



History of Morlaix - Wendy Mewes

Wendy The town is very much based on it's peculiar geographical situation. It's at the point where two rivers meet and it's actually the boundary between the historical regions of Leon and Tregor. The first chateau was built in the 11th century initially owned by the Lords of Leon but bought up by the Duke of Brittany in the 12th century and it was at that time that the settlement began to grow up at the base of the hill on which the chateau was around the river. The two river valleys that join where the modern town hall is. That's approximately where these two rivers join run underground and then out to the sea at Carantec

Elaine So I understand that in 1522 there was a very major event that occurred?

Wendy Yes. In 1522 an English fleet sailed up the river knowing that the garrison was away at an army review and that the merchants were away at a big fair leaving the town pretty much undefended. They left the ships at the port and entered the town in disguise and burnt and pillaged the entire town. Something that took Morlaix ten years to recover from economically. As they were leaving they were grabbing what they could from all the merchants houses along the quays to take back to the boat including a lot of wine. Most of the English got on the boats and sailed off with their loot but a few hundred drunk rather too much of the wine in the Bois de Stivel just above the river and were still sleeping it off when the Morlaix garrison returned at full gallop and slaughtered the lot of them in the wood and it's said that the little stream that runs down the hill ran red with English blood and the fontaine which is still on the quay today is called the Fontaine des Anglais for that reason. One very important result of this raid was that 20 years later the Chââteau du Taureau was built on a rock at the entrance to Morlaix estuary so that such a thing could never happen again and indeed such a thing never has happened again. And it also led later to the famous pun of Morlaix's motto 's'ils te mordent mords-les' If they bite you bite them back. After a couple of hundred years Morlaix was developing as an important port with trade to England, a little to Holland and to Spain and the trade was based on the products of the river valleys, items like paper - leather which were produced in mills along these rivers called the Queffleuth

and the Jarlot but the major commodity was linen produced from flax in the area mainly of Leon, grown, processed, woven, brought to Morlaix where it was a commodity traded by English and Breton merchants in Morlaix. Many English merchants were based in Morlaix in the 16th, 17th centuries and the real legacies of this trade that you can see today are firstly the parish closes which were built with the wealth accrued in the area of Leon from the linen trade with England but in Morlaix itself the very fine half timbered houses that are one of the glories of the town. And they actually have in Morlaix a unique architectural form called the 'Maison à pondalez' and although there are many different versions given for this name possibly come from 'pont' and 'aller' 'to go across a bridge' because the houses are constructed around a central staircase with wooden bridges leading to the rooms at the front and the rooms at the back from the central staircase, and these houses- what's so interesting about them is that many were the homes of nobles who had turned from their noble status to becoming merchants in order to make a lot of money, but because there's no room to build châteaux in the town these houses were built upwards so they're tall and they have all the features you would expect of a nobleman's house with magnificent carvings with huge stone fireplaces. The one to visit is number 9 Grande Rue because its part of the museum of Morlaix. The other one that's open to the public is the so called house of Anne de Bretagne although in fact during her visit to Morlaix in the early 16th century she didn't stay there she stayed in the Jacobins - the oldest building in Morlaix which dates back to the 13th century and was also the place where Mary Stuart stayed when she arrived in Morlaix on her way to Paris to marry the Dauphin and she was only aged 6 at the time.

Elaine And the viaduct- obviously that's something you first see that hits you isn't it as you come into Morlaix?

Wendy Yes- the viaduct is spectacular. It was built in the early 1860s. Initially the plan had been for the railway to come across the centre of Brittany but ferocious lobbying by St Brieuc Guingamp and Morlaix led to Napoleon III deciding in 1859 that it would be best to go along the north with potential links to ports on the coast and that in itself is one of the reasons why central Brittany has never developed. Well, it came to, to Morlaix and it carried the Brest- Paris line and it reduced the journey time from about 46 hours to 16 so it made an enormous difference to trade and business on that northern route.

Elaine Its an absolutely stunning piece of architecture..... So, just moving on a little bit more I believe there was an er um incident at the school at the top of the viaduct?

Wendy Yes the viaduct was the scene of a terrible tragedy in WWII on the 29th January 1943. It was obviously very important for the allies to cut the German communications and the Paris -Brest railway was an obvious target so bombing the viaduct at Morlaix was an important target for the allies. The raid on 29th January there were several hits on the town. About hundred people died altogether but the worst loss was the little school which was just at the end of the viaduct on the station side where all 39 children and their teacher were killed by the bomb. There's now a chapel on that spot to commemorate – the Chapel of the Angels commemorates the deaths of those children and their teacher. Um many other buildings were damaged in that raid. The viaduct itself lost half one of the arches but the Germans had it repaired very very quickly and the trains were running again I think within a fortnight.

Elaine So onto now, present time, um Wendy, The current developments I believe you mentioned something about, um a tobacco factory being renovated and restored - not for tobacco?

Wendy No (laughter) One of Morlaix's other great industrial successes was the tabac, the tobacco factory on the quay by the river which dates back to the 18th century. This actually continued in operation till the 20th century and they produced cigarillos, cigarettes, cigars and employed up to a thousand people in the heyday of Morlaix. And it was also quite an innovative place in that many social benefits were devised for the workers. There was a crèche because many of the employees were women. There were things like holiday sick pay. It was very advanced in terms of social benefits and so a very important resource for the people of the town. It's a vast building built around a huge central courtyard. The work is slow there are many enterprises already established but there's not much for the visitor to see at the moment. There's a great gallery of honour that's going to include works of art that will be open to the public eventually. There's also part of the university has a branch there so there's a lot of young people around uh, an educational facility and the Breton book company Skol Breizh has their office there. Morlaix has an awful lot to offer and it has an excellent shops and restaurants and cafes and is a really good place to pass a day.

Elaine Thanks very much Wendy for your time and its lovely situation..

