

# The chapels of Notre-Dame, Kerfons, Locmaria, Belle-Isle-en-Terre and Loc Envel

Saturday morning, 17 September

Our Saturday morning visits, in beautiful countryside east of Morlaix, were to three churches all retaining their late medieval rood screens, similar to the one we had seen at Le Faouët. These elaborately carved and originally polychromed screens, surmounted by galleries for preaching or the display of relics, are true treasures of Breton churches. A decree of the Council of Trent (1545-63), forbidding any

obstruction of the view of the high altar from the nave, brought an end to the provision of rood screens; it is thought some 100 survived into the 17th century in Brittany, although only about 15 now remain.

Our first visit was to the funerary chapel of the Seigneurs de Coetfrec at Kerfons. The rood screen of circa 1485 was the most complete example we were to see; it survives in its original position, retains its polychrome decoration (considered to have been 'refreshed'), and still has the circular staircase to the gallery. The screen is of five bays, with a central door flanked by four flamboyant gothic windows. Six carved circular pillars support the gallery; on the gallery facing the nave are carvings of the 12 Apostles and Mary Magdalene, St Barbara and the risen Christ. On the gallery facing the high altar are 13 panels of interlaced foliage, similar to panels on the Plougrescant dressoir. Every available surface is vigorously carved, with men and animals, vines, interlaced foliage, gothic buttresses and depending angels.

Other notable woodwork in the chapel includes the wooden roof of the south transept, rebuilt in 1559. Soaring above the transept, the alternate principals are each carved with an elaborate grotesque figure, similar to Andrea Du Cerceau's designs of long-necked harpies and terms thought to date from about 1560. For many years this had been covered by a later ceiling and was only re-discovered during restoration work in 1976. The wooden retable of the high altar also has renaissance detail but with none of the sophistication of the south transept roof; it is a technicoloured confection of columns, saints and disembodied angels, thankfully restrained behind an altar rail supported on close-set Ionic balusters of yew or cedar – the dark finish made definite identification difficult.

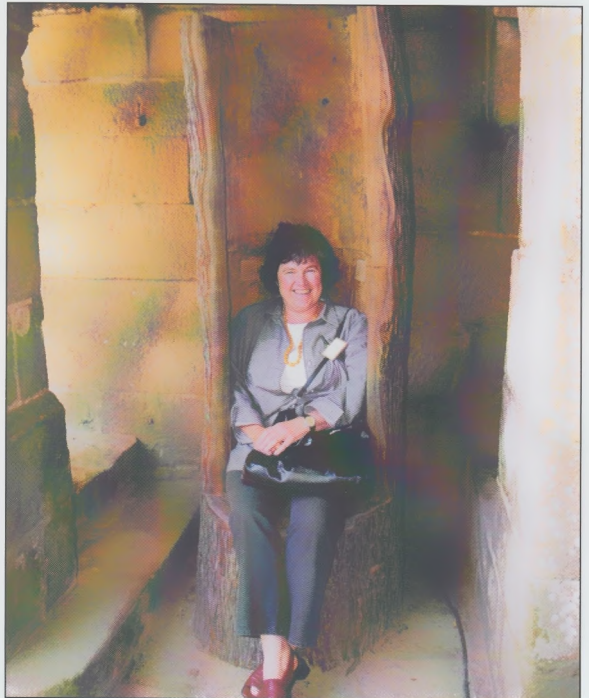
In the north transept is an imposing wall settle, considered by members to be in the same tradition as those from the West Country, such as the one from Muchelney Abbey. However details of its design and construction led us to consider this of a later date. Despite the use of mason's mitres to the moulding of the framing of the back, the use of joiner's mitres to construct the moulded raising design of the panels to the back of the settle, rather than the earlier linenfold design, and the turned, ringed baluster supports to the seat and arms, suggested a date in the second half of the 16th or possibly early 17th centuries. Empty plough grooves below the gothic finials would have held the now missing panels, presumably pierced or carved, which originally fitted above the top rail of the back. This combination of gothic and renaissance detail was a feature we had already noticed in the carving of late 16th and 17th century panelled chests.

Our second chapel of the morning, at Locmaria, near Belle-Isle-en-Terre, is dedicated to Our Lady of the

Whooping Cough, and had been a place of pilgrimage for the recovery of sick children. The screen here, no longer with its polychrome decoration or in its original position, has both 12 Apostles and interlaced leaves very similar to those on the screen at Kerfons. Sophie Duhem suggests that the particular treatment of eyes, cheeks and grimacing mouth of a monstrous dragon carved at the end of one of the roof beams indicates the work of one of the master carvers working in the area in the late 15th century, Jean Jouhaff, active 1484-1500, whose name appears in the fabric accounts at Tréguier Cathedral and in an inscription on a beam at Tredrez church.

Our third visit was to the church at Loc Envel, a small village clinging to the side of a wooded valley. St Envel, one of the Celtic missionaries, is believed to have established a church here when the village became his mother's home. The rood screen, again lacking its original polychrome decoration, appears to be slightly later than the others we had seen, having a combination of gothic and renaissance detail in the carvings. The church boasts a beautiful 16th century ceiling with depending polychrome figures, very unusually carved in the round. They include God the Father, Christ showing the stigmata, and angels carrying instruments of the Passion. Here also was the only turret clock we saw in a church nave, presumably in its original position as it was above a stone-lined pit excavated to allow the descent of the driving weights.

*Michael and Polly Legg*



Sue Bourne at Chateau Kerjean.