

# The Chapels of St Fiacre and Ste Barbe, Le Faouët

Thursday afternoon, 15 September

Finistère, described as the most Breton part of Brittany, is a land of priests and pagans, pierced steeples and spectacular parish closes, where fervent piety is said to mingle with ancient superstition. This was apparent as we took the road to reach the two chapels via Quimperlé, a beautiful old town developed on an island at the confluence of the rivers Ellé & Isole. Our destination was Le Faouët, a small village named after the surrounding hills once covered with beech trees (*faou* means beech tree in the Breton language).

St Fiacre is the patron saint of gardeners and he is usually depicted with a spade in his right hand. He emigrated from Ireland in the seventh century and settled in Meaux where he spent time praying and punishing himself in an isolated retreat in the middle of a forest, gaining a reputation for his prowess as a healer; he died in 670. The chapel, and several fine buildings nearby, were built at the behest of a local family. After visiting the chapel of St Fiacre, pilgrims went on to visit the nearby chapels of St Sebastian and Ste Barbe.

Inside St Fiacre chapel was a beautiful polychrome oak rood screen, the best preserved of its type in France. It dates from 1480 and is the work of Olivier le Loergan, a multi-talented artist subsequently ennobled. It is missing the platform that was usually placed above the screen; this was used to expose relics and the Holy Sacrament to the



An illustration of the arrival of the armoire at the bridegroom's house, from *Vie des Bretons dans L'Armorique* (1844)



Brass-studded armoires from the Maison Bigouden



Detail of a cupboard at the Maison Bigouden, showing religious motifs and studding



Detail of the sliding door to a bed in the Maison Bigouden

faithful. The most important part of the rood screen was a structure known as 'the beam of glory' which included Christ on the cross, St John and the Virgin Mary. The screen was restored several times in the 19th and 20th centuries, not always successfully. The purpose of the doors (and curtains) in the middle of the screen was to obscure from the congregation what was happening during the Mass. Only at the Eucharist stage were the doors opened.

In the decorations on the side facing the congregation (the *côté fidèle*), the Crucifixion and the Annunciation were depicted, together with St Martin and St Gregory. It was explained that during the Mass of St Martin, the focus was on two women who hadn't been to confession, so the Devil wrote down a list of their sins. At the Mass of St. Gregory the focus was on a fox disguised as a monk preaching to chickens that he then killed and ate.

On the opposite side of the screen animals were depicted: savage dragons, a unicorn and a lion, with apple catchers and a green man; also a small seated individual with a barrel in one hand and a goblet in the other. He was said to be 'throwing up a fox!' This explanation caused much hilarity. Apparently its roots are in the literature of Rabelais, and the expression, *vomir le renard*

is still used in the Toulouse area of France. Our translation was 'drunk as a skunk'!

With these images in our minds we continued our pilgrimage to the chapel of Ste Barbe. Born in Turkey, she converted to Christianity despite opposition from her father. He was so angry that he locked her up in a tower where she was tortured and decapitated with his own sword in 235. At the moment of her death, he was struck by lightning. As virgin and martyr she prays for protection from fire and lightning, and is therefore the patron saint of firemen, miners, sailors and paramedics. The chapel was built in 1489 at the wish of Seigneur de Toulboudou who, while out hunting, was struck by lightning but lived to tell the tale. He promised to build a chapel to the glory of Ste Barbe on the very spot where the lightning struck. The building work lasted 25 years, which was a speed record for the time and achieved, so legend has it, through the efforts of mysterious red oxen who transported materials at the dead of night!

Of particular note were the three stone staircases built in 1700 in the style of Louis XIII. The chapel was built in flamboyant Gothic style with two finely carved doors, soaring gargoyles and pinnacles. The polygonal turret, with



The rood screen from the Chapel of St Fiacre, Le Fauouët, by Olivier le Loergan, 1480



The chapel of Ste Barbe, Le Fauouët

its three windows representing the Trinity, has a prisoner: a small statue of Ste Barbe. Stained glass windows relate the story of Ste Barbe and the mysteries of the faith. As we left the chapel to climb the stone staircase, a small fitted room in the wall, of uncertain use, could be seen: some said it was an ossuary, others that it was a refuge for beggars. Other beautiful monuments were observed on the climb up the steps, including a fountain sheltering a statue of Ste Barbe, built in 1708.

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