

The Fruit Road



The perfume of Normandy is in an apple...

Like thatch and half timbered buildings, the apple is also an emblem of Normandy. A magnificent fruit with biblical overtones from our landscape of thick orchards, apple blossom in spring, the sharpness of farm cider and the voluptuous strength of old calvados. The apple seems to have kept its forbidden quality and is imbued with a connotation of revolt and independence, a wild acidic after taste so satisfying to the Norman country man. However it is not the sole fruit of the valley : preceded by the vine, it now competes with the cherry and the plum.

A beneficial micro-climate

On both sides of the river between Bardouville and Bliquetuit, two important fruit growing areas developed :
 - The raised alluvial strip along the river called the "bourrelet"
 - The initial alluvial slopes called "sablon"

Between the "bourrelet" and the "sablon", the low lying land is often peaty, liable to flooding and as such unsuitable for fruit trees. Like the higher ground, it is left for forestry. Down river from Rouen, the land surrounding the Seine is difficult to manage with poor soil, mild local climate, and due to the relief of the cliffs, untypically low rainfall.



P. Ahoen - Coll. Parc naturel régional des Bouches de la Seine Normandie

"...moytié pomyers et moytié périers"

It is difficult to determine at what time in history the apple was first cultivated in this part of Normandy. There were probably wild apple trees in the Brotonne Forest as an official text from 1203 seems to attest, authorising monks from Jumièges to collect forest apples for cider. These wild shrubs were of little use in developing orchards and in addition to improved husbandry had to be grafted with Spanish apple branches before widespread cultivation could take place.

The written contracts of the period show to what degree the abbey put pressure on its tenant farmers to create ever more orchards by commanding that a dozen new fruit trees should be planted yearly, that being half pear and half apple.

Over the centuries similar contracts have been found, and the conditions became even more constraining . So, little by little, pear and apple orchards replaced vines. No mention was made in the texts of the time concerning the cherry or the plum.



Cueillette des cerises : manuscrit du XVIIe siècle.

How orchards change through time

The pear tree was soon deemed inappropriate by agricultural experts and progressively dispensed with. As for the apple, its supremacy has not been unchallenged to this day. In areas like Jumièges, le Mesnil and Heurteville, plums and cherries are predominant.

Varieties change according to criteria of productivity and consumer preference. Similarly, certain types are selected for cultivation solely on the merits of cash turnover. In this way, the eating quality of fruit on offer has been impoverished along with the variety of species cultivated. Thus, orchards are in a constant state of change. The vast majority of the forty or so types of plum available at the turn of the century have disappeared : Gaillon, Reine Claude, Goutte d'Or, Quetsche, la Prune de Monsieur ou la Verte Bonne are the most common varieties found today.

Cherries are divided into groups according to time of ripening and picking : early, like "Burlat", semi late like "Napoleon" and late, "Hedelfingen". Popular eating apples are : Reinette, Cox's Orange, Boscoop and Bailleur. It is said that the popular apple of the area called the "Benedictin" owes its name to the Benedictine Monks who introduced the strain to the valley.

The Cider apple is for local consumption only on a cottage industry scale as there are no industrial cider factories or distilleries in the area. To this day, distillers still use the mobile still pots which are taken from village to village to distill the spirit on the spot. Orchards with trees and high branches are often replaced with the lower, hybrid "bush" apple trees which afford higher yields, are quicker to grow and easier to pick. Sometimes these are planted in existing orchards to complement the trees.

Planting of such trees in sheep or cattle pasture in addition to the animal grazing affords extra revenue for the farmer. The farming of fruits like strawberries, raspberries and gooseberries is fast developing in the area too.

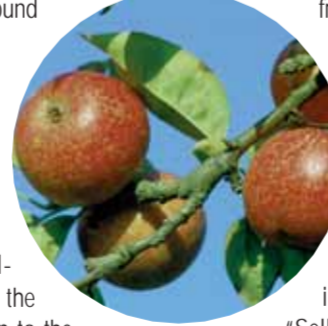
From rowing-boat to road-side

The means of marketing the fruit produced here has also evolved through the centuries. Until 1924, barges used to go down river from Jumièges to Le Havre and thence to England. At Conihout, fruit producers would bring their wares out to the barges in rowing boats. Shortly afterwards, an evening railway service was started transporting fruit from Yainville station to Le Havre. The markets of Rouen used to be supplied by horse and cart from the points of production and the carts would need to start out at 11 am, only to return to the orchards the following day.

Nowadays, many producers attend the numerous weekly markets that can be found all over Normandy, or take their produce to the M.I.N (Marché d'intérêt National) in Rouen. From the 1960's onwards, the trend of setting up stalls on road sides or at farm entrances has increased. This is called "Vente à la Barrière" or "Selling over the fence".

Not unsurprisingly, different fruits are grown on different types of land. Cherries are grown on the higher ground of the alluvial "bourrelet" close to the river, where as all other species are dispersed more or less everywhere.

Fruit production provides revenue for producers throughout the year. From May and June with cherries, September with plums and then autumn which is the apple season. Note also that apples are kept in cold rooms allowing conservation and sale right through winter.



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A man-made Ecosystem

The traditional orchard landscape is man-made. As such, tree species and hedgerows providing protection and contributing to a gentle local climate encourage particular types of wild life and plants.

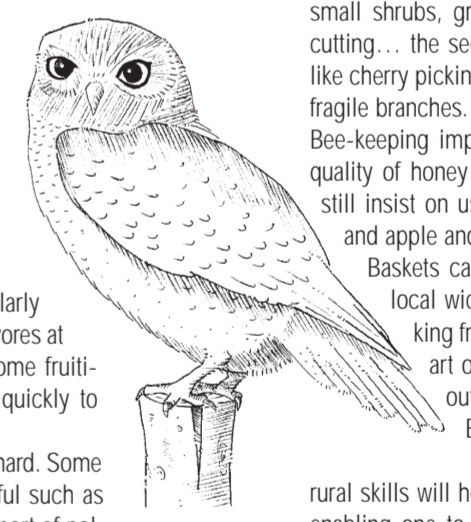
Lichen and mistletoe are common and so is a fungus called Polyphore which regrettably dries out the trees, and other microscopic plants also cause damage through disease. Although rodents are common and even climb trees in search of fruit, birds are the real kings of the orchard.

Thrushes and tits eat the mistletoe berries and as such ensure the parasite's reproduction. Blue tits and coal tits nest in cracks of ageing tree trunks, and the nuthatch eats spring buds. The distant tapping of a green wood-pecker can often be heard, but the bird is elusive, but if you are lucky you may catch a glimpse of it.

Little owls also nest in tree hollows preying on voles, shrews and beetles.

An endangered species, the little owl is regularly monitored. Starlings which start out as insectivores at the beginning of spring quickly learn to become fruit-eaters consuming cherries early on, moving quickly to pears and apples.

Insects also play their part in the life of the orchard. Some are pests such as greenfly and some are useful such as bees and bumble bees which ensure the transport of pollen between flowers.



Conserving the landscape for the benefit of fruit

The land scape of the valley is without doubt one of the most beautiful but also one of the most delicately balanced in Normandy.

Originally shaped by man from a hostile environment between heavy waterlogged soil and sterile sand, they bear witness to historic economic and social needs that are now obsolete. Modern machinery, enlargement of fields, poplar plantation and intensive draining are as much a menace to this fragile environment as are the impositions of agricultural productivity. With a desire to protect the habitats and species of the valley, the Park Authority has undertaken concerted action to either directly set up or provide support towards conservation initiatives such as the planting of willow and traditional husbandry methods. The Park provides guidance in supporting fruit production notably with the "Apple House" in Sainte-Opportune-la-Mare, and by overseeing four orchard conservation schemes, where a wide variety of species are planted.

The Park has also been instrumental in the development of accommodation for the tourist industry : gites, and Bed and Breakfast facilities which provide quality service in a rural setting. In addition to the quality restaurants to be found, the "Fermes-Auberges" provide good food and delicious regional dishes prepared from local ingredients.

Skill and workmanship

Fruit tree husbandry is demanding labour intensive work relying on skill and know-how but also time consuming tasks undertaken with little help from machines. Raising small shrubs, growing and nurturing grafts, grafting and cutting... the seemingly easy jobs can be the most risky like cherry picking on the high ladders which can break the fragile branches.

Bee-keeping improves pollination and contributes to the quality of honey produced. A number of cider producers still insist on using traditional methods to produce cider, and apple and prune brandy.

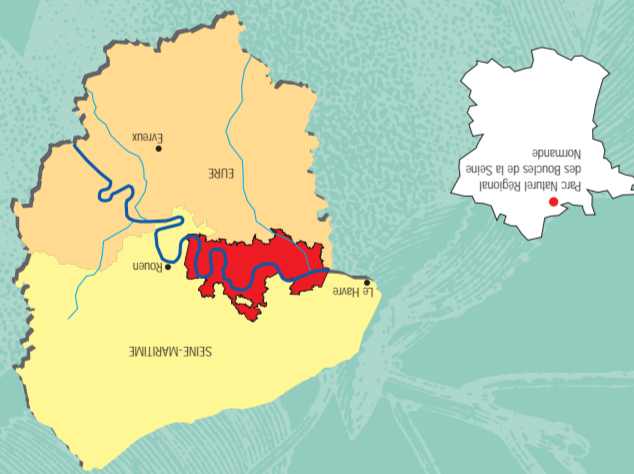
Baskets called "Mannes" and "Touries" made from local wicker and willow strips were used for packing fruit for the market. Unfortunately today, the art of basket making using old skills has died out.

Encouraging appropriate agricultural methods in conjunction with traditional rural skills will help to preserve this precious countryside, enabling one to savour authentic juicy cherries from the high branches and marvel at the sight of blossom in spring. To experience misty summer mornings heavy with the enchanting fragrance of plum laden trees and to understand that the essence of this dear land is also encapsulated in the plum.



A. Hoan - Coll. Parc naturel régional des Bouches de la Seine Normandie

The Fruit Road



Maison du Parc naturel régional des Bouches de la Seine Normandie
 76940 Notre-Dame-de-Bliquetuit
 Tél. 02 35 37 23 16 • Fax 02 35 37 39 70
 www.pnr-seine-normande.com

Maison du Tourisme
 76480 Duclair
 227, avenue du Président Coily
 Tél. 02 35 37 38 29 - Fax 02 35 37 12 59
 e-mail : mtdclair@wanadoo.fr

Office de Tourisme de Jumièges
 Rue Guillaume le Conquerant
 76480 Jumièges
 Tél. 02 35 37 28 97 - Fax 02 35 37 07 07
 e-mail : sj.jumieges@wanadoo.fr

Base de Tourisme UCPA
 Jumièges-Le Mesnil
 76480 Duclair
 Tél. 02 35 37 93 84 - Fax 02 35 37 99 97
 goff : 02 35 05 32 97

USEFUL ADDRESSES
 OF THE FRUIT ROAD :



On the fruit Road...

Bliquetuit and la Mailleraye...

As soon as one leaves the Park House, the village of **Notre-Dame-de-Bliquetuit** comes into view with its half timbered houses and farm courtyards brimming with fruit trees. The elegant landscape is carved with beech hedgerows planted with help from the Nature Park and the church whose origins go back to the XIth century still boasts its XIIth century Roman tower.

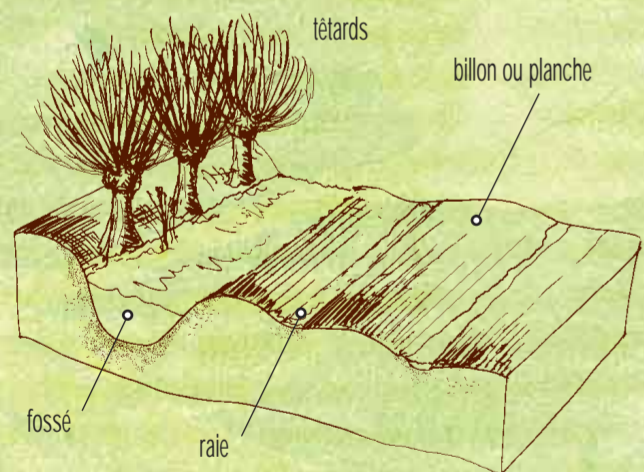
The road carries on through **La Mailleraye** past the municipal camp-site which is near to the site of a castle demolished in the XIXth century. Belief has it that the plum tree was king of the fruit trees of the village : this tradition seems to have died out as today the apple is predominant in the orchards. It would also appear that another fruit, the "medlar" used to abound here and the name of the village, "La Mailleraye" is derived from the common name for that fruit : the "Meiller".

La Mailleraye, "capital of the peninsula", as described by the chronicler Spalikowski, has undergone a number of important changes this last half century. In 1944, heavy bombing destroyed the centre of the town and much of its original picturesque charm was lost in the rebuilding of the town.

The opening of the Brotonne Bridge in 1977 and the demise of the river ferry damaged the local economy and today one has to go down to the quay-side to get an impression of the former relationship between town and river. Down on the right just after the hair pin bend, a century old pear tree stands like an advanced sentry for the orchards and court-yards to come.

From Heurteauville to Port-Jumièges...

From here on the landscape clears. Parcels of land are lined with ditches and lines of pollarded willow with their swollen heads and hedgehog like branches. This land-scape is formed in parallel lines of mounds called "billon" separated by narrow drainage canals called "raies". In the background can be seen the edge of the **Brotonne Forest**.



Progressively the landscape takes shape. Opposite "Le Trait", and the industrial area of Yainville the land is concentrated into a series of orchards typically situated between the loops of the river : on the alluvial rise called the "bourrelet". One of the water collecting canals drains into the Seine at this point. This landscape is momentarily interrupted between the Yainville river ferry and the church : the farm "La Ferme de la Grange" used to belong to the Jumièges monks, and the farm land here forms a distinct and different tract of land with large fields. Today, the farm is largely fruit orchard with low and high branch fruit trees : cherry, apple, plum and raspberry bushes.

The XIIIth century "grange dimière" has been renovated with help from the park authority and the half timbered manor house is one of the most remarkable examples of Norman heritage in Heurteauville. The church called "Chapelle du

Bout-du-Vent" was completed in 1730. Tucked away on the edge of the forest the marshland "marais de la Harelle" covers the low lying land of Heurteauville. A large portion of this has been common land for some time, where locals grazed their cattle and sheep. These mediaeval rights to common land are to be found in many stretches along the Seine from the Vernier marshes to Jumièges, Le Mesnil and Duclair.

Above the graveyard can be seen large masses of black peat. La Harelle is a vast peat bog which has been excavated since 1757, however the bog is private property and cannot be visited. The wet moors with their sparse tree cover provide home to delicate mosses and local carnivorous plants called "droséras" ; peat bog woodland with birch and spagnum moss ; water-logged trenches with water cress and other vegetation colonising the waterside. The ponds are home to newt and frog, the woods to viper and vivipare lizard. The marsh is also rich in bird life : mallards, lapwings, moor-hens, willow-warblers and buzzards.



Following the river, one eventually arrives at a beautifully sculpted box tree in the shape of a cockerel. A near intact lime kiln from the XIXth century stands away from the river on terraces created around 1885 for fruit tree plantation. In order to reach **Jumièges**, one can use the river ferry at Port-Jumièges. River ferries are part of the heritage of the lower Seine. Until the French Revolution, the Jumièges ferry was under the authority of the Jumièges Abbey and probably existed as early as the VIIth century.

An other way by Yainville...

The Jumièges ferry stands in reserve to back up the other river ferries of the lower Seine in the event of breakdown or maintenance. Consequently, the ferry service at Jumièges can be rather sporadic and operates only on week days, so those wishing to cross the river at this point should backtrack and take the alternative route and crossing at **Yainville**, which owes its development to the building of a power station in the 1950's (which was demolished in 1995) is home to two major heritage sites :

- le fossé Saint-Philibert, an iron age fortification which protected the entrance to the peninsula, reducing it to an isolated strong-point. It leans against the dry bank which was once the course of the Austreberthe, a tributary which now enters the Seine at Duclair.
 - l'Eglise Saint-André, a remarkable church of roman style, parts of which date from the XIth century.
- The alternative route continues through the plain to Jumièges where it meets up with the main route in front of the abbey.



St Valentin's church at Jumièges : Jonas, vitrail of the XVIIth century.



Jumièges

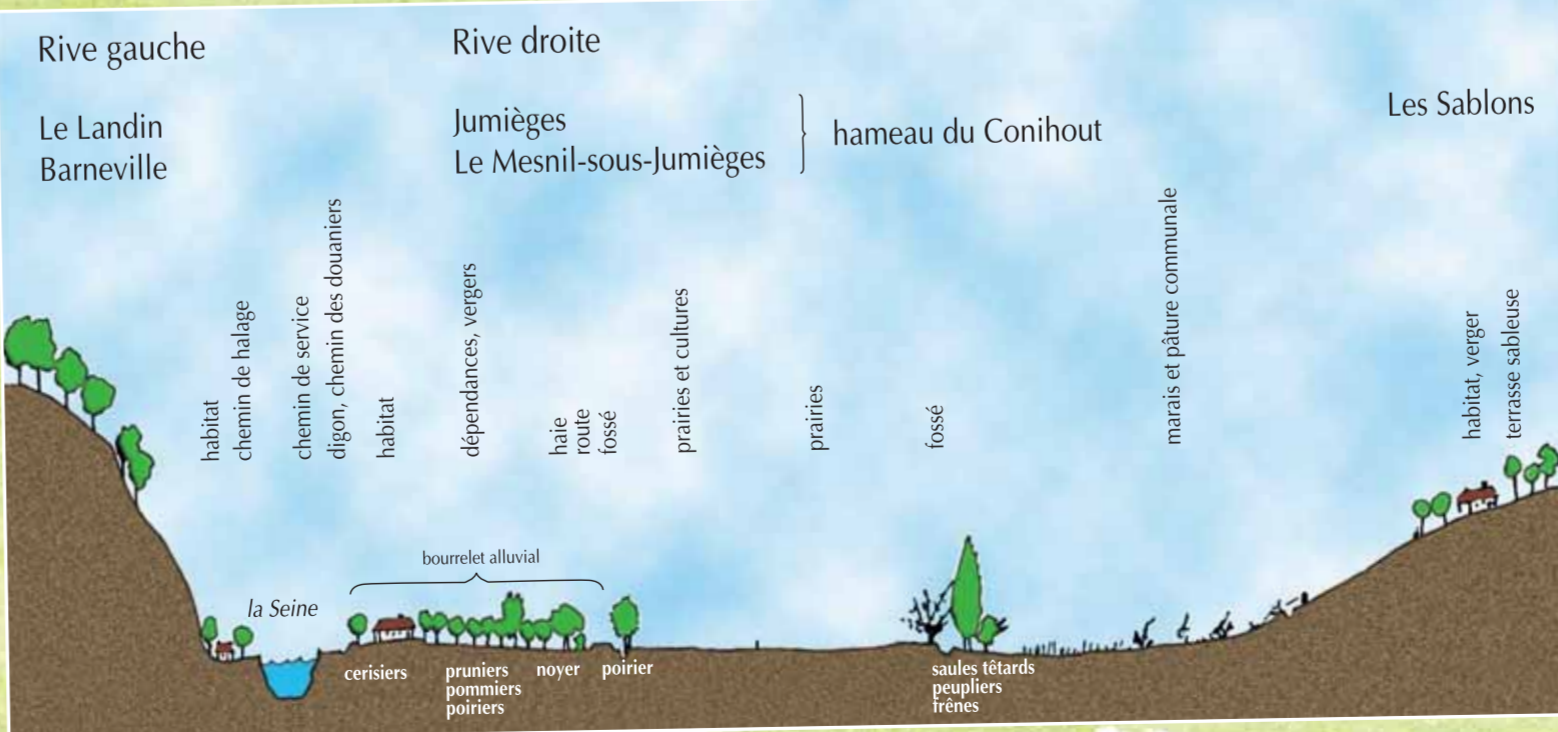
It is said **Jumièges** possesses the most beautiful ruins in France and certainly the abbey is a monument one should not miss. Its twin towers dominate the surroundings as if still clinging to the former authority that the abbey enjoyed. In addition to the abbey, Jumièges is also home to a rich and varied religious heritage like the church of Saint-Valentin which has a Roman nave and a renaissance choir, or the "Chapelle de la Mère-de-Dieu" lost in the forest. It is also home to heritage such as public bread kilns and wells once used by the people of the town and an array of half timbered houses. Jumièges also boasts literary heritage with Victor Hugo, Roger Martin du Gard, Stendhal, Maupassant and the author of Arsène Lupin, the writer Maurice Leblanc who spent his childhood holidays here in the imposing brick house opposite the Abbey, which today is used as the Tourist Office. At the corner of the Abbey, the fruit road splits into two routes.

To Le Mesnil via Conihout...

● The southern fork, to the right, leads to the hamlet of **Conihout**, which lies along the bank of the Seine. Away from the centre, the settlement comprises two distinct communities : divided between **Jumièges** and **Mesnil-sous-Jumièges**.

Upon arriving at Conihout, the landscape becomes more orderly. Between the river and the road, is a succession of fruit orchards. These shelter the local dwellings usually half timbered and built on the alluvial ridge called the "bourrelet" which runs along the edge of the river. Cherry trees which need to be away from water are found here. In the traditional "Cour fruitière" (high branch orchard) apple and plum trees abound. Farm buildings are dispersed and the occasional bread oven or cider press can be seen.

Barns and stables are a reminder of the importance of livestock and horse rearing in the grassy pasture. There are also tree nurseries designed to maintain the production of new trees and grafts, and vegetable gardens carefully tucked away. Parcels of land are in rectangular strips and have grown narrower as a result of inheritance laws. Each man in addition to his land, had a right of access to the road, the river and the alluvial "bourrelet" on which to build his house. A small number of pear trees still survive, but the walnut has died out here, a victim to the disease called "l'encre du noyer". Few hedges have survived here due to the demanding chore of maintenance and encroachment of the road.



On the opposite side of the road are agricultural fields. Pasture and ploughed land compete with the fruit orchards which have suffered as a result these last two decades. This point is the limit of the fruit tree, and other trees, more adapted to the conditions that altitude and humidity impose creep in. The landscape is flat, punctuated by the silver blue willows contrasting with the tall Italian poplars. Down from here is the marsh, traditionally allocated to common use-as is the case around the village of **Heurteauville** - and large ponds, the result of excavation.

...or via the Sablon

● The second branch of the fruit road cuts through a second level of landscape situated above the marsh and ponds : "les sablons". Though less traditional, orchards and fruit trees thrive on the dry and easily drained soil. Colourful fruit markets are organised on Sundays in season, at la place Martin du Gard. According to season, local producers offer their produce of cherries, plums, apples, strawberries and raspberries, and also jams, honey and cider.

The leisure resort and the Park's Golf Course



Situated on the common between Jumièges and Mesnil-sous-Jumièges, the Park's leisure station offers a moment of relaxation and sport. Occupying an area of 25 hectares surrounded by lakes, the station offers such leisure activities as sailing, wind surfing, archery, tennis and rambling. Equipped with hotel and restaurant facilities and open all year round, the station provides its facilities and professional instruction to all : beginners or experienced people, adults and children alike.

Close by, a municipal Golf Course welcomes all those who wish to try golf, novices and experienced players alike. In addition to the eighteen hole course is a nine hole "compact" course. Players are free to roam the course or practice the sport with an instructor. Accommodation is available on site.

A few hundred meters further on is the XIIIth century Manor house, "le Manoir de la Vigne" more commonly known as the Manor of Agnès Sorel, mistress of King Charles VII, who died here in the winter of 1450.



From Le Mesnil to Duclair

The two separate routes rejoin at the exit of the village of **Le Mesnil**, and the circuit then follows the old embankment along the Seine to **Duclair**. Reaching the end of the Fruit Road, one arrives at the county-town of Duclair. Despite war damage, the town has managed to preserve some fine examples of local architectural heritage : the Church of Saint Denis, which boasts some remarkable Roman architecture and marble columns, and numerous mills dotted about the Austreberthe river. In 1895, the Mustad family from Norway founded a factory that produced nails, horse-shoes and screws. The factory's closure in 1991 contributed to a trend of general industrial decline in the area. Nonetheless, commerce is still vibrant in Duclair and the weekly market, founded by Richard the Lion Heart, has been a high point in the life of the town every tuesday since the 7th of June, 1198. Tourism is of course important and the office of tourism is situated on the quay-side. Duclair is above all reputed for it's ducks, which are reared on the sunny south facing slopes overlooking the river. Duclair duck is used in local gastronomy in such renowned dishes as "canard aux cerises" and "canard au sang".



Collection du Parc régional de la Seine-Normandie