

Dry stone huts were not used by shepherds, nor the Gauls...

Architecture of France...
Dry-stone wall huts



By JANE HANKS

TAKE a drive into the French countryside and, in many areas, you will see small dry stone wall huts.

They are found in locations where the local stone is on or very close to the surface and breaks off in layers thus making it easy to build with. You will find huts, abandoned and in ruins, for example, in Burgundy, Provence, Languedoc, the Lot, the Dordogne, Brittany and the Alps.

They are typically thought of as small and round but actually come in a huge range of styles. Common explanations are that they are shepherd's shelters and ancient constructions called *bories*.

But a group of professional and amateur ethnologists and archaeologists has uncovered the truth behind these buildings - and debunked many myths surrounding them.

The *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur l'Architecture Vernaculaire* (CERAV) was formed in 1978 to study the vernacular architecture heritage handed down by past generations and, in particular, dry stone structures. One of its researchers is Jean-Marc Caron, who has been walking the hills around Daglan, Dordogne, for 20 years, photographing an area particularly rich in stone huts. To understand why they were built, Mr Caron took me on a trip into the past in a landscape which has changed dramatically.

Today you have to fight your way through brambles and woodland, but 200 years ago this area was cleared and seeing the beginning of huge social change as a result of the French Revolution.

Ordinary people, who had worked for local lords, were allocated their own plots of land and began to cultivate them.

Around Daglan, in particular, they grew vines. The land was covered in stone, which they had to clear. They had to walk some distance to their fields and they stayed all day so they wanted shelter from the rain, sun, and cold. They had plenty of stone so they began to construct *cabanes en pierre seche*.

They are everywhere - in every field there is some sort of structure in various states of conservation. It must have been a



Dry stone huts expert Jean-Marc Caron in front of Cabane du Mazut, a Monument Historique

lively place. Mr Caron said: "This shows that these buildings were constructed for agricultural use in the 19th century. They vary according to the building ability, tastes and wealth of each family. Some put up a crude structure. Where there are wider entrances with a lintel in wood, it is evident there was more building knowledge used in the construction and perhaps a builder was employed to help. But mostly it would have been families building their own shelter in any way they could."

In 1994-1995 CERAV employed Mr Caron to study his area. He found 400 stone huts in that first year and many more since. He has studied the local plans from 1836, which show the huts present at the time, calling them *cabanes*. He deduced that those he has found in other places and which are not marked on the plans must have been built later.

He says it is impossible for any of them to be ancient structures: "I have seen companies taking tourists on guided tours of these, as they called them, 'Gallic sites' but that is completely false."

"You would need iron picks and crow-bars to build the shelters and they would not have survived that long as the structures are fragile, easily destroyed by weather extremes and invasive vegetation over the centuries."

"We can already see many of the structures here falling into ruin. Another myth

is the name *borie*. My grandmother used to tell me about her visits to her family *cabane* as she called it. The term *borie* means a small property and was applied to stone huts later on.

"I do not think they were used by shepherds, either, as they needed a mobile shelter and would be more likely to use a small caravan on wheels. For me *cabanes en pierre seche* are shelters built by agricultural workers in the 19th century."

"Their use in this area died out with the rural exodus, the phylloxera epidemic in the late 19th century which destroyed the vines and then World War I when there were no more men to cultivate the land. Since then they have been deserted."

What is astonishing is the variety of styles. One such as the Cabane du Mazut has been classified a *Monument Historique* and is large and square with a fireplace and what would have been a *citerne*, a water tank, to collect rainwater as there was no other source of water.

Others are tiny and are built into the dry stone walls, also constructed when peasants became landowners to define the boundaries of each plot. Looking up into the roofs from inside it is fascinating to see how they were constructed in ever decreasing circles to meet at the apex.

In some places there are huge piles of stones, which would have been constructed to clear the land. They are not piled up haphazardly but built carefully in layers so as to take up the least space possible.

Mr Caron said what fascinates him is that some local people can remember hearing their grandparents talking about them.

Conserving them for the future is not easy because they are on private land and not many landowners are interested in taking the time to renovate them: "The ideal thing would be to make sure that some examples are kept and repaired but it is not easy to achieve. It is why I take as many photographs as possible as a way of preserving the proof of their existence."

Mr Caron is happy to show his local dry stone huts to anyone who contacts him on jean-marc.caron@pierre-seche.com.

He has a website, pierre-seche.com, and the CERAV website, with articles in English, and details of occasional dry stone wall courses is www.pierreseche.com

Property Watch

Burgundy



REGIONAL CAPITAL: Dijon

DEPARTMENTS: Côte-d'Or, Nièvre, Saône-et-Loire, Yonne

MAIN CITIES: Dijon, Chalon-sur-Saône, Nevers, Auxerre, Beaune, Mâcon, Montceau-les-Mines, Prémy

DIJON, a Unesco World Heritage Site, is the capital of the historical Burgundy region, one of France's principal wine-making areas. As well as its vineyards, it is known for its traditional mustard, rich gastronomy (think Boeuf Bourguignon and garlic snails) and building styles ranging from Gothic to Art Deco. The area is crossed by a network of canals and studded with imposing chateaux.

Ancient Burgundy now makes up half of the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region following the redrawing of the map of France a few years ago. The region is bordered by the river Loire, in the west, and by the Franche-Comté and Champagne areas in the east - and ranges from rolling agricultural land in the northwestern Yonne department to the golden, vineyard-laden hills of the Côte-d'Or, and the foothills of the Jura in the east with the Saône-et-Loire department.

Not surprisingly, property prices are at their highest in historic Dijon, a city of 150,000 inhabitants just over an hour-and-a-half from Paris by TGV, where houses can command prices of €2,410/m². The average property price is €226,000, noticeably higher than the regional average of €181,632.

Meanwhile, in Côte-d'Or, house prices are about €1,650/m² and fall as low as €810/m² in the less popular Nièvre, €1,110 in Saône-et-Loire and €1,030 in the heavily agricultural Yonne, which is sparsely populated despite bordering Ile-de-France.

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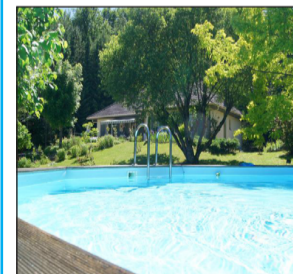


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Next month: We look at Aquitaine



Looking up into the roof of the Cabane du Mazut