The French Revolution and the Fête Nationale

In the late 1700s, over 200 years ago, France was a very unfair country. It was ruled by a king called Louis XVI and his wife, called Marie-Antoinette. A few of the people, the aristocrats, were extremely rich. They lived in enormous "châteaux" and had hundreds of servants. The king and queen lived in a beautiful palace called Versailles. The aristocracy wore beautiful, extravagant clothes and their servants dressed them because they thought they were too important to dress themselves.

Louis XVI

Marie-Antoinette

Versailles

A room in the palace of Versailles

The poor people in France had to pay the aristocracy money in taxes so that they could keep up their extravagant lifestyles and wage war on other countries. They couldn't afford these taxes and many of them were starving. Louis XVI decided that he had total control of the country, so there was no way of telling him how unfair he was being. If you said something he didn't like, you could be sent to a prison in Paris called the Bastille, without having a trial, and you could be kept there for ever.

A painting of some poor French people

The Bastille

Eventually the French people had had enough and they formed an enormous army. In 1789 they broke into the Bastille and freed the prisoners. Then over the next few years they rounded up most of the aristocracy and executed them using the guillotine. This was called the French Revolution. Some of the aristocracy escaped and fled abroad.

The new France, without the aristocracy or the King and Queen, was called La République. Some special symbols of the République were created which still exist today. There was a new flag called the Tricolore (because it has three colours), a slogan, "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" and a character called Marianne, a woman who represents the spirit of the revolution. A new national anthem called "La Marseillaise" was composed.

The Tricolore

A hundred years later, there was a special celebration to mark the 100-year anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. A very famous painter, Claude Monet, painted a picture showing the celebration. After this it was suggested that the 14th July should be a holiday every year.

La Rue Montorgeuil"
by Claude Monet

The parade on the morning of the
Fête Nationale

In the morning of the 14th July there is an enormous parade, called a "défilé", in one of the main streets in Paris. It is the biggest parade in the world. Thousands of French people stand by the road to watch it, and millions more watch on the TV. In the afternoon and evening, there are parties, and huge firework displays. All day, children play with firecrackers called "pétards", which they let off to make people jump!