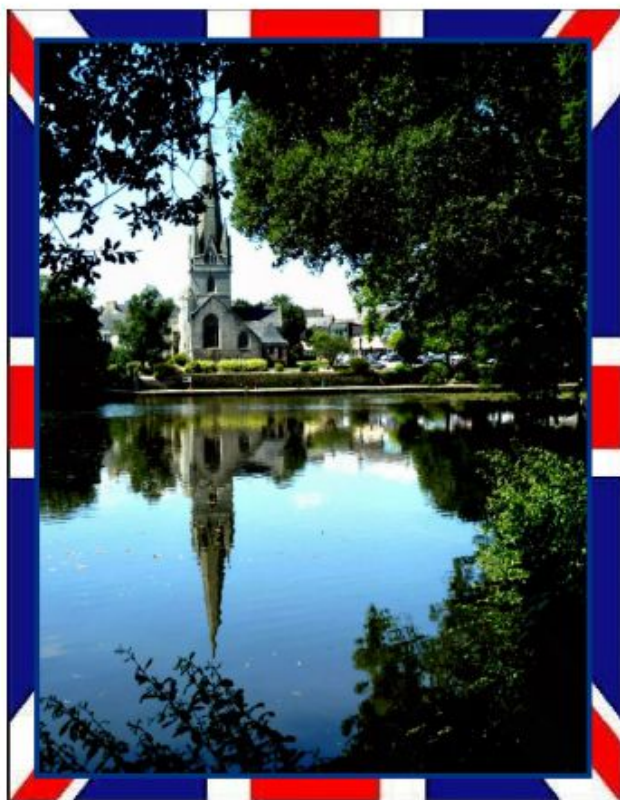


The church of Our Lady of the Assumption Rosporden



History and Architecture

In the late 13th century/early 14th century, a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary was built in Rosporden, between the feudal castle and the mill by the ford, replacing a chapel dedicated to St Alar, third Bishop of Quimper, patron saint of horses.

The fifty-year reign of Duke Jean I of Brittany (1235-1286) had brought prosperity. His successor, Jean II (reigned 1286-1305) died accidentally in Lyon, on 14th November 1305, while leading the mule of Pope Clement V during the Pope's enthronement celebrations. In June 1305, King Philippe IV "The Fair" of France (crowned 1286), who had been in conflict with the Papacy, had had a Frenchman elected as Pope. Soon afterwards, the king had the Knights Templar put on trial. Many were burnt at the stake and their assets were handed over to the Knights Hospitaller of Jerusalem.

13th century "Rospreden" or "Rosperden" was a fortified small town, with a castle, a mill and a court for the weekly (Thursdays) exercise of Ducal and Seigneurial Justice - the latter by the Lords of the Manor of Treanna, Goarlot and Coet Heloret. To the north and east, the town was protected by a lake. To the south, it was protected by ditches and by remparts topped with palisades.

	
Blason du duc de Bretagne Jean III	Blason de Robert Knollys
	
Blason de Jehan du Juch	Blason de Retz
	
Blason de Tréanna	

In 1334, Jean, Bastard of Brittany, son of Duke Jean III, was made Castellan of Rosporden. His successors included Robert Knollys, an English commander (circa 1365), Jehan du Juch (1373) and Jeanne de Retz (1382).

If the 13th century had brought prosperity, the 14th century brought many ills. There were wars, the Hundred Year War (1337-1475) as well as the War of the Breton Succession (1341-1364) which saw the Penthièvre and Montford factions, supported by France and England respectively, fighting for the Ducal crown. There were famines caused by poor harvests and the plague (the Black Death) raged from 1347 to 1350. In the end, the Montford side prevailed (Battle of Auray, 1364) and Jean de Montford became Duke, as Jean IV.

The Church was damaged during the War of the Breton Succession and restored in the 15th century. Three elements of the 1300 church survive today: the porch, the choir and the square tower. The tower, which rests on 4 massive pillars, had a military purpose, being both watchtower and stronghold. It is likely to be the work of the Knights Templar who lived in the area. The large, flamboyant gothic style lucarnes, set between the tower's pinnacles, bear the Treanna arms (a lozenge) carved in low relief. The Treannas were from nearby Elliant, the parish of which Rosporden was, at the time, a sub-parish.

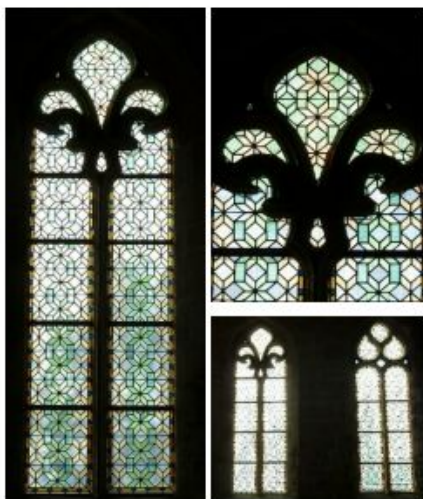
The choir is lit by two mullioned windows, one of them with a fleur-de-lys motif. Remarkable carved beams run along the top of the walls.

In August 1594, during the Wars of the Holy League, Spanish soldiers set fire to the town. Many inhabitants sought refuge in the church cemetery where they were massacred. The Church was damaged. It was repaired in the 17th century and a side-aisle added on the south side. In 1675, Rosporden lost its right to a church bell in punishment for taking part in the Red Cap Rebellion. No great bell would ring again until 1710.

The apse lost its 15th century, flamboyant gothic style stained glass window in 1848, when a tree fell through it during a thunderstorm. The present window is a recent replacement.

The nave was lengthened by 4 metres at the end of the 19th century.

The pulpit was removed in 1970.



The interior of Our Lady's Church in the early 20th century

The reredos of the main altar

The gilt wood reredos is divided in two by a carved frieze. The central dome is flanked by two turrets, with railing and spindle ornamentation, topped by baskets of fruit. The dome is crowned by angels holding Baby Jesus aloft on their wings. Sadly, the reredos is badly damaged : some small statues and four circular decorative panels were stolen in 1971, 1972 and 1973. The panels showed *The Annunciation*, *The Nativity*, *The Circumcision* and *Jesus among the Doctors*. The reredos was made in an excellent Breton workshop for Ploare Church (Douarnenez), then brought to Rosporden.

The statue of Our Lady of Rosporden stands on the left of the main altar and that of St Giles on the right.

Statues



St Alar

His painted stone statue stands in a small recess under the porch, in the conventional place for the patron saint of a church. Until circa 1300, St Alar's chapel stood where the church is now. Abbott Henri Guiriec wrote: "Every statue shows him as a bishop. He is St Alar, third Bishop of Quimper and patron saint of horses. From the beginning, his being the patron saint of Rosporden's church attracted many worshippers who contributed to the town's development. When the new church was dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption, to ensure that his cult would continue, he was given a prominent spot under the porch. On either side of the statue, standing on stones placed there for the purpose, candles were kept permanently lit in his honour."

Another chapel in his honour was later built, in a wood on a nearby hill (known as St Eloi's today).

Our Lady of Rosporden

The painted Kersanton stone statue of a Black Virgin wearing a crown stands to the left of the main altar. Two angels hold a scroll with the words "Ave Maria Plena". The Virgin's dress, her poulaine shoes and the shape of her face are characteristic of the 15th century. Black Virgins were much prized in mediaeval times, harking back to the black deities of Antiquity: Artemis (Ephesus), Isis (Egypt) and Belisama (Celts). They also bring "The Song of Songs" to mind: "I am black and beautiful, daughters of Israel". Crusaders brought back dark-coloured cedar wood and this made black Virgins fashionable once more after the Crusades.

Their help, as intermediaries between Heaven and Earth, was sought to cure illnesses. In the 19th century, the Church deemed the Rosporden statue "unchristian" and it was relegated to the cemetery. In the face of local indignation, it was brought back to the choir in 1902.



St Giles

The 16th century painted wood statue stands to the right of the main altar. St Giles is the patron saint of Elliant, of which Rosporden used to be a sub parish. He took the place of St Ellian, a Breton saint, when it was decreed that all but "official" saints, ie those recognised by Rome, should be removed from churches. Both saints are depicted with a hind and protect against wolves. Giles the Hermit, a legendary monk, was born in Athens circa 650. His help is sought to ward off nervous illnesses and to keep children from harm.

The Rosporden statue is missing the hind and the saint's left hand.

The Entombment of Christ



The painted and gilt wood Flemish piece is set in the body of the main altar. Carved in high relief, it bears the mark of Antwerp (a severed hand) and dates from the late 15th century or early 16th century.

In the centre, the body of Christ is held in His mother's arms. St John stands behind Mary. Mary Magdalen is shown prostrate in front of the tomb, in a composition characteristic of Flemish art. Her veil discreetly hides her intense grief. Joseph of Arimathea supports Christ's shoulders and Nicodemus His feet. Abibon, a Jewish scholar and disciple, stands behind Nicodemus.

Two of Jesus' aunts, Mary Cleophas and Mary Salome, stand on the left. Their clothes and headdresses are typical of 15th century fashions. Mary Cleophas' headdress, called a barb, was conventionally worn by widows or old women. Mary Salome's balzo headdress and plucked hairline are both characteristic of aristocratic (or wealthy) women's fashion. The men's hoods, of a type which could be worn twisted around the head, often feature in northern paintings.



A pyramidal composition, bodies shown mid movement, flowing clothes, expressive faces full of emotion and on which grief and disbelief blend with dignity, Christ's serene features, everything speaks of great mastery of execution, resulting in a genuine masterpiece. (NB : Restored 2006, Regional Restoration Workshop).

How did The Entombment come to be in Rosporden? As for the Kerdevot altarpiece, no-one knows. There was, at the relevant time, a thriving trade between Antwerp and Brittany. Was it commissioned by a wealthy patron, perhaps a member of the Treanna family, which was at the height of its power in the 15th and 16th centuries?



Up to 1906, The Entombment was set in the body of the altar of St John the Baptist's chapel, in the north aisle of the Church, adorning the private funerary chapel of the Kerninihy family. Their arms can be seen in a stained-glass window on the east side of the Church.

St Mary Magdalene

The 16th century statue shows the saint, the repentant sinner blessed by Christ, holding a vase of perfume. She has been worshipped in Rosporden since the Church was first built. The statue used to stand to the right of the main altar, where St Giles' statue now is. Both St John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene were particularly honoured by the Knights Templar and the Knights of Jerusalem.

Mary Magdalene is a composite of three women: the anonymous sinner who bathed Christ's feet in perfume, Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' sister, to whom it was granted that he should be resurrected, and Mary of Magdala who was present at the entombment and who was the first person to whom Christ appeared after the resurrection. She is the patron saint of perfumers,



St John the Baptist

He was Christ's cousin and the son of Zachary and Elizabeth. He first led the life of an ascetic in the desert, then went on to prophesy and carry out baptisms on the banks of the Jordan. It was he who baptized Jesus. He was arrested and put to death by Herod Antipas.

He is often represented wearing an animal hide and holding a staff topped with a cross, or - as in Rosporden - holding a book on which rests a lamb. He is the patron saint of the Knights Templar and the Knights of Jerusalem.

St Diboan

"Diboan" is the Breton version of Abibon, one Christ's disciples. The painted wood statue dates from the 16th century. In Gouellet, in "Lochan" (Leuhan, near Rosporden), there is a chapel dedicated to him, built in 1330 by the Knights Hospitaller near the old Roman road leading to Vorgium (Quimper). Diboan grants relief from pain (Diboan means pain free in Breton) and comforts the dying.

In 1924 Abbot Mevel wrote in the Diocesan Newsletter of History and Archeology: "in our Cornwall, there are 3 places notable for the worship of St Diboan: Tremeven [...], Leuhan [...] and Plevin [...]. St Abidon's pardon takes place in Leuhan on the third Sunday in August. St Abibon's help is sought in cases of illness but also for the protection of children."



St Cornely

"Cornely" is the Breton equivalent of "Corneille". The painted wood statue dates from the 16th century. According to a legend, Cornely, a 3rd century Pope, fled from Rome to Carnac to escape Roman persecution. He is the patron saint of livestock and of the parish of Tourc'h, nearby, where he replaced Cernunnos, the Gallo-Roman god of livestock and wealth.



St Margaret and the Dragon

The 17th century painted wood statue shows the saint vanquishing a dragon. Margaret of Antioch, a virgin, was martyred by beheading in the 4th century. Legend has it that she was devoured by a monster whose belly she cut open with a cross, escaping unscathed. She is widely worshipped, particularly by pregnant women. She was, with St Catherine and St Michael, one of the saints who spoke to Joan of Arc. Her attributes are a dragon, a cross and the palm of martyrdom.

Paintings

The Assumption (Nicholas Loir)

NB : At the time of writing, in 2019, the painting is not kept in the Church which suffers from dampness. It is in Quimper Fine Art Museum and cannot be returned until the dampness problem is solved. Consideration needs to be given to remedial work.

The huge painting by Nicholas Loir dates from circa 1660. It was bought by George le Borgne, the parish priest, from the Ursulines in 1907 when they were expelled from their Quimper convent. The painting had been a gift from Bishop Sergent to the Ursulines in 1868. It is the only painting from Quimper Cathedral to have escaped the 13.12.1793 bonfire during the French Revolution: it was hung so high in the apse, in the chapel of Our Lady of Victories, that it could not be taken down.

The painting measures 220 cm by 384 cm and is arched at the top. It shows Mary's rapture. She sits on a cloud bathed in light, arms wide open, surrounded by angels. In accordance with tradition, she rises from an open grave, watched by the astonished apostles. In the background, a landscape of mountains is reminiscent of Nicholas Poussin's Italian landscapes. The work epitomises 17th century French classical art.

Nicholas Loir (1624-1679) was the son of a Paris goldsmith and a pupil of Simon Vernet and Sebastien Bourdon. In the company of Andre Felicien, he spent 2 years (1647- 1649) in Italy, where he painted numerous copies of works of art. Back in France, he was employed on decorating the Chateau of St Germain-en-Laye and the Palace of Versailles. In 1663, he became a member of the Royal Academy of Pictorial Art and Sculpture. The recently restored painting was exhibited in St Malo in Autumn 2017.



The Entombment (Raymond Guesdon)

(Raymond Guesdon was born in Rosporden. He was killed in 1915 while serving in the French armed forces during WWI). The painting is an early 20th century copy of a work by Titian kept in the Louvre.

Annunciation : The work is a 17th century Italian painting.

The Stained Glass Windows

Mary Presented at the Temple

The 1924 window by G. Merklen can be seen in the east side-aisle.

Our Lady of Perpetual Succour

The 1924 window, also by G. Merklen, can be seen in the south side-aisle.

Christ the King

The work of the Leglise workshop, it can be seen in the north transept.

The Baptism of Christ

It can be seen near the font, on the west side of the Church.



The Organ

The 19th century organ was built by John and Edwin Abbey, organ builders and was installed in the Church by Beuchet-Debierre in 1950.

The Bell

The 1765 bronze bell, cast by M. Guillaume, a bell founder, bears the arms of the du Laurent de la Barre family.



Rosporden's Coat of Arms

The bend sinister, gules, refers to the fact that the illegitimate son of a Duke of Brittany was once the town's Castellan. The chief, azure, above the Ermines of the Duchy of Brittany, evokes the town's lakes.

Price :
2,00 €

For the preservation of
Our Lady of Rosporden
and its Contents



A creation of **hppr**

Maison de Ker Lenn - 4 rue Louise Michel - 29140 Rosporden

hpr29@outlook.fr - website : www.hpr29.org

Photographs : © **hpr**

Document reference : **FLLT-002 - 2019-031**