YORKMINSTER PARK
REFLECTS

Friday, June 21, 2015
Reflections by Debbie Ivison

Mont St Michel

I recently had a wonderful opportunity to travel to the Normandy coast in France to visit the island of Mont St. Michel. Set in the bay where Normandy and Brittany merge, the "Mont" is aptly described by one writer as a *'magical island topped by a gravity-defying medieval monastery'*. It is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is visited by an estimated three million plus tourists each year.

In prehistoric times the Mont was on dry land. As the sea levels rose, erosion reshaped the coastal landscape and several outcroppings of granite emerged in the bay, one of which became known as Mont St Michel. According to legend, the Archangel Michael appeared in 708 to St. Aubert, the bishop of nearby Avranches, and instructed him to build a church on the rocky islet. Aubert repeatedly ignored the angel's instruction until Michael burned a hole in the bishop's skull with his finger. This apparently got Bishop Aubert's attention!

The abbey on the Mont was built by Benedictine monks starting in 800, and became a place of Christian pilgrimage and a renowned centre of learning for many centuries. Due to its unique position only 600 metres from land, the Mont was readily accessible at low tide to many pilgrims. Its unique position also made the island highly defensible as an incoming tide could literally wash away any would-be assailants. The tides today continue to vary greatly, and still pose dangers for visitors who choose to walk across the sands to the Mont versus across the modern causeway.

My friend and I were very grateful for the advice given us to stay overnight at one of the small hotels on the Mont instead of staying on the mainland. It was wonderful to be able to fully explore the Mont in the early evening and again the next morning with only a few fellow overnight travellers. When walking along the outer stone walls, I was struck by the silence – there was only the sound of the wind, the seagulls, and the faint noises of the sheep grazing along the nearby coastal pastures. What must it have been like as a Benedictine monk to live and study on this isolated place, hundreds of years ago, and literally in the middle of the ocean?

Mont St Michel is a stunningly beautiful place – and all the more so given the constant 'push and pull' over the centuries between 'man' and 'nature'. Arguably man assumed responsibility for the stewardship of this amazing naturally created island as soon as Bishop St Aubert decided to build a church on it. The forces of nature continue to "push" in such a way that man has to continually develop new ways to protect the site while continuing to enable so many people from around the world to visit the Mont and experience its magic – truly an ongoing stewardship challenge.