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LYONS LA FORÊT



Any visitor discovering Lyons-la-Forêt quickly remarks how well preserved this pretty village is. Lyons' rich, long and rather unique history is the reason for this picturesque charm, but in fact since the time of the French Revolution, and even earlier, the town was largely oblivious of its own history. Indeed, Lyons remained something of a mystery to everyone until a handful of individuals in the 1930s set about understanding its past.

The first mystery to unravel about this market town, nestling in the huge forest far from any major thoroughfares, is why it is here at all? In the Middle Ages, Lyons was a royal property. It again came into royal hands in the Renaissance for about 20 years during the reign of Charles IX and his mother Catherine de Medici's, and also at the end of Louis XIV's reign in the early 18th century. But even when no king was in possession of the village, as was the case for some 250 years, Lyons continued to enjoy the generosity of other princesses and dukes, notably Renée de France in the 16th century and the Duke de Penthièvre in the 18th century.

What explains this royal fascination? In the Middle Ages, from about 600 onwards, the old Roman town of Lyons stood at the heart of one of the most renowned hunting grounds of the realm, a forest extending over 25,000 hectares. Despite the numerous wars and dynastic upheavals that followed, the forest itself remained a Crown property from the early Middle Ages until the French Revolution in the late 18th century. It's no surprise the first dukes of Normandy, later the kings of France and England, took up residence in Lyons within this forested land-unto-itself.

Today, the most striking feature of this unique history is the absence of the church from the town centre. In fact, it was Lyons that moved away from the church, after King Henry 1st of England (1100 – 1135) actually ordered the town to be shifted one kilometre from its initial site on the banks of the Lieure river - where the church still stands today - to set it next to the newly-built royal castle.

Whatever happened to that fortified castle? It was destroyed at the end of the Hundred Years War in the 14th century but the ruins of the ancient royal residence (where William the Conqueror's son, King Henry 1st of England had died in 1135) are still visible at the heart of the village, standing in the middle of private gardens. The presence of the old castle explains the shape of the town today, with its roads tracing a central ring around the fortified site, and the covered market place square standing in the position of the old courtyard, or bailey, of the castle.

Visitors often ask why this rural village of just 750 inhabitants has the prosperous air of a market town. Even though Charles IX (1560 – 1574) was the last king to regularly stay here, the town retained its role as the administrative, economic and legal capital of an area covering 450km², from Gisors to Gourmay to Charlevall, from the Middle Ages until the new administrative system of départements was introduced at the time of the French Revolution.

Subsequently, Lyons was all but forgotten throughout the Industrial Revolution, thus spared the ravages of time. But with trains and motorcars, it was rediscovered as a fashionable holiday destination during the peaceful and prosperous years of the Belle Epoque before the First World War. Numerous artists such as the composer Maurice Ravel and the famous cabinet-maker Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, as well as authors and intellectuals like Louis Aragon, André Breton and Paul Léautaud or celebrated painters like Surrealist artist André Masson, all came to stay in Lyons, seeking inspiration and a change of scenery. More recently, film director Claude Chabrol chose Lyons in 1990 to shoot his version of *Madame Bovary*, in faithful homage to the classic work's author Gustave Flaubert and because the décor was still intact as the author would have known it.

HISTORY

HENRY 1st, also known as **HENRI I^{er} BEAUCLEUC** (1068 – 1135)

King Henry 1st of England, who became duke of Normandy, is said by chroniclers of the time to have died of indigestion in Lyons' castle. He apparently had eaten lampreys from the royal fish pond. It was Henry I's decision to create the royal market town that we know today. It was during his reign that the town centre, initially situated next to the church, was moved up the hill to stand outside the gates of the castle, a site still occupied by the covered market today.

PHILIPPE LE BEL (1268 – 1314)

Today we know little about the personality of this cold and distant man, whom history depicts as the symbol of an all-power state. The one aspect of the Capetian king's character that still stands out is his boundless passion for hunting. It was during his reign that Lyons – with its 25,000 hectares of forest, five royal residences and a stud farm – became the kingdom's prime hunting grounds, ahead of the rival forests of Compiègne and Orléans.

ENGUERRAND DE MARIGNY (about 1270 – 1315)

Enguerrand de Marigny came from a Lyons family, who guarded the gates of the royal castle throughout the 12th century. Towards the end of the reign of his guardian, Philippe le Bel, Enguerrand de Marigny established himself as a kind of "viceroy". The stellar rise of this obscure Norman knight aroused jealousy and even hatred: following Philippe Le Bel's death, Enguerrand de Marigny was the target of a plot to bring about his downfall. He was sentenced to death for witchcraft, and hanged at the gallows in Montfaucon.

CHARLES IX (1550 – 1574)

Like Philippe le Bel in his time, Charles IX was one of the very few French kings who felt truly at home in the forest of Lyons. Even though his short reign was tragically afflicted by religious wars, Charles IX seized the opportunity during every interlude of peace to come to Lyons and go hunting with his court. From 1570 to his death, he set about the construction of an imposing castle in Charlevall. Ronsard wrote in glowing terms about his achievements as a hunter: Charles IX was also an author, having penned the only work devoted to hunting ever written by a French king.

ISAAC DE BENSERADE (1612 – 1691)

Isaac de Benserade was a poet at Louis XII's court, and a librettist to the composer Lully. He was born in Lyons. Handsome and talented, he was not a rich man, but as a relative of the Cardinal Richelieu (who was the most powerful man at the time), Benserade went to the Royal Court where he used his wit to win over the King, and the powerful Cardinal Mazarin. He was nominated as member of the French Academy in 1674. The covered market square, where his house is situated, is named after him.

DUKE DE PENTHIÈVRE (1725 – 1793)

The Duke de Penthièvre was the grandchild of Louis XIV and Madame de Montespan but was legitimized as a prince. When his first cousin, the Earl d'Eu, died in 1775, the Duke de Penthièvre became lord of Lyons. He was an important patron and benefactor to the town of Lyons. In 1782, he had the City Hall rebuilt and the covered market restored. In 19th century, the King Louis-Philippe donated the covered market to the local authority in memory of his ancestor.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875 – 1937)

Maurice Ravel stayed numerous times in Lyons-la-Forêt, as Mrs. Dreyfus' guest (Roland-Manuel's mother), who became his "war godmother" in 1915. Ravel showed a profound attachment to Lyons and its beech forest, and the influence of both can be found in his work. At the end of World War I, Ravel finished the composition of Le Tombeau de Couperin in Lyons and also orchestrated Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition there.

SOME FAMOUS CHARACTERS FROM LYONS' PAST



LYONS LA FORÊT



SAINT-DENIS CHURCH (12TH, 15TH, 16TH & 17TH CENTURIES, ISMH)



The Lyons church is remarkable for two reasons, namely its tripartite choir and also its location, far from the town centre. In fact, the heart of Lyons was initially near the church, until it was moved to its present location in the 11th century. The outside stone setting is laid out as a checkerboard of sandstone and flint, with a beautiful side door under a 12th century arch.

- : Tourist information centre
- : National heritage sites. (The French "National Trust")
- : Car park
- : Public toilets
- : Post office
- : Old curtain walls and castle (missing parts) (12th century)
- : Site of the old castle's ditches
- : Ruins of the castle (12th century)
- : Starting point of marked footpaths

ANCIEN HÔTEL DE LA MARÉCHAUSSEE OR THE OLD CONSTABULARY (12TH, 16TH, & 18TH CENTURIES, ISMH)



This was one of the outbuildings to what was probably **Charles IX's** hunting lodge in the 16th century. It was rebuilt in the 18th century to become the town constabulary. The house stands against the vestiges of the Pavilion door (ISMH) and of Lyons' outer walls (ISMH), where you can see a memorial to King Henry 1st of England (known in France as **Henri I^{er} Beauclerc**), who died in Lyons in 1135.

LA HUCHETTE (15TH & 18TH CENTURIES)



This country house belonged to the balloonist **Charles Dollfus** (1893-1981). In **Claude Chabrol's** film *Madame Bovary*, the building is used as the heroine's first home.

LA GAUDINIÈRE (18TH CENTURY)



This house belonged to surrealist painter **André Masson** from 1937 to 1941, a very productive period for the renowned artist. He received many guests here, including such luminaries as **André Malraux**, **André Breton**, **Louis Aragon**, and **Jean-Louis Barrault**.

THE OLD BENEDICTINE CONVENT OF SAINT CHARLES (12TH, 16TH, 18TH AND 20TH CENTURIES, ISMH)



Built on the outer walls of Lyons, this building was probably **Charles IX's** hunting lodge in the 16th century. It became a Benedictine convent from 1706 to 1768. The facade overlooking the valley has beautiful stone, silex and flint decorations (16th century, ISMH), with sculpted elements.

THE THREE MILLS SQUARE



The charming public gardens, through which the **Lieure** river flows, are situated close to the old mills and royal fish ponds. On one of the mills, you can still see the trace of a wooden wheel and on one of the stones over the river is a mysterious lion carved in stone.

THE OLD CORDELIERS' CONVENT (17TH CENTURY, ISMH)



In 1624, King **Louis XIII** gave his permission for a Cordeliers' convent to be founded in Lyons. From 1793, the impressive building was used for industrial purposes, producing printed cotton until 1850, before being turned into a glass factory. A cloister and the remains of the chapel are still visible. (Guided tours possible. More information at the tourist information centre)

LE FRESNE & MAURICE RAVEL'S STUDIO (18TH & 20TH CENTURIES)



Between 1910 and 1914, the owners of Le Fresno transformed the large 18th house into an Anglo-Norman villa. **Maurice Ravel**, who was a friend of the family, stayed here numerous times between 1911 and 1922. In 1917, he completed the composition of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* here, and later orchestrated *Mussorgsky's Pictures* at an Exhibition.

THE WAR MEMORIAL (20TH CENTURY)



The memorial to the Great War was inaugurated in 1921. It was designed by the famous architect **Pierre Patout**, a friend of Art Deco designer **Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann** (cf *L'Herbage* - n°12). On the brick column, there is a sculpture by **Maurice Lerouge** representing *Pallas*. Lateral additions date from 1945.

THE COVERED MARKET (15TH & 18TH CENTURIES, ISMH)



At the heart of Lyons (first documented in the 14th century), stands a remarkable covered market place. It shelters the thrice-weekly market that is still held in the village (on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays). It was renovated thanks to the **duke de Penthièvre**, grandchild of **Louis XIV**, and last lord of Lyons.

THE BENSERADE HOUSE (17TH & 18TH CENTURIES)



Isaac de Benserade was born here in 1612. He was one of the most famous poets of **Louis XIV's** court and a librettist for **Lully**. The house subsequently belonged to one of the King's councilors. The remarkable frontage is composed of bricks, stones and timber frame. The window railings are from the 18th century.

THE TERRASSE OR THE PATIO (VERS 1910)



This house was built by **Frederick Arthur Bridgman** (1847 - 1928), a famous American orientalist painter who settled in Lyons around 1910. He lies today in Lyons' cemetery.

THE CITY HALL (18TH & 19TH CENTURIES, ISMH)



This building, dating from 1782, is where the main events of the town history took place. On the first floor, there is the old bailiwick room (ISMH). The walls are covered with blue hangings with lilies. There is an alcove-chapel, and the furniture of the old royal court. The court became clerk of the peace in 1789. The dungeon (ISMH) is a reminder of how the building was first used. The south facade was rebuilt in 1865 and bears the duke de Penthièvre's coat of arms.

L'HERBAGE (1912)



Designer **Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann** (1879 - 1933), a master of the Art Deco style, asked his friend the architect **Pierre Patout** (1879 - 1965) to build him a villa in Lyons, where he enjoyed fly-fishing. The house became a haven for Ruhlmann's numerous artistic friends.

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