

## **Caen-Portsmouth Friendship Committee**

### **Report on visit by French Veterans for D-Day 2012**

The purpose of the visit was to strengthen the links between Caen and Portsmouth in relation to D-Day. Each year the Lord Mayor of Portsmouth is invited to the prestigious D-Day commemorations in Caen and Normandy which this year included the President of France. Similar reciprocal visits of a French delegation to Portsmouth have not taken place and it was considered that with the 70<sup>th</sup> D-Day anniversary looming (2014) and in the light of the advanced age and frailty of the French veterans, this year (2012) would be a good opportunity to invite a French delegation to meet their Royal British Legion counterparts and veterans.

The French delegation comprised of:

Mr Pascal Blanchetier, Deputy-Mayor for Participatory Democracy, Integration and Citizenship

Mr Andre Heintz, French Resistance Veteran (aged 92)

Mr Claude Andre, Free French Navy Veteran (aged 88)

Ms Camille Varin, International Relations Officer, Caen City Council.

The delegation arrived in Portsmouth on the afternoon of 5<sup>th</sup> June, with 2 guests returning the following evening and the remaining 2 guests departing on the early morning 7<sup>th</sup> June ferry. On the 5<sup>th</sup> June our guests were taken to the City Museum to see the Lancelyn-Green Conan-Doyle exhibition and the current "Tale of One City" Dickens exhibition. The veterans were able to reminisce about their school years and the importance of English authors in French education. Deputy Mayor Blanchetier was particularly interested in the museum's engagement with young visitors through interactive displays such as the "dressing-up" box for young children.

Similarly the visit, the following day to the D-Day Museum was very interesting for our visitors including a presentation by Andrew Whitmarsh, the museum's curator on the secrets of D-Day preparation, the large Pegasus Bridge temporary exhibition, the Overlord Embroidery and the opportunity to share WW2 reminiscences with other visitors.

This was followed by a visit to Gunwharf Quays and Spinnaker Tower which showcased Portsmouth's tourism and visitor offer.

The highlight and main purpose of the visit was the D-Day commemorations at the D-Day memorial stone. Mr Blanchetier was able to lay a wreath at the service on behalf of Caen City Council and the event generated very positive media attention (see News article attached). As indicated in the News article, despite the inclement weather, this was the best-attended D-Day event for several years. Following the service the delegation were the guests of the Royal British Legion at their Lucknow Street premises. This was a very useful meeting with links being forged between the Royal British Legion and the Caen City Council department for Participatory Democracy, Integration and Citizenship. Mr Blanchetier noted the importance of the British Legion to the British veterans and families in providing a well-used community facility and commented that there were no such facilities available in Caen.

As a newly-formed Twinning Committee, we feel that the visit by the French veterans has been a useful first event in furthering the 4 aims of our Committee, namely:-

- (a) Within a framework established by the City Council, to maintain official contacts between Portsmouth and Caen.
- (b) Actively to encourage organisations and individuals in Portsmouth to link with those having similar interests in Caen.
- (c) To advise on arrangements for hospitality for groups coming to Portsmouth from Caen other than official visits organised by the City Council.
- (d) To promote a greater understanding of the Caen area and customs of the people of Caen.