

Cambrian Archaeological Association 158th Summer Meeting in Gascony

25th June - 2nd July 2011

On the 25th of June 40 Cambrians assembled in Bordeaux by various means of travel from various parts of Wales, England, Ireland and even Portugal. Those who arrived early had the pleasure of exploring Bordeaux, and even those who arrived later in the day were taken for a drive down the newly restored and invigorated quay alongside the river, with fountains, eighteenth century buildings mirror pools and a shiny new tram system. The coach brought us via the fortified mill at Barbaste and the haunts of *le bon roi, Henri Quatre* to Condom, the small but elegant city which would be our base for the week.

The week was organised with enormous enthusiasm and meticulous care by Marie-Thérèse Castay who, after a career in the University of Toulouse, had returned to her native region where she knew all the places and all the people who would ensure that a fascinating, informative and above all an enjoyable time would be had by all. Her first success was the choice of hotel – the Hotel Continental close to the river – very comfortable, quiet and serving delicious food. The formal dinner with regional specialities on the Tuesday evening was a *tour de force*. The proprietor, Veronique Sémézies was an ideal host. The coach firm, Bajolle, and especially our driver, Bastien, gave splendid service too, perhaps because his grandmother had been a friend of Marie-Therese's parents. It was that kind of a meeting; one where the Cambrians were absorbed into a network of friends and family and everyone came away feeling that they knew intimately that corner of the Gers, so densely filled with fascinating historical sites that few journeys were longer than 25 km.

Sunday morning, after the rigours of the journey, was designed to be leisurely, and the increasing heat of the day made that a necessity and curtailed the exploration of Condom proposed for the afternoon. The morning was spent at Mass in the Cathedral or alternatively at one of the town's best Armagnac distilleries. Both parties returned to the hotel for lunch via the narrow streets of the town centre where 16th and 17th century houses were pointed out, and even a window of 12th century date surviving in a much-altered facade. In the afternoon several British friends of Marie-Thérèse brought their cars to the hotel (where lunch was taken every day) to ferry members to the Ancien Carmel on the outskirts of town. This old Carmelite convent had recently been converted into a hostel for pilgrims and retreatants and its chapel re-designed for use as a lecture room. It proved to be a cool and well-aired refuge from the mid-day sun and was an ideal setting for the daily lectures which provided the background to the visits.

On Sunday Marie-Thérèse herself gave a beautifully illustrated introduction to the geography of the region and to the broad sweep of its history. Gascony /Aquitaine was a particularly sophisticated part of Gallo-Roman France, but suffered in the barbarian invasions, and throughout the Middle Ages was battered by the triangular power struggles of the Counts of Armagnac and the French and English kings, struggles in which many Welshmen were involved. The Plantagenets had become players in this field with the marriage of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine and remained active there until the end of the Hundred Years War in the 15th century. After that the players changed – the English left (only to return in the 20th century), the house of Albret eclipsed Armagnac and the Wars of Religion brought Henry of Navarre to prominence and eventually the French throne, bringing Gascony firmly with him. The 18th century saw a period of peace and prosperity under the wise administration of Antoine Mégret D'Etigny, but disruption returned with the Revolution. Throughout all this turbulent history the Gers sustained an agricultural economy, as it still does today, with the addition of many blazing fields of sunflowers. Another constant was the stream of pilgrims crossing the region on the road to Compostella, bringing with them artistic styles which

make the small country churches a delight. Perhaps less constant than the agriculture, this strand is also present in the Gers of today.

Afterwards the whole party went to the Cathedral for an architectural tour with a lecturer from the Tourist Office, but since the heat outside was intense it was decided that it would be wise to return to the hotel directly rather than continuing with a walking tour of the town.

Monday's programme was devoted largely to the Romans. The main visit in the morning was to the great villa at Séviac. Gascony and south-west France has a great number of wealthy villas, evidence of the high level of prosperity and education in this part of the Roman world which survived the decline of the Empire. This villa, whose excavation and display during the later part of the 20th century was due to the energy, knowledge and enthusiasm of a local woman, Paulette Aragon-Launet who received little official support until the importance of her findings became apparent. The huge villa is adorned with large and well-preserved mosaics in virtually every room and all the corridors. Most of what is displayed belongs to the IVth and Vth centuries, but there is evidence that the estate was established by the II century and occupation continued into the VIIth century, but by then invasions had damaged the local economy and the great bath house was turned to agricultural use. The later evidence included an early Christian church with baptistry and a cemetery of Christian graves. On leaving the site a brief visit was made to the nearby *bastide* at Montréal, but the Museum was unexpectedly closed.

After lunch at the hotel the party set out for Nogaro because the Roman lecture had had to be cancelled. Nogaro was an important site on the pilgrimage to Compostella and the church is an especially fine and interesting example of Romanesque architecture. After examining some of the surviving conventual buildings the party entered the church under a fine carved tympanum to look at the particularly fine series of carved capitals and Romanesque frescoes. Since this was an addition to the programme there was no guidance in the Programme Booklet, a situation which led to a lively debate about the identification of the biblical scenes represented.

We then returned to the original programme and left for Eauze, one of the oldest towns in Gers since it began life as an Iron Age *oppidum* and became the capital of the Elusates and a Roman colony, though the centre of occupation moved a little during those six centuries. Evidence for the splendour of the Roman town emerged from the excavation of the railway in the 19th century and more recently (1985) in the discovery of a huge hoard of silver coins and jewellery of the III century belonging to a single individual called Libo. So enormous was this hoard (28.000 coins) that a new museum was built to house it. After visiting the museum the party went out to see the recent excavations at Elusa, the original Roman town which replaced the *oppidum* located at Esbérous two miles away.

Tuesday started early with a visit to the fortified village of Larressingle, Marie-Thérèse's home village. Outside the imposing gateway she explained the origins of the village with the donation of this land in 1011 to the Benedictine monastery at Condom. The 12th century church is the oldest surviving building, followed by the earliest stages of the castle rising close beside it. From 1154 the fortress fell into the hands of the English and the village was jointly administered by Edward I and the abbot, an uncomfortable situation which nevertheless protected the village from further damage during the 100 Years War, though it did suffer in the 16th century Wars of Religion. The exact sequence of building within the church and the castle and the date of the houses built against the inner side of the encircling wall engendered a good deal of debate amongst the party.

From Larressingle the bus took us to the Pont d'Artigues which was crossed on foot in company with a group of modern pilgrims. This bridge and the lost Commanderie above it stood on one of the

long-established routes to Compostella. From the bridge the party went up to the small church of Vopillon, once the chancel of the much larger priory church of the Order of Nuns of Fontevrault. The Wars of Religion and finally the Revolution destroyed the priory and the church was reduced in size and nearly collapsed. A restoration programme in 1966 revealed a series of 13th century paintings showing the Nativity and Passion of Christ in the apse and well preserved around the door to the sacristy.

The lecture that afternoon covered the Pilgrim Routes to Compostella and was by Dr Lawrence Butler. From the Carmel the party went to the Cistercian Abbey of Flaran where the great abbey church and the Chapter House retain their Cistercian simplicity but the domestic quarters reflect a more opulent 18th century monastic life, ended at the Revolution. Dr Butler spoke about Cistercian architecture here in the fine chapter house, where his audience could sit comfortably on the monks' benches around the wall. A large Roman mosaic in the grounds is witness to another large villa similar to Séviac on land owned by the abbey. On the return journey a brief visit was made to the Chateau of Caissaigne, once a country retreat of the Bishops of Condom and now an Armagnac estate; and to Mouchan. At Mouchan we were met by the Mayor who has been most energetic in establishing the beautiful Romanesque church with its unusual fortified tower on the tourist circuit, as a member of the network of Cluniac foundations. The 12th century church has several points of design which relate to the transition from Romanesque to Gothic and some fine corbels, capitals and doorway details.

Wednesday was another day of day of religious architecture with an interlude for tea in a delightful garden. The morning started at a small Romanesque church, Ste Germaine de Soldunum, with a puzzling construction history. Although not on the original pilgrim route, it is popular with modern pilgrims to Compostella and we met a group there that morning. Like many others this church suffered damage in the 17th century wars and was reduced in size. The remaining central apse has a beautiful blind arcade and finely carved capitals. The nave was truncated in the 18th century when the western roof collapsed. Outside on the north side there is clear evidence of a missing short apse and on the south side there is a very fine decorated doorway (blocked) whose role is puzzling since it cannot be recognised on the inside.

From Ste Germaine the party went to La Romieu, an entirely gothic structure of the 14th century. This great church was built by a local man, Cardinal Arnaud D'Aux a cousin of Pope Clement V. He was a papal diplomat who had many dealings with the English court and Edward II granted him funds to found a college of canons in his native village, alongside a great palace for himself which he did not live to enjoy. The huge church is a long rectangle with a tower at each end. The eastern one houses the sacristy, the chapter house and an archive room. The view from the belvedere on the top was enjoyed by only a few Cambrians, but most reached the chapter house and all were able to see the painted sacristy. This room has a series of angels skilfully filling the spaces between the ribs of the vaulting, interspersed with heraldic shields. The painting was highlighted with silver which, now tarnished, gives a heavier look to the decoration than the artist and patron intended. The large cloister was unusual in having a second storey in wood, which was destroyed by fire in 1569. At the Revolution the cardinal's palace was sold off and eventually demolished and the Collegiate church became a parish church.

The lecture that day was the Presidential Address 'Aristocratic Residence in the Plantagenet world: Britain and Europe' given by Professor Gwyn Meirion-Jones. The text is published elsewhere in this volume. Although the Annual General Meeting had not been held because this meeting was not within the UK, on the previous evening Professor Meirion-Jones had been invested as President by Professor Tony Carr, a past-president of the Association.

The party returned to La Romieu via a rare survival, the chapel of the Commanderie at Abrin. These establishments were set up to serve the needs of pilgrims. This one, though independent at first, was run by the Order of St John of Jerusalem and was very prosperous until badly damaged in the Wars of Religion. At La Romieu the party enjoyed a splendid afternoon tea with a special Gascon apple cake at the beautiful arboretum at Les Jardins de Coursiana. On the return to Condom a short stop was made at the Romanesque church at Lialores. The triple-apsed east end has some particularly fine carving on the exterior and the gothic west end is topped by a triangular wall-belfry, a very characteristic later addition on many churches in this region.

Thursday was a day devoted to the *bastide* towns which are such a feature of this region in the 13th and 14th centuries, just as they are in the areas of Wales washed by the same Plantagenet wars, when commerce needed serious protection. The first visit of the day was to Fourcès, a circular walled village with arcaded houses and shops around a central space which may have been the site of a motte castle of 11th century date. If the village had grown up around a castle it would be a *castelnau*, like Larressingle, rather than a true *bastide* or merchant town with an arcaded central market square which might not have had a castle. At Fourcès the surviving castle is peripheral, the arcaded stone houses replace earlier wooden ones and the church is outside the walls; all of these are *bastide* characteristics but they are late in the history of Fourcès.

The party then returned to the undoubted *bastide* of Montréal-du-Gers which was created in 1255 on a new site, on the end of a steep spur. The town has a clear grid pattern of streets focussing on the central market square with arcades. The gothic church, enlarged in 1300, is on the south east side of the square and is incorporated into the wall which originally completely surrounded the town. The town was designed from the start to be a large one and, in a period when towns changed hands frequently in the ebb and flow of French / English rivalry, documents show that it proved difficult to find burgesses, until rich privileges were granted.

After lunch the lecture was very appropriately one on French and Welsh *bastides* by Professor Tony Carr. The afternoon's visit was to the great castle of Lavardens, rescued from dilapidation by a devoted local group who had raised huge grants to bring it back to use as an art gallery. One of this group and also a member of one of the twelve families who had bought sections of the building after the Revolution, M Moth who is currently mayor of Lavardens, was our enthusiastic guide for the afternoon. Apart from the elegant stone patterned floors the huge rooms had lost their original sophisticated 17th century fittings, but they were still impressive. The castle, built in 1619 for Marshall Antoine de Roquelaure, an old man newly married to a young wife, was built on the ruins of a 12th century fortress occupying a prominent crag. The first two floors at the west end are part of this fortress and the 17th century chateau is built on them, enveloping the crag and dominating its landscape. The view from the roof was particularly exhilarating. The return to Condom was a little delayed this evening by some Cambrians losing the bus, but finding a bar! As a result the planned visit to Valence-sur-Baïse had to be postponed.

Friday's visit to Auch was the most distant visit made that week and was the only one to a major city; for the most part we had been exploring the great historical depth of small villages. In fact the first visit of the morning was to one such – Valence-sur-Baïse – founded as a new *bastide* in 1274 along the top of a narrow ridge. The market square with arcaded shops and the 8m high wall and one of the original gateways survive in a village which still retains its grid of medieval streets.

The history of Auch and of Eauze (visited on Monday) is one of similar but fluctuating power bases. Both were important Iron Age *oppida* which became Roman cities in the first centuries AD. Eauze was the capital of the Elusates, Auch of the Auscii. At Auch the flourishing Roman city was down on the flat lands on the right bank of the river, but the period of barbarian invasions forced the

inhabitants to move to high ground on the left bank which provided natural protection with steep slopes on all sides except the northern approach along the ridge-top. It was there that the medieval and modern city developed and when Elusa (Eauze) was destroyed in the 9th century, Auch became the main town of the region, as an archbishopric and as a centre of civil administration. This dual importance was a cause of friction for many centuries, added to which the establishment of a major independent monastery on the hill and a castle for the Counts of Armagnac, the growing power of the townspeople, and the ebb and flow of the struggles of the Plantagenets and the King of France, all make the history of Auch particularly complex. In 1716 when France was divided into *généralités* governed by *intendants* (representatives of the king) Auch became the seat of one of the most conscientious and far-sighted of these administrators, Antoine Mégret d'Etigny, whose period of office, though relatively short, saw major improvements to the infrastructure of the region. His memory is rightly celebrated by a fine statue which dominates the *allées* and Courts of Justice which he had built, together with many of the roads along which the Cambrians had travelled.

On arriving in the city some of the party went to visit the Museum, with good local collections and also some fine Central America material, down towards the lower town. Others stayed on the summit and explored the medieval streets around the cathedral, while checking the shops and restaurants for the best place for lunch. In the afternoon all assembled outside the city Tourist Office to meet Natasha, our official guide to the cathedral and the old town. The present cathedral was started in 1489 with a substantial crypt as foundation for the large sanctuary, but the main work belongs to the 16th century and it was not completed until 1672. The main glories of the cathedral are the series of stained glass windows by Arnault de Moles (1507-13) in the chapels of the ambulatory and the 113 magnificent Renaissance choir stalls (1510-54). Both the windows and the stalls are not only artistically of the highest quality but are an expression of a unified theology carrying a coherent devotional message. After the tour of the church there was a short recital by one of the cathedral organists on the great 17th century organ. The bus returned to Condom via the lower town, close to the sites of the Iron Age and Roman settlements, long abandoned and now a modern suburb.

Saturday saw a return to Bordeaux to catch trains and planes through the afternoon. This left time to pass through Nérac and glimpse the remains of the castle of Henry IV and to make a longer visit to Vianne, another well-preserved *bastide* town with an earlier church set at an angle across the prevailing grid of the streets. Rejoining the motorway, the bus became embedded in the traffic of the traditional French escape to the beaches but the wise planning of the organisers ensured that all travel deadlines were met.