

Orne's Initiative

Some 1,500 French, British, Dutch, American, Australian and New Zealand members are already reaping the benefits of Ornelink, as **Kitty Stephens** reports

It may come as a surprise to the 3,000 English-speaking residents of Orne to learn that the President of the Council, M. Alain Lambert, regards them as ambassadors for the department. He knows that when expatriates visit friends and relatives or do business *outré-mer*, the questions about France in general, and Orne in particular, offer a wonderful 'shop window' for all that the department can offer. He also knows that people who have made the decision to live in another country have talents and skills that can enrich their adopted communities, but only if they know how. He decided that what was needed was both a virtual and an actual meeting place and he came up with Ornelink.

Ornelink, the only Anglo-French departmental initiative of its kind in France, is a means of cultural, social and economic exchange between English-speaking residents and their French neighbours. However, this simple idea disguises a great deal of hard work by the *Conseil Général de l'Orne*. Scarlett Merrill, who has worked with Ornelink since its inception, explains: 'M. Lambert is very keen on giving newcomers a voice as well as a way of contributing to the future of

Orne so Ornelink exists as a means whereby expats can make contact with each other as well as with any French residents who may be interested in cultural and social exchanges and/or business networking. So Ornelink is both an information portal and a forum.'

The organisation was eventually launched in July 2009 with a delightfully *franglais* Garden Party at the *Hôtel du Département* in Alençon: sunshine, beer and Jazz, *rillettes*, *baguettes* and *charcuterie*, and a speech by Ken Tatham, the English-born Maire of Saint-Céneri-le-Gérei who is now a French citizen. Further events have included a day at the races and an evening party and more events are planned for this year.

However, Orne covers a large area and is over 200 kilometres from east to west, so it is not always possible for people to travel to Alençon. This is where the website provides help, information and support. You can even download an English-language version of the Users' Guide to the Council. If you live in (or near) Orne, or have an interest in the department through twinning or business, then it is simple to sign up for

ORNELINK
shaping the future together

membership. Currently there are about 1,500 French, British, Dutch, American, Australian and New Zealand members. It is growing all the time and is an excellent source of help and information as well as offering guidance through the complexities of local bureaucracy or advice on where to get help with setting up in business.

The latest initiatives to be piloted are language clubs where people interested in exchanging language skills can meet in a way that is comfortable and enjoyable. Similarly, if you need a job or are looking for a business partner it's worth trying an enquiry on Ornelink.

M. Lambert, who is thoroughly at home with modern ways of networking, has his own blog on the site (in French) or you can follow him on Facebook or Twitter. His latest initiative, which also taps into the resource of English-speaking residents, is a scheme whereby volunteers will go into schools to help children with their English. This is at a very early stage, but promises to be a satisfying way of contributing to the local community.

www.ornelink.orne.fr



Ornelink Language Club



Ornelink was launched with a garden party



Orne President Alain Lambert