



HOW QUIMPER BECAME THE CAPITAL OF FINISTÈRE

When it came to making a decision on which town would become the 'capital' of the newly created Département, it was hardly surprising that all the towns of any appreciable size - Quimper, Carhaix, Chateau Lin, Brest, Landerneau, Morlaix and Saint-Pol-de-Leon - coveted the title.

Whereas for the other départements of Brittany, the Constituent Assembly designated a principal town, passions were running so high in Finistère that they balked at making the decision. They confined themselves to choosing Quimper on a provisional basis on 22 January, 1790, leaving it up to the electors to decide for themselves at a later date.

The meeting of the electoral assembly was fixed for 7 January in the college chapel, which today has been transformed into an auditorium. There were about 500 eligible electors, that is to say taxpayers (male) aged 25 or over and paying taxes of at least the value of 3 days work. There were important items on the agenda: the election of 36 people who would be responsible for the administration of the Département, and the choice of a principal town. If the first question was resolved without much difficulty, such was not the case for the second, despite the fact that a majority of 251 votes to 219 showed a preference for Landerneau. The minority group from Cornouaille contested the result, and after much discussion they succeeded in bringing about a consensus: the question would be referred back to the Constituent Assembly, which would have to decide between the two towns, Landerneau and Quimper.

The people of Léon painted a picture of the old capital of Cornouaille worthy of Dante:

... To get to Quimper you have to take a circuitous route avoiding the mountains of Arrée, which are impassable at the time indicated for the session of the local Assembly, and which are, in any case, horribly dangerous in all seasons. It is most distressing to see the list of people who perish every year in the snow, or who, having escaped from robbers, fall prey to wild beasts. Is it right that 300,000 inhabitants of Léon should have to go chasing after 200,000 people scattered amid bandit-infested mountains and woods?

The inhabitants of Quimper, on the other hand, highlighted the fact that lawyers

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(TRANSLATED BY
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and litigants from Brest, Morlaix and Carhaix had been coming to Quimper ever since 1552, when the county courts were created (courts which dealt with appeals against judgments in the royal courts); in the shadow of the beautiful cathedral, vast chambers, formerly the property of religious orders, were made available to them, with more than ample space to house all the different administrative services. They emphasised that Léon was already wealthy, and that priority should be given to the poorest areas.

On 20 August, 1790, the matter was thrashed out in the Constituent Assembly. The chairman, in summing up, asked that Landerneau be designated as principal town, in accordance with the vote taken some months previously by a majority of the Finistère electors.

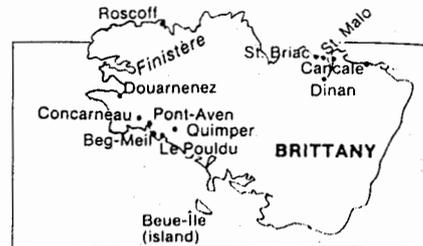
It was at that point that Denis Bardier, Grand Master of the famous Collège Louis Le Grand in Paris, and former principal of the Collège de Quimper, intervened. Thanks to his great oratorical talent and his personal connections, particularly the impressive support given to him by Camille Desmoulins and Robespierre, who were his former pupils, he succeeded, against all expectations, in reversing the situation and having his native town, which he dearly loved, designated principal town of the Département of Finistère.

The decision was couched in the following terms: 'The National Assembly has decreed that Quimper will remain definitively the administrative capital of Finistère'.

Landerneau's Revenge

The execution of the king on 21 January, 1793, added to France's political problems both internal and external. In response, the Montagnards, exalted republicans who had gained control of the Convention, were to govern by terror.

The majority of the Département's administrators, judged to have been too moderate, were imprisoned before being guillotined at Brest on 22 May, 1794; among them was the Citizen-Bishop Expilly, one of the chief authors of the



Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Quimper, which had now become Montagne sur Odet, was dispossessed by a decree of 19 July, 1793, of its title of 'capital' which was granted to Landerneau. After the fall of Robespierre, another decree of 5 November, 1794, again declared Quimper to be the chief town of the Département of Finistère on a definitive basis, with no appeal allowed against that decision.

More than a century later, the same problem was raised again. In 1905, when plans were made to reconstruct the Préfecture (administrative headquarters), some councillors from the north of the Département, led by the mayor of Morlaix, argued that it would be greatly to Finistère's advantage to have its capital in the city of the viaduct rather than in Quimper. Having been put to the vote, this proposal was rejected by a majority of the Council.

The Trésorerie Generale

Because of its position as capital, all the main administrative services of the Département are in Quimper, with the exception of the finance department. This rather paradoxical situation dates back a long way. It was as a result of an edict issued by the government of Louis XVIII, without any apparent reason, that the Receiver's Office (now called the Trésorerie) was transferred to Brest. Periodically throughout the 19th century, the city councillors of Quimper expressed a wish that it should be returned to the administrative capital, but in vain.

SOURCES

Le Guennec, Quimper and Corentin and district.

Minute books of the Quimper Town Council.

Quimper: A Century of History by Alain Le Grand.

Le Finistère, articles from the Collected Works of Yves Le Gallo.

Archives Department, Quimper.