

Out and About

in Montreuil-sur-Mer

John Painter explores a strategically-important French boundary town, over which neighbouring powers have competed for over 1,200 years.



The ramparts on the western side of the town



Queen Bertha's Tower in the castle

Montreuil in Picardy is one of the most interesting small towns in northern France and a good base for visiting the battlefields of Crécy and Agincourt as well as the Somme Western Front. It was Haig's headquarters from 1916 and his statue still takes pride of place in the main square (Place du Général de Gaulle), despite the original, erected in 1931, having been used for target practice and destroyed by the German armies which occupied Montreuil during the Second World War.

A strategic history

Montreuil lies on a high chalk bluff rising out of the marshy lands in the valley of the River Canche. It is called 'sur-Mer' because until the river silted up in the middle ages, the estuary came inland as far as the town, making it an important seaport of the Capetian Kings. For much of its life, Montreuil was on the edge of France, which explains why it was fortified from the end of the ninth century, when the count of Ponthieu built the first wooden fort. The town passed into royal hands a century later under the first Capetian king and a separate royal castle was founded, one tower of which still exists. Philip Augustus granted the town a charter in 1186 and built a new castle with stone walls and circular towers. In the thirteenth century, a new outer wall with ramparts was built around the town, much of which is still in situ today.

During the later middle ages Montreuil was uncomfortably placed between the county of Ponthieu – the lands to the south around the mouth of the Somme claimed by the English – and the Burgundian lands in Artois north of the Canche. It was recovered by the French crown, but in the sixteenth century Artois was ruled by the Emperor Charles V. This was a turbulent time for Montreuil, with the town being besieged by Imperial and English forces in 1522; captured and sacked by Imperial forces in 1537; and again besieged for three months, unsuccessfully, by English forces in 1544 as part of Henry VIII's campaign to capture Boulogne.

Following the peace treaty of 1559 between France and the Empire, Charles IX of France replaced the castle of Philip Augustus by a citadel and upgraded the town walls based on the Italian bastion method (*trace italienne*), re-designing the ramparts both to withstand and to facilitate cannon fire. More strengthening of the walls took place in the early seventeenth century.

The military successes of Louis XIV eased Montreuil's position as a frontier town. By the Treaty of the Pyrenees of 1659, France gained the county of Artois, to the north of the Canche, and the frontier was moved further north by the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1678. The French continued to recognise the strategic importance of Montreuil, however. Vauban further improved the defences in the 1670s and the town remained garrisoned throughout the eighteenth century to protect it against seaward incursions by the British. This role continued through the Napoleonic wars, when in 1804 marshalls Ney and Soult were in Montreuil for a planned invasion of England. The fortifications were not declassified until 1867 and the citadel was garrisoned until 1929 when it was bought by the town.

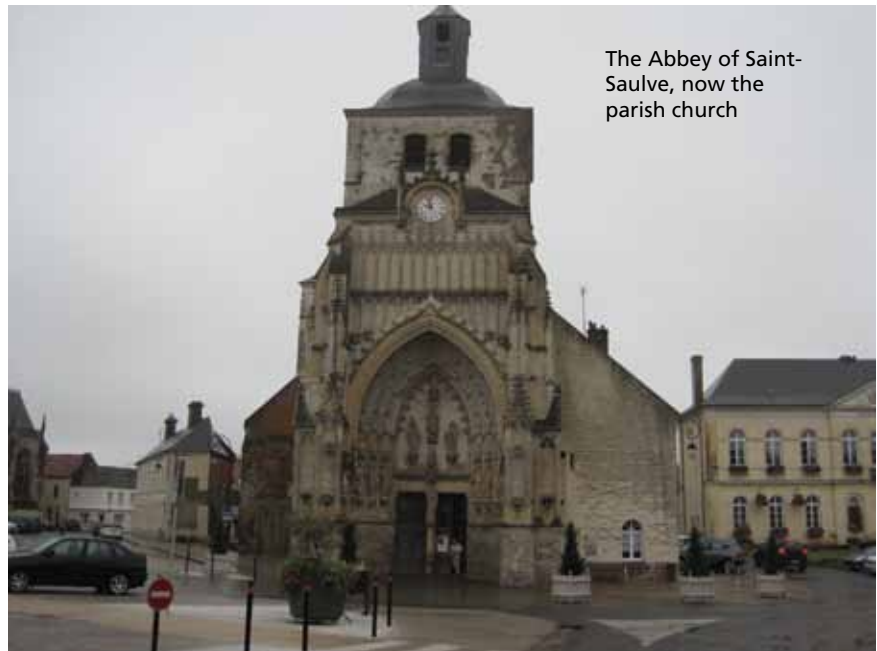
General Haig moved the British Army's General Headquarters from St Omer to Montreuil in March 1916 to be nearer to the hub of the Western Front on the Somme. The casemates under the citadel were again put to military use. Montreuil became an important centre for Belgian refugees and for a war hospital. Haig lived at the Château de Beaufort, a little outside the town, where in August 1918 he hosted King George V and President Poincaré.

During the Second World War, Montreuil fell to the German Second Panzer Division on 22 March 1940, and was occupied by German troops until it was re-taken by the Canadians on 13-14 September 1944. Its location gave it strategic relevance to Hitler's planned invasion of Britain in 1940 (Operation Sea Lion) and later the construction of the Atlantic Wall. The German Army dug new barracks in the chalk under the town from 1943, which later caused local subsidence.

What to see

The strategic fortified hilltop location, tightly restricted by its defensive walls, has defined the town. The main road from Paris to the north ran through the walled town and, until 1699, through the Citadel. Walled Montreuil (the Haute Ville) had only two gates accessible by vehicles – the Porte de France at the south and the Porte de Boulogne at the north. The former was removed in the

Les Hauts de Montreuil, the supposed home of Jean Valjean



The Abbey of Saint-Saulve, now the parish church

1820s; the latter still exists, accessed by a steep hill with a sharp hairpin bend. Within the walls, the cobbled main street, now called the Rue Pierre Ledent, was previously the Grande Rue – the royal road from Paris to the Channel. Montreuil has a tight pattern of streets radiating from two public squares: the Place Gambetta, at the north end; and the larger, Place du Général de Gaulle, at the south end, where the Grande Rue widened out to form the market place.

Religious buildings

In the middle ages Montreuil was also a religious centre of some significance. Its name is a corruption of 'Monasteriolum' ('place of the monasteries'), based upon a monastery believed to have been founded on the hill in the sixth century by Saulve, Bishop of Amiens. In the

The church of the abbey of St Austrebertha



The entrance to the citadel



The rue du Clape-en-Bas

early tenth century, Breton monks fled from Norman invaders to seek refuge in the town and built a monastery dedicated to St Winwalow (or Walloy), the founder of their original Breton Abbey. It was to this site that, in 1111,

the remains of St Saulve were removed. The Abbey of Saint-Saulve, in what is now Place Gambetta, was a centre of pilgrimage but it suffered much in later centuries. It was burned down by the invading Imperial army in 1537 and

rebuilt in a much curtailed manner, with only the nave remaining. From 1801 it became the only parish church in the town and has been refurnished with fittings from other town churches.

Medieval Montreuil had seven other churches and religious houses, traces of some of which can still be seen. To the north of the Place Gambetta is the nineteenth-century hospital, now converted into the Hotel Hermitage. Built on the site of the Hôtel-Dieu, the attached St Nicholas Chapel was rebuilt in the mid-fifteenth century in flamboyant Gothic style following an earthquake. It was restored in the 1870s but with baroque fittings from the reign of Louis XIII.

Behind the hospital was the Abbey of St Austrebertha, a seventh-century Merovingian nun and saint. The chapel was rebuilt in the eighteenth century in Renaissance style. Also close to the Place Gambetta are the transepts and chancel of the church of St Wulphy (fifteenth century) and the Chapel of the Hospital of the Orphans (founded in 1596).

Castle

The castle/citadel is on the west side of the town and is open to visitors. It retains buildings and features from most of its historical periods, the oldest surviving being Queen Bertha's tower, where Bertha of Holland, the estranged wife of Philip I, ended her days in the late eleventh century. The site includes the casemates underneath the ramparts, accessed by steep stairs, built by Louis Philippe in the mid-nineteenth century in fear of Prussian attack. Between 1916 and 1919 they housed the British Army Communications Centre and today they contain an exhibition of Montreuil during the First World War. The Musée de France Roger Rodière, based in an eighteenth-century chapel within the citadel, contains local archaeological finds and sculptures.

Ramparts

There is a complete circuit of ramparts around the Haute Ville which offer a walk of around three miles, giving good views of the fortifications and outer ditches, and the valley of the Canche. The ramparts date from between the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries and can be accessed from various parts of the town through postern gates and alleyways. They are higher than the surrounding housing, which backs on to them.

The northern gate, the Porte de Boulogne, is wide enough for one car to pass through at a time. A separate pedestrian passageway was cut next to it in 1886, as an alternative to its

Statue of General Haig



demolition. It was widened in 1955, but to date, with local support, has withstood the efforts of town planners ever to get rid of it.

Running south from the Porte, to the east of the main street is the Cavée Saint Firmin, a picturesque but steep cobbled street, which originally formed part of the Royal Route until the Porte de Boulogne was built. It was the location of several scenes from the 1925 silent film, *Les Misérables*.

Architecture

The town does not have vernacular dwellings which pre-date the attacks of the sixteenth century. Look out for the restaurant Les Hauts de Montreuil, two combined buildings in the main street – the Rue Pierre Ledent – which is a half-timbered house dating from the sacking of 1537. English troops were stationed here during the First World War. A sign on the house claims it to have been the home of Jean Valjean, hero of Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer.

Also in the Rue Pierre Ledent, just to the north and on the other side of the road, is a seventeenth-century staging inn, the Hôtel de France. Laurence Sterne stayed there, and mentions the town in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768). As with a number of Montreuil buildings, the ubiquitous external render has been stripped away to reveal a fascinating amalgam of local building materials – brick, chalk and tile.

The Haute Ville is made up of a jumble of streets linked by alleys called *venelles* which act as shortcuts. Close to the eastern ramparts are the Rues du Clape-en-Bas and du Clape-en-

Inscription below statue of General Haig



Haut. Again cobbled, these are lined with single storey houses. They take their name from the sewers that line them: a *clapet* was the metal flap that stopped water flowing back. The Rue du Clape-en-Bas is now home to artisan restaurants.

The peaceful years of the eighteenth century brought prosperity and new residential buildings in the style of Louis XV. Particular examples are the Mansion de Longvilliers in the Rue de la Chaîne, and the Hôtel St Walloy in the Rue Saint-Walloy. The Mansion d'Acary de la Rivière, in the Rue du Petit Sermon near the Porte de Boulogne, dates from the early nineteenth century and is now the Musée de l'Espoir de Franck et Mary Wooster, which Madame Wooster, an Englishwoman, left to the town on her death: it includes a collection of furniture.

In the Place du Général de Gaulle, the early nineteenth-century grain hall is now the town theatre. The statue of General Haig is in front of it. The theatre was actively used by British troops in the First World War, and by German troops in the Second.

Culture

The connection to *Les Misérables* followed Victor Hugo spending half a day in the town, on a trip north with his mistress in 1837. Every year, the townsfolk stage an outdoor *son et lumière* performance of the book (not the musical) in the citadel at the end of July and the beginning of August, with all 600 parts played by local people.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, Montreuil, as the nearest picturesque French town to Calais, became a focus for impressionist painters from America and Britain. Their legacy is promoted in signs across the Haute Ville. At this time too, as surviving railway posters demonstrate, the town was promoting itself as a *ville pittoresque* which was only three hours away from both Paris and London by train. Montreuil is today a small town of 2,500 people but its location near to the Channel ports has meant that it has hotels, restaurants and shops that promote themselves to a tourist trade from Britain, Belgium and Holland. Another insight into modern tourism is its status as an official *ville fleurie*. Flowers are much in evidence, in particular the banks of red roses around the citadel.

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A typical house in the Place Gambetta

