



Wendy Mewes speaking about traditional Breton head-dresses

Wendy:

The coiffe is perhaps now the most recognised cultural symbol of Brittany, in many ways. It's become regionally, nationally and internationally famous, in advertising, tourism and commercial products. The problem is that that is the coiffe of one particular part of Brittany and in fact the coiffe depended on each community, had their own style, their own history, their own development, and it's very much about local and personal identity and pride. The coiffe that is the most popular and has kind of over ridden all the others is from Pays Bigouden, the South West corner of Brittany, Finistere, south of Quimper. The main town is Pont-l' Abbé and on the opposite side on the Atlantic coast, if you drive through Pors Poulhan, you will pass a great statue of a Bigouden woman, with a great tall towering lace coiffe, which is so famous. So that area of Brittany is where this coiffe, that has taken over all the others comes from.

Now there's a story attached to it, a very famous story, which requires a little bit of history....In 1675 the revolt of the Papier timbré, otherwise known as the Bonnets Rouges, took place particularly in Western Brittany. It became a revolt of peasants against their overlords, the nobles. Many manors were burnt, nobles were actually murdered by peasants and Louis 14th decreed the most savage punishments, executing very many of the peasants involved, but also the symbolic punishment of cutting off the towers of many chapels in the area, as a punishment for ringing the bells to summon the peasants to rebellion and you can still see that in places like Lambourin Pont-L'Abbé to this day. The chapel with the tower cut off...and the story is that the resilient and courageous women of Pays Bigouden raised their previously flat head dresses into great lace towers to symbolise the lost towers of the chapels. This of course is not true at all, but it's a very good story and it partly accounts for this great popularity of this very showy coiffe that in the early part of the 20th century actually reached its height of between 30 and 40 centimetres. And as I said at the beginning this Pays Bigouden coiffe has taken over as a symbol of the whole of Brittany but nothing could be further from the truth as I think Marie-Laure is going to tell us now.