LA MERIDIENNE VERTE – Abroad Thoughts from Home

A light hearted look across the Channel

Those who have spent happy hours cruising the autoroutes of France will have noticed from time to time signs indicating “La Meridienne Verte”, and may have wondered what this means. It is the most recent manifestation of the perennial competition between England and France.

In 1660, the Sun King was persuaded to establish an astronomical observatory in Paris, and staff were encouraged to solve the question of how to establish longitude accurately. Such a measurement was vital for the world’s shipping, and therefore would afford a nation both a trading and a military advantage.

At almost the same time, Christopher Wren was busy designing the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. It took Britain a few decades (60 years) to persuade the Government to put up the money for a prize (£20,000) to anyone who cracked the longitude problem. Those were the days when no matter how far you sailed.

In the interests of fairness, one should point out that the successor to metric units, SI units, have been adopted everywhere except Burma, Liberia and (of course) the United States of America. The United Kingdom (of course) has gone half way and sells milk in litres, but beer in pints. Lord (Geoffrey) Howe has been conducting a one man campaign for two decades to get us to adopt the kilometre.

Vive la différence

Alan Malcolm