

The Cathedral of St Corentin, Quimper

Thursday morning, 15 September

We had all gazed up at the impressive pierced twin spires, glittering in the late afternoon sun, as we emerged from the adjacent Breton Museum the previous afternoon. On entering the west door the first surprise was to find that the nave and chancel are not on a straight axis, but that

the chancel kinks to the left: apparently this is not unique, and is a feature of other cathedrals in Brittany. As with many aspects of Breton history, there is a choice of legends explaining the offset. A possible explanation at Quimper is that the 13th century chancel was built on the foundations of earlier 9th or 11th century structures. Construction halted with the wars of succession and epidemics of the 14th century. It was not until the 15th century (the golden age of Breton prosperity) that building of the nave commenced, by which time the adjoining bishop's palace could have got in the way. Interestingly, Truro Cathedral, built in the late 19th century by Pearson, in homage to Breton cathedral architecture, has a similar kink between nave and chancel.

France was spared the 16th and 17th century destruction seen in English churches, but only until the Revolution: during the Reign of Terror in 1793 the craftsmen's booths along the outside of Quimper Cathedral were converted into bars, the interior given over to 'the Cult of Reason' and huge bonfires made of the furnishings. It appears that much of the 15th and 16th century stained

glass, for which Brittany was famous, was destroyed at this time, but the sharp eye of Rachel Moss spotted that much of the clerestory glass of the chancel, depicting Breton saints, was authentic; and beautiful it is too. In the mid-19th century restoration began. The spires were completed and the interior simplified by removal of altars; much of the woodwork was coated with a walnut stain simulating age, in the taste of the moment.

Probably the most interesting item of woodwork in the cathedral is the magnificent carved baroque pulpit, dated 1679, complete with its sounding board. The graceful curved staircase is inset with carved and gilded panels depicting scenes from the life of St Corentin. The image of his death bed in particular shows furnishings of the time in some detail, including the grouping of pictures on the wall. What is not clear is how such a large and extravagant structure survived the sacking of the building during the Revolution. Could it have been out of fashion and stored elsewhere, or was it deliberately hidden before the bonfires were started?

Jeremy Bate



An early 19th century lit clos from Finistère, in the Breton Museum, Quimper.



A 17th century carved oak coffer from the Breton Museum, Quimper; height 3ft 7 1/2 in (110cm) length 6ft 1 in (185cm).



Grain coffers illustrated in a 17th century painting in the chapel of Loc-Mélar en Sizun, Finistère