



Wendy Mewes - Parish Closes

Elaine: But first of all Wendy, just, er, briefly sort of tell us what you've been up to since I last saw you which was a year ago up in the launch of "Spirit of Place".

Wendy: Well "Spirit of Place" has done very well in, in English and French editions I'm pleased to say, um, but because of illness last year my new book is going rather slowly, but it's called "Wayfaring in Little Britain" and it's about old paths and routes in Brittany connecting historical sites and it's trying to give a character and a dramatisation to routes covering things like megaliths, dark-age sites, medieval buildings, etcetera.

Elaine: So anyway, what we're going to talk about particularly is parish closes, because people have been, they've seen it on the events programme for AIKB and they say 'well what exactly is a parish close' because in England a close means rather like a cul-de-sac.

Wendy: Yes, yes, far from a cul-de-sac the, the parish close. There are over 70 in Brittany in fact but, the vast majority are concentrated in Northern Finistère in a sort of corridor between Landerneau and Morlaix and the reason for this is that it was the wealth of the linen trade with England which was the economic basis of that particular area that gave communes the funds to build these wonderful parish closes which are religious 'ensembles', a precinct with a surrounding wall, a church, and other elements of sculpture and functional buildings arranged in a, usually in a particular pattern, but varying greatly from close to close in their scale, their ornamentation. They are visually stunning often. They have the real 'wow' factor people come from all over the world to see the most famous parish closes which we'll be looking at on the tour in, in April, but some are very sweet and charming and subtle and small. All of them are in fairly small places, often villages. And what's most interesting for me is the social and economic background - how can a tiny little village in the 15th, 16th, 17th century afford these phenomenally large, elaborately ornate churches? They're often enormous, and those villages often endured centuries of constant work on these, on these closes, and there was an intense competitive spirit, so if a neighbouring village added a new tower, you had to add a new tower, and a bigger one and a more elaborately decorated one. It was fiercely competitive, it was a matter of, of local pride, er, to have the best, the most spectacular parish close.

Elaine: And how would they be funded?

Wendy: Well, they were funded by donations. Typically Breton, that display and ostentation is in public monuments, not in private houses. You like your your, your community to show wealth rather than to have the latest things in your, your personal house. There's a great, the parish closes express a great sense of communal, er, solidarity. Nobles, merchants, but the cloth industry involved the high to the low, people working on the land. Growing the flax, harvesting it, weaving it, washing the flax. All the people involved in all the stages of the production of cloth had money at that time because it was a highly lucrative industry.



Elaine: But don't you think that spirit of community is still alive and well in many villages?

Wendy: Oh, yes, I absolutely do. I think, um, of liberty, equality, fraternity, it's fraternity that is the most striking and astonishing for us British people because I don't have any sense of that on any scale in Great Britain, er, whereas here it's alive and kicking I think associations are the most obvious form of, er, people's passion about their, their local environment.

Elaine: Well, there is very much a community feel, isn't there.

Wendy: People are proud of their heritage and their present.

Elaine: So this trip to Morlaix, near Morlaix, in April can you tell us something about that?

Wendy: The week before I'm going to talk at the AIKB about the principles of the "enclos", the parish closes, to give an idea of what to expect and what to look out for, and then the visit will be to three of the most famous of all. But three very contrasting parish closes because none of them are the same in appearance, in atmosphere, so it'll be a way of applying what we've learnt in the talk on the grounds and giving people a chance to explore on they own as well, not just to be, to be talked to about them.

Elaine: So there's almost a point then when they were doing these or making them, or developing these closes rather like keeping up with the Jones' whatever the equivalent of that would be in French.

Wendy: Abs.... absolutely.

Elaine: Rather than the latest kitchen, you know, look at what we've done in our village...

Wendy: It was very important. There are all sorts of stories about one village sabotaging another's work - stealing a new bell, um, transferring it over the Monts d'Arrée from Pleyben to Saint Thégonnec, the spirit of rivalry was very, very strong.

Elaine: Skulduggery going on in the middle of the night.

Wendy: Yes, absolutely, absolutely, medieval sporting contests.

Elaine: Yes, ransacking and ..

Um, So, on the 12th, yes the 12th of April you've got the talk at AIKB and I think that's half past two in the afternoon, and then the 19th is the actual guided tour.

Wendy: Yes, the talk I hope will be interesting for anyone whether they are coming on the tour or not. If someone is coming on the tour but not able to come to the talk I'm going to provide a summary sheet of the talk so they are not disadvantaged in that, in that way. And the other thing, the good thing about the parish closes is that often it's the exterior that is the thing so you can visit them at any time of year, you don't have to rely on the church being open to get a lot out of it, but most famous closes are open every day of the year the church as well so they're great places for a visit, and if you know the basics



to look for you can take your visitors and show them round and point out everything once you know the basics.

Elaine: That's fascinating. And er, so, in the future, what future plans have you got now, bearing in mind of course you're, you know, recovering still from your health problems?

Wendy: Um, indeed, well I'm pursuing my new book slowly, er, not having quite the sort of physical energy that I had last year. I'm doing a lot of translation work. At the moment I'm doing a large project for the parish closes because a new permanent centre is opening in Guimiliau this year, recognising what an important phenomenon they are for attracting visitors.

Elaine: OK, thanks very much, Wendy, for your time it's been good to catch up with you again.

Wendy: Thank you very much.