

A VISIT TO NORMANDY, SEPTEMBER 1983

by Dolly Potter

After the turmoil of the 9th century when Christian Europe was beset on all sides, the 10th century (at least in Normandy, following the Treaty of St. Clair sur Epte in 911) was a time of peace and increasing prosperity which led to the great religious rebuilding of the 11th century whose monuments were the chief goal of our visit. But we saw much else besides.

Passing through rebuilt Le Havre, on a sparkling morning, we stopped briefly at the Pont de Tancarville, a suspension bridge of 1995 feet central span, opened in 1959 after "3,477,000 heures de travail", and—as its plaque records—"aucun accident mortel".

Eastwards a comfortable pastoral landscape, with slate-roofed chalk houses banded in red brick, and small timber-framed barns, led past the icing-white church of St. Léonard and the Roman theatre of Villebonne. A plain of larger, close-studded houses and barns, many formerly long-houses with byres now converted to garages, led to the suburbs of Caudebec with yellow-brick Victorian houses neatly trimmed in stone. Our stop in Caudebec was too short to appreciate fully the wonderful Gothic sculpture of the porches; one must return.

We heard Gregorian mass at St. Wandrille where the monks have cleverly adapted a fine medieval aisled barn to replace their ruined church. A tour of the 17th and 18th century conventual buildings, with earlier fragments and symbolic carvings, preceded a brisk trot through the woods to St. Saturninus' chapel, the earliest Romanesque building we saw. Early 10th century on a 6th century foundation, (and with re-used classical impost) tiny and trefoil-apsed, it showed thick-mortared herringbone masonry upon which sat snugly a later medieval tiled timber roof.

At Duclair the Restaurant du Parc did us proud, a fitting prologue to Jumièges, where two ruined churches side by side illustrate changes from 10th century to 11th century. St. Pierre, begun 949, still had a narthex and stair turrets of modest scale, whereas Notre Dame, a century later, had big west towers and a three-storey porch, full three-stage bay design and ribbed groin vaults to the aisles. Fragments of early carved stones were built into the walls and polychrome plaster survived in places.

The abbey church of St. Georges-de-Boscherville was a puzzle. Externally handsome, with bold massing and finely carved west doorway, internally stark white and (apart from some very pretty carving at the east end) appallingly crudely cut. Were two minds at work here around 1100? Or had there been a fierce restoration? However, a rich, late 12th century Chapter House compensated.

All tastes could be pleased in robust Rouen. We saw three fine churches: the Cathedral, with its lofty nave and apsidal

chancel, a little like Canterbury; dainty, delicate St. Maclou, with good old glass in its nine chevet chapels, magnificent organ case and stair; and St. Ouen with rich narrative porches and airy towers. Sculpture dominates in Rouen in churches and in the doorcases of tall timber houses lining its oldest streets.

On a windy, showery Saturday we drove east through rich, mixed farming country with black-and-white spotted cows and prim brick villas; then a hilly, wooded area by the Forêt de Lyons, across the River Andelle and back into the Seine valley, where much maize grows and timber framing reappears.

Les Andelys was one vast street market, selling everything from tractors to toothpaste, old and new, dotted with roundabouts and sideshows. Our coach was slowed then stopped altogether by the holiday crowds; until a female Moses in red trousers parted the human waters with her bicycle and led us, cheering, through the throng.

Romantically perched on a bluff above the river, Château Gaillard was a classic site: round keep within enceinte within large bailey, all built in beautiful masonry of hard chalk blocks with flint and rubble infill. Richard Lionheart left a lovely thing, though he could not defend it!

Westward through woods, orchards and pastures across the broad Eure valley we saw timber houses on flint plinths, their exposed gables slate-hung. Beyond the rich Neubourg plain lies Brionne, a charming town with some good 18th century brick houses and an interesting church, apparently mostly about 1400 but with puzzling signs of earlier work. Here the timber-framed houses illustrate a distinct Norman vernacular style: on each floor fairly close studding, with long straight braces, above a low rail; and square, diagonal-cross panels below. Although in places more elaborate (particularly around Bernay where one sees duplicate braces and herringbone panels) the basic style pervades, and persists into the 18th century.

The farmsteads around Le Bec have big, projecting half-hipped wagon porches and external granary stairs. At the Abbey of Le Bec Hellouin, landmarked by its tall belltower of 1450, the Abbot sent his personal regrets at having departed for Jerusalem that very morning. We were shown round by a brisk monk, excellent in English, through the 17th and 18th century monastic buildings, the 18th century formal gardens round the canalized Beck (whose médieval water system is used to this day), the chapel (with St. Hellouin's tomb) made from the barrel-vaulted former refectory; and the 17th century cloister with earlier sculptured detail.

South now through woodlands to Bernay, where the grand but mutilated Abbey church stands near 17th century houses with moulded brickwork. One remembers specially the huge wagon

roof of the nave, the later domical vault in the south aisle, varied carved capitals throughout — and amazing modern restorations in timber.

A whistle-stop at Lisieux, with its asymmetrical Gothic cathedral and old carved wooden houses, then on through rubble stone country, with crow-stepped gables, to Bayeux, where our hotel was a typical U-shaped 17th century house of finely-dressed stone with ornamental dormers and cantilevered stone staircase.

The Cathedral, begun 1077, contrasts a richly patterned Norman nave arcade with a 13th century clerestory, vault and chancel — very French, with lots of flying buttresses and radiating chapels. We went back at night for “*Son et Lumière*” and next morning to study the sculptured portals.

Bayeux’s other glory, the famous Embroidery, is beautifully restored and displayed, with multilingual Anglophobe recorded commentary. Harold was not shot in the eye; he was struck down beneath the hoofs of a Norman charger!

Sunday took us through a rich land of larger imposing farmsteads, past the jolly restored Château de Creully, to early 12th century Thaon church. Arcading and patterns not unlike Bayeux cover the outside walls. (Within, despite its damp valley site, the church was host to an exhibition of truly horrible paintings.) Again there was rich and refined ornament — and the Mystery of the circumscribing Brown Band, which no-one could explain.

On to Caen, the climax of our tour, a big city with spectacular public gardens, a castle converted to a public park, and the two great abbey churches. Ste. Trinité is slightly earlier, of modest size and Benedictine plan. The nave has a very low arcaded tribune stage and clerestory whose design is dictated by the early 12th century rib vault. The choir arm (above a charming groin-vaulted crypt) is a noble composition sadly obscured by dark modern glass.

St. Etienne is a much grander affair with an elaborate radiating chevet, big galleried transepts, dominant twin West towers and full three-stage bay design, somewhat cramped above by the later vault.

The early 18th century conventual buildings, now in civic use, show rococo woodwork and fittings of high quality; and fine staircases, the principal one having an unsupported bottom flight.

So we came west to our last stop at Honfleur, an utterly picturesque little harbour town which the French have been wise enough to leave alone. (Could we but do the same!) A thoroughly enjoyable dinner at the tiny restaurant La Tortue sent us happily off to the ferry. Thanks once again to Susan Gold and Elizabeth Cooper for organizing, guiding and preparing material for this most rewarding and worthwhile trip.