

Queille



A history

NOTES ON QUEILLE AND ROUNDABOUT

The corner of Languedoc between the Pays d'Olmes and Mirepoix has been known as the "Pays de Queille" for many centuries. The history of the area is turbulent: at least since the Carolingian Empire, Queille has been subjected to repeated claims and counterclaims. The place was also directly affected by both the Albigensian Crusade and the French Religious Wars.

Like all the surrounding region of Languedoc and South West France, Queille was caught up in Simon de Montfort's vicious and murderous campaign against the Cathars in the early 13th century (the Albigensian Crusade). Simon de Montfort gifted the lordship of Mirepoix to his chief lieutenant, Guy de Lévis, as reward for his contribution to this notorious campaign. The lordship covered the whole area around Mirepoix, including the Pays de Queille and the surrounding villages and castles. There can be no doubt that it was quite a prize: Guy de Lévis's usurpation of the lordship was specifically mentioned among the terms of settlement between King Louis IX of France and Raymond VII, Count of Toulouse, known as the Treaty of Paris, which brought a political end to the Crusade in 1229. Thus the lordship was held by direct consent of the Crown and given the name "Terre du Maréchal", Guy de Lévis was made "Maréchal d'Albigeois". The Lévis family has dominated local history ever since, becoming one of the great aristocratic families of France in the process. Its heirs still adopt the title "Duke of Mirepoix" and retained title to one third of the chapel at the time we came to buy the place¹.

Before and During the Albigensian Crusade

It is known that in the late 10th century Eude, Count of Razès owned rights to the land at Queille. For some reason, he transferred these rights to his brother Roger the Old, Count of Carcassonne. Then, in 1002, Roger left the part comprising the Château de Queille, said already to be one of the most ancient in Ariège, to his eldest son, Raimond². By 1034, Queille was in the hands of Raimond's brother Pierre, Bishop of Gérone, who gave the Château de Queille, the castle at Foix, several abbeys and other lands, including the stronghold at Olmes (i.e. Laroque d'Olmes) to his nephew Roger I in exchange for an oath of fealty. Being a bishop, Pierre himself hung onto the diocese of Carcassonne and several abbeys, including the one at Camon (still to be seen nearby and described below).

By 1070 Queille belonged to Ermengarde of Carcassonne, sister to Roger III of Carcassonne, who had presumably inherited it when Roger III died without heirs. Ermengarde was married to Bernard Trencavel, Viscount of Albi (the Trencavels are famous as Counts of Carcassonne and for their exploits before and during the Albigensian Crusade) but the Counts of Foix always continued to claim the estate for themselves. Consequently, in a defensive move, Ermengarde and Bernard sold Queille and all its lands and rights to the Count of Barcelona. At the same time, they also swore fealty to the Count who then granted Queille back to them in fief. Ermengarde and Bernard hoped that by virtue of this manoeuvre they would deter Foix from continuing its threats (Barcelona, after all, was a very rich and powerful county) and pre-empt whatever legal claim Foix may have had to the property.

- 1 At the time of our purchase, the Duke's mother had just died. The Duke affected not to deal in commercial transactions while in mourning and completion of our purchase was delayed for six months as a result. Unfortunately, his strict observance of mourning did not prevent him from using the delay to his commercial advantage!
- 2 A parchment record of the sale of Queille from 1002 survives in the Bibliothèque

The Counts of Foix were not deterred; by 1095 they were at it again. In that year, Roger II of Foix renounced all claim to the County of Carcassonne but used the opportunity to reassert his rights over the estates in Mirepoix and the Pays de Queille by stating specifically that they were not and had never been within the gift of Carcassonne anyway. It seems, therefore, that the house of Foix was once more in the control of the lordship of Mirepoix by the end of the 11th century. Matters must have rested thus for the next 100 years or so, for we know that between 1225 and 1243, and perhaps for longer, Isarn of Fanjeaux, son of Pierre Roger the Old of Mirepoix (brother to the Count of Foix), and his wife Rausanne were living happily at Queille. All around them the Crusade against the Cathars was raging.

Cathars were the contemporary cousins of ancient Gnostics, Manichaeans and Bogumils and believed in dualism: the simultaneous presence of evil and a benign, single Creator. In many respects Cathars were quite “modern”: vegetarian, ascetic, puritanical and believing in equality of men and women. Their followers were known as “credenti”, “Albigensians” or “bonhommes” and their leaders or exemplars were called “perfecti”. Catharism was becoming established in Languedoc (the region around Albi, Agen, Pamiers, Carcassonne, Foix and Toulouse) throughout the 12th century. By the end of the century their influence had permeated the entire society to the extent that by the early 13th century, Catharism had become adopted and was encouraged by much of local aristocracy, particularly the Counts of Toulouse and Foix. Coincidentally, Languedoc and these same courts of Toulouse and Foix, having been the cradle of courtly love, the chansons and jongleurs or troubadours³, had reached a zenith of cultural vitality and become centres of that medieval flowering known as the 12th Century Renaissance.

3 The castle at Piuvert, just the other side of Chalabre and about 20 minutes from Queille, is credited with having been the most dazzling venue for the Troubadours in all of Europe.

A History of Queille

Languedoc's cultural and economic wealth owed a good deal to the combination of a decadent church and weak monarchy. The Roman Catholic Church had become corrupted by its wealth and power, while the French monarchy, challenged by England/Aquitaine from the west and South, Burgundy and the Empire from the East and Toulouse/Barcelona from the South, was struggling vainly to broaden its power and influence. Thus, the County of Toulouse was a virtual state of its own, independent of the French and Aragonese crowns, remote to the Papacy and glittering with wealth, learning and arts. Rome and Paris had much to fear from so powerful a political and cultural challenge. Catharism, and its quite separate but equally powerful challenge to Rome's spiritual authority, was a final straw.

At first the counter-attack was based on persuasion. A Spanish monk, Dominic (1170-1221), believing that the Cathar heretics could only be regained by an austerity and purity equal to their own, came to the area to preach and "dispute". He based himself at Fanjeaux (25 km from Queille), a Cathar centre of sorts, and in 1206 founded the convent at Prouille near there⁴. From Fanjeaux, Dominic introduced a dramatically new form of religious order with a universal mission to preach both to pagan and Christian alike. He laid great emphasis on scholarship and on a highly centralised and strict administration. His ideas, along with those of his contemporary St. Francis, were responsible for the creation of mendicant friars (Dominicans and Franciscans) who, following exactly the example of Cathar perfecti, were not attached to any particular monastery, foundation or parish but wandered to wherever they perceived a demand. They renounced all property through a vow of poverty and depended upon preaching, teaching and charity to subsist.

Pope Innocent III had declared Cathars or Albigensians to be heretics in 1199. However Rome was impatient and not willing to rely on Dominic's tactics of adopted puritanism and didactic persuasion. Following the

4 This convent, now restored, continues as such today.

murder of a papal legate, Peirre de Castellanau⁵, at Saint Gilles-du-Gard in 1208, Innocent preached the Crusade against the Cathars in 1209⁶. The Crusade was promulgated in precisely the same terms as the Crusades against Islam in the Holy Land. Thus Crusaders, promised remission of all sins, were given an unfettered licence to pillage, loot, rape, murder and lay claim to territory, all in the name of God. Simon de Montfort (father of the Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester who led the revolt of the English barons against Henry III) and 12,000 knights from France and

- 5 Pierre de Castelnau was a Cistercian from Frontfriode Abbey (worth a visit) and an early detractor of Catharism. He was murdered as he crossed the Rhône when returning from Rome with instructions to enforce Raymond VI's excommunication. It was claimed that Raymond himself was responsible for the murder but, much like Henry II and Becket, there is little doubt that Raymond was not to blame; it is much more probable that one of his equerries did the deed without Raymond's knowledge.
- 6 Dominic's own attitude towards the Crusade is rather unclear. There is no doubt that he was against it at the start and throughout much, if not all of it. He continued his preaching at least until 1218, the last time he is known to have been in Toulouse and the same year as Montfort's death. Throughout the period he made frequent trips to Rome (during one of which he and St. Francis of Assisi met famously to swap notes) to argue from a more peaceful strategy as well as to try and get papal recognition for his new order. The Pope was not initially in favour of the new order, arguing instead that existing orders were adequate. But in 1218 Dominic got his way and the Dominican Order was established. Towards the end, Dominic seems to have become disillusioned himself and in his last sermon in Languedoc he appears to have called for a new crusade (which was never carried out): "... for many years I have exhorted you in vain, with gentleness, preaching, praying and weeping. But according to the proverbs of my country, 'where blessing can accomplish nothing, blows may avail', we shall rouse against you princes and prelates, who, alas, will arm nations and kingdoms against this land ... and thus blows will avail where blessings and gentleness have been powerless." The Dominicans went on to become agents of the papal "Inquisition". Initially established to eradicate Catharism, the Inquisition and the Dominicans later became instituted as the instrument of Rome's notorious subsequent attempts to suppress of non-conformism throughout the Reformation and the architect of Roman Catholicism's own Counter-Reformation. The Inquisition was officially abolished until 1962.

A History of Queille

Burgundy came south to do battle with the heretics and the forces Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse. De Montfort's men were responsible for a most notorious example of wanton brutality, mass burnings, torture and murder on a scale which was probably without match until the extermination of Red Indians in the US and of Jews in Nazi Germany. De Montfort was killed in 1218 but the Crusade entered a second phase in 1225 when Louis VIII of France entered the fray. By 1229 and the Treaty of Paris (between Raymond VII of Toulouse and Blanche of Castille acting as regent for Louis IX), the political purpose of the war — consolidation of Languedoc and the Counties of Toulouse, Carcassonne and Foix into France — had been largely achieved and with it the end of a great flowering of civilisation, learning and arts. But Catharism, although driven underground, was far from beaten; the Crusade had simply increased mistrust and hatred for both the Roman Catholic Church and its puppet monarchy in Paris. So the resistance carried on. "Faydits" (local aristocracy, gentry and landowners who had been dispossessed by the crusading northerners), perfecti and credenti continued to preach, to plot the return of the ancien regime and to carry on an underground resistance movement. Raymond VII never gave up his ambition to reverse what he saw as an illegal settlement made under undue duress and treachery and so never wholeheartedly honoured his treaty commitment to continue the fight against Cathars or to uphold the rights of the new northern seigneurs. Neither the House of Foix nor the Lords of Niort were formally dispossessed and they too continued, even more openly to protect Cathars and to harry the conquerors. The "Crusade" itself ended officially in 1271, but even after then pockets of Catharsim continued for at least another 100 years.

Having failed to achieve its purpose by force of arms, the Church turned to a new and even more savage instrument of suppression: the Inquisition. The Inquisitors, almost always Dominicans, owed allegiance to no-one save the Pope. They overturned all medieval legal principles by trying "heretics" in camera, by denying an accused the chance to know the identity of his accuser or to have any representation, by assuming that any witness who spoke well of an accused was thereby himself admitting to heresy and thus ruling by insinuation, terror and the mob. Such

techniques are bound to succeed eventually. Indeed one of the more pernicious techniques was to promise immunity from the stake to anyone who came forward to recant heresy. Having recanted, penance was inevitable but its severity depended upon the number and importance of other “heretics” identified. Since a “light” penance might be pilgrimage to Canterbury or Rome, and hence six months or so separation from family and livelihood, it’s not hard to understand why so many heretics were “found”. There is little or nothing which the French Revolution, Stalin, the Gestapo or the Serbs could have taught the Dominicans about ethnic or tribal cleansing.

Montségur, which is visible from Queille, had been constructed as an impregnable home and final refuge for Cathars: it was constantly under attack and siege. Finally, after a 2 years or more of successful resistance to siege, insiders showed the attackers a way into the castle and it fell in 1244. 210 Cathars chose to be burned alive in one vast pyre at the foot of the castle’s hill rather than succumb to conversion to Rome. This event marks the symbolic end of Catharism⁷. Nevertheless, Cathar communities carried on; for example Quéribus, another Cathar stronghold, did not fall until 1255. Year by year, village by village the “cleansing” continued until sometime in the mid 14th century whatever survivors there were found themselves perforce within the Roman Catholic fold and Catharism became totally extinguished. The unity of France had indeed been built but upon the misery of the Midi⁸.

Forty minutes or so from Queille is the isolated village of Montailou, where Catharism was still rife in the 14th century. A bishop of Pamiers, and chief inquisitor, spent many weeks cross-examining its inhabitants. Notes of these interviews form the foundation of Emmanuel le Roy

7 Tradition has it that the night before Montségur’s finally fell, its “Treasure” was spirited away and hidden. It is not known what this “Treasure” comprised and it has never been found. One of the consequences of the remorselessness of the Crusaders’ and the Inquisition’s extinction of Catharism is that virtually nothing remained or has been discovered of their writings, habits or artefacts.

Ladurie's renowned book "Montaillou", which provides as vivid and as exciting an account of personal life in 14th century Europe as can be imagined. Read this book (there is a copy at Queille), then visit Montaillou: you will find yourself in a completely familiar setting with not another visitor from our own time in sight. You will experience immediacy of a distant epoch and be astonished and moved.

Or look around you. By the time Isarn and Rausanne were living at Queille, there was a mill on the River Touyre and a village which surrounded it, both of them adjacent to Queille. Remnants of the village, such as two fallen medieval bridges over the Touyre and some foundations of houses, can be found in the garden and around about. Isarn was the son of Pierre Roger the Old of Mirepoix, brother to the Count of Foix. Pierre Roger, like the rest of his family, was a determined adversary of the Crusade and so, presumably, was Isarn. It is known, for example, that Isarn was instrumental in keeping Montségur stocked with food, water and arms throughout the siege and that Queille itself was a Cathar enclave. The chronicler Michel Roquebert says that this village was "a hotbed of active but clandestine Catharism". It's easy to imagine Queille and its village as a resting point for the "faydits" and "parfaits" or "parfaites" who wandered between Montségur and the Lauragais. At Queille there would have been guides, bodyguards and safe houses for the Cathar wanderers and there are many references to one villager in particular, a certain Arnaud de Lescure. Often the travellers would have been given money in return for their visits and preaching. Cathar bishops and deacons stopped at Queille to preach; for example Guillaume de Mirepoix, the deacon of Mirepoix, administered "consolamentum" (final rights) to several people at Queille.

- 8 If you want to read more about the history of the Albigensian Crusade, have a look at the "Albigensian Crusade" by Jonathan Sumption or "Massacre at Montségur" by Zöe Oldenburg, both of which are in the library at Queille. Sumption's book is probably the better on the campaign itself but Oldenburg is masterful at bringing the era and the people to life and at analysing the upheaval in its own terms of ethics, religion and politics.

In 1241 Pierre Roger the Younger of Mirepoix (i.e. Isarn's brother) was in charge of the defence of Montségur. He came to Queille to find Arnaud de Villar, who lived in a nearby fortified house, known as "la force de Laval" (the "Laval" you see on the hill as you head from Queille towards Belloc). Impressed with the fortifications, Pierre Roger persuaded Arnaud to install arbalettes (cross-bow positions) at Montségur. Arnaud completed this task in just four days, thereby making a key contribution to the successful defence of Montségur against Raimond VII's siege of that year⁹.

So Queille and the inhabitants of its château and village were far more than spectators of the history and life of the region during this extraordinary period. Its isolated position at the end of the Touyre valley and its distance from main roads made it an ideal spot. Equally important is the fact that the Counts of Foix, always stout defenders of the heresy, seem to have been especially fond of their title to Queille and its dependencies of Belloc and St Quentin and, consequently, to have provided consistent protection to its inhabitants. Therefore, following the Peace of 1229 and Louis IX's subjugation of Languedoc, Queille became a Cathar haven and beacon of hope in the midst of land all around which had been conquered. Languedoc never fulfilled its potential; paralysed by disbelief and shock, its landscape and remnants of its civilisation seem even now to remain locked in coma.

9 Raymond VII, like his father Raymond VI, was champion to the Cathar cause and the leader of Languedoc's defense against the invading crusaders. However, in 1241, he made the Oath of Montargis in which he swore fealty to the King and swore to fight against Catharism; he thereby retained the County of Toulouse and became "re-communicated". He remained committed, albeit somewhat halfheartedly, to these undertakings thereafter and so was instrumental in continued attacks on Catharism and in Montségur's final collapse in 1244.

After the Albigensian Crusade

By the 14th century it was the Counts of Armagnac who were contesting the Counts' of Foix continuing claims to Queille. In 1308 Gaston I of Foix reclaimed part of an inheritance — the estates of Moncarde and Castelvieil — which had sometime earlier been given to Gaston of Fézensaguet, a son of the Count of Armagnac. In 1310 the two houses put an end to their feud by agreeing a swap. Foix retained the reclaimed estates but Gaston of Fézensaguet got certain other properties: Queille, Belloc, Saint-Quentin, Arzun, Alairac, Plissac, Monantié, Sarraute, Montréal and Bouichou. By 1311 the Viscount of Fézensaguet was giving permissions to build mills in these areas. It is possible that the ruins which stand on the hill just north of Bente Farine may be one of these.

The truce did not last long. In 1360, fuelled by Foix's territorial ambitions over the Bigorre (the central, high Pyrenees), which had traditionally looked to Armagnac for protection, rivalry between the houses of Foix and Armagnac became a full-blooded feudal war. The marriage, in 1371, of Jeanne of Armagnac to Jean Lévis III (Foix) should have made matters better but in fact they got worse because Bertrand of Armagnac, having failed after several attempts to assassinate Jean Lévis, simply usurped the lordships of Queille, Belloc and Saint-Quentin. The Armagnac's were now back in possession but soon afterwards Bertrand died. Neither Bertand nor his wider family could supply any convincing heir and among pretenders the most prominent and convincing were none other than lords of Mirepoix, the Lévis family again, now disguised as Counts of Carmaing.

Events such as these continued throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. For example, in 1482 the inhabitants of Queille and Belloc swore loyalty to Jean I of Foix-Carmaing, Viscount of Rodez and Lautrec, Lord of Saissac, Queille and Belloc. His successor to the lordship of Queille and Belloc was his second son, Guillame of Foix-Carmaing. This fellow then both leased the barony (in 1514) and (in 1540) gave homage to the King for the fief of the baronies of Beaulieu (which is to say Belloc) and of Queille. He also leased the Tour of Saint-Quentin¹⁰ by giving homage to

Arnaud of Lissac. But by 1543 Saint-Quentin was back in the hands of a François of Lissac, while another Lissac, Bernard, had one third of Queille and Belloc; the remaining two thirds still belonged to the Foix-Camaing. The Lissacs held onto their lordships for two centuries but on 17th February, 1774 their heirs sold the lordship of Saint-Quentin to Louis Marie François Gaston of Lévis, Marquess of Mirepoix and Leran for 102 pounds.

In 1598, a sole surviving Lissac heiress — Jeanne — married Jean François of Péguilhan, so Péguilhan became lord of one third of Queille and Belloc. The other two thirds, following various inheritances (some of which went through the female line) ended up by 1621 in the hands of Catherine of Lévis. In 1632, Peirre of Pédihlán (Péguilhan) married Madeleine of Saint-George, from Sibra (the château of Sibra can be seen nestling in the valley from the road between Camon/Belloc and Mirepoix), by whom he had six children (three boys and three girls). In 1686 he left the Queille and Belloc estates to his eldest son Jacques of Pédihlán, his second son, Grégoire, got the land and Château of Laval (the same one mentioned before and visible on the hilltop on the way to Belloc), while the third son became a priest. In 1689, his wife Madeleine borrowed 6000 pounds from Henri Gaston of Lévis and Anne of Lévis-Ajac, her sister in law, for the upkeep of the other children. Jacques of Pédihlán renounced this debt and this gave rise to protracted legal proceedings before several courts.

In 1738 Paul-Louis Lévis bought a farm called La Bouzigue, which was a dependency of Queille's. Then, when in 1750, Gaston Charles Peirre of Lévis, Marquess of Mirepoix, lieutenant of the King, ambassador to England became Duke of Lévis and Marshal of France, he bought the outstanding third part of the barony of Queille and Belloc and, in 1751,

- 10 The Tour of St. Quentin is the large, square tower you see when approaching St. Quentin from either Lavelanet or Mirepoix. The tower as such, which is said to be 14th century, was built as a granary and never covered. It's size gives clear evidence of the size and importance of St. Quentin, Queille and Belloc at the time.

gave the whole lot to his cousin, who lived at Léran (the huge and nineteenth century-ised château in the valley between Belloc and Laroque d'Olmes) as a wedding present.

More research is needed to bring the story into the 20th century. It is clear that in the 18th and 19th century, Queille was quite a grand family home; and one of various seats the Lévis Mirepoix family. 18th century paintings of Queille at Camon show a large castle, with a round tower and pointed roof where the pool is now and a duck pond and village around the base of the rock. A 19th century engraving shows a building very much as it is now except that a grand staircase rises from the river directly up the side of the cliff to house. Traces of this staircase can be seen in the terracing between the house the river.

Recent Events

Following the Second World War, Queille became a “colonie de vacances”. It had somehow come to be owned by a priest, who doubled as the vicar of the chapel. About 20 years ago the holiday centre closed and the property passed to a nephew of the priest, a cattle farmer named Ferran. He allowed the house and surroundings to fall into disrepair and ruin. By the time we bought the house from Ferran it had been empty and deserted for 20 years or so. Remnants of its existence as a holiday centre were to be seen everywhere: old mattresses and bedframes, a legion of urinals and loos, a huge industrial gas cooker in the fireplace in the kitchen and so on. Some of these remnants survive: the wooden benches in the kitchen and steel frame chairs which you see in various places date from this period. The Chapel, which is by far the earliest of the surviving buildings and dates from the early 11 century, continued in use for a little longer but finally succumbed about 10 years ago after almost 1000 years of continuous worship. Many families who remember happy childhood holidays at Queille return to look and remember.

Considerable demolition and reconstruction had to be carried out. There was a large, three story dormitory wing where the garage and pool

terrace now stand. Another ugly accretion stood behind the house, reaching up two stories over the North Terrace. The tower had fallen as far as the roof of the main house. Next to the Chapel stood remains of what once had been a presbytery, built in 1823, whose doorways now adorn the pool terrace and kitchen. The floor of what is now the dormitory was all terra-cotta tiled but inside the entire structure was weak and in need of considerable repair.

We were fortunate to come across a young, fanatical and perfectionist architect, Jean Philippe Claverie, and together we set about putting the place back to use. Claverie had been responsible for the restoration of Laval, had long loved Queille and longed to have the chance to do something with it. As always much more had to be done, or redone, than had been bargained for but the guiding principle was to preserve as much as possible, to do as little as possible and to re-use as much as possible.

The engraving of Queille in 1865 gave the design for the tower, while other ideas came from the Abbey at Camon, where 18th century wall paintings also depict Queille. For example, the idea for the kitchen, with its stone faced columns supporting a single shelf comes from the early, medieval kitchen at Camon.

We think the main house itself, as you see it now, is 16th or 17th century. But in the 18th Century what were two large renaissance or Jacobean windows on the first floor were replaced by the four smaller windows you see now. There are vestiges everywhere of a much earlier building: the fireplace and chimney in the kitchen, the defensive structure above the front door, even the tower itself, which would have served as a privy in times of siege. The terra cotta tiles you see are were all found within the building (mainly in the dormitory) and we have preserved all doors we found, most of which are 17th or 18th century. A particular feature, which was discovered accidentally, is the ceilings on the first floor. These had all to be dismantled and re-assembled much in the manner of their original construction.

Once outside the main house itself, where the buildings were from distinguished, we were keen not to become prisoners to restoration. The chandeliers in the Music Room were conceived, designed and made by Giles Pujol, a local sculptor, who had never made anything electrical before.

Future Plans

One day we hope to restore the Chapel. It would be good to see it re-consecrated and in use as a room for music, parties and quiet contemplation. Besides the cost, there is a dispute which must first be resolved. Inside the Chapel is evidence of both 12th century and 18th century frescos. The building, which is a perfect Romanesque shrine of its type, was vandalised in the 18th century when three of the five Romanesque windows which lit the nave and the apse were bricked in and 18th century folk art plastered over the entire apse. Our own wish is to open the windows again and restore the interior to its Romanesque character, although not to restore the 12th century frescos. The bureaucrats in charge of classified buildings in France, have different ideas! In all events, it is certainly planned to bring back to the Chapel its 11th century font and its bells; both of which were taken to St Quentin la Tour at the time the Chapel stopped being used to protect them from 20th century vandalism.

The Grounds

Although not yet manicured, it is worth taking a stroll around the grounds. There are good views and walks all around, both in and along the river valley and up on the surrounding hills. Queille comes with all the land within the “presqu’île” which is formed by the river’s track around the rock to the cemetery, the hillside on this side of the road to Bente Farine and the meadow on the other side of the bridge. Cross the bridge and continue down the road until it turns sharply to climb the hill towards St Quentin la Tour, cut your way into the brambles and growth

which confront you and you will come upon the rims of what is said to be the largest pre-industrial forge south of Lyons¹¹. Certainly it is large and you will find there at least three smelters cut from stone and an assembly of very impressive buildings, chimneys and chambers.

Alternatively enter the “Secret Garden” by following the old track which leads off from just beyond the chapel across the hillside and go through the tree line at its end. You will come into a secluded glade. There, among the scrub trees which grow on the rise of the hillside, you will find remains of very ancient dwellings cut from the stone boulders themselves. Walk along the river, either in front of or behind the house, and you can see remaining foundations of medieval stone bridges; or follow the path from beside and below the cemetery all along for half a mile or so, and a ruined mill, covered in ivy can be discovered. Perhaps it is this mill which gave rise to the name Bente (or Vente) Farine, the hamlet at the top hill on the road to Belloc. Climb up beyond the mill and you will have fantastic views of the mountains.

11 The forge, whether or not the largest South of Lyons, is certainly large and provides further evidence of a very substantial community having existed at Queille.

NEIGHBOURING SITES

The area surrounding Queille is remarkably rich in other sites of interest and houses or châteaux. Many of these have been mentioned in the history of Queille itself, for example Laval, Léran, Lagarde, La Tour de St Quentin, Camon and Mirepoix. All are virtually within walking distance and certainly worth knowing a little about.

Camon

The name “Camon” is derived from the Gallic “cambo” meaning a meander, suggesting that the site has been occupied for a very long time. In Occitan the word came to connote an alluvial plain created by a meandering river. Legend has it that in 778 Charlemagne, back from a campaign against the Saracens, passed by Camon and ordered that the monastery be put under the protection of Notre Dame. It is certain that the abbey at Camon existed by the 10th century: in 928 there is a record of its donation by Charlemagne’s grandson, King Raoul. In 943 it was placed under the power of the Benedictine Abbey of Lagrasse. It remained a Benedictine priory until the Revolution.

Little is known of the Benedictine attitude towards Catharism but it is obvious that the monks at Camon received numerous gifts and patronage allowing considerable enlargements and embellishments of the abbey to be made. The abbey seems to have reached its spiritual and temporal peak during the 12th and 13th centuries. But on 18th June, 1279 a dam of the lake at Piuvert burst and all the villages of the Hers valley were destroyed. Bernard de Cascatel, Prior from 1283 to 1316, rebuilt Camon in the fortified style of a Royal stronghold and, according to a bull of Pope John XXII, 12 monks were re-installed there in 1317. During the Hundred

Years War the Abbey's fortifications were re-inforced by a surrounding crenellated wall (which is still there behind the Abbey). Notwithstanding, the place was ransacked and burned in 1494 and the monks deserted it again.

Rivalry between competing candidates for Prior delayed reconstruction. In 1502 the King's candidate, Philippe de Lévis, was elected Prior of Camon and Abbot of Lagrasse by the Parlement in Toulouse. A later act (1503) of the Toulouse Parlement gives us an idea of the scale of reconstruction which was then authorised: the church, the refectory, the dormitory, the cloister, the Library and the monks' cells had all to be rebuilt. The works were carried out between 1505 and 1537 at a cost of 300,000 livres. Philippe de Lévis set up his own apartments in the large rectangular tower, which from then has been known as "the castle". The exteriors you see today remain virtually unchanged. From this point the Abbey settled down to a more peaceful life in which the position of Prior was handed from uncle to nephew and the Abbey was kept well within the family. As a result both the castle and the Tower were continually embellished and decorated in ever more sumptuous style.

Following the Revolution, the monks left the Abbey without resistance (thereby preserving its sumptuous interiors) and in 1791 the conventual buildings and Castle were sold by the state and the Abbey became a parish church. The family of Lemosy d'Aurel acquired the Abbey of Camon in 1848; their current descendant, Dominique du Pont, lives there today.

The Abbey is well worth a visit and can be reached easily and pleasantly on foot. Inside the Tower are a series of exquisite 18th century rococo rooms, one of the them decorated by Boucher. In two of the rooms, delightfully painted panels depict local scenes and houses: two of these show Queille as it was at the time (see inside back cover). Also to be seen inside are a most beautiful spiral staircase, the refectory and remnants of a most charming cloister.

Lagarde

(imposing ruins between Camon and Mirepoix)

Another most enjoyable and rewarding walk is to Lagarde (about 3 or 4 hours round trip). The château at Lagarde belonged to the King of Aragon until 1197. Nothing remains of this early building but the lordship passed, for a short time, to the Count of Foix who had married Philippa of Aragon. Following the Albigensian Crusade, this land, like all the lordship of Mirepoix, was given to Guy de Lévis and his descendants lived at the château right up to the Revolution. Throughout the intervening centuries the Lévis family carried out construction work and embellished the buildings.

In 1310 the original, dilapidated buildings were reconstructed by François I de Lévis and his wife Elips de Lautrec. The château continued to pass from father to son. In the 16th century, Jean V carried out a considerable expansion: the chapel in 1526, two round towers, a double loggia in the internal courtyard in the then fashionable Italian style and various fortifications to protect the château. In the 17th century, after the death of Alexandre de Lévis-Mirepoix, his second wife Louise de Roquelaire transformed the château and entirely suppressed its medieval character. She created the “Versailles of Languedoc”. She made double terraces, French gardens and corner towers topped with massive statues. The chapel had pride of place and was filled with religious objects in gold and silver, with silk chasubles and purple, embroidered velvets. The ground floor was given over to the kitchens and offices. Above, on three levels, there were twenty bedrooms, a “grand salon”, eleven “petits salons” or “cabinets”, another great room, a knights room, a common room and a billiards room. Together these rooms reflected the height of luxury; refined furniture, tapestries by Aubusson, paintings and bibelots. The bedrooms were known by the names of related families: Terride, Lomagne, Armagnac, Foix, Ventadour etc.

The château then passed to the Lévis-Léran branch of the family. Gaston de Lévis-Léran made a few modifications and lived at the château until

the Revolution in 1789. During the Revolution he decided to emigrate and his château was confiscated. In 1792 it was razed.

In the nineteenth century descendants of the Lévis-Leran, the Vigarosy family, reclaimed the ruined château, its imposing ruins still giving witness of a glorious past. No doubt the château has not yet revealed all its secrets; perhaps there are “oubliettes” still to be found there and the underground passages, which it is said, linked it to Mirepoix and Queille. The inside of the château must be explored to be believed. Its enormous scale harbours many accessible and “undiscovered” secret rooms, gaols, corridors, staircases, towers, moats and carvings. The place is usually locked and empty; to get inside, walk westwards along the southern flank wall under the grand drive which leads to the front of the mansion from the village. Once you are just around the south-western corner of the flank wall, there is an easyish climb up the wall and inside. Have a look also in the church in the village where you will find an impressive large scale model of the château in its heyday.

Léran

There has been a castle at Léran for centuries, long before the Albigensian Crusade, built on a rock outcrop. The fortress was surrounded by ramparts, moats and the River Touyre, however all that remains of this period are three internal towers with walls which are two metres thick. Like Queille, Léran belonged to the Lords of Mirepoix and was also given by Simon de Montford to his lieutenant Guy de Lévis. Up until the siege of Montségur, Léran was a Catholic bastion, under frequent attack by dispossessed Cathar lords.

In 1329 the sons of Jean I de Lévis divided the Lévis inheritance into two: Jean II de Lévis kept the lordship of Mirepoix while Gaston de Lévis got the castle and grounds of Léran. The barony of Léran was not as rich as the lordship of Mirepoix and its lords remained relatively poor. On the other hand, it never became the focus of envy and competition as did Queille and so Gaston and his descendants held onto and lived happily

A History of Queille

at the castle as their principal residence, without interruption, until the Religious Wars.

When, at the beginning of the 16th century the French Religious Wars broke out, the region divided into two camps: the lords of Mirepoix remained faithful to the Catholic Church and the King while the lords of Lérans leant towards the new religion. Some of them became committed Huguenots such as Germain de Lévis-Lérans or his second son Jean-Claude, baron d'Audou, the lord of Bélesta. In fact so outspoken was Germain in support of the Huguenots that the court at Toulouse stripped him of all his chattels in 1539, and the local inhabitants of Aigues-Vivres and Limbrassac then happily confiscated them all.

His son, Gaston VII did not share his father's Protestant ardour but nevertheless brought up his own two sons as Protestants. When he died his sons were still minors and religious war had broken out all around. The baron of Audou became the protector of Gaston's young widow and her children. He was a resolute Calvinist and uncompromising warrior whose convictions bordered on fanaticism.

On 7th June 1568 Lérans was attacked by the Catholic army under the command of Philippe III of Lévis, lord of Mirepoix. The village took fright and sought refuge within the castle. Even though the Catholic canons breached the ramparts, Audou rebuffed the assault and led his men and the villagers into the attack. So violent was the battle that the siege was lifted and more than 200 Catholics left dead.

Lérans was besieged again on 6th September 1622. This time the Count of Carmaing with a small army, aided by the Marquess of Mirepoix and the Baron of Chalabre attacked Lérans after having burned La Bastide, Le Peyrat, Mireval and Limbrassac. This assault was to punish Gabriel de Lévis, Lord of Lérans and his Protestant army for devastating the entire Pamiers region. The castle was taken but the Count of Carmaing, generous in victory, let Gabriel's wife Catherine remain there. Gabriel himself had submitted to Louis XIII but nevertheless continued to do

battle on behalf of the Huguenots. The Catholic Baron of Chalabre therefore decided to order the razing of the castle. But when it came to it the Baron, a relation of the Lévis-Léran, settled instead just for demolishing the surrounding walls and sparing the buildings.

In 1651, despite royal orders to the contrary, Jean-Claude de Lévis restored the castle, rebuilt the walls and embellished the castle, adding, for example, a huge stone staircase.

Matters rested there until the Revolution when Léran and all its estate was confiscated and sold by the State (1793). Unlike so many other châteaux which suffered the same fate, Léran was not demolished because the local population defended it against bands of pillagers. Even so it fell into disrepair and little by little its toitures en pignons, the privilege of the rich, were replaced by ordinary roofs.

The Lévis repurchased the house in October 1805 but it remained uninhabited. Then in 1851 Adrien-Charles-Guy, Duke of Mirepoix and of San Fernando Luis, Grandee of Spain, became the inheritor. He decided to restore the place and had it clad in the neo-gothic fashion of the time. The restoration begun in 1875 and was overseen by Clément Parent, a fashionable Parisien architect.

Much comfort and luxury was introduced. Like Lagarde, there were many rooms, anti-chambers, vestibules etc. And like Lagarde, the rooms bore the names of the family: Lomagne, Lautrec, Ventadour, Foix, Gaudiés, Montségur, Charlus. In fact many souvenirs from Lagarde were taken to Léran, so for example, chapel carvings, Flemish tapestries and the Gobelins of the arms of the Lévis from Lagarde were all installed at Léran. Several rooms were fitted with grand stone fireplaces and numerous family pictures and objets d'art were housed. The dining room was covered in leather from Cordoba. The library had oak shelving with more than 10,000 books. Léran became the principal residence of the Lévis rivalling, a century later, the grandeur Lagarde.

Nowadays, the château has been broken up into apartments and cannot

A History of Queille

be visited.

Mirepoix

You are bound to visit Mirepoix for shopping, coffee or a beer. It is as fine an example of a “bastide” as you are likely to find. Bastides, which pepper the countryside of South West France, are early examples of town planning and invariably involve grid street layouts (or sometimes concentric circular street patterns) around a central square. Usually the central square is arcaded and Mirepoix is no exception. The towns were built as new towns of free citizens by local lords or knights who sold plots as a means for raising armies: although the inhabitants owed no fealty or taxes to the local and were left in peace to trade and farm, in exchange they provided manpower in time of battle. Many of the bastides were built during the 100 years war by both the English and the French.

Mirepoix was laid out in the late 13th and 14th centuries. There had been a town of Mirepoix long before this but it was located somewhat further downstream. In 1279 the Hers flooded and wiped out the entire medieval town. The “new town” you see today was then built in a safer position.

Vals

Not far north of the main road connecting Mirepoix to Pamiers lies a hamlet called Vals. The Church here is one of the most astonishing to be seen. It dates from the pre-medieval period and is built in three layers, one upon the other. The lowest layer is carved out of a rock. You should certainly go and have a look.

Rocquesfixade

The nearest of the mountain top Cathar castles. You can drive to the village — an exquisite one anyway — and walk up for 20 minutes or so.

It's a wonderful site with a stunning view and a good place for pic-nics. You can also walk there from the north. The climb is quite manageable and the walk (one to one and a half hours) is very pleasant indeed. To do this take the D1 from Lavelanet, turn left off this and follow the road and track until it's end. You should be able to pick out the road and track in question from one of the large scale walking maps you will find in the house.

Chalabre and Piuvert

Carrying on from Camon you will travel along a very pretty road to Chalabre. Chalabre is another bastide which is worth a stop for coffee, a stroll and shopping. Further on you will arrive at Piuvert, the site of very impressive castle remains which, unlike many of the "Cathar Castles", is very accessible: you can virtually park in it. Piuvert's particular claim to fame is as the most colourful of the troubadour courts. Jongleurs from all of Europe (including the one who found Richard Lionheart locked up in the Wachau, near Vienna) used to sing and perform here in what was said to be the most glittering venue of the period.

Other Easy Excursions

You will find an ample supply of guidebooks, walking maps and local history, coffee table photo books and so on in the library. Carcassonne is an obvious place to visit but it is very crowded in the summer months. Foix is a charming and interesting town, with a large and famous castle in it's midst. From Foix there are many beautiful valleys and mountain roads to explore as well as the famous pre-historic caves paintings at Niaux; a particular favourite is the "Route des Corniches" to the south east of Foix. A route along this stunning road can be well combined with a visit to Montailou; be sure to stop and look at the church at Axiat (and others of a famous series of Romanesque churches along this route). Carry on south towards Andorra (and go east or west along the mountain roads and valleys) and soon you will be in the Pyrenees proper where there are countless walks, mountains to be climbed and lakes to see. The

A History of Queille

spring provides quite wonderful displays of wild flowers. The mountain road between Montgaillard and St Girons is a fantastic drive; but leave plenty of time for it.

Cathar castles abound: probably the best of these is Peyrepeteuse but Quéribus, Aigullar, Lastours are all worth a visit. Montségur is near by and combines an amazing site with an almost mystical status.





Saint-Quantin La Tour. Miniature du château de Pucelle faite en 1865
pour le Duc de Lévis Mirapoux.



From 18th century painted panels, Camon



