



Maison de Toile, St Thelo

Between 1670 - 1830 the growing of flax and the production of linen was a key industry of Brittany.

The Maison de Toile, in the small village of St Thelo, is a most beautiful house. Built in 1715 for a linen merchant, it is a copy of a Vauban house in St Malo called Les Malonouires .

Vauban was the foremost military engineer and architect of his age, famed for his skill in designing fortifications for Louis XIV. Linen merchants would have been travelling all the time to St Malo and their wealth allowed them to recreate what they saw. The only difference was the stone they used. In St Malo the houses are built in granite, here in Brittany, of slate. There are approximately 100 of this type of house in Brittany.

But it is interesting to contrast the wealth of the linen merchants, who were able to build these beautiful houses, with the poverty of the farmers who grew the flax, and the families who spun it and wove it into linen.

Typically the preparation of the flax and the spinning was done by women, the weaving by the men, and young boys would be apprenticed to their fathers at a very early age. Families would live in one room, dominated by the loom which they would have had to build for themselves. In the 18th century around 35,000 people lived off the linen trade in the Cotes d'Armor region.

'Toiles de Bretagne', was known for its extremely high quality. But the golden age of Brittany's textile industry is a distant memory today.

So I asked Anita Boscher about the decline of the linen industry in Brittany - but first she explains to us that there are three types of flax.

Anita We find three types of flax, decorative, the type you grow in your garden oily flax, this is the flax you find in the fields of Brittany for linseed oil and for animal feed, and flax for textiles. This is not grown in Brittany in 2012, but is grown in Normandy in the north of France

Helene Can you explain why there is no flax grown now in Brittany

Anita The growth of flax stopped at the beginning of the 19 century not only in Brittany but everywhere in France and after the Second

World War the Belgians moved into France to grow Flax, so the production is now essentially in the north of France, from Caen to the Alsace, north of Paris around, the Somme.

Why there? Because the soil is very good for flax. There is a bond of about 50km wide from Caen to the Netherlands

The climate is also very good, not too wet. This part of France is the premier producer of flax, about half the world production, 90 thousand tons a year.

Helene And are there factories for weaving the flax in the North of France?

Anita Yes, some but importantly the person who does this work is the farmer's wife, who not only weaves the fabric make clothes and other things from the material.

Today in Brittany there is no more flax grown for making linen but there is a small production of flax used for making linseed oil, mainly for animal feed, but there is no market to make money from this, so the farmers prefer to grow something else. You can't count on flax production so there is no large production

Helene So, it is not good to produce flax because if something goes wrong the farmer loses everything and there is no government subsidy, as for growing maize and wheat?

Anita Yes, and, moreover it is a crop which takes a lot out of the soil and you have to wait 7 years before you can grow it again in the same field. So, the farmers prefer to grow other things. Also, we haven't got enough infrastructure to process the flax ready for weaving in Brittany, so if we want to produce linen here in Brittany we would have to buy it in from elsewhere, which would make it more expensive and more difficult to sell.

Helene Nowadays do you need to take into account production in Asia?

Anita The flax produced in France is often brought by the ton by Asia, where they treat it, spin it, and then the thread is sold back to Europe.

Helene So it is Asia that is controlling the price? If the price isn't right surely that means that linen production could disappear in Europe?

Anita But, the good thing is that France still sells half of the world production, mainly because Flax won't grow in Asia, so they will always need French and European growers. And today the Asians are buying certain French ports better to control the import and export trade, rather like they are buying up French vineyards. The most important thing is to keep the production here.

Helene Well it is good to finish on an upbeat note, thank you so much for

allowing us to come and visit the beautiful Maison de Toile and to talk to you.