QUIMPER, THE CAPITAL OF CORNOUAILLE, BRITTANY, BECAME LIMERICK'S TWIN CITY IN JULY, 1981.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF QUIMPER

There are few towns more pleasant than Quimper, the capital of Cornouaille; there is no prettier in the whole of Brittany. Its cathedral is a canticle in granite; the two rivers, so clean and musical at low tide, become silver mirrors when the rising tide of the broad estuary of the Odet bears them up.

Ardouin-Dumazet

Like its twin city Limerick, Quimper is also a port. It is situated on a river, on the confluence of three rivers, the Steir, the Jet and the Odet. The tide reaches Quimper, but the Odet is no Shannon: it is much narrower, as it winds the 15 kilometres or so to the sea. Ships of only 300 tonnes could, at one time, navigate up to Quimper (the name of the confluence), but today the bridges that cross the river prevent ships from entering the city itself.

In 1981, the city of Quimper feted the bi-centenary of the birth of its most famous son, Rene-Theophile Laennec. He was a doctor and became famous for inventing the stethoscope. He was one of the most eminent doctors of his time and professor of medicine at the prestigious College of France in Paris, but returned to Quimper shortly before his death in 1826.

Quimper is also famous for its china. In Limerick today you can buy Quimper-made plates and cups, with their Celtic design and typical blue-and-gold edging.

The city is best known today for these two aspects of its history. But how did Quimper fare in the development of France, from the pre-Roman era, through the upheavals of the middle ages, the
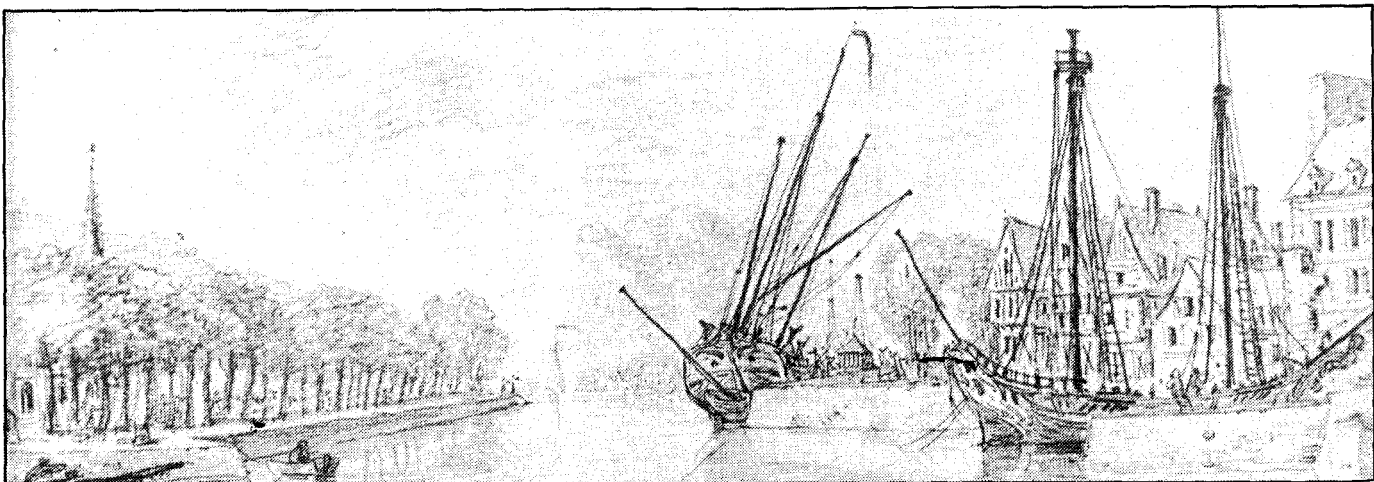
BY MARTIN CHAPPELL

French Revolution, the occupation of the country to the relatively quiet waters of the late 20th century? It was the Romans who first recognised the value of the river crossing. The Celts, the Osisnes, had made their capital to the east. The site was well chosen and could be easily defended. The Roman settlement developed and prospered during the first three centuries AD, particularly after the reign of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine. The Romans named the town Aquilonia. Its centre was located a few hundred yards south of the present Quimper, so as to avoid the confluence where the river met the road. This place is today known as Locmaria.

But the Gallo-Roman Empire was to fall to the successive waves of invaders from the east, popularly known as the Barbarians. Many of these Germanic tribes were, however, already installed in Gaul as mercenaries to the Roman administration. The small city of Aquilonia, like so many others in the 5th century AD, simply disappeared. No-one knows what happened to the inhabitants, who abandoned their potteries and tile factories, no doubt to seek refuge in the surrounding forests.

It is here that legend joins history. The legend is that of the Celtic king, Gradlon. It is said that while fleeing his tempestuous sister Dabut, he was so enchanted by the meeting of the rivers that he founded a city and called it Kemper (confluence). This legend embellishes the less fanciful account of the foundation of Quimper, that it was more likely settled by groups of Cornish Britons, who were also Celts. There is no doubt that it was they who founded what is still known as the capital of la Cornouaille, the region surrounding Quimper.

From the 5th to the 11th century, the Dubas or Cornouaille governed this region. Papal powers gained ascendancy, and Brittany split into a multitude of hereditary fealties. Quimper, however, remained the capital of the Basse-Cornouaille. Little is known of this period either in historical records or archaeological finds.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, Quimper became established as a medieval town, mainly due to the presence of a Papal court. The centre of the city shifted nearer to the confluence of the Steir and the Odet, which protected the town on its southern flank. This thriving town of 5,000 inhabitants has left its mark on modern Quimper. To

Quimper in 1776 ... 'the two rivers so clean and musical at low tide'.

this day, the outline of the ramparts can still be seen. These defences were built by the bishop in reaction to the construction of a formidable fortress by the husband of the duchess, Constance. The style of these fortifications was inspired by those seen by the Crusaders in the Middle East. The centre of modern Quimper is a mediaeval oasis. The area around the Place-au-Beune (so named for its weekly butter market) is of a mediaeval origin and has preserved much of the original architecture.

Saint-Corentin cathedral, named after the hermit that King Gradlon was supposed to have met in his travels, still dominates the city. It was built and modified over a period of 200 years. But in the middle ages another, older monument dominated Quimper. This was the church of Locmaria, built in Romanesque style. Its construction was even partly financed by Henry II, King of England, who governed the Duchy of Brittany in the name of his son, Geoffroy, husband of the duchess, Combanu. It is Quimper's oldest surviving monument.

It must be remembered that at this time France was not a united country, but was made up of areas of power ruled by dukes (or even by England), who had scant regard for the central power of the kings of France. Brittany was only absorbed into France in 1532, after its share of internal and external power struggles.

The most tragic of these struggles occurred in the 14th century, during the course of what is known as the Brittany War of Succession. The bishop, Alain Le Gall, favouring Jean de Montfort, had allowed a strong English force to hold the town. In April, 1344, Charles de Blois laid siege to the town with a large French army. A vigorous assault was followed by a massacre of many inhabitants. Charles de Blois then held the town for 20 years until his death in 1364. Jean de Montfort regained Quimper the next year, but in 1373 it was once again under siege by the French forces, who gained the upper hand and maintained the town for the French from then on.

These were not the only calamities to befall Quimper in the middle ages. The famine of 1346 only served to weaken the population, before the Great Plague killed thousands in 1349. In 1498, a peasant army, under the leadership of Yann Plouge, invaded the town. They had been driven from the land through penury and famine. For four days, they ransacked the town, until they were driven back by a force of 'gentils-hommes'.

However, once peace was established under Henry IV, few notable events took place in Quimper before the French Revolution. The 18th century was a period of growth and construction, apart from a serious fire in 1762, which lasted two weeks. The plans to redevelop the old quarter were interrupted by the great Revolution, which was to bring widespread

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upheaval and strife, even to Quimper.

The Revolution was welcomed by the members of the town council, and they swore allegiance to the people of France. New laws and regulations were drawn up and enforced. The decree of 1790 made Quimper the capital of the new 'département' of Finistère, and the new administration was set up. But in 1793, the administrators were accused of federalism and many imprisonments and executions followed. A new Comité dé Régénération was formed and old names bearing traces of feudalism or superstition were changed. Quimper itself was re-named Montayne-sur-Odet. In December, 1793, a huge bonfire of statues and saintly relics was lit on the Place de la Liberté. All traces of the hated religion were systematically destroyed by the revolutionary supporters. In 1793, the administrators of Finistère were executed

without trial on the orders of La Montagne, the leader of the Regeneration Committee, who had changed his name from Le Roy.

Since the Revolution, Quimper has managed to live with the successive regimes of French government. It profited from the English blockade of Brest during the Napoleonic wars, and met the return of the Bourbons, the change to a Republic, the Second Empire and the Third Republic with equanimity. Quimper remained an administrative centre and acquired the buildings to reinforce this status.

In the 20th century, Quimper has grown to 60,000 inhabitants by taking in the surrounding suburbs in 1959, and can look to the future strengthened by the experiences of its 2,000 year history.

(Based on *Ce Vieux Quimper* by Claude Fagnen, Quimper, 1980).