

Chartres Cathedral

I was now on the plain that lies to the south of Chartres and here another railway accompanied me for several miles, only this was dead and overgrown, merely the track bed was left, it had been of narrow gauge. Where it came from and what was its purpose were completely unclear to the casual observer, it started in a village and ended, well, nowhere in particular and yet it kept as loyal to the course of the road as a faithful old dog would do to its master. At its end it no longer held my attention and so released from its puzzle I was free to look up and forward, and there, on the horizon, rising like a harvest moon into the afternoon sky were the disparate steeples of the great cathedral itself.

The flat, hedgeless fields that the road was passing through had been harvested and were awaiting the sowing of next years crop. There was little obstruction to the view other than an occasional barn and the wind turbines were behind me now. The bulk of the city itself lay below the level of the horizon so at first I only saw the tips of the steeples, and these then grew higher into the late afternoon sky until the roof of the cathedral itself was in sight and all the buildings around it. Like a mirage in the desert I couldn't quite get a grasp of its scale thinking it closer than it was. It would take another 20 minutes before I found myself amongst the houses and confronted by the inner ring road, a stretch of tarmac that had obviously been designated as a playground for every darn maniac that had taken to driving in France. It was more by luck than judgement that I found my way to the centre unmolested by any of the car bumpers that had been getting perilously familiar over the last mile or so. Yet I needn't have bothered seeking the tourist office for the campsite lay close to the road on which I had entered and was betrayed by a helpful sign that I swept past on the opposite carriageway. It took some time to turn around so as to get back to its position and then proceed in the direction it indicated which, rather to my surprise and contrary to my suspicions, turned out to be the correct one. I arrived at the site dead on the hour of six although the fellow at the reception made it reasonably clear that he had spoken quite enough English for the day. Despite this he soon thawed out to quite a friendly fellow and I was still settled and ready to explore in very short order.

The afternoon I had fondly imagined would be available to me to look around the city once more fell foul of my insistence on avoiding the major routes leaving only the evening to explore. Naturally the centrepiece of the city is the great church and so it was here that I first directed my steps. Like all the other buildings of this genre it is built to remind the humble supplicant of his place in God's great scheme of things and irrespective of whether you believe in this particular god or any other, what is undeniable is its success in fulfilling that purpose. We all know there are bigger buildings in the world and that mankind has since achieved even greater feats of engineering but these massive cathedrals that are dotted around Europe really are testament to what devotion and belief in a cause can achieve even with the most basic of materials and the simplest of tools.

The day was drawing to a close at the time of my visit which unfortunately excluded too detailed a study of it's exterior and so it was that I spent much of the time there seeking some sort of sense as to what such a magnificent artefact must have meant to it's creators. Inside, it's vastness can only be appreciated by the simple expedient of experiencing it. The measurements are readily available but units of science, be they feet or metres, simply do not explain the overwhelming sense of awe generated within the visitor as the arches and columns soar away from terra firma to hold in place a canopy of stone and decoration that is the very reverse of the normal order of things. To add to the majesty of the visit the organ swelled into life the moment of my entering through the door, the volume and weight of Bach's Organ Concerto rolling out from above added another spine tingling dimension to the moment, one that will remain lodged with me, perhaps for ever.

Mankind as a rule operates at ground level, with rock beneath his feet, we have eyes that look around us, not upwards, that is nature's way, but here in these cathedrals that order is defied. The solidity of rock is not only beneath our feet but also in the air above us, those

hemispheres of stone suspended high above our heads are a direct demonstration that mankind is the only animal with the power to overcome nature, in fact, we are not animals at all for there is no other known beast that can do this! This part of the message is transmitted loudly and clearly and must, no doubt, have worked well on folk who were either to disinterested to question it or were willing to believe as it chimed with their own spiritual feelings. By looking up as demanded by the design we are required to slip the bonds of our evolution and turn our heads in a direction for which we are not well equipped. The distant vaults with their linear supports, which draw the eye upwards, command our attention and decree that we are not like other animals, we are the chosen ones who are no longer tied to the world of lesser life, mankind is superior to Mother Nature and her pagan ways of seasons, fertility and earthy cycles, we have God instead! Thankfully for the prelates there wasn't the telly or printed books around to dispute this notion for the faithful might have noticed that other beasts, such as termites, are pretty handy at creating their own skyscrapers and cooperation within groups is not at all confined just to humans as any victim to a pack of wolves would relate, if they could.

Now, we are also given to understand that just so long as we do what this deity, the one celebrated by this cathedral, requires of us then all will be fine and dandy, as far as our souls are concerned anyway. His messages and broodings upon the state of our existence are the subject of more printed words than are remotely countable so there is very little that can be added that has probably not been said before. With such a vast and divergent canon of literature available to us there is little, if any, possibility of anything approaching full comprehension of man's relationship to the old fellow. A study of the ideas that have been put forward on the matter since mankind learned to record such things would be the work of an eternity of lifetimes. This leaves us in something of a quandary, information overload can either send us mad through indecision or turn us away from the subject altogether. Now that the greater part of western civilisation is literate and so free to read the bible and other relevant texts we may decide for ourselves what we wish to believe independently of the self serving interpretation of the established church. Yet such has been the ferocity of argument and the constant avalanche of scripts on the subject that it is second route, disinterest, which is easier and so more normally encountered.