

## THE THATCHED COTTAGE TRAIL

Starting from the Maison du Parc, the Fruit Trail (62 km - 39 miles) and the Thatched Cottage Trail (53 km - 32 miles) complement each other perfectly. The Fruit Trail will take you to the east towards Jumièges, Duclair and Anneville-Ambourville, whereas the Thatched Cottage Trail will take you through Vatteville, Aizier and Vieux-Port to the west, to the Marais Vernier where the estuary becomes wider and stretches over the alluvial plain.



### A symbol of rural dwellings...

How can we define a thatched cottage? Basically, it is a house covered with a thatched roof, many of which can still be seen in Normandy. Yet, the misuse of the word and the image of thatched cottages as ideal country dwellings made them become synonymous with rural houses, and even more with half-timbered houses.



### ... or an archetypal image of Normandy?

Thatched cottages are a symbol of rural dwellings, as well as the archetypal image of Normandy conveyed at the beginning of tourism advertising. Literature also played a part by depicting an ambiguous image that did not reflect reality. To some writers, it is a cosy and neat home sweet home; as described by the local writer Hector Malot: "...in an orchard planted with beautiful apple trees, a small peasant house looking tidy and cosy, or at least in a good state of repair. The thatched roof, crowned with little plants sprouting green leaves from a flowering carpet, did not have any holes; the walls, with an exposed timber frame filled with cob, were carefully painted, wood in black, so that the whiteness of the clay and straw mortar was even brighter due to the surrounding black frame, which made the house look bright in the middle of the dense, deep-green foliage. No manure in sight, but a hen house at the far end and a cow shed on the other side, which we could reach thanks to two small footpaths where the grass was shorter and thicker because they were used regularly".



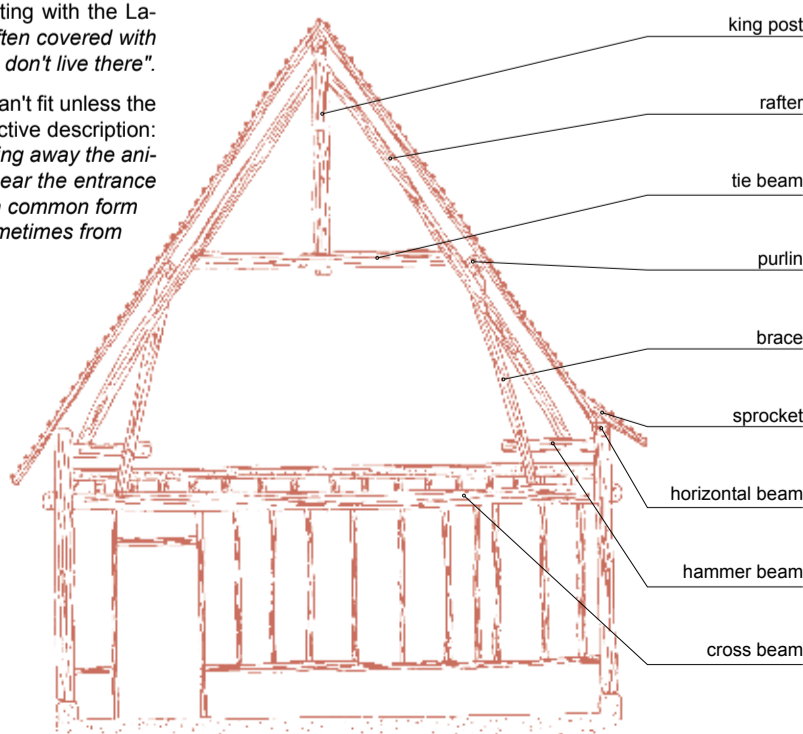
### A miserable house

To some others, it is, on the contrary, the height of discomfort and insalubrity. Starting with the Larousse illustrated from the 19th century which defines it as "A poor, rustic dwelling, often covered with thatch", and even adds the quotation: "Thatched cottages are only to the taste of those who don't live there".

Indeed, the openings are small and daylight limited, the ceilings are so low that wardrobes can't fit unless the legs or top are cut. In 1832 in the Marais Vernier, M. Leprieux, a local doctor, gave an instructive description: "We wanted to take a rest. A thatched cottage would do: but what an awful place! After moving away the animals blocking the way and endured the ammoniacal stench of a big pile of horse manure near the entrance of the cottage, the door opened and released a blinding and choking cloud of peat smoke, a common form of heating in the area. We got in. The light, which is only coming from the door, although sometimes from small flames in the hearth as well, was not enough to distinguish the objects in the room".

### A several-thousand-year-old tradition

Far from these clichés, thatched cottages are the protectors of the Norman spirit. Made with clay, stone, wood and straw, they are the representation of the land on which they stand and the heirs to a long tradition, the living examples of a time when buildings used local resources and contributed to a true regional identity. The first known builders in the Seine Valley, whose houses date back to 4600 BC, already used these materials. Excavations in Rouen revealed complete Gallo-Roman half-timbered walls and those in the Brotonne forest also showed that they used the same methods at the same time. Yet, the features of the traditional half-timbered Norman house were set from the 14th century, only, and until the 18th century.



### A wooden framework...

The load-bearing structure is made of vertical and horizontal timbers that form frames:

- The posts and wall studs (1)** are vertical framing pieces set at more or less regular intervals and defining the size of the panels. Depending on their role and place, these vertical pieces can be called "posts" when they are situated at the corners of the house, "wall studs" when they frame the windows and doors or when they form smaller sections of walls.
- The horizontal beams (2)** are called "sablières" in French. There are often two types of horizontal beams: the sill-beam (also called sole-piece) and the wall-plate at the top, sometimes an intermediary beam can be added. These beams rarely run the full length of the house, especially because the sill-beam has to stop for doors: the carpenter thus chooses pieces of different lengths that can be placed at various heights.
- The cross-beams** are load-bearing pieces that join together opposite posts. They are used as tie beams to support the rafters and ensure rigidity. They are all in one piece so their length - usually between 4.5 and 6 metres - determines the width of half-timbered houses.

To this load-bearing structure, there are other elements to add:

- The door and window frames (3)**, which are narrow to adapt to the oceanic climate.
- The timbers, called "colombage" in French (4)**, that create together the inner frame structure and hold the infill. The upright wall timbers (called "colombes"), some of which run diagonally to add rigidity to the timber frame; they are the bracing situated in the angles and the struts. When the facade comprises an additional eaves, the framing needs less work and it is thus likely to be decorated: saltire design, lattice pattern, diamond shapes, herringbone patterns, etc. The quantity of beams, the number of diagonal pieces and the kind of decorative pattern can vary greatly and define different regional styles.

The roof, in the countryside, usually has a tie beam and a king post. It also has a hipped end or at least a half-hipped end, called a "queue de geai" (literally, a jay's tail) that shelters the outdoor staircase. Slate started to replace thatch in the countryside in the 18th century, but not everywhere. Flat roof tiles made in Normandy, also replaced by slate in the 19th century, were kept for the most prestigious buildings: manor houses, large country houses, churches, etc.

While the timber frame, subject to the weather, is mostly made of oak, other local species, such as elm are used for the interior framework. Poplar was used in the valley for the rafters as it is not destroyed by insects.

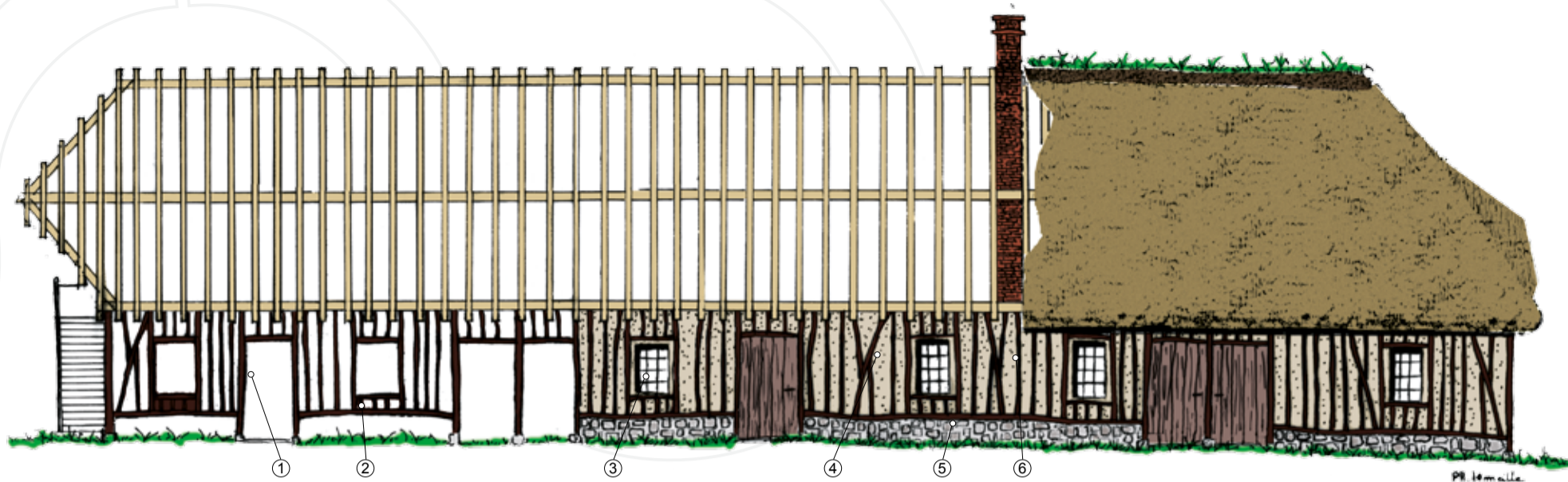
### ... with stones and clay...

- The base, called "solin" in French (5)** consists in a low wall made of local stones (chalk, limestone and flint) piled on shallow foundations. Its height, usually between 0.30 and 0.80 metres, can vary from one facade to the other. A whole gable wall or ground floor made of stone are extreme forms of this kind of base.
- The chimney** is the cornerstone of thatched cottages; made of stone (the lower part only) and of brick, it is a key element for the stability of the building because of its weight.
- The infill (6)** is called "hourdis" in French. The most popular infill is cob, a mixture of clay or silt, chopped straw, hay, and horse or cow hair, the composition of the infill varies greatly from one area to another: small chunks of limestone clumped together with lime putty, rubble flint stones, and now bricks are used. The method used to apply the infill depends on the size between the wall timbers: if they are close, the infill is applied on both sides on little strips of hazel or hornbeam wood stuck in the grooves on the vertical beams and held together by twisted



straw. When the space is wider, a woven lattice is attached either on the inner side of the vertical beams - which remain visible from the outside - or on both sides, allowing larger parts only to be seen.

Using a lattice has become the prevailing method, as it is easier to apply compared to the straw to twist between the beams and it allows the creation of a smooth wall surface inside.



### ... and with reed

A vegetative roof covering: that is the original feature of thatched cottages. In the plateaus where cereals are growing, thatch used to be composed of wheat or rye straw. At first limited to the marshy areas in the valley and harvested in the local reed beds, reed is now commonly used. It is cut at water level in winter, then left to dry before being tied in bundles. Thatched roofs require young and thin stems.

The thatcher arranges, on the roof structure, some hazel stems tied to the rafters to form the base ("clayonnage" in French), on which the bundles of reed or straw will be attached. He starts at the lower edge of the roof, which is a tradition in Normandy, he places swathes of straw (about 25 cm large) side by side with the ear towards the top. They are then tied with wicker or wet rye; today roofers use galvanised steel wire. This is how the base that determines the thickness of the roof is made. Then he works his way up, pressing and trimming the thatch, pushed tightly into position with a tool called a "legatt" and cutting the wisps with a "shears hook" to make the surface look neat and flat. At the ridge of the roof, the stems are folded back on themselves and intertwined with one another. A thick layer of clay then covers the ridge which is planted with irises whose rhizomes hold the reeds together and keep a consistent level of moisture.

The thatcher finishes by trimming the eaves of the roof and combing the surface. A thatched roof has steep slopes for the rain to run quickly off: usually between 55 to 60°. Although farm leases recommended replacing the thatch roof every 18 years, they could actually last 30 to 40 years for a straw roof, a little bit longer for a ree roof.



"The thatched roofs of buildings, at the top of which grew irises with leaves like swords, released a little bit of smoke as if the dampness of the stables and the barns was evaporating through the straw."

Guy de Maupassant

### Conservation and development

The Boucles de la Seine Normandie Regional Natural Park has long been dedicated to the conservation and defence of traditional construction methods, for instance through the studies and projects on the use of cob, the training courses for craftsmen and local people and with the cob mixer lent to the Association du Torchis (Cob Association).

The Nature Park is not the only one concerned with the conservation of this local technical and architectural know-how. Masons specialised in cob, thatchers and carpenters, supported by their professional associations such as the CAPEB in Upper-Normandy (Craftsmen and Small Construction Businesses Association), are committed to working with a quality approach (list available upon request). The hundreds of thatched cottages along this trail are perfect examples of the quality and diversity of this heritage that is kept alive and handed down from generation to generation.

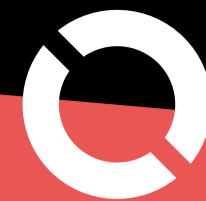
At the Maison du Parc, an architect is available to the people and villages to provide (free of charge) useful guidance on their construction or renovation projects.

For any advice concerning construction, renovation or furnishing:

**The architect at the Maison du Parc**  
Tel.: +33 (0)2 35 37 23 16  
contact@pnr-seine-normandie.com

**Association du Torchis**  
Rue Martel - 27350 La Haye-Aubréée  
Tel.: +33 (0)2 32 56 82 38

**CAPEB Haute-Normandie**  
67, rue Tal Coat - 27000 Evreux  
Tel.: +33 (0)2 32 23 50 56  
www.capeb-haute-normandie.fr



# The Thatched Cottage Trail



### For more information:

Accommodation, restaurants, attractions, leisure activities, bike hire, etc.

**Tourist Information Centre**  
6, Grande Rue - 27500 Bourneville  
Tel.: +33 (0)2 32 57 32 23  
www.tourisme-quillebeuf.com  
info@tourisme-quillebeuf.com

**Maison du Parc naturel régional des Boucles de la Seine Normandie**  
76940 Notre-Dame-de-Bliquetuit  
Tel.: +33 (0)2 35 37 23 16  
www.pnr-seine-normandie.com  
contact@pnr-seine-normandie.com  
Mobile app available on:





## Along the Thatched Cottage Trail...

As soon as you leave **Notre-Dame-de-Bliquetuit** and the Maison du Parc, you will see the outline of the Brotonne Bridge on the horizon. Opened in 1977, it broke the isolation of the peninsula; it has a rare, pleasing design, often compared to a tall ship due to its prestressed concrete deck and its stay cables.

The village of **Saint-Nicolas-de-Bliquetuit** has only existed since 1779 when it separated from the local town, Notre-Dame-de-Bliquetuit. The road on the right, just after the church, used to lead to Port-Caudebec and the river ferry, which was closed down when the bridge opened.

In 1929, a large ceremony with a procession presided over the inauguration of a wayside calvary "Calvaire du Bac" (River Ferry Calvary), a bronze sculpture made by the artist, Edme Bouchardon. A text describing traditional village life was placed in a sealed lead tube under the base of the monument. This wayside calvary stands as "a symbol of protection for ploughmen in the fields, travellers and pilgrims on their way, sailors on the River Seine." Further along the road, you will enjoy a stunning view of Caudebec-en-Caux and the right bank of the river.



After four kilometres, before arriving in Vatteville-la-Rue, you will see the old path - dating back to the Middle-Ages - that used to lead to the river ferry when the crossing was located further down. On the right, the marshes stretch all the way to the river Seine, bordered with pollarded trees, small trees with a large crown and splendid branches: mostly willows with blue-green leaves, but also some oak and ash trees.

**Vatteville-la-Rue** is known for its historical, archaeological and architectural heritage. After the first intersection, there is a farm, the Ferme Colleaux. Besides its remarkable brick and flint porch, it comprises a half-timbered dovecote, which fits surprisingly well with the large brick farm building. A heritage trail, leaving from the church, allows visitors to learn more about Saint-Martin Church and its ancient graffiti testifying to the importance of the river in local life (key available at the town hall). The authentic royal country house that Francis I, King of France, built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which is followed by a rammed earth wall on the left side of the road, the medieval castle with its motte and 12<sup>th</sup> century tower. Vatteville developed along the road and saw its inhabitants sail the seas and make a living from the fields and forest. Besides farming, the main activity in Vatteville today is quarrying.

You will go through the hamlet of La Neuville, then through the Brotonne forest. Further down near the forest still stands an old beacon. Further away, on the left side of the road, there is a small hill called the "butte à l'Ecuyer" (the squire's mound), probably a medieval fortification that is part of many legends: it is said that an evil spirit keeps a treasure and jumps on any rider who spends the night in the area. Isolated between the river Seine and the forest, the hamlet of La Vaquerie was named after a royal park where the animals were kept after being caught grazing in the forest. It was under the authority of a feudal lord who must have stayed in the little thatched cottage, whose imposing chimney betrays a certain rank.

The **Brotonne forest** has been part of the royal domain since 1204. It is now under the supervision of the French National Forest Office and covers more than 6,700 hectares planted with tall beech and oak trees interspersed by scots pines, in a rather poor soil.



### Key

- Tourist Information Centre
- Impressionist site
- Cycle hire
- Car park in the forest
- Motorhome service point
- River ferry
- Museum
- Church or chapel open to the public
- Local heritage and ecomuseum
- Garden, park
- History and heritage tour
- National Nature Reserve
- Area of outstanding natural beauty open to the public
- Panoramic viewpoint
- Nature trail
- Water sports activities
- Canoeing-kayaking
- Start of hiking trails
- Start of horse riding trails
- Start of mountain bike trails
- Golf course
- Tree-climbing adventure park
- The Thatched Cottage Trail
- The Fruit Trail
- Cycle route of the Seine Valley
- Cycle route along the Fruit Trail
- Wetland, marsh
- National Nature Reserve

Seventeen kilometres away, Flacq is already in Aizier and the Eure department. The border has not changed much over time: the well "Coquerel" on the left in the courtyard served as a boundary marker for the fishermen of Vatteville and Aizier.

**Aizier**, a quiet village, has a surprising church with a bell tower from Bessin: it was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century with Caen stone dressed in Lower-Normandy and then transported by ship. In front of the graveyard, a stone with a hole the size of a man is the only remain of a Neolithic funerary monument located nearby. Nestled on the edge of the forest, the Romanesque chapel Saint-Thomas is considered as the last ruin of a leprosarium, as well as a long-lasting place of worship: people come to tie a knot in a branch of a tree and make a wish, if the knot stays tied then the wish will come true. A trail with information panels tells visitors about the place, the archaeological finds, the life of people affected by leprosy, the traditions of pilgrimage and the "charitons", members a local Confraternity of Charity.



**Vieux-Port** with its numerous half-timbered houses, is one of the most visited places in the Seine Valley. The road goes up through private woods offering, from time to time, a clear view over the river Seine, the marshes and the petrochemical plants on the right bank of the river, crowded round the border of the Nature Park.

**Trouville-la-Haule**, which used to belong to Jumièges Abbey, is located on the Roumois Plateau, and the plains forming a flat landscape contrast with the scenery of the Seine Valley. In **Sainte-Opportune-la-Mare**, which lies between the plateau and the valley, there is the former 18<sup>th</sup> century presbytery behind the modern church. There is also a thatched building used by the Nature Park for its environmental education and awareness-raising activities.



For those who have never been to the **Marais Vernier**, arriving from the hillside is a unique experience. On the edge of the forest, the panoramic view opens onto this large (45 km<sup>2</sup> -17 m<sup>2</sup>) natural amphitheatre surrounded by hills. This natural scene, bordered by the river Seine on the northern side, reveals an unexpectedly rich fauna and flora. The construction of the dyke, called Digue des Hollandais (Dutch Dyke) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, then the embankment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have shaped the flow of the river Seine and dried up parts of the marshes, making it more easily accessible to people. The landscape, which has been shaped over centuries, is the result of the relationship between people and nature. The woods, at the top of the slope, protect the orchards, located halfway up the hill, from erosion. At road level, the hill and the marsh meet, creating an area originally used for grazing and scything, and more recently for the production of cereal between the embankments. Alders are typical trees in the marshes and their popular name "verne" has probably given its name "Vernier" to the "Marais Vernier".

In the heart of a meander, the **National Nature Reserve of the Marais Vernier** is now managed by the Nature Park as decided by the French Ministry of Environment. This is where an experimental project for the management of wetlands has been initiated in 1979: Scottish Highland cattle and Camargue horses grazing there enabled to maintain the ecological balance of the site. This type of management proved successful and has become a reference for many fragile environment management systems. The lakes, including the Grand'Mare, are home to breeding and migratory birds in the reed beds. Irises and orchids add colour to the marsh in spring.

The rows of thatched cottages in the Marais Vernier, at the end of the meander of the river, can't be reached by the water at high tide. They are surrounded by



prickly shrubs. Their typical architecture results from the use of local materials: timbers coming from the neighbouring woods, the reeds from the Grand'Mare for the roof, the foundations are built with stones and flints found in the site's subsoil, the infill is made with limestone found on site. The single-storey cottages are usually built parallel to the hill. Those at a perpendicular angle comprise a half-buried basement, called "ca-foutin" in French, used to store fruits and vegetables.

From the valley, the Thatched Cottage Trail corresponds exactly to the Marais Vernier cycle route, which leaves from the village of Marais-Vernier. You will have to come back with your bikes to experience the tranquility of the landscape, its atmosphere, sounds and smells. The road runs parallel to the hill on the edge of the marsh. On the right you will see the hunting reserve of the Grand'Mare, which belongs to the National Hunting and Wildlife Agency; this big lake is particularly interesting for bird watching (fish eagles, ducks, Eurasian teals, herons, spoonbills, etc.). Next to the lake, the ruins of a castle rest on a former medieval site; its moat



must have been filled with water at the time. The 16<sup>th</sup> century dovecote next to it is outstanding with its stone and flint pattern. Halfway, in the place called Les Viviers, a Romanesque stone building, standing alone in a yard, could be a former chapel.

It is in **Bouquelon** that the courtyards take on a characteristic shape: long strips of land bordered by ditches planted with pollarded willows and visible divisions left by successive legacies.

The village of **Marais-Vernier** is also the centre of the marsh. Most of the inhabitants used to breed cattle and made use collectively of the pastures. This peculiarity gave rise to a tradition, the cattle branding ritual, which takes place every 1<sup>st</sup> May when the livestock is branded with a hot iron before releasing them to graze in the common marsh. The only remains of the Church Saint-Laurent, dating back to 1129, are the Romanesque choir and apse. It was altered during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. An impressive dovecote neighbours the farm called "le château" because it was built on the site of a medieval castle at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As the road leaves the centre of the village it follows the Dutch Dyke, built at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Humfrey Bradley at the request of Henry IV of France, but which can barely be seen today. To the north, there are large, soulless plots of land opened onto modern alluvial plains: it is the new marsh, mostly made of areas of land created by the river deposits in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the background, the Tancarville Bridge, opened since 1959, was the first bridge after Rouen to link the banks of the river Seine: its commissioning prompted the end of the river ferry in Le Hode that couldn't cope with the rising traffic. To the south, the old marsh: the "Croix de la Devise" is a former calvary that was used as a marker to indicate the boundaries of feudal lords' domains, and later of the villages.



You will reach **Quillebeuf** through **Saint-Aubin-sur-Quillebeuf**, whose church contains ship models. The heritage trail, which starts from the lighthouse on the left just after the church, attests to the quality of the town's architecture, especially the 16<sup>th</sup> century half-timbered houses. The Church of Notre-Dame de Bon-Port, displays the most beautiful examples of Romanesque architecture in Normandy with its tower and gate. Besides, the walls are covered with ancient graffiti depicting boats and the nave houses a collection of ship models. The river ferry, constantly coming and going, maintains contact with the petrochemical plants of Port-Jérôme on the opposite bank.

The Thatched Cottage Trail ends at the **observation point of the Boucles de la Seine Normande Regional Natural Park**, which explains in detail the landscapes and natural environments of the Marais Vernier.

