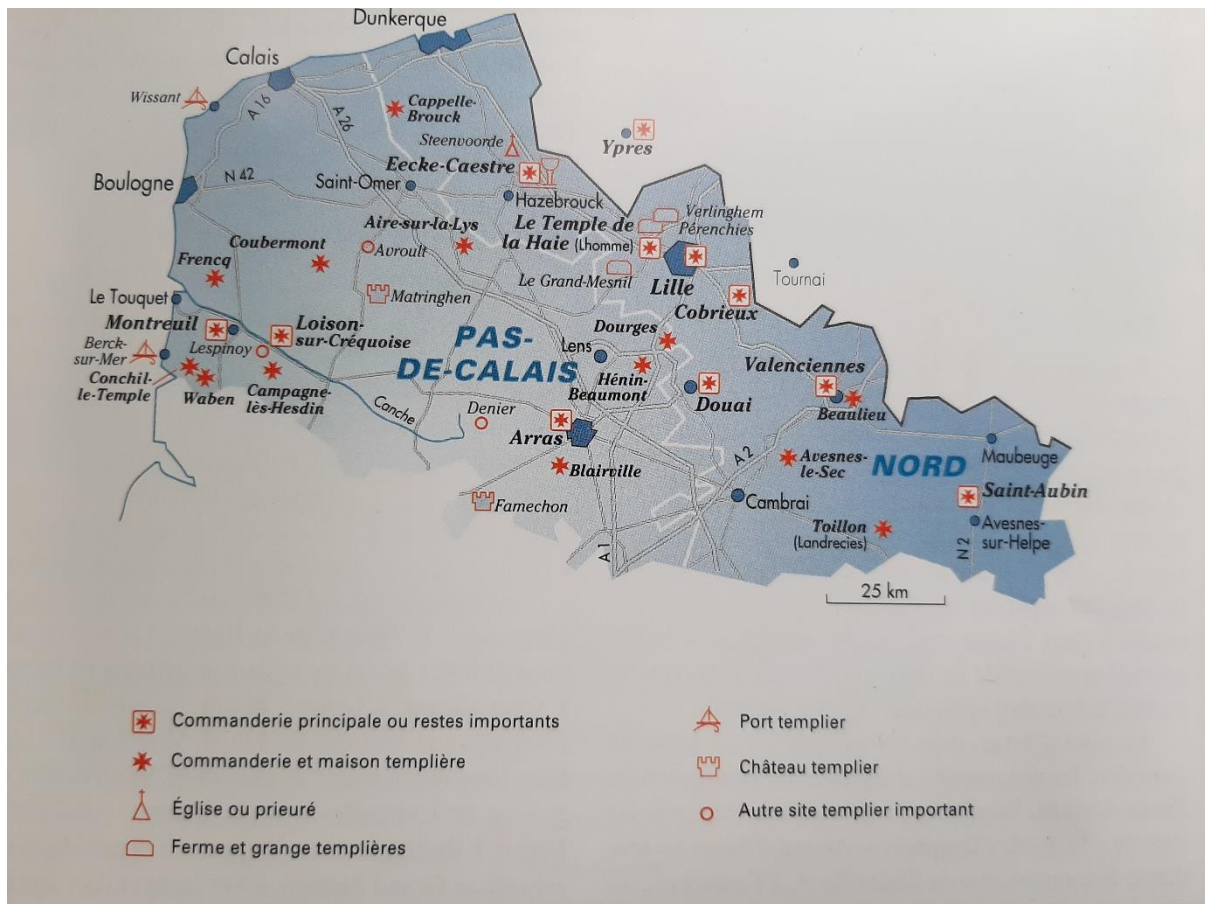


TEMPLARS AROUND LE WAST

Introduction

In their book "Les Sites Templiers de France" (The Templar Sites of France), Jean-Luc Aubarbier and Michel Binet present an illustrated catalogue of the Templar sites in France, including some chapters on the history of the Knights Templar in France. Its map of Templar sites in the Pas de Calais is copied below.

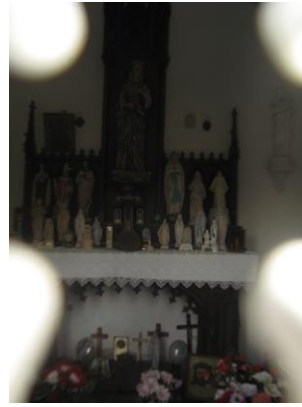


A group of Middlesex Knights Templar have enjoyed mutual company at an Hostelry at Le Wast, a few miles inland from Boulogne and there are, according to the book, a few Templar sites in that region. So I undertook to try to find some of them.



What the Book Says

Brother Knights already knew that the Church at Le Wast had been endowed by a sister to Godfrey de Bouillon. The book tells us that both Godfrey and Baldwin (Baudouin) 1st, King of Jerusalem had been born in Boulogne.



View through the grill of the little chapel close to the hotel.

In the maritime part of the Department Pas de Calais, Commanderies were grouped around that at Montreuil. Just to the east were those of Campagne-les-Hesdin and Loison-sur-Crequoise with its possession of Lespinoy. A little to the south there is Conchil-le-Temple (whose commandery woods still exist) and its twin, Waben. All these commanderies converge towards the port of Berck-sur-Mer, where there still can be found “Le Temple sur Autie”. The Templars possessed also another port establishment, more to the north, at Wissant, destroyed in 1347.

Between Le Touquet and Saint Omer were the commanderies of Frencq (twinned with that of Loison), of Coubermont (between Ergny and Campagne-les-Bouonnais), of Aire-sur-la-Lys, together with the Templar castle at Matringhem (ruined) and the deep (80 metres) well at Avroult. We should note another city which played a role in Templar history – Saint Omer whence came one of the nine founders of the Order and - Godefroy of Saint Omer as well as a Grand Master of England, Othon Saint Omer.

At this point it is as well to define what a Commandery may have been. Templars did not really play a military role in Western Europe and a commandery was likely to have been firstly a large farm, only sometimes fortified but usually possessing a chapel. Their role was essentially economic and juridical – the exploitation of land and materials and the imposition of fines and taxes. This of course naturally means that there will have been other houses and lands, members, annexes and dependencies.

In the east of the Pas de Calais Department commanderies concentrated between Arras and Lens. That at Arras was particularly important. Destroyed by fire in the 16th century, restored in the 19th it preserved a fine allure in the Faubourg de Rouville. On Friday 13th October 1307 the Templars of Arras were almost alone in opposing their arrest. Half of these were massacred by the sergeants of the king. The remainder were imprisoned in Paris.

To the north of Arras were the twin commanderies of Dourges and Henin-Lietard. To the west, at Denier, is the “Motte des Templiers”. To the south are the commandery of Blairville and at Famechon the vestiges of a chateau called “Le Temple”.

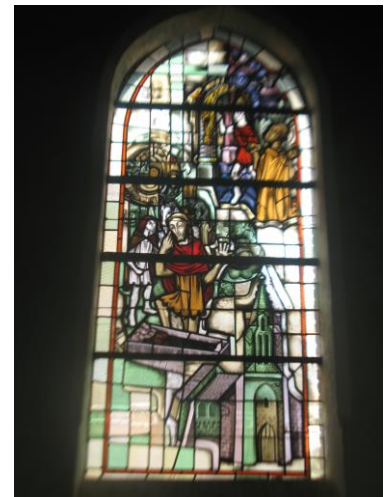
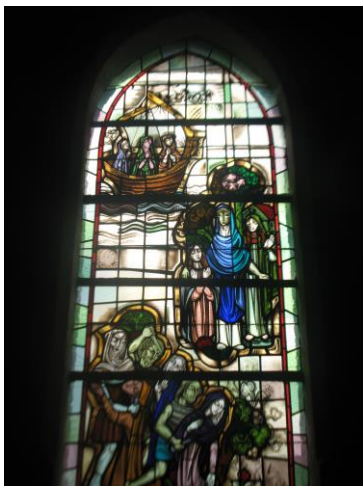
In the Department “Nord” there were Commanderies at Valenciennes, Beaulieu, Avenses-le-sec, Toillon, Saint-Aubin, Douai, and Cobrieux, the latter founded in 1226 by Amaury de Cobrieux. According to tradition the Templars at Douai escaped arrest and found refuge in Scotland.

To the north of Hazebrouck was the most important of Commanderies in French Flanders. Called Eecke by the Templars and later Caestre by the Hospitalers, it comprised a large farm which can still be identified – principally by its entrance porch. The farm itself dates essentially from the 16th and 18th centuries but its cellars and certain buildings hint at the Templar era.

Our Investigations

These actually began with Eecke/Caestre. At Caestre the chapel of Our Lady of Grace (Notre Dame de Grace) dates at least part from the 9th century. In the porch is a statement of it having been owned by the Knights Templar and subsequently the Knights of Malta. The church commemorates an interesting legend. In the 9th century 3 English nuns began a pilgrimage to Rome when they were set upon, raped, robbed and murdered by brigands near to Caestre. A blind landowner knight living there found the bodies and, upon touching his eyes with their blood, had his eyesight restored.

Accompanying photos show the chapel and the farm – together with the name of the road to the farm. The farm buildings essentially date from the 16th and 18th centuries but nevertheless have preserved the cellars, the layout and some aspects of the original buildings.



The chapel at Caestre



The site of the Commanderie at Eecke, and the road to it.



The Information Office at Aire-sur-la Lys could not point us to any Templar remains in the town, but this is not unusual for such a large town. However, the girl there had noted a symbol on a stone by the town hall which she suspected was masonic. The information office itself is in a very ancient building, but only just not ancient enough.



Typically, the only people we found to ask directions of in Avrout and Matringhem were the restaurateurs – who simply did not know. But we were surely correct that the 80m deep well adjacent Avrout church was the one the book mentions. Besides, a nearby farm has all the indications of dating from the Templar era.



At Matringhem we eventually discovered, at the extreme east of the village and in a commanding position, a mound covered with scrub measuring about 200 by 100 metres and which was clearly man-made. Besides various levels and slopes which suggested “castle”, there were quite a few building stones protruding from the scrub. We took our find back to the restaurateur. Who knows, some kind of restoration project, or at least documentation, might get under way.



Loison-sur-Crequoise was particularly interesting. I could believe that the present buildings were Templar in origin. The place now functions as a motel-restaurant. It is well sited beside the fast flowing Crequoise river whence power, water and fish were available. This particular commandery may well have controlled other establishments in the area since the book's maps indicate other Templar sites quite close by.



Montreuil was originally closer to the sea and the Canche river is still tidal up to there – I have kayaked down to the sea from Montreuil – with the outgoing tide and back with the incoming. I have also kayaked the Canche from Hesdin to Montreuil. The Information Office was closed when we were in the town and I couldn't identify anything except that in the Collegiate church which dates from the correct era, the flagstones in the treasury depict a Maltese Cross. The solid vestiges of Montreuil castle contain information about the battle of Agincourt. The battlefield and its museum are in the region.



In Arras research was more interesting. The Tourist Office directed us to the Faubourg de Ronville (note, not Rouville), which is in a near suburb. At one end of the Rue du Temple is a church – L’Eglise des Bonnes Nouvelles – The Church of the Good News. It is adjacent a Leclerc hypermarket and from the latter’s car park I noted an interesting architectural feature adjacent the church. A gentleman who lived there – it is now an elderly persons’ residence – told me that it had been a convent and showed me the vaults below the place. This strongly suggested to me that this was indeed a commandery site. Behind the frontages opposite – which I explored via various alleyways, I noted a number of stone building walls which had been incorporated into more modern structures. Perhaps the commandery here had been quite extensive.





The next pictures I believe are of the site of the Cammanderie at Blairville, just to the south of Arras.





Finally we sought out the farm at Coubermont (another spelling change – it's now Combremont). Some buildings there were old. However the farmer, who was aware of the Templar association of the place, assured us that nothing now remained.

