

Maison Bigouden, Pont L'Abbé, Finistère

Thursday morning, 15 September

This folk museum at the charming Kervazégan Farm is set in the heart of Bigouden, a district named after the distinctive tall white lace head-dress traditionally worn by the women. The modest lime-washed rubblestone farmhouse is approached by a chestnut-lined path. It is a south-facing single-storied structure with dormer windows facing a walled rectangular yard with barns to each side.

The interior consists of two large similar sized rooms on either side of a narrow hall separated by panelled wooden walls painted attractive shades of matt blue and green. The floors, which appear as hard as concrete, were made of beaten earth and chalk, polished with resin and sawdust. It was traditional in Bigouden houses for a table to be placed at the window, its axis towards the centre of the room. On either side there is a bench, one of which is used to climb into a box bed which sits directly behind it.

These enclosed short beds, often with carved and perforated sliding doors, had no roof in this part of Brittany. The occupants finished undressing within the bed and tumbled into an eiderdown filled with husks of oats. Those RFS members who travelled to Northern Holland a few years back will recall similar beds and stools to gain access. Again, here in Brittany, the short structure ensured the occupant slept in a semi-reclined position. Superstition supposed a supine slumber led to death.



Detail of the pulpit in Quimper Cathedral, showing the scene of the death of St Corentin.



The carved eagle on the lectern in Quimper Cathedral appears to take exception to Michael Legg's torch inspection of the base.

Along the windowless wall opposite would be one, two, three or more tall cupboards, a dresser (perhaps with a built-in clock), and maybe another box bed. These boxy pieces appear to have been made to a standard height with no return mouldings or cornice, allowing them to be butted up against each other like an early form of system furniture. Like so many pieces of vernacular furniture it is difficult to date these pieces, but we learned that from the mid-19th century in this region it became fashionable to decorate large items with brass studs to catch the limited light from the window opposite. Some had the date picked out in studs: one example was made in 1895. The distinctive scrolled brass escutcheon plates often had religious symbols punched onto them, and one piece bore the profiles of Napoleon III and Eugénie. Sophie, our guide, explained that the imperial couple were popular in this region because they championed agricultural workers.

It was difficult to determine the timber that these well polished and patinated pieces were made from, but Bill

Cotton pronounced most to be of chestnut, and at least one to be of wild cherry. He added that chestnut and cherry trees would have been grown for their seasonal crops and would only be turned into furniture once their fruiting days were in decline. Oak, bearing no important crop, was a scarcer tree and thus more prized.

This was the second museum where we were confronted with a line of cupboards virtually filling the long back wall of a room, and members were curious for an explanation. It was the custom for a prospective bride's family to arrive at the door of her future husband bearing an armoire, and to try to propel it through the entrance; the groom would make an attempt to reject it. It is unclear whether so many cupboards would have existed in one home in the mid-19th century, but we understood that they accumulated later by inheritance, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th century when emigration and the movement of younger family members to the industrial cities depopulated the countryside.

Jeremy Bate