



Hidden Rennes - Jan Tyacke

The weather was amazingly kind to us for the trip to find 'hidden Rennes', warm and sunny with a cloudless sky.

About 15 of us eventually assembled at the Tourist Office, some a little late having missed the extremely obscure entrance to the nearest car park! Our guide, Lionel, was very enthusiastic and spoke good, concise English.

Fifty-five years after the Great Fire of London, Rennes too suffered a devastating fire which destroyed 39 streets within the walled medieval city aided, as in London, by the overhanging upper floors of the timber houses. Much of our visit was centred around this event.

Unlike London, the area of the fire is still visible if you know what to look for. Standing and looking in any direction in the central old town you notice that a row of timber-framed houses suddenly becomes a huge mansion or a row of stone buildings. The mansions were built by members of the Parlement who took advantage of the sudden space to build what had been impossible before. A relatively unknown architect was commissioned to rebuild but the dispute over his costly plans caused the King to lose patience and use his own architect, Jacques Gabrielle.

Costs for house reconstruction were brought down by the clever idea of producing plans for the design of several stone facades which were repeated around the city. Lionel was able to take us into several of these private buildings to show us that the apparently substantial buildings were, in fact, constructed of wood much as the previous ones. We left these building feeling that Rennes is a city of staircases. The houses are built around courtyards from which arise the most beautiful original wooden staircases, carefully preserved as are the interiors of many houses.

We walked through the old streets with plenty of intriguing boutiques of various types until we came to Place des Lices where, each Saturday, there is the second largest food market in France open from five, yes, five in the morning until two in the afternoon. The 2 market buildings look rather modern to the casual glance but date from 1869. This square was where many of the important people of Rennes found space to build their mansions. Lionel was able to access one of these mansions some of which was used as professionals' offices, Again, the most imposing carved wooden staircase and, apparently, as an historic monument, the original friezes and murals of the interior are protected.

There are numerous small, hidden places which Lionel was able to show us - a

section of the medieval town wall, now hidden in the courtyard of a modern building.. A courtyard off Place Saint Anne which illustrates not only that crooked buildings can be stable but that those buildings showed 3 lower stories not visible in the buildings at the back of them This was because the buildings at the back were a bridge but rubble from the fire had been used to level the ground there but not in the courtyard behind. Apparently, not even the locals generally know about these things.

Lunchtime - oh dear, too much choice for us country yokels! Should we go to the restaurant in the old prison just for the atmosphere? Crêperie,, outdoor restaurant, sandwich shop, ice-cream parlour, modern fast food, plat du jour of faux filet or rabbit or guinea fowl or, maybe à la carte.....? French, Chinese, Greek, Ethnic? The prices were very reasonable and it was so hard to get going for the second leg.

The first two visits of the afternoon were to 2 contrasting courtyard buildings one of which had a facade and the other was stone-built throughout with a semi-enclosed stair built of stone with wrought iron balustrades unlike the more common wood.

The next visit was to the Parlement of Brittany. To get there we crossed the square between the Hôtel de Ville designed by the king's architect and the Rennes Opera. Lionel pointed out that the architect who designed the Opera decided on a design which was the opposite of that of the Hôtel de Ville, this having 2 wings with a concave semi-circular central section whilst the Opera has a rotunda flanked by 2 wings.

Twenty years ago, the Parlement caught fire some time shortly after a fairly fierce demonstration by fishermen in the square. By the time the fire was noticed by some students, it was too late to save the roof and most of the first floor. This was devastating as the building had been built with a second purpose in mind, that of depicting the power of the Crown. The original design had had a terrace to the front the same size as the footprint of the building making the square much smaller than now. From that terrace arose an imposing stairway to the main entrance on the first floor. As the pre-fire houses had been half the height of the replacements, the Parlement was designed to completely dominate the city representing the dominance of the King. The burnt-out first floor had been the most impressive and decorated floor with the ground floor used for commerce.

The restoration of the Parlement, which is, more correctly the Palais de Justice, is outstanding as well as beautiful. However, fate had one more disaster to throw at Rennes. During the fire, many of the ancient tapestries had been saved and sent to Paris for repair. Sadly, there was yet another fire in the Paris atelier which destroyed those tapestries.

Rennes , the city of fires and staircases, is a beautiful and very interesting city to visit and has the advantage of being relatively flat. There are various guide tours available are the Tourist Office or, if you prefer, a map in English with a comprehensive walking tour..... and don't forget all those lovely restaurants and shops.

