

Research Visit to:

Picardie and Nord Pas de Calais



Northern France

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1. THE PEOPLE WE MET

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Farmers' Market
Set up in 2000 by Bienvenue a la
Ferme - wanted some organic farmers.
Worked with Chamber of Agriculture.

2. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the research visit was to learn about activities that support and promote organic farming in northern France. Our hosts were Frédéric Galon and Olivier Desmarest. Frédéric works with the Chamber of agriculture in Picardie and has been working to develop organic agriculture in the region since 1992. Olivier works with the Association of Organic Producers of Picardie (AABP) and has been in post since 2000. The two organisations work very closely together.

We met with some of the producers who are directly benefiting from support in Picardie and also with organisations in Nord Pas de Calais that are implementing activities to support organic farming. Many of the people that we met expressed enthusiasm for working together with Common Cause, Sussex Rural Community Council and farmers in the Sussex area to exchange information, market products, and work on partnership projects.

Picardie and Nord Pas de Calais are the two most northerly regions of France and they have climatic conditions similar to the South East of England. Farming operations are relatively large scale and industrial. We were told that there is not such a strong incentive for farms to diversify into organics as there is in the South of France and Brittany where small farms are suffering economically.

In France, every region and sometimes the departments that divide each region have a regional organic organisation that has developed independently of national bodies. In both Picardie and Nord Pas de Calais activities to support organic farming are run by independent regional organic organisations like the AABP. They receive funding from the Government's six year (2000 – 2006) development plan for agriculture and the environment and from the respective Regional Councils.

Support for organic farming in Picardie and Nord Pas de Calais includes technical support for conversion, training, farmers' networks, and developing innovative marketing activities including co-operatives, collective marketing and direct marketing as well as promoting organics to the public. Because it is done at a regional and even departmental level it is highly relevant to the farmers in each locality.

Compared to other regions in France we were told that it is more difficult to get funding for organic agriculture in Picardie. In spite of this, our impression was that there is significantly more financial support coming from central government and regional council budgets to the regions we visited compared to the support available in Sussex.

Our impression was that there is a strong demand for organic produce in Picardie and Nord pas de Calais, especially since recent food scares. This is reflected in the successful marketing activities of organic producers and in the growing demand by parents for organic school meals.

3. PICARDIE

Background on Picardie

There are three departments in Picardie: Somme, Aisne, and Oise. The population is about 1.9 million. There are about 12,000 farms and the average size is about 80 ha. Most of Picardie is very rural. 70% of the land is agricultural. The main products are: cereals, sugar beet, dairy, industrial scale vegetables such as potatoes and chicory, and beef (in that order). Agri-food industries are important including sugar, milk, and potatoes. Compared with other regions in France it is difficult to get public funds for organic agriculture in Picardie and there are not so many city dwellers willing to buy organic food. There is a long history of vegetable production in Picardie and there is not such a strong economic incentive to convert to organic as there is in other regions such as Brittany. It is, however, one of the few regions where there is a good relationship between the Chamber of Agriculture and the organic farming organisations.

The Association of Organic Farmers of Picardie (AABP) and the Chamber of Agriculture

Every region in France, and sometimes the departments that divide each region, have a regional organic organisation that has developed independently of national bodies¹. Of the 120 organic farmers in Picardie, 100 are members of the Association of Organic Farmers of Picardie (*Association des Agriculteurs Biologique de Picardie*), AABP.

The AABP was set up in 1992. It is a trade union body and a member of the national federation of organic agriculture (*Fédération Nationale d'Agriculture Biologique*) F.N.A.B². AABP is supported by the Chamber of Agriculture of Picardie, the Regional Council (*Conseil Régional*) of Picardie and the Ministry of Agriculture.

Frédéric Galon has been working for the Chamber of Agriculture in Picardie to develop organic agriculture in Picardie since 1992. He obtained funding for AABP for a full time post in 2000. This is the post that Olivier Desmarest holds. The Chamber provides technical support to farmers. There are three technical advisors for arable (one for each department) and one person for dairy (there are 15 dairy producers who now network together). There are few organic meat producers and none sell direct (they currently all sell through the supermarkets). CAP helps farmers to network and meet together through training sessions and advisors. A one day meeting was held in 2000 and another is planned for 28.9.01 for all the advisors and producers to talk about development work. About 30 farmers attended the last meeting. The advisors and AABP meet every month and co-ordinate the programme of trainings, meetings, etc. They have particularly helped organic vegetable and fruit

¹ The Government certification symbol for organic produce is "AB".

² F.N.A.B is a member of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movement, IFAOM.

growers with direct sales, box schemes, etc. A monthly newsletter is produced (4 issues so far).

The Chamber of Agriculture also worked with *Bienvenue à La Ferme* to identify organic producers for a new weekly (Friday Morning) market. The market is now run by an association of producers.

AABP does promotional work, helping individual member farms with publicity, providing information to consumers, organising farm open days, etc. For example, The AABP/Chamber invited organic producers to a national food fair to collectively promote organic food. In return for attending, the organic producers received aprons with the AABP logo, individualised publicity leaflets and signs for their market stalls. In 2000, AABP and the Chamber of Agriculture Picardie attended the *Salon International d'Agriculture* in Paris with a number of producers. The AABP/Chamber team was the only regional group promoting organic produce (the rest were supermarkets). They were visited by the Prime Minister and Miss France which gave them lots of publicity in the regional press.

Future development plans include:

- A new organic vegetable box scheme (there are none at the moment in Picardie).
- Setting up a marketing collective of producers with ideas for producers to purchase a depot for surplus produce and a van for deliveries (80% of the funding could come from the regional government because it is a new initiative). Shops could purchase surplus produce on condition that they do not sell below the producer's direct sale price. Producers will establish selling points (farm shops) and sell each other's produce. A part time manager will be hired for this project to do a 3 month feasibility study (funded by state/EU and AABP).
- Production of a common logo or trademark: "Bio Picardie".
- A feasibility study for collective, direct marketing of meat. At the moment the French supermarket Auchan runs 4 organic abattoirs in France and most organic meat producers sell to Auchan. There is concern that the supermarket will soon buy cheaper organic meat from Argentina and undercut the local producers.
- Organic school meals – 350 organic school meals will be produced at a secondary school during the Week of Taste, 15th to 19th October.

Les Hortillonnages – Organic Market Gardens

Jean-Louis Christen is an organic market gardener who owns 2.18 ha. of land in an area near the Somme River in Amien called *Les Hortillonnages*. *Les Hortillonnages* is an area of 300 ha of which 25 ha is cultivated by professional market gardeners. The remaining land is private gardens and weekend allotments divided into about 1,300 plots.

Historically, Amien was famous for its fresh vegetable production and the market gardens supplied the whole region. After the 2nd World War with improved

communication and transport, imports from the south competed with local production. Many of the professional producers divided up their land and sold it off. Recently, the Town Council bought up some remaining undivided plots and they now lease them to professionals to conserve the horticultural tradition.

The area is close to the river and is criss-crossed with irrigation channels. It is also liable to flooding. Jean Louis has to maintain 11/2 km of ditches on his land. Since 1985, the land has provided Jean Louis with his principle source of income. He has no employees but has volunteers and students. JL is very active in promoting organics and is vice president of AABP. His main products are fresh vegetables and sauerkraut made from cabbages. He grows 3,500 square metres of white cabbage (about third to quarter of his total vegetable production) and produces about 12 tonnes of sauerkraut per season made in 3 days with 5 people.

JL sells almost entirely direct at his farm shop (open Wednesday and Friday evenings) and at a Saturday market in Amien. He also delivers to two shops: Bio-coop Amiens and Corbeille. A monthly organic market organised by AABP/chamber of Agriculture is planned for the car park next to his land. JP also sells his sauerkraut at a weekly organic market in Paris. JP attends about once a month and the rest of the time another stall holder sells his product. He also has some outlets in shops in Paris.

Much of JP's publicity and promotion has been paid for by the regional council including: signs, boxes, leaflets. This has helped to promote organics generally to the public and also JP's sales. In 1999, the regional council funded the branding of produce from *Les Hortillonages* "eat regional eat seasonal". 500,000 F were spent on publicity, logos and public campaigns in the Spring and Autumn. Advertisements were placed in buses, at bus stops, etc.

JP now feels that too much funding goes into publicity and he would rather have some funds to help maintain his drainage ditches.

The AABP has a direct sales group that includes: livestock, arable, market gardeners, beekeepers, eggs, and fruit. They meet regularly and have agreed to all set up selling points (farm shops, etc) and sell each others produce. They are thinking about a depot but are faced with the problems of transport – are thinking about mini depots.

Ideas for vegetable trading exchanges include runner and broad beans from the UK and lentils and buckwheat 'pancake' flour from Picardie.

Visit to Bio Coop Picardie

Lucien Francoise started the Bio Coop Picardie in 1974. It was one of the first organic co-op shops in France. It predates the "Bio Coop" federation of shops (see below) and has remained independent of it.

The Coop started as a group of 15 families who came together to sell their own garden produce. They then formed a co-op that opened 2 days a week. One year later the Bio Coop was open every day. Vegetables were the main product for the first two years and then as members increased, other items were bought in. At the beginning they

only sold to members. The shop is still a co-op and the property of the members but is also open to the public. They are able to compete with the supermarkets because they give customers advice and confidence in their products and also the produce is cheaper than in supermarkets.

They currently have a turnover of 8F million. The mark up is far less (about 50% compared with 150% in supermarkets). As it grew, the Co-op had two choices to a) sell at normal prices and share the profit or b) keep prices low and have no profits. They decided on the latter. Most shops have a profit margin of 22-24%, the Bio Coop's profit margin is 18%. If they get a reduction in the price of goods they pass this on to the customer rather than increasing the profits of the Coop.

Christian Cotrell – Organic Egg Producer

Christian was a conventional farmer growing mainly cereals. His parents had had a battery hen business. In 1999, Christian decided to produce organic eggs. He knew nothing about organic production and became interested through meeting and networking with other farmers at events organised by the Chamber of Agriculture's organic programme.

Christian's conversion to organic production has succeeded in ensuring his future as a farmer. His farm represents, according to the AABP, the minimum size for a viable production unit. We were struck by the degree of personalised support offered by the Chamber of Agriculture and the AABP to organic producers like Christian.

Christian had a short conversion period for his egg production of only 6 months because nothing had been done with the building and court yard for so long. There are two producers of organic feed, although the cost is high. The farm is located in a wealthy suburb of Amien where there is a high demand for direct sales of the eggs (most large scale organic egg producers in Picardie sell to the supermarkets). Christian is open for sales from the house 5-8 pm 6 days a week. He also sells eggs at the weekly Farmers Market (set up by *Bienvenue à La Ferme*) and through other members of AABP such as Jean Louis Christen. Christian in turn sells other selected organic produce from his house.

Christian has 47 ha of arable some of which is in conversion. He spends more time in his fields but makes more money from his eggs. He grows wheat, maize and '*fevroles*' (beans) for animal feed and intends to produce organic flour for milling and potatoes when the land has organic status.

Why did Christian go organic? He has been farming the family farm since 1981. His parents had battery hens (2,300 hens) and he felt the land was saturated with chemicals. He now has 500 chickens in the same barn space. Also for financial reasons; a farm of his size producing cereals cannot compete and the farm wouldn't have survived. Conventional wheat is 65 cents per kilo and in conversion wheat is 1F 65 c. He intends to diversify once his land is in conversion. Christian feels that organic farming is real farming.

How has the Chamber of Agriculture helped? With technical advice and by putting Christian in touch with other organic producers. The Chamber held a meeting aimed at giving conventional farmers an opportunity to talk to organic producers. Christian met with organic hen producers. Christian has now also met with other organic producers and collaborates in direct marketing. He plans to grow cabbages for Jean Louis for instance. Christian enjoys selling at the farmers' market, particularly meeting customers. The AABP produces publicity leaflets and Christian pays half.

Problems faced? Finding a vet (difficulty of finding a conventional vet for chickens let alone one that can treat organic hens). The barn has to be left empty for 1 month each year and for another 3 weeks the eggs are too small to sell. During this period, Christian has to buy in eggs (from his sister) on which he makes no profit to ensure continuity with customers. His sister is also a producer of organic eggs, although she sells mainly to the supermarkets.

4. NORD PAS DE CALAIS

Background on Nord Pas de Calais

Nord Pas de Calais is the most northerly region of France with Belgium to the north and Picardie to the south. There are two departments, Pas-de-Calais and Nord. There are larger industrial centres than in Picardie and the region traditionally has strong links with trade unions and the green movement (the former president of the Regional Council was a Green Party member). The population is more aware of organic food and there are more public funds for organic farming initiatives.

There are 120 organic or in conversion farmers in the region on 2,600 ha. This figure has risen from 35 organic producers in 1993. The development plan for organic agriculture in the region is 500 producers on 9000 ha by 2006.

In 1999, 27% of organic producers were small scale vegetable producers and market gardeners (*maraîchage*), 24% were dairy, 15% were mixed arable (*polyculture*) and large scale vegetables (eg potatoes), 15% were poultry, 14% were top fruit and 5% other). 30% of the organic producers currently sell part of their produce direct from the farm or at markets.

There are three main organisations active on organics in Nord Pas de Calais: *GABNOR* works directly with farmers (its members are all farmers); the Chamber of Agriculture also works with farmers and has 1 1/3 people working on organic agriculture; and the Association *A Pro Bio* works to promote organic food - its members are processing, marketing and retail organisations. There are also two research stations (*FEDEC* a private research station and *SRPV* a state funded biological control research station).

Association GABNOR

GABNOR (Groupement des Agriculteurs Biologiques du Nord Pas de Calais) is a similar regional organisation to AABP (a trade union and promotional/advisory organisation). They have 100 members (who pay 500 F per year). *GABNOR's* aim is to develop organic agriculture in the region and to bring organic producers together. They have nine staff (both full and part time) and are the main point of contact for farmers. 60-70% of funding comes from the regional council and government as part of the national support programme for environmental agriculture. The rest is raised through EU funds (Interreg, etc).

GABNOR has two full time advisors providing technical support on conversion for different products and to help farmers produce the 5 year contracts (Contract Territorial d'Exploitation, CTE) required to get funding from the government. *GABNOR* also has staff working on marketing and selling particularly for fruit and vegetables.

INTERREG Project: From Jan 2000 to December 2001 *GABNOR*, *A PRO BIO*, and *La Fedec* (a private research institute) participated in an Interreg project with

Horticulture Research International (HRI), East Malling, Kent, and more recently with the Soil Association. HRI are building a Centre of Excellence for organics with a library and demonstration sites and trials. In France they have done a feasibility study to look at establishing an Organic Centre – they are only at the thinking stage. Interreg funding also included money for web sites:

www.hri.ac.uk/organic

www.agriculturebio.com/gabnor

GABNOR would be interested in developing future projects with Common Cause and organisations in Sussex.

La Coopérative NorABio

(Background information on how the co-op was set up is available in French).

NorABio was set up in 2000 by organic producers supported by GABNOR. The co-op markets apples and pears, vegetables, potatoes, beef, and cereals. The fruit growers, who already worked together were the main impetus behind setting the co-op up. The aim was to use their common strength to sell together. They started working to sell together in 1997 with the support of GABNOR. They went to management consultants for advice on their structure and were advised to set up a GIE – an *economic group of interest*. Some months later, the group felt that they had been badly advised and decided to form a Co-op.

There are 48 members of the Co-op. Members can be a member of the input or marketing sectors. This enables those producers who sell directly to benefit from purchasing inputs.

There are two aims of the Co-op:

1. collective purchase of inputs – there are lots of rules and regulations for organic inputs and buying through the Co-op is not only cheaper but also gives an assurance of good practice.
2. marketing of produce

The Co-op pays three part time people who also work part time for GABNOR. Salaries all come from the co-op's income and public funds (the Co-op is not self financing yet). To become viable the Co-op needs higher profit margins or more members. At the moment there is a strong solidarity amongst the members, and financially stronger sectors are happy to support the weaker sectors. For example, the vegetable producers contribute relatively little to the Co-op's income because their profit margins are small (to finance an equal contribution would mean that they would have to add 20% to prices which is not feasible – they currently only add 3%). It is possible that this good will from the producers involved could change in the future.

Fruit

There are 5-6 apple and a few pear producers. 80% of the fruit comes from the same apple varieties including Elstar, Jonagold, Boskoop, and Idared. The Co-op markets 200 tons of fruit per year. The marketing currently works very well. In the Summer, the fruit growers forecast the quantity of fruit that they expect to harvest. All the fruit

is sold because they have regular customers who are specialist organic wholesalers. Very little goes to conventional wholesalers or supermarkets. The producers are also interested in the English market because, apparently, in France there is a minimum apple size and they would like to sell smaller apples to the UK market. They would also think about selling English varieties such as cox. A producer of coxes was about to pull out but found that they were very popular in the south of France where the variety is unknown.

The Co-op staff take the burden off the producers by liaising between them and the clients on quantities required etc. Producers stock their own fruit and clients are encouraged to buy from one member of the co-op to reduce transport costs. *NorABio* has no depots or transport but good contacts with regional haulers. *NorABio* pays for transport and claims back the transport fee from the client,

NorABio has thought about a joint stocking system – i.e. a depot. The problem is that some years the crop is very poor and would not pay for permanent storage costs.

Vegetables

Arrangements for small scale vegetable producers are more difficult and complicated. There are only a few, dispersed, producers who have low and irregular production volumes. They are trying to work with the wholesalers, but can't produce sufficient quantities. This means it is difficult to keep good relations with their clients. They are also competing with farmers in Brittany who are bigger and mechanised and sell at lower prices. Also in their region, there are as many wholesalers as there are producers and the situation is very disorganised.

NorABio is now reflecting on their strategy and considering specialising in a few products that are typical of the region. Their aim is to be recognised as a seller of these products for the region. The producers would co-ordinate to ensure sufficient produce throughout each season. Products would include: summer cauliflower, leaks, chicory, and celery.

An additional problem is that the small growers are up against wholesalers encouraging conventional vegetable producers to grow organic products – these could become a major competition. *NorABio* is even wondering if they have a role for small scale vegetable producers. Other ideas include direct marketing such as veg-boxes.

Cereals, animal feed, potatoes (*Polyculture*)

The Co-op plan to identifying what animal feed is required in the region and co-ordinate distribution.

The buyers of industrial scale vegetable production tend to be processors looking for vegetables to tin. There is a lot of expertise in the conventional system which is big in the region.

Meat

Virtually no meat is sold locally/directly by producers. *F.N.A.B.* and the conventional supermarket Auchan have an agreement concerning organic meat marketing. It is up to each region to organise how the animals get into the supply chain. In Pas de Calais,

all the organic animals are collected together and taken by a conventional farmer to an abattoir. *NorABio* monitor which producers have what animals and liaise with transporters for collection. The Abattoir pays *NorABio* for animals and *NorABio* pays the producers.

NorABio is trying to develop local sales and direct sales for meat producers and are interested in our experiences in the UK/Sussex.

A Pro Bio

A Pro Bio was created by *GABNOR* for the promotion of organic food in 1994. The aim was to help develop the organic economy in the region. The organisation is funded by the Ministry of Agriculture. There are two full time staff and an administrator. Members of *A Pro Bio* include processing and distribution companies, goods and services (eg animal feed, inputs, seeds) retailers and consumer organisations. They are building their contacts with trade unions, training establishments, etc. They also work with food providers such as the school meal service. Their objective is to achieve regional supply chains, to get producers and retailers to understand and trust each other, and not to reproduce the conventional system. Some of their activities include:

- training for shop keepers on selling organic products eg on practical problems of storage or communication with the public.
- helping retailers to set up and go to trade fairs or produce a catalogue.
- helping retailers to network and exchange ideas and experiences. Retailers are even thinking of having the same computing system.
- research and development on issues such as storage and processing to address problems.
- Monitoring – surveys and compilation of statistical data on organic production funded by the INTERREG Project. So far they have only surveyed farmers. They produced a very detailed questionnaire which they took to the farms. The result is a report detailing their findings: *A Pro Bio, 2000. Observatoire Economique. Production Agrobiologique Nord Pas de Calais, Donnes 1999*. There are issues of confidentiality for gathering similar statistics for processors and retailers.
- Communication – trade fairs, agricultural shows, open days on farms and at processing plants. 2 day event in May and September: on the Saturday producers go to shops and talk to the public; on Sunday shops go to the farms and processing plants. Produce a list of farm shops, retailers and organic markets in the region. Produced an English version with INTERREG funding.
- Training – work with consumer and environmental associations, teachers, etc. to help understanding of organic, impact on wildlife, whether people can trust organic food, etc.
- Markets – created 6 monthly organic rural markets in small villages. Some work well, some don't – most successful are where there are no shops.

School Canteens – *A Pro Bio* in 2000 organised a conference with schools and colleges. The meeting received a lot of media attention that has led to a high demand

from schools and parents for organic meals. *A Pro Bio* feel that it is a good way to organise regional production, but there is not sufficient production, processing, etc of organic food in the region to meet schools' demands.

As a start, they are thinking of one meal a week or one product in the menu. Need to work out who does what, who can follow up, how address obstacles eg seasonality, regionality, price, etc. *NorABio* feel that they could find regional producers for fruit and vegetables and that they could contact wholesalers to complement ingredients. They are very keen that something is organised and well co-ordinated because they don't want the private wholesalers to go direct to the schools.

In May 2001 *A Pro Bio* had a promotion at a secondary school. Pupils visited a farm and organic ingredients were included in the menu. In June *A Pro Bio* held a meeting for all schools interested to discuss issues. They plan to do another meeting next year with more help from *Manger Bio*³ in the South.

In October 2001, during the Week of Taste, a national park is producing a teaching kit for schools so that schools can make organic meals. *A Pro Bio* does not currently have capacity to work with individual schools, teachers or parents.

Bio Coop near Lille La Ferme du Sens, Villeneuve d'Ascq,

La Ferme du Sens is a member of the *Bio Coop*. It was a beautiful shop with a wide range of local, regional and international produce.

The *Bio Coop* is a federation of consumer co-ops and small family shops. There are around 250 members with a turnover of around £80 m. Members must adhere to strict standards outlined in their charter. Bio Coops are not a brand or shop chain but more comparable with the fair trade certification system.

The *Bio Coop* helps smaller shops start out by giving them access to a full range of products, even if they are buying small amounts. While the *Bio Coop* shops buy from regional distribution centres, preference is given to local suppliers. Bio coops are an important point of access for consumers to buy local organic produce.

³ Manger Bio (Eat Organic) is project run by CIVAM, Le Gard, in the South of France. They currently serve 300,000 organic school and college meals daily and work with around 20 local organic producers.

5. Key Points of Interest for the OATES Project and Organic Farming in Sussex

- State and regional funding for organic farmers' associations allows for flexibility in design of research and development work to suit the local and regional needs.
- Regional organic farmers' associations undertake promotion, networking, marketing, distribution and trade union responsibilities. There is a strong personalised relationship between the staff on the support programmes and producers, shops, and other members of the supply chain. This is important in creating new partnerships between producers, retailers and consumers.
- The regional programmes give significant resources to raising awareness of organic food and farming with the general public. It is an integral part of the strategy to help expand the market for local producers. Promotion takes the form of open days, weeks of taste, advertising, information leaflets, attendance of organic producers at food fairs, etc. Awareness raising of organic and sustainable food systems is an area that could be effectively developed by Common Cause, eg through a week of public events on organic farms, processing units, shops, restaurants, etc., producing publicity leaflets.
- Mainstream funding allows for good co-ordination and communication between the different organisations. In Nord Pas de Calais, areas of work are divided up between the different organisations so that for example *GRABNOR* is working with producers while *A Pro Bio* work with processors, retailers and consumers. In Picardie, the Chamber of Agriculture is mainly responsible for technical support of farmers while AABP are developing innovative marketing strategies and raising awareness of organic food and farming. There is a need for a level of co-ordination and division of tasks in the South East of England so that the organisations working in this region can be more effective and avoid duplication.
- Specific promotion, networking and marketing initiatives could be replicated in Sussex, eg: aprons, signs, personalised leaflets, newsletter, organic markets (urban and rural), regular promotional events, and links with school meal provision.
- There is recognition of the importance of direct marketing for meat producers to avoid competition from cheaper imports. There is little experience of direct marketing of meat in Picardie and Nord Pas de Calais and there may be opportunities for producers to learn from the experiences of farmers in the South East where there are some good examples of successful direct marketing ventures.
- There is a recognition by the town council of Amiens of the historical, social and cultural importance of market gardening and the importance of the local population supporting the market gardeners by buying locally grown food. Similar links between town populations and nearby allotments/small scale market gardeners could be made in the Sussex area.
- There are opportunities for partnership projects and exchanges between Picardie, Nord Pas de Calais and Sussex area.