

Let's Share a Glass with the Bretvins



For many Cardiff residents, there's nothing more enjoyable on a fine day than to stroll around the Lake at Roath Park. There's lots to see, particularly the many species of birds floating on the lake's surface. However, one lakeside feature that often goes unnoticed is the number of memorial plaques attached to benches or placed near trees. Messages on these plaques are often poignant and reading them serves to underpin the great sense of loss felt by family members. Whilst many of the messages are written in English or Welsh, one differs. Underneath the shade of a tree (described by the Parks Department as a "Quercus palustris") is a plaque whose inscription, partly in French, quotes the maxim ascribed to the French author, Jean Richepin:

"Bois le Vin, Sois Bon Comme Lui" - "Drink the wine, be as good as it "

Since 1948 the words have been used as the motto of an Organisation of world-wide renown based at Nantes, in France. This is the, "L'Ordre des Chevaliers Bretvins" , which, for present purposes can be translated as the "Brotherhood of the Bretvin Knights", in short, the "Bretvins".

The history of the Bretvins goes back to 1948 when Nantes, like many other European towns and cities, was suffering post-war economic hardship. On 20th May of that year, a group of local businessmen - winegrowers and traders - came together to discuss how the local economy might be revived, particularly in respect of the region's cuisine and wine, particularly its Muscadet. Such was the group's determination that it was decided that a "framework" was needed to help it achieve its objectives. In turn, this led to the creation of the Bretvins.

Since its beginning, the Brotherhood of the Bretvin Knights has maintained three objectives: firstly, to promote the local economy; secondly, to promote tourism; thirdly, to promote the culture of the Nantes region, particularly in respect of its historic link with the Duchy of Brittany.

This third objective is of particular importance. Until the Second World War Nantes had been part of the Duchy of Brittany. (Indeed, it had once been its capital for hundreds of years.) For this reason the Brotherhood of the Bretvin Knights has consistently demonstrated its commitment to the customs and traditions of Breton mediaeval folklore. Indeed, many facets of its management and structure - even its mode of dress - are permeated by elements of its Breton past:



- Its Patron is Anne, Duchess of Brittany and Queen of France.
- Its induction ceremony for bestowing knighthood is based upon the Breton version of the "Chivalric Code".
- It resembles a mediaeval guild of merchants formed to promote the economic interests of their members as well as to provide protection and mutual aid.
- Its designated name, "Bretvins" is a blending of "Bret" - taken from Duchess Anne's soubriquet, "La Petite Brette" and "Vins", i.e., "Wines".



During its early years, the Brotherhood of the Bretvins was often linked to local groups who also sought to promote Breton culture. One of these was the, "Kevrenn de Nantes", a Breton pipe band formed in 1950 by Emile Allain. Emile's life was devoted to the revival of traditional Breton music and he was always willing to adapt his music to the wishes of the Bretvins. Interestingly, when William Muston, Lord Mayor of Cardiff, visited Nantes in April 1952, it was the Kevrenn de Nantes which

welcomed him.

In terms of its management and functioning, the Brotherhood of the Bretvin Knights follows the "corporate" model of management with three tiers: the "High

Council", the "Dignitaries" and the "Chancellory".

The High Council, composed of 40 members, takes all decisions regarding the good running of the Bretvins. It also appoints a "High Master", a type of Chief Executive, who heads the second tier of management, the "Dignitaries". Members



of the Dignitaries determine the Organisation's strategic direction . The third tier, the "Chancellory", oversees all day-to-day and annual activities.

The Dress Code is usually quite rigid. All Bretvins wear a hat, a gown, white gloves and a coloured collar. The knights wear green collars; musicians wear blue; the Dignitaries wear yellow collars; members

of the High Council wear red velvet. (Dignitaries can also wear varieties of ermine.) Females, admitted to the Bretvins in 2009, are known as the "Dames of the Duchess Anne". Dames currently number around 50. They wear a cape, a gown, green cuffs and headgear which has been described as "*perhaps more feminine*" than that of the knights .

The Breton regalia is always prominent during the many events which take place during the year. Attendance at these events is, for the most part, optional. There are four principal events.

The first is held on the Sunday nearest to January 22nd each year and is the occasion when the knights and dames attend Mass at a local church to mark the Feast of St. Vincent, the patron saint of winemakers.

During the third week-end of March the "Nantes Vineyard Fair", is held in the nearby town of Vallet. Described as the "showcase of the best vineyards of Muscadet wine", the Fair is renowned for the many hundreds of bottles which are exhibited, tested and, of course, tasted.



In mid-June the "Festival of the Flower of the Vine "takes place (in a different vineyard each year). Here the members wind their way through rows of vines, occasionally stopping to check the progress of the flowering, to admire the flower's beauty and to "savour its intoxicating fragrance".

In late summer or early autumn, following the grape harvest, the "Ceremony of the Golden

Bottle" takes place. This is the occasion when the Brotherhood awards a trophy to the commune which has won most medals at the wine competitions held at Nantes and Paris.



Perhaps the most important event for the individual Bretvin is "Intronisation", the ceremony of Induction when the prospective knight or dame is "dubbed". The ceremony, described as "solemn and moving", can be compared to the mediaeval ceremony of "adoubement" when the knight made promises to defend the weak, the poor and the oppressed.

The Bretvin also makes promises, but there the comparison ends. Where the mediaeval knight promised to defend the weak, the poor and the oppressed, the Bretvin's only concern is with wine. Reading from an inscribed pennant, he/she promises to "glorify" the wines of the Nantes region and to defend their reputation against assaults made by "jealous and envious people", including the "henchmen of Satan"! The ceremony ends with a final pledge:

"May my life be ruled by the motto of our order: Bois le Vin, Sois

Bon Comme Lui"

Promises of the Brotherhood of the Bretvin Knights

During its seventy- five years, fourteen Branches, of the Brotherhood have been established across Europe. These are called, “Bailliages”. Two were created in 1993. The first was the Bailliage of Jacksonville in Florida, USA; the second - much nearer to home - was the “Bailliage du Pays de Galles”, established at Cardiff on 23rd October 1993. Described as “dynamic”, the Welsh Bailliage follows the organisational structure of its parent body. At its head is the “Bailli”, the first official of a Council – le Conseil -which directs all activities. The titles of other officials include: Le Sénéchal, Le Maitre de la Monnaie, and Le Héraut. (Official titles are always written in French.)

Le Bailliage du Pays de Galles, Fonmon Castle



For many years the annual “Chapitre” (Assembly) meetings of the Welsh Bailliage were held at Fonmon Castle in the Vale of Glamorgan. However, following the sale of the castle, the Bailliage is currently without a central venue. That said, members look back fondly on the meetings at Fonmon. Hospitality was always second to none and the occasions were enlivened by the presence of colleagues from France. Meals were of the highest quality, and these were always preceded by the recitation of a short prayer of Grace. The prayer is in English with a translation in Welsh. There is no French version. One aspect of the prayer would not pass unnoticed as its main thrust appears to echo the promises made during the ceremony of Intronisation - to promote the virtues of wine, particularly of the Muscadet variety.

Bretvin Grace

*We thank you Lord before we dine,
for food, but most of all for wine
Wales, we pray for France,
friendship this our world enhance
We pray for peace in this our day,
We pray for Les Chevaliers
We thank you Lord, as every day,
for your great gift of MUSCADET*

Gweddi Bretvin

*Diolch i Dduw am y wledd hon,
Y bwyd a'r gwin wnawn fwyta'n llon We pray for
Gweddiwn dros ein Gwlad a Ffrainc, may
Y cyfeillgarwch sydd yn ffrainc
Gweddiwn dros heddwch yn ein dydd,
Dros y Marchogion yma sydd
Diolchwn Dduw am y rhodd-
Y "Muscadet" sydd wrth ein bodd*

No study of the Brotherhood of the Bretvin Knights would be complete without mentioning the "Bretvin Hymn" which is sung at the end of each Chapter meeting. The format never varies. The hymn consists of five verses sung by "experienced cantors" to the tune of "Le Pendu". At the end of each verse, all present join in with the chorus. Whilst the words of the first four verses are light hearted (and occasionally risqué), the words of the final verse can often engender a feeling of a communal sadness :



"..... and when the time comes for a Bretvin to leave this earthly life - purged of misery, forgiven, comforted and blessed - he will pass into Paradise and will meet his God who will say:

"My good friend, you are welcome You are now in charge of my Feasts".

The hymn closes with the Brotherhood's motto –
"Bois le Vin, Sois Bon Comme Lui".

All present sing or recite the words of the motto; the words are repeated; the High Master closes the Chapter; farewells are exchanged and all depart.

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My thanks to Anthony Pugh of the Welsh Bailliage

A video of the 20th anniversary of the Welsh Bailliage is available on YouTube at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvIGFwmjODQ>