hand from Cheylard to Luc; and second, my road lay through one of the most beggarly countries in the world. It was like the worst of the Scottish Highlands, only cruelty; cold, naked, and ignoble, scant of wood, scant of heather, scant of life. A road and some fences broke the unvarying waste, and the line of the road was marked by upright pillars, to serve in time of snow. Why any one should desire to visit either Luc or Cheylard is more than my much-inventing spirit can suppose. RLS

Unlike me, Robert Louis had to camp. I had a comfortable night at Chasserades in good company.

“I tied Modestine more conveniently for herself, and broke up half the black bread for her supper, reserving the other half against the morning. Then I gathered what I should want within reach, took off my wet boots and gaiters, which I wrapped in my waterproof, arranged my knapsack for a pillow under the flap of my sleeping-bag, insinuated my limbs into the interior, and buckled myself in like a bambino. I opened a tin of Bologna sausage and broke a cake of chocolate, and that was all I had to eat. It may sound offensive, but I ate them together, bite by bite, by way of bread and meat. All I had to wash down this revolting mixture was neat brandy: a revolting beverage in itself. But I was rare and hungry. Then I put a stone in my straw hat, pulled the flap of my fur cap over my neck and eyes, put my revolver ready to my hand, and snuggled well down among the sheepskins.” RLS

Well I liked Luc, I don't think Robert Louis was having a good day. The sun shone and I sat opposite an auberge in the little square by the war memorial. The owner of the auberge came out to talk to me and offered coffee.

There is some distance on a minor tarmac road to cover after Luc. After walking through the scattered village of Laveyrune, apparently abandoned and empty of inhabitants, I passed on my left the enormously long building, the defunct Colonie des Vacances, where the state used to pay to send the children of the mine and allied industries. I went over a low hill and descend into Rogleton, an old



coaching station on a busy road. A short distance along this road you turn right, cross the river Allier, and turn left to go along a path which runs parallel to the river. However I missed the un-signposted turn off to this obscure path and went some distance into the hills before realizing my mistake and re tracing my steps. The path rises steadily along the wooded valley before descending steeply towards La Bastide, crossing the railway line at the substantial semi-derelict station, though it is still functioning, with weeds growing all around and rusty rail tracks. Then I crossed the River Allier again into La Bastide.

La Grand Halte is in the High Street at about two minutes from the station. It was a nice looking restaurant bar and I had made good progress. However they were only just friendly and said I could not get to my room before five o'clock. So I mooched around town but everything else was shut too. Back to La Grand Halte and passed the time reading and listening to podcasts with a couple of beers. I paid cash for the beers but the following morning they produced a bill for them, along with the glass of wine I'd had at dinner. They were prepared for an argument when I said I'd already paid, so I just paid twice for the beers for the sake of peace and quiet. I was now very used to the dark corridors! However; dinner was fine.

La Bastide – Chasserades. Day 5. Saturday 9th June. 8 miles.

After breakfast La Bastide was in business. A couple of shops were open as was the Post Office and the Tourist Office. So I bought some postcards and a baguette for lunch.

I set off for the short eight mile walk to Chasserades described as ‘mainly a wide forest track that poses no difficulty, unless wet’. It also said ‘you commence with quite a steep and sustained climb’. So back across the Allier and through the station across the tracks, only to find the road blocked off and a sign which I couldn’t

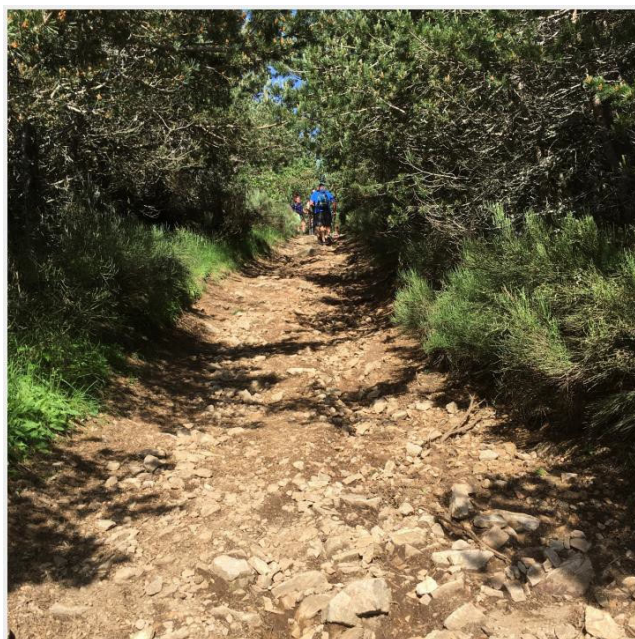
translate. Up pitched Roget and Babette followed by another couple of walkers. They engaged in a sustained discussion with a local resident which seemed to leave them no wiser. But they all accepted we had to follow the diversion. The ‘steep and sustained climb’ bit was accurate, but the diversion meant it was not the ‘mainly a wide forest track that poses no difficulty’. It was apparently a short cut, very much steeper than the promised forest track, over a nasty broken rough narrow path.

When I finally made the plateau I met Bernard for the first time, plodding along with his donkey.

Bernard had, as I had been tempted to do, ignored the sign and followed the ‘wide



Sign saying path closed as I leave La Bastide.



Climbing up going up the rough diversion out of La Bastide after sign closes track.



Bertram Dupont and his donkey Myrtille

forest track' with no problems. It became apparent that there was forestry work going on and the signs were there at the whim of the contractors. We have the same thing in the New Forest! The logging had also removed many of the way-mark signs. Paths on my notes were blocked off, diversion signs sent me down forest tracks in which I wandered for some time. Having no good local map, nor anything useful on my iPhone,

I decided that, at some obscure division of the paths, that I was lost. I decided the best plan was to descend, hopefully finding some sort of road in the valley and locating myself.

After going down steeply for a bit I came to a sign saying 'Prive'. I plodded on till I found a large old farmhouse with a narrow tarmac road coming up to it. I still had no idea where I was so I walked round to find the entrance.



RS in Cheylard-L'Eveque



Roget and Babette in Le Cheylard

"I was much disturbed by the barking of a dog, an animal that I fear more than any wolf. A dog is vastly braver, and is besides supported by the sense of duty. If you kill a wolf, you meet with encouragement and praise; but if you kill a dog, the sacred rights of property and the domestic affections come clamouring round you for redress. At the end of a fagging day, the sharp cruel note of a dog's bark is in itself a keen annoyance; and to a tramp like myself." RLS

Two large husky type dogs, which seemed to me to bear a strong resemblance to wolves, barking ferociously, rushed towards me as I entered the yard. I stood still and motionless but acted relaxed. I knew better that to move my hands. They came close, still barking, but quite quickly decided I was a) no threat and b) boring. One of them wandered off, the other sat and elaborately scratched himself.

Nobody appeared. There were what looked like farm workshops with open doors so I cautiously walked up to them. The remaining dog had totally lost interest. Nobody

there. After ten minutes I concluded the place was deserted or, the surly and unhelpful peasants, who refused to help Robert Louis, were still there. So I set off down the tarmac road. After about a half mile I crossed a river, I hoped it might be the Fontaleyres Stream and shortly after that met a main road. I suspected it was the D6. I sat by the roadside, there was little traffic, and with a G3 signal got Google maps. So I was able to confirm I was on the D6. I had to be trying to get south or south west so I started walking.

After a few kilometers I found the settlement of Chabalier. Here was where I should have exited the forest, I was back on track. So the GR70 trail, the D6 and the railway ran side by side, pleasantly enough and I looked out for signs to Chasserades. But just before Chasserades I was distracted by the Hotel des Sources attractively situated by the roadside. I went in to buy a beer and was delighted to find that they served Stevenson Beer! I bought a couple of bottles to take home. I happily went out to sit in the sun and met two French friends again. No sooner had we sat down than Roget and Babette joined us. Le Relais de Modestine where I was booked for the night did not open until four o'clock, so I was early in spite of my wanderings. I walked on the short distance to Chasserades and found another two people with a donkey who asked me anxiously where they could get water for the donkey? Did I know of a fountain. I explained as best I could that I was not local and had not yet entered the village. I passed the village shop, owned I later found out by the same people as Le Relais de Modestine, over the bridge to cross the now familiar Fontaleyres Stream. Opposite were some chairs and tables and beside them 'Modestine's' moorings where they claim Robert Louis tied up his donkey.

After a few minutes the lady of the house emerged and said it was OK for me to occupy my room now. Very nice it was too. Dinner was at a communal table with excellent shared food. The other guests were most anxious I should eat well, if there was any dish I had not tried it was insisted that I try it. I must have sampled six local cheeses while they waited earnestly for my opinion.



Hotel des Sources, Chasserades



Stevenson beer at Hotel at Hotel des Source

That night I was sitting beside a Frenchman from Paris who, being young, spoke English and could translate for me so I had more idea of what was going on. I always got a warm feeling at these communal meals of good fellowship and anxiety for my welfare.

Chasserades - Le Bleymard. Day 6. Sunday 10th. 10.25 miles

“Over the summit of the Goulet there was no marked road — only upright stones posted from space to space to guide the drovers. The turf underfoot was springy and well scented. I had no company but a lark or two, and met but one bullock-cart between Lestampes and Bleymard.” RLS

Chasserades was a delightful village, and like so many places I should have liked to stay longer.

It was here that Robert Louis lodged with the men employed in survey for the projected railway, and commented that they were, ‘intelligent and conversible’. He slept in a room which slept six but with four beds. Privileged Robert Louis got a bed to himself. At dawn he was awakened by a cry of ‘HE, BOURGEOIS; IL EST CINQ HEURES!’ He noted the three other beds with five nightcaps on the pillows.

But one must move on. I climbed up the village hill, past the church, and looked down from the plateau on the quite beautiful Mirandol Viaduct. Another splendid piece of engineering — and this time still in use! As the line leaves the viaduct it goes into a narrow cutting which is roofed over to avoid the line being closed by snow in winter.



The beautiful Mirador Viaduct. Note snow tunnels

A winding descent to the valley of Chassezac and through the tiny village of Mirandol nestling under the viaduct. Across the racing river you climb out of the village. My route took me on a path beside the railway line for some distance before entering the Goulet Forest.

You now commence the climb up the Goulet Massif which takes you up to 1,413 metres, 4,635 feet. The climb is on forest paths again until you get to the summit and start the descent through the woods into Les Alpiers. The undulating, but steadily descending, forest trails pass beside an abandoned ruined village, much overgrown.



The path up the Goulet Massiff

From Les Alpiers you continue downhill on a path which gets rockier and steeper until you arrive on the tarred road. A left turn takes you into Bleymard and the Hotel Le Remise.

Robert Louis had yet more problems with Modestine.

“I was now led by my good spirits into an adventure which I relate in the interest of future donkey-drivers. The road zigzagged so widely on the hillside, that I chose a short cut by map and compass, and struck through the dwarf woods to catch the road again upon a higher level. It was my one serious conflict with Modestine. She would none of my short cut; she turned in my face; she backed, she reared; she, whom I had hitherto imagined to be dumb, actually brayed with a loud hoarse flourish, like a cock crowing for the dawn. I plied the goad with one hand; with the other, so steep was the ascent, I had to hold on the pack-saddle. Half-a-dozen times she was nearly over backwards on the top of me.” RLS

Le Bleymard - Pont-de-Montvert. Day 7. 11th June. 10.5 miles

A new road leads from Pont de Montvert to Florac by the valley of the Tarn; a smooth sandy ledge. This was a pass like that of Killiecrankie; a deep turning gully in the hills, with the Tarn making a wonderful hoarse uproar far below, and craggy summits standing in the sunshine high above.” RLS

From the Hotel Remise I walked into the old village of Le Bleymard through its narrow streets and up steep steps. Then followed the steep and prolonged climb for a mile. This is followed by another protracted climb up through the Neyrac forest. On clearing the forest, with no markers to show the way, I paused and thought. A large forestry tractor was parked to one side, seeing a lost soul a friendly workman climbed down from it and came over to point me on my way.

Robert Louis camped on the slopes of Mont Lozère as recounted below. Setting off late, after dinner in Bleymard, seems crazy to me but I suppose he was getting used to finding a place to camp in the dark.

“From Bleymard after dinner, although it was already late, I set out to scale a portion of the Lozere. An ill-marked stony drove-road guided me forward. The trees were not old, but they grew thickly round the glade: there was no outlook, except north-eastward upon distant hill-tops, or straight upward to the sky; and the encampment felt secure and private like a room. By the time I had made my arrangements and fed Modestine, the day was already beginning to decline. I buckled myself to the knees into my sack and made a hearty meal; and as soon as the sun went down, I pulled my cap over my eyes and fell asleep.” RLS

The unattractive Mont Lozère Ski Centre complex was not far ahead, it was a small desolate depressing scatter of closed buildings. However I located the only one open, the Chalet du Mont Loziere, and went in for a coffee and croissant. I was greeted by some French and went to sit with them.



Hotel Remise, Bleymard





Chalet du Mont Lozère

They introduced me to the waiter as Robert Stevenson. He rushed off to get his boss who came to welcome me and shake hands. One Frenchman told me there were some English students here. First I'd heard of any Brits so I went to investigate. It was a group of youngsters, around 15 of them I suppose, sitting round a long table. They were from Cambridge University studying biology and on a field trip. They were very friendly and were based there. One of the girls showed me sketches she'd done of some wild flowers. They seemed beautiful to me and I genuinely admired them. I explained I was walking the Robert Louis Stevenson trail from Monastier but they had never heard of it, nor of Robert Louis and asked vaguely if I had walked far.

When I went to pay for my coffee I was waved away. Robert Stevenson did not pay for food here I was told!

So I set off again and above me I could see a layer of dense grey cloud. I followed the path marked by ancient tall stone pillars to show the way in snow, and finally reached the highest point of the Robert Louis Trail, Le Pic de Finiels, which is also the



highest point in the Southern Massif Central. I was now in thick mist with visibility only about 50 feet. A sign pointed right to the summit of 1,670 metres, 5,575 feet, but warned of the dangers of attempting it in cloud as there are steep drops. Since I would not be able to see anything if I got there I decided the risk was unjustified and walked on. This started the long, long descent to a tarred road which led me into Finiels.

Once through Finiels I rejoined the path to complete the descent into Pont de Montvert.

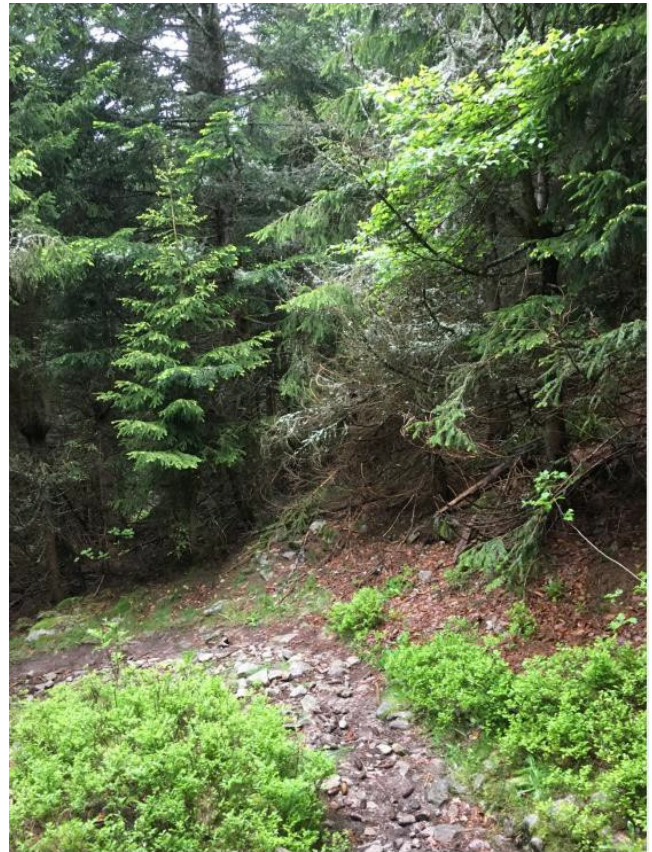
The descent was long and ankle turning. The paths were narrow and twisting. The forest pressed close on both sides and I felt that, if the wolves were still about, it would be a very scary place to be. Alone in the deep silence of the forest, the rain falling gently, running being quite impossible I imagined grey shapes slinking along beside me in the trees.



“The merchant was much interested in my journey, and thought it dangerous to sleep afield. ‘There are the wolves,’ said he; ‘and then it is known you are an Englishman. The English have always long purses, and it might very well enter into some one’s head to deal you an ill blow some night’.” RLS



No, I didn't meet him. But in 1878 wolves were around.



Descent between Bleynard and Pont du Montvert. To Finiels. I was glad the wolves were gone.

As I got closer to Pont-de Montvert the rain steadily increased in volume until it streamed down. The paths turned into roaring streams. The sky grew even darker. How it is possible to get lost in a place as small as Pont-de Montvert I cannot image, but when I finally emerged off the mountains down that awful path, I did! There were no signs I could see. The streets ran as rivers. It was impossible to look at my guidebook or notes as they would be instantly soaked and there was not enough light for me to read. There was no shelter. I had on my light waterproof trousers and jacket and my waterproof broad brimmed Australian leather hat. The hat had performed admirably so far. It kept the rain out of my eyes and shaded them from the sun. But now it was no longer waterproof. Water seeped through the seams and ran down my neck and face. I took it off to pull on my light waterproof jacket hood, but the hood was full of water, so I just put the sopping hat back on. Then there were great jagged streaks of lightning followed by crashing rolls of thunder and, impossibly, the rain got heavier. I knew the Hotel was beside the river Tarn so kept heading downhill. I also knew the Hotel did not open till 5 o'clock and it was still only around 3.30. No glimmer of light was visible. I descended some steps, arriving from an alleyway into a narrow street to see in front of me the Hotel in total darkness. Not far on my right there was a glimmer of illumination to which I headed. A café! I stepped doubtfully through the door of this small refuge, the Café de Commerce, half expecting to be thrown out. I stood there pouring water onto the tiled floor. An expanding puddle rapidly formed around me. The proprietor seemed unmoved, so I ordered coffee, a glass of wine and two Kitcats. I lodged myself in a corner and reviewed the situation. My light walking pack was soaked through and everything in it. But apart from my head and shirt collar I was dry underneath. I went to the toilet and dried my hair as best I could with paper towels. Opposite me across the room in the poor light a youngish man sat studying a map. When I went

for another wine and coffee I nodded to him and Bonjoured, commenting that it was a wet day. He laughed, stood up and shook hands so we fell into conversation. He was walking a 1,000 mile circular route on his own, taking 3 months over it. Like most younger French I met he spoke good English.

At five I bade farewell and headed for the Hotel aux Sources du Tarn. Another long way up the stairs to a darkened corridor but a nice room and I made myself comfortable, showered and put on fresh clothes. I had been walking for seven hours and was quite tired. I sat down alone at dinner, then in came Bernard who had been leading his donkey and was the only other person walking alone I met on the trail. He went to sit alone so I called to him, asking him to share a table with me. He joined me and we had a most pleasant dinner. He spoke some English and we managed well enough. He was a pharmacist. He described the intense frustration of walking with the donkey. The horribly slow pace of the animal and the impossibility of speeding it up. I imagine today that had he used the same methods as the desperate Robert Louis he would be prosecuted by a Donkey charity. Robert Louis was compelled to belabour Modestine with sticks until his arm ached, he pricked her with a goad until 'drops of blood' appeared. But poor Bernard, being a modern kindly man, could not resort to such methods.



Looking back on Pont de Montvert

Le Pont-de-Montvert – Florac. Day 8. Tuesday 12th June. 17.5 miles

I set off after breakfast, crossing the river by the old bridge, and paused at the donkey stable for a picture and to see Bernard saddle up.

On the steep climb out of Pont-de-Montvert I paused several times to look back on the little town in the valley and studied the mountains beyond it from which I had descended in the dark and the rain.

I first reached the stony Champ de l'Hermet plateau, giving a splendid view of the mountains that lay between me and Florac. 'Some climbing and descending to do today' say the notes. I wondered what I had been doing since I set out. Fortunately; I am not very imaginative. There is nowhere in the next 29 kilometers (18 miles) where you can get food, drinking water or shelter (not quite true. There is a stone hut, the equivalent of a Scots bothy) the notes continue helpfully.

They conclude with strongly recommending walking poles to cope with the long descent of 21k, (13 miles) from Signal de Bouche. Walking poles are unobtainable in tiny Pont-de-Montvert.

I descended about 150 metres and climbed about 450 metres, 1,475 feet, to Signal de Bouche. Then the long weary 13 mile descent of about 800 metres, 2,625 feet, to Florac. When I crested the Signal de Bouche I could see in front of me dense black rainclouds sitting on the lower hills. As I got closer I could actually see that the clouds were riven with jagged forked lighting, though I could hear no thunder. I stopped to put my waterproofs on, and this time I put my waterproof hood on with my Australian hat on top of it.

Robert Louis camped on this descent as narrated below.

"I began to cast about for a place to camp in. This was not easy to find; the terraces were too narrow, and the ground, where it was untterraced, was usually too steep for a man to lie upon. I should have slipped all night, and awakened towards morning with my feet or my head in the river.

After perhaps a mile, I saw, some sixty feet above the road, a little plateau large enough to hold my sack, and securely parapeted by the trunk of an aged and enormous chestnut. Thither, with infinite trouble, I goaded and kicked the reluctant Modestine, and there I hastened to unload her. There was only room for myself upon the plateau, and I had to go nearly as high again before I found so much as standing-room for the ass. It was on a heap of rolling stones, on an artificial terrace, certainly not five feet square in all. Here I tied her to a chestnut, and having given her corn and bread and made a pile of chestnut-leaves, of which I found her greedy, I descended once more to my own encampment." RLS



I was in for another horrible descent in teeming rain, lightning and now I could hear the thunder. Again the path was turned into a torrent. I really could have done with the walking poles. I found myself taking council of my fears and imagining the consequences of falling. Lying hurt of those rocks with the water pouring over me and few people likely to come along. I felt it was a bit unfair. I'd only come for a walk. It was around six o'clock by the time I finally cleared that path just on the outskirts of Florac. It was an extraordinarily abrupt transition from wild remote mountains to a main road with, just across the river, a little town. I crossed the river Tarn into the town by the road bridge.

The main street through Florac was flooded with running water inches deep, and as I went down the street cars dashed past throwing sheets of water over me which I could not avoid, the pavement being backed by brick walls. Even my feet were wet as the sheets of water from cars hit my legs horizontally, lifting the protective waterproof trousers to soak down into my boots.

Florac was a substantial place with shops. I noted a camping shop as I splashed past, but it was closed, and determined to visit it the next day.

The Hotel des Gorge du Tarn was at the far end of the town so I was as wet as possible by the time I got there. My little light sack was again soaked along with its contents and I was tired.

It was a nice modern hotel! A friendly boy came up and welcomed me, once again I had wondered if, given my mud covered dripping self, I would be admitted. Third floor again, but they even had a lift! First since I set out.

I had a shower and put on dry clothes from my backpack. I discovered that if I turned the central heating tap on the radiator warmed up. So I covered it with shirts, socks etc. and went down to dinner. A splendid dinner served by charming and attentive girls, though no English at all. So tired but contented I went to bed.

Florac – Cassagnes (Espace Stevenson). Day 9. Wed 13th June. 11 miles

An excellent breakfast. A couple of nice Frenchmen came over and asked might I be Robert Stevenson. I admitted I was. They asked for pictures thus drawing the attention of the other breakfasters that there was a celebrity amongst them. More pictures and good will.

As I had waded through the flooded streets of Florac the day before I had noted the camping shop so I went in and got walking poles. So now, finally, I was all equipped. I should have listened to advice, not least from David and Wendy, before. They had urged them on me for years. Florac turned out to be a lovely old town in the centre and I was able to buy a few souvenirs. I remarked to the woman in the Tourist Office who spoke excellent English on how friendly the French people were. Ah, she said darkly, walkers are all decent people. The French aren't all like that.

The trail led out of Florac on the main road which I followed for about a mile before turning sharply left, over the river, and left again. It had looked pretty smooth on the profile compared with the last couple of days, and only eleven miles. I looked forward to an easy day. I don't think the profile drawer had been there. True it wasn't much compared with the last couple of days but a long up and down section ensued as the trail followed the River Mimente up it's twisting valley.

“On Tuesday, 1st October, we left Florac late in the afternoon, a tired donkey and tired donkey-driver. A little way up the Tarnon, a covered bridge of wood introduced us into the valley of the Mimente. Steep rocky red mountains overhung the stream; great oaks and chestnuts grew upon the slopes or in stony terraces.

It was difficult here again to find a spot fit for my encampment. Even under the oaks and chestnuts the ground had not only a very rapid slope, but was heaped with loose stones; and where there was no timber the hills descended to the stream in a red precipice tufted with heather. The sun had left the highest peak in front of me, when I spied a bight of meadow some way below the roadway in an angle of the river. Thither I descended, and, tying Modestine provisionally to a tree, proceeded to investigate the neighbourhood. A grey pearly evening shadow filled the glen; objects at a little distance grew indistinct and melted bafflingly into each other; and the darkness was rising steadily like an exhalation. I approached a great oak which grew in the meadow, hard by the river's brink; when to my disgust the voices of children fell upon my ear, and I beheld a house round the angle on the other bank. I had half a mind to pack and be gone again, but the growing darkness moved me to remain. I had only to make no noise until the night was fairly come, and trust to the dawn to call me early in the morning.

A hollow underneath the oak was my bed. Before I had fed Modestine and arranged my sack, three stars were already brightly shining. I slipped down to the river, which looked very black among its rocks, to fill my can; and dined with a good appetite in the dark, for I scrupled to light a lantern while so near a house.” RLS

I got acquainted with a couple of Frenchmen who I passed and re-passed. I never got their names. Tucked under my arms were my two new walking poles. I tried using them and my new friends advised me that I had it all wrong. They adjusted the lengths and showed me how I should hold them. After walking around eight miles we descended sharply to a main road and walked along it for about half a mile before turning left over the Mimente and right to continue along the far bank at St Julian d'Arpaon.



The track now followed the disused Florac to St Cecile railway line. The old line is cut through rock, tunnelled through mountain spurs, and crosses over roaring waterfalls as it curves through mountains. What a feat of engineering this had been. All built by muscle power and dynamite. Now abandoned except by wondering walkers. It was

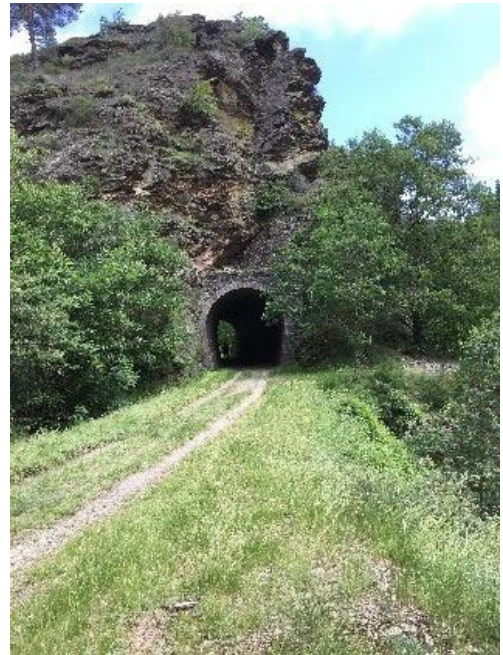
completed in 1909, the year of my father's birth, only operated for 60 years being closed in 1968 by some French Dr Beeching.

I don't usually like walks on old railways lines. Too flat and boring. But this was different. The rock tunnels and the rushing waters all around signalled the fleeting nature of human achievements. I wondered how many human lives had been lost in its construction.



The Espace Stevenson

Eventually I crossed the Mimente and continued along the old line with the river, the GR70 Trail being squeezed between the road and the river in the narrow valley. Eventually the road went off on its own and a few miles later I arrived at Espace Stevenson in the old railway station, just before Cassagnas. It was the only lodging available, there was nothing in Cassagnas itself.



The old station had been, somewhat horribly, rebuilt and Dinner was indifferent.

"I was now drawing near to Cassagnas, a cluster of black roofs upon the hillside, in this wild valley, among chestnut gardens, and looked upon in the clear air by many rocky peaks. The road along the Mimente is yet new, nor have the mountaineers recovered their surprise when the first cart arrived at Cassagnas." RLS

Cassagnes (Espace Stevenson) - St Germain de Calberte. Day 10.

Thursday 14th June. 8.5 Miles

At breakfast next morning I got talking to Maryse, who I had exchanged greetings with previously, when it dawned on me that she spoke English. She was an English teacher in France and had spent some years in Réunion, the French island in the Indian Ocean.

"A little after two I struck across the Mimente, and took a rugged path southward up a hillside covered with loose stones and tufts of heather. At the top, as is the habit of the country, the path disappeared; and I left my she-ass munching heather, and went forward alone to seek a road." RLS



I collected my packed lunch as I was advised there would be nowhere today to get provisions en route. The path crossed my old friend the Mimente River and left it behind. It was ‘moderately challenging’ in terms of climbs and descents on forest trails according to my notes, and I climbed steadily, endlessly it seemed to me, some four miles and 770 feet, 235 metres, to the summit before taking the Royal Road for the descent,



Le Petit Calbertoise

some 1,400 feet, 427 metres, to St Germain de Calberte. It was indeed forest track, and easy ground for walking, all the way with a break just over half way giving a superb view at a Dolman, Menhir. Some kind of stone age religious site, where I met Maryse again and took a picture.

There were a series of good views of the mountains sweeping away into the distance, and the heavily forested nature of the countryside was again obvious.

My notes told me I was going to St Germain de Calberte for the night and staying at Le Petit Calbertois. This turned out to be untrue and somewhat confusing. Le Petit Calbertois is actually at Le Serre de la Can, some miles before you get to St Germain de Calberte.

There is no village there but Le Petit Calbertois, a strangely modernised hotel in architectural terms, was welcoming enough.

Again I was on the third floor and no lift of course. The girl who booked me in insisted on carrying my backpack up for me and by the time we got to the third floor I think she regretted it.

Dinner was a bit difficult. Of course the good lady who took my order spoke no English at all. Of course there was no menu. You are given the options verbally, in French, at speed. I could identify nothing at all in the flood of words. She repeated it. I looked blank. I thought to explore a little and tentatively asked, ‘Madame, avez vous peut-être le poulet? Le viend? Le poisson? Omlette jambon?’

She became visibly distressed and raised her arms in the air. ‘Mais monsieur’ she cried. ‘vous êtes végétarien’. It seemed that ‘The Enlightened Traveller’, in booking my room had checked a box condemning me as a vegetarian. ‘Madame’ I said indignantly, ‘je ne suis pas végétarien’. So I got some food and wondered if the poor woman had got in nut cutlets especially for me. Certainly none of her French guests were vegetarian. No wonder I had not recognised whatever it was she was offering.

St Germain de Calberte - St-Jean-du-Gard. Day 11. Friday 15th June. 14 miles

It is interesting that Robert Louis was mistaken for a pedlar a number of times, as he was by the very old shepherd. No other reason could explain to locals this wandering solitary man with a donkey.

“A very old shepherd, hobbling on a pair of sticks, and wearing a black cap of liberty, as if in honour of his nearness to the grave, directed me to the road for St. Germain de Calberte. There was something solemn in the isolation of this infirm and ancient creature. Where he dwelt, how he got upon this high ridge, or how he proposed to get down again, were more than I could fancy.” RLS

A bad start to the day. About an hour into the trail, in forested mountains, I realised I had forgotten to bring my new walking poles! I had left them in my room when I took my backpack down for transport. I considered going back, but no. Had I been in civilisation I might have taken a taxi, but I wasn’t.

After a few miles I reached St Germain and I stopped at the Café au Figuier des Cevennes in St Germain de Calberte. They had baguettes, croissants, a lovely clean



toilet and a friendly landlord. The password for the WiFi, he came across to tell me, was 'stevenson'. So I told him my name was Robert Stevenson and he was delighted. A visitors book was produced and I was earnestly asked if I would be good enough to sign and perhaps write some comment?

Two more descents and one last hill to climb. Another descent through the woods and to St Etienne of a few hundred metres in about five miles.

There I found a delightful roadside café/restaurant where I rested and drank a couple of cokes. St Etienne lost 22%, not far off a quarter of its men in World War 1, thus ruining agriculture and metal working. They were getting the lunch time barbecue fired up and the wood smoke was pleasant. Suddenly feeling very weary, with the end not far off I suppose, it's all in the mind, I set out on the trail that continued a mile or so along the main road before turning up a woodland path, over a spur and down to the road again. Another mile or so on the road then onto a track and the steep climb started up to Col St Pierre of some 400 metres, 1,312 feet. The path is rocky, twisty and steep up to the crest. Another two hours to St Pierre, but no more climbs. A steep and varied descent takes you into St Jean du Gard and the notes advise me that I am entitled to a drink in the square for having completed the Chemin de Robert Louis Stevenson.

I booked into the Hotel St-Jean-du-Gard, gave the rather uninteresting swimming pool a miss, and went off to explore and get a beer and some dinner.

St-Jean-du-Gard - Avignon. Day 12. Sat 16th June.

The taxi to take me to Avignon arrived at 6.30 am, it took me to the tiny airport from where, once every Saturday in summer, you can fly to Southampton Airport.

So, rather too hurriedly for my liking, my walk came to an end. There had been many places I would have liked to linger in, St Jean du Garde being one of them, but it was not to be.

"Modestine and I - it was our last meal together - had a snack upon the top of St. Pierre, I on a heap of stones, she standing by me in the moonlight and decorously eating bread out of my hand. The poor brute would eat more heartily in this manner; for she had a sort of affection for me, which I was soon to betray.

"It was a long descent upon St. Jean du Gard, and we met no one but a carter, visible afar off by the glint of the moon on his extinguished lantern.

Before ten o'clock we had got in and were at supper; fifteen miles and a stiff hill in little beyond six hours!

On examination, on the morning of October 3rd, Modestine was pronounced unfit for travel. She would need at least two days' repose, according to the ostler; but I was now eager to reach Alais for my letters; and, being in a civilised country of stage-coaches, I determined to sell my lady friend and be off by the diligence that afternoon.

It was not until I was fairly seated by the driver, and rattling through a rocky valley with dwarf olives, that I became aware of my bereavement. I had lost Modestine. Up to that moment I had thought I hated her; but now she was gone." RLS

Epilogue

By the end of his walk in the Cevennes, in October 1878 Robert Louis' health was again miserable. It had been a strenuous journey and, combined with sleeping in the open in the damp chill of autumn, had resulted in exhaustion. His constant heavy smoking, often mentioned in 'Travels with a Donkey', continued right up to his death. This addiction coupled with the hardships to which he exposed himself must have considerably shortened his life.



Fanny, Robert Louis, Isobel and his mother Mrs Stevenson in Samoa

After a spell in the south of France to recover, during which he coughed blood for the first time, believed by many to indicate the onset of tuberculosis, he returned to cold damp Edinburgh and his family.

At the end of July 1879 he got a telegram from Fanny. It has not survived, and we do not know what it said, but it is thought to have indicated Fanny was now close to finalising her divorce and that she was ill. Robert Louis reacted by deciding to go and join her immediately.

On 7th August 1879 he left, without telling his family, and caught an immigrant ship from Glasgow to New York, the *Devonia*. His journey across the Atlantic and the awful immigrant train journey across America to San Francisco which followed became another book, 'The Amateur Immigrant'. Now very ill he contacted Fanny and took lodgings.

At the end of July 1879 Fanny finally got her divorce from Sam Osborne completed, and on the 19th May 1880 Robert Louis Stevenson and Fanny were married, although as he said, he was 'a mere complication of cough and bones, much fitter for an emblem of mortality than a bridegroom'.

His father, William Stevenson, had been advised of their marriage. Previously he had strongly disapproved of their affair as Fanny was a married woman. However he also believed that a woman had a right to a divorce whenever she wanted. So with Fanny, now divorced and married to his son his objections disappeared and a family reconciliation followed. He learned of their desperate financial plight and settled an annual allowance on Robert Louis of £250 a year. A not inconsiderable sum worth perhaps £28,000 today (2018). In addition royalties from his writings steadily increased. After many travels and adventures, including sailing across the Pacific in a yacht with Fanny and her children they settled in Samoa and Robert Louis bought land there in 1889. They built a house which they called Vailima and lived happily there until his death.

Robert Louis Stevenson died of a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of 44 in July 1894. His body was buried on the summit of Mount Vaea, carried up there by Samoan friends. In Samoa he was known as Tusitala – The teller of tales.

Francis (Fanny) Matilda Stevenson. Nee Van de Grift. (1840-1914)

Born in Indianapolis, Fanny had married Samuel Osbourne in 1857 at the age of seventeen. She moved to Nevada to re-join her husband after his participation in the American Civil War which ended in 1865. She journeyed by ship down south around Cape Horn and up to California.

Then on by stagecoach to Nevada. The Transcontinental Railroad did not open until May 1869.

The marriage produced three children: Isobel (or "Belle"), Lloyd, and Hervey. But anger over her husband's infidelities led to a number of separations. Sam Osbourne frequented the saloon bars and knew the girls in them well.

This was the Wild West, the era of Bill the Kid, Jesse James and many others. Fanny became a competent pistol shot and rolled her own cigarettes, which perhaps impressed Robert Louis.



Fanny Osbourne Circa 1876

In 1875, exasperated by Sam's behaviour, she took her children to Belgium. Little Hervey died in 1876 in Belgium at the age of five and was buried in a pauper's grave. There she discovered women were not allowed to attend university in Belgium and moved to France where she and Isobel studied art. Fanny was a considerable writer in her own right.

She first met Robert Louis in 1876 in Paris. They met a second time early in 1877 and became lovers.

Robert Louis spent much of the following year with her and her children. But in early 1878 she abruptly returned to America to meet Sam Osbourne. After Fanny's departure Robert Louis undertook his walk in the Cevennes with his donkey.

Their reunion in 1879 led to their marriage, as noted on the previous page.

The day after Robert Louis died, Louis as she and his family always called him, Fanny wrote to a friend:

'his life had been one long romance and he hoped to have a romantic end; the artist in him demanded that completeness. To grow old he could not bear. He has had his wish and, for that, I try to be thankful, though all the rest of my life will be empty and lonely. True, I have my children but I have not Louis. No one knows what that means but me.'

Fanny died in 1914 at Santa Barbara, California at the age of 74. In 1915, Fanny's ashes were taken by her daughter Belle, as she had requested, to Samoa where they were interred next to Stevenson on top of Mount Vaea. The bronze plaque for Fanny bears her Samoan name 'Aolele' (Flying Cloud in Samoan).