

Clisson revue by Jen Spackman

If it's Thursday it must be Clisson, home to Hellfest and also years ago, to Luc, my sister's first exchange student. The town is situated in the Pays de la Loire region of Western France at the confluence of the two rivers the Sèvres Nantaise and the Moine, 17 miles SE of Nantes. We were there to explore and enjoy the town with the help of our knowledgeable and entertaining guide who brought Clisson with its surprising architecture and its history to life.

Entry was via la Porte de la ville one of three entries whose drawbridges protected the inhabitants. The adjoining castle's construction stretched from the 11th to the 17th century and saw violent battles between Republicans and Royalists during the Vendée wars. Today it is considered one of the best examples of military architecture in France.

Les Halles date from the 14th century. During the Vendée wars they served as the withdrawal base for the troops and managed to escape the fire which destroyed the town. Today the weekly market is held in Les Halles, a tradition dating back 5 centuries. On other days they are the ideal place to enjoy a coffee whilst admiring the roof and timbers of chestnut and oak.

Two medieval bridges cross the rivers, le Pont de la Vallée and le Pont St Antoine. A stone cross stands at the centre of the former, marking the dividing line between the parishes of la Trinité and Notre Dame. The latter was a vital crossing point on the route from Nantes to Poitiers. There is also an imposing viaduct, built in 1840 spanning the Moine. It has 15 stylish arches which are reminiscent of a Gothic nave.

However, things were about to change for Clisson. In the early 1800s, Frédéric Lemot, a renowned sculptor and architect discovered the town which at the time was largely in ruins after the war. His idea was to create a stylised Italian countryside on the banks of the rivers. Furthermore, he was aware of the importance of safeguarding the medieval ruins. He bought the chateau and thereby protected it as the citizens were no longer able to remove the stones to rebuild their homes.

Our first encounter with Italian architecture was at the Église Notre Dame which stands on the site of the collegiate church destroyed during the wars of the Vendée. It was built at the end of the 19th century in the style of St Jean and St Paul in Rome.

La Garenne Valentin was to be his grande maison, created in an Italian style above the river Sèvre. The loggia, the terrace, the design of the windows and the orange tiled roof are all reminiscent of Tuscany. To further the effect, he planted umbrella pines and vines.

Frédéric Lemot also had a direct knock on effect on the development of the town. Roofs were less steeply pitched and were tiled in the red-orange of the Italian countryside. Brick rather than stone was used to decorate the windows whose shape

was changed to reflect the Tuscan style; arches and decorative bands of coloured brick were more common.

In the 1990s work began to restore the tannery quarter of Clisson. Due to the need for a plentiful supply of water in which to soak and wash the leather, tanneries were often situated on river banks. Whilst the powerful smell from the hides ensured the need to locate them out of town. The water used in the tanning process was returned to the river, thus polluting it.

In 1950 tanning activity ceased and the river became much cleaner and in the 1990s work began to restore the tannery quarter. The footprints of the buildings were maintained as were the doors, roofs and windows. The red of the galleries underlines the terra cotta roof tiles and reflects the Italian style. Where the nearby trees grow would have been where the hides were dried.

The other industry concerns the two mills in the town. In the 16th century each river had a mill belonging to the seigneur. Both produced flour but at the start of the 1820s, one mill changed to paper production. This was not well received by the locals as they were kept awake by the pounding of the machinery.

The seigneur, on the other hand, found the noise to be low, monotonous and continuous and far from the cause of disturbance and sleepless nights. Even if that was the case, in due course the paper mill was replaced by a textile mill which became part of the town.

Today the textile mill is a hotel. Its roof is made of slate but it maintains a certain Italian style whilst its riverside terrace affords a special view of the Clisson landscape which is now “un paysage architecture protégé”.

However, Clisson does not reside solely in the past. Renowned local artist Alain Thomas has created murals on the theme of tropical birds in their environment and the toucans, parrots, macaws in their jungle setting are eye opening.

As for Hellfest it is considered the best heavy metal festival in Europe attracting 240,000 fans to the event for which the 2025 4 day passes are already sold out. In spite of its somewhat menacing name, Hellfest is considered a welcoming and safe environment which welcomes families with children as well as rockers of all ages.

I had previously visited Clisson to see friends and my memories of the village were largely of their kindness and hospitality. To revisit as a tourist with a guide was a very different experience introducing me to a previously unknown Clisson. The history of the town and its architecture were fascinating and it is easy to see why it now has protected status.