

St Pierre-lès-Calais as the lacemakers knew it

While we view St Pierre as a suburb of Calais, as far back as 1640 a sketch map of Calais and its environs clearly shows the network formed by the streets *Quatre Coins*, *Soupirans* and *Vauxhall* on the western side of *Jacquard*, and *Vic*, *Tannerie*, *Temple* and *Neuve* on the east.

At the start of the 19th century, the area that developed into St Pierre was settled to some extent. There were some 140 dwellings lining the named streets, with some of the smaller ones developing with names that indicated the rural nature of the area: *Fleurs* (flowers), *Prairies* (meadows), *Verte* (green). Pigs and cows still wandered along these pathways.

By 1830, St Pierre had 1000 houses covering some 2200 hectares. Three quarters of the population was English. As urbanisation progressed, new streets were named in memory of the English lace pioneers — Leavers, Lindey, Webster, and Martin. Heathcoat, who the French recognise as one of the leaders in the field, had a street named after him, but its pronunciation in French was just too awkward, so the street was renamed *Hermant*, after an early mayor.

The subdivider was evident early in the development of the suburb. As expansion took place, more and more landowners sold off small parcels without street frontage. Eventually unofficial 'streets' were formed, and Council regulations were developed to ensure some standards were maintained. The owners developed the streets on their land at their cost (their profit being in the blocks) and then gave the street to the community. Most of the streets between St Omer Canal and Rue des Fontinettes were formed in this way. Even with some regulation, there was little development of the condition of the streets. *La Grande Rue* i.e. *Le Boulevard Jacquard*, running into *Boulevard Lafayette* was the only one paved to a width greater than 4 metres. All the others were muddy or dusty, depending on the season. Often in winter, horses, carriages, and even pedestrians had difficulty when it rained heavily. The journal *L'Industriel calaisien* stated that a few could not be crossed without a bridge.

Houses went up throughout St Pierre without order or unity of style — some set back from the street and others almost on the footpath. There was no "elite" area. Most were modest workers homes with the occasional farmhouse - a leftover from the farming era of the district.

Most of the houses were single storied and fairly solidly built, usually with a tiny attic under the eaves. They were whitewashed each year, and sometimes a little yellow colouring was added to the wash for interest. The footings were treated with tar, giving a nice contrast, and often woodwork was painted in bright colours. The ground floor often lacked a hall, and the entrance was straight into a room paved with red tiles. This was both kitchen and living room. Sometimes, if the house had a hall, there would be a small, very narrow room at the front. This made a kind of sitting room, used only on special occasions. A coal fire could be lit in the *prussienne* - a fire with an open hearth, but with a grille that could be lowered to prevent cinders flying out, or a child falling in. In more modest homes, this room became the parent's bedroom, while that tiny attic was for the children. Babies slept in their parent's room in a cradle that the mother was able to rock by pulling an attached cord. To make coming and going easier, the room would be softly lit with a night light made from a small wax wick poked through a disc of cork, and floated on oil in a glass jar.

While this conjures up a cosy picture of cottage life, this was not the case. Often there were no internal doors and the stairs to the attic were steep and narrow, with a knotted rope for a banister. There were neither sewers nor water on tap. Each house had a sewage bucket in the corner that was emptied night and morning at a public disposal point known as *MacIntyres* and very early each day householders could be seen rushing to dispose of their effluent, slopping the contents as they ran. Fortunately, each day when the bell struck nine, it was compulsory for householders to go out and sweep the area in front of their home, under the watchful eye of the Sergeants. Rubbish was then picked up by a dustman.

The land was such that drainage and water were large problems. Rain and run off went into a series of ditches pompously called sewers. These ran along the streets into the *l'Abyme* and *la Calendrierie* Rivers. Even as late as 1842, St Pierre did not have private wells. The land was swampy and the water briny. This would not have been quite so bad if it had not been for the sewage that sank into it! The only public wells, at least those provided with a pump, were those at the gates to the walls. Water merchants supplied water from *fontinettes*. They carried it in huge barrels and sold it at between a half and one sou per bucket.

Often the extended family also lived in the house. Grandparents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts as well as aged people who rejected the idea of hospitalisation were often found crowded into one tiny abode. Where there was still room, some households took in one or two boarders to

supplement their incomes. Sometimes apprentices were given food and board at the home of their employer.

The life of our laceworkers was simple. Their housing was modest and nourishment frugal. Interestingly, a large part of the family income was spent on the toilette of the wife when young and without children. Older women were happy with a more modest wardrobe. The women always wrapped up in a woollen shawl when they went out, always bareheaded. They only wore a hat when their husbands reached the grade of *petit fabricant*, and then chose one that was much more suited to a middle class, older lady!

Saturday was payday and wages depended on production. Workers were paid by the piece. It was custom to take one's pay and go to the cafes. It is presumed that this is the equivalent of the pub or club of today. Workers gave their wives what they thought was needed for the house, customarily keeping plenty for themselves. Housewives supplemented what they got with the earnings of the older children.

Food was simple. Breakfast was a concoction of baked barley with milk and cream, and tea or coffee. There were two main meals: one based on potatoes with butter or lard, the other, (once or twice a week) was meat from the butcher, or pork from the delicatessen. The rural nature of St Pierre meant there was often vegetable soup, sometimes enriched with bacon, and bread. On Sunday, beef gruel would be served.

Supper was bread with cream or milk, and sometimes an egg or a piece of apple. There were plenty of potatoes and bread - and brown bread was cheaper.

Later, all workers ate more meat. The French see this because of English influences. This demand kept the prices for meat up. The English are also reputed to have introduced tomato sauce and English and Dutch cheeses to St Pierre.

The workers drank beer as a daily lunchtime routine. The beer was light, cheap, and easily drunk. The English brewers in St Pierre made a stronger and better-quality brew which they introduced to the French. Wine was usually only imbibed on Sundays. Alcohol was drunk all too freely. The workers supposedly drank neat brandy all day "to kill the worms". It was drunk at a cafe or bought from a *bistouille* that opened in the morning and after the midday meal. One Dr. Arnaud, who was severely critical of the English workers, accused them of mixing sugar water with gin, and of choosing to get drunk in the evening, while the people of Calais, being less prudent, "got drunk at all times of the night and day"!

In crisis times, when there was less money and less food, meat was supplemented with smoked herrings and kippers, and the workers even went fishing for their own fresh fish. When times were hard, lard replaced butter, and supper became bread and butter, or lard dunked in tea or coffee. Tea became a concoction made from blackberry leaves; and coffee, which always had some chicory, became chicory alone.

After 1815, there was a friendly invasion of English in Calais. Businessmen stayed because they liked the French way of life, some were gentlemen of independent means and others were self-employed.

The start of the lace industry brought thousands more lacemakers, mechanics and designers. These brought, in their wake, grocers, cafe owners, butchers, booksellers and barristers. The influence was such that *Le Journal de Calais* published an English supplement.

From *Pickaxes and Needles*: "Those who were employed in the lace industry were mostly English who had obtained permission to live in France. This population was considered unstable - they all said they would leave at the first sign of any war that threatened France. A quarter of these were composed of the very poor who swarmed wherever there were factories. They came from everywhere to buy the rather sandy land available - some at 100F, other blocks at 50F, 15F and even down to 10F. They wanted a shack they didn't have to pay rent for!"

In 1824, there were 412 English living in Calais. By 1841, this had increased to 1420. There was a sharp decrease after the events of February 1848, but by 1858, the numbers had increased to 2500.

Assimilation was gradual and mainly precipitated by the mixing of families rather than totally English families socialising with French. In the factories there was daily contact that saw love affairs blossom and lead to marriages that reflected a little of each other's way of life. Mostly, the children of these marriages were raised as French, so schooling did much to assimilate them.

The registers of births are a good indication of this. 1853-1870 saw Eugene and Eugenie creep into English/French families, and Adolphe, Leonie and Narcisse supplanted, little by little, the Williams, Walters and Mary Annes of the 1840s.

The drop in English numbers in 1848 is one of which all researchers are aware. An eyewitness account of that time is interesting. Henry Robinson Hartley, resident of St Pierre noted that on the evening of February 28, 1848... *about 11 O'clock, they agitated the workers on the railway to stop work. They sang the Marseillaise, broke windows, threatened the Mayor. The demonstrations went all night. The next day the Mayor called in the National Guard, who organised patrols and requested the Government send a regiment to control attacks on the factories and the English who lived there.*

A certain xenophobe, evident in parts of France, circulated alarming rumours in the early days of March. It is said that at Boulogne, the English workers were expelled from the factories. Henry Hartley, on March 8, wrote *yesterday, all was extraordinarily quiet, not a coach, not a rider. ... it was by the order of the authorities.* The next day he wrote to a friend: *You will be happy to know we have had no attacks and there is no disorder in this village.*

However, the word 'republic' frightened the English (and also a certain number of French if one is to believe *Le Jour de Calais*). In frustration, and with the support of the Workers' Union, 500 English subjects left St Pierre in May and June 1848.

There had been acts of pillage on the part of certain individuals who broke into a few houses and demanded donations in kind, or their lives. The intervention of the National Guard and the threat of court action stopped these practices.

The garrison was on alert, ready to intervene if needed, and in the letter of thanks the mayor wrote to the Commandant, he replied: *It is my pleasant duty to reply, and to pay a great compliment to the locals, particularly to the numbers of workers, who, during the crisis, have not uttered one word that would hurt the military.*

NOTE: This article has been generated from information contained in *Calais et St Pierre au XIX Siecle (1815-1885)* by Albert Vion, published in 1992 by Westhoek-Editions, Les Editions des Beffrois (Dunkerque). The translation was provided by Gillian Kelly and published in *Tulle* in November 1991 (Issue 34) and August 2010 (Issue 108).