



The history of the Lac de Guerlédan - Wendy Mewes

Well the wonderful Lac de Guerlédan, which is so important a part of holidays and pleasure in central Brittany today did spell the death of the Nantes-Brest canal when it was created and it was created in the 1920's because after the First World War the provision of energy, of electricity became increasingly important with domestic electrification increasing as well as industrial needs and it was decided that flooding the Blavet valley would be the best way to provide a constant source of electricity in Central Brittany.

The idea was first mooted by the sub-prefect of Pontivy, Joseph Ratier, and his initial idea did not meet with a very positive response as it being too great a project, too difficult too complicated but an engineer called August Leson took up the idea and made practical studies and put it all on paper and was able to present the project which was taken up by the Société d'Entreprise in 1922. They did geological studies to test whether the plan was valid.

And so work began in 1923. It was envisaged that the whole thing would be completed in three years. In fact, they found many problems of various sorts, money being not least, because the work involved the cooperation not only of the energy, industrial companies, state, two departments, Morbihan and Côtes du Nord as Côtes d'Armor was then called then were both involved. Raising the, such a huge amount of money was a constant problem. They soon found that the hard bedrock of armoricain grès, that the dam was to be founded on in places was riven by schist with clay, which was far too soft to take the weight of the dam and so more work had to be done to dig deeper down to the a solid foundation which added to the cost and the time.

There was also a flood which washed away much of the work site, the footbridges, the machinery, at one point. All these setbacks meant that the project was actually stopped in September 1925 and it didn't begin again until March 1927, when the new company, the E. I. Energie Industriel took over the project and worked constantly, they actually worked all through the night in shifts for the next three years to complete it in 1930 and electricity started being produced at the beginning of 1931.

Now, when this project was originally mooted the immediate concern was what would happen to the Nantes-Brest canal and the people who made a living from moving goods in barges along the canal and the original plan, there was a provision of two million francs to create a very steep ladder of locks to take the boats up across the lake and to continue. When finances became difficult very early on this was about the first thing to be abandoned.

There was also a plan to take a big departmental road across the top of the barrage to connect Côtes d'Armor, Côte du Nord, and Morbihan. That was also abandoned as being non-essentials. So, in effect, completing the barrage and the hydro-electric station broke the Nantes-Brest canal in two and made it impassable for through traffic.

In fact, only about on average a hundred and eighty barges a year, were using it at that time. So the eco... economical sense was not to spend so much money on a ladder of locks for so few boats because by now the train and lorry transport had overtaken the canal as a, as a practical cost-effective way of moving goods.

The workforce on the project of building the dam, it did provide employment locally. There were about three hundred fifty workers involved. Some foreigners, Polish carpenters were employed, Italian labourers and many of the local workforce soon found that the, the very poor conditions and the very low pay meant that they preferred to go back on to the land or to work with logging because with the forest of Quénécan there was a lot of work in forestry at that time.

The work was badly paid. It was also very hard and quite dangerous. There were reports of substandard safety gloves for the use, the cement workers lost fingers and a hundred years earlier when the Nantes-Brest canal was being built it was the same thing; industrial accidents, death, poor safety measures. A hundred years later building the barrage things had not changed all that much. Conditions were very, very hard and at the end they were working night shifts as well in the dark, um, to get the thing finished and the whole thing took a hundred and fifteen thousand working days to complete.

