



## DISCOVER MEZIERES-EN-BRENNE IN POSTCARDS

The photographic heritage of the capital of the Brenne is remarkable for its quality and quantity. The council wants to help you to discover this with a 3.6 km walking tour which criss-crosses the village. 39 postcards have been displayed to let you compare the views of the past, with those of today. Open your eyes and switch century...

You will come across them individually as you wander around. Each postcard is numbered. The names below in italics are the *current* names of streets and squares.

All these photographs were taken between 1900 and 1920. Mézières at that time was a bustling community of 2000 inhabitants and over 60 shops and workshops.

### **1 – LE MOULIN = The Mill:**

This seigniorial mill, situated on the canal fed by the Claise, has existed since the Middle Ages. Up to the 17<sup>th</sup> July 1793, a charge was made, in the form of a portion levied by the miller, to get one's corn ground into flour. Depending on the region, this amounted to between 12 and 16 per cent of his output, making him both rich and unpopular. The mill ceased to operate in 1970 and the council acquired it in 1988, followed by the miller's house in 1994, one side of which was turned into a tourist hostel with 36 beds and the other into the local tourist information office "Destination Brenne". One room has been set aside to house exhibitions of the works of local artists, which it has done since 1989, without a break.

### **2 – RUE DE LA POSTE (*rue du Nord*):**

The exact location of the Post Office (probably open in 1834) in this road is unknown, but there were post inns at numbers 3 and 9-11. Lacking practicable roads before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, official mail went via the north of the county. In these inns, exhausted horses were swapped for fresh ones, and the board and lodging were much welcomed by passing travellers. According to local history, this road has been called "de la République", "Journeau" from the name of the owner of a hotel situated at no.14 in 1899 and "Napoléon" (III).

### **3 – LE CANAL (et les ruines du vieux château) = The canal (and the ruins of the old castle):**

This canal, 2 km in length, has been in existence since 1447. Diverting waters from the Claise, it was built to provide water to the moat of the old castle and the mill, so that the old town and the castle were on an island. It remained private property until 1968, when it was bought by the commune, which, by decree from the Prefecture, had to forbid the residents from throwing their rubbish into it! On the left, near the new multimedia library, there used to be one of the communal open air laundries (labours).

#### **4 – RUE DE L'OUEST = West Road:**

This road follows the line of the former moat of the castle. On the left Georges Aubry used to sell coal, seeds and hardware until the 1950s. A tax collector's office replaced it when Mézières was the main district town, but it has not been that since 2015, following reorganisation in 2014, which halved the number of these administrative subdivisions.

#### **5 – RUE DE L'OUEST (continued):**

This was a very lively road with its innkeepers and café owners. In the background we can see Marie Riauté with 3 of her 5 children (Marie-Jeanne and the twins Léon and Léontine). The family is posing in front of the Café de l'Ouest, which was also a grocer's. Let us not forget Emile Renard and his agricultural machines, the clog maker - Louis Pain, the electrician - Pasquet and the l'Hôtel de l'Ouest at No.11 where they accommodated travellers who arrived on foot and by horse.

#### **6 – LA MAIRIE = The Town Hall (*place Jean Moulin*):**

This former central building of the castle was used as an administrative building for the Justice of the Peace, the girls' school and the police station. It was demolished in 1928 and replaced by the Town Hall which is in front of you. On the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1928 the councillors sealed into one of its pillars an iron box, containing a photo similar to the one you are looking at and a statement. What is written on it remains a mystery! Jean-Louis Camus has been the Mayor of Mézières since 1983 and is President of the Community of Communes, the Coeur de Brenne (Heart of the Brenne).

#### **7 – LA GENDARMERIE = The Police Station:**

Following the removal of the police station to better equipped premises at no.14 route de St.Michel at the end of the 1990s, the former gendarmerie buildings were converted into social housing. In June 1846 George Sand spent a night there when she came to attend the races at Mézières' former race course. She retained an itchy memory of it, as the novelist described below:

"In Mézières, which is a little place, one stays where one can. We slept in the bed of the Brigadier of the police station, called Mr. Goret...with innumerable superb specimens of fleas, which had fed on policemen's blood. A policeman's flea is ferocious! It carries a sword and a leather straps".

#### **8 et 9 – LE PONT DE LA « CHAUMARATE »:**

What a strange name! "Chaume" in the Indre means wasteland, poor pasture. « A raté » remains a mystery....This bridge is over the Claise, an 86km long tributary of the Creuse. To the right you will see the end of the canal. This structure was completely restored in 1971, to replace the original, built in 1884.

### **10 – AVENUE DE LA GARE (*avenue de Verdun*) = Station Avenue (*Verdun Avenue*):**

This road was created in 1899 to enable access to the brand new station, served by the famous B.A. train (running between le Blanc and Argent-sur-Sauldre). This one metre gauge railway line criss-crossed the Brenne, between 1902 and 1953, opening up the territory. It took 14 hours to do the 191km, providing a link between the SNCF main lines. Today the section between Valençay and Salbris remains in use, mainly for schoolchildren. In the summer the Bas –Berry tourist train runs between Ecueillé et Valençay with a steam engine and a diesel railcar, from another époque, maintained by enthusiasts.

### **11 – LA GARE = The Station:**

This is what remains of the station, with its ceramic friezes and the name still visible. On the postcard you can make out the hydraulic crane, which refilled the steam trains' water tanks. The water, drawn from the Claise, via pipework, fed into a water tower. Small fish often found themselves sucked up at the same time. These were fed by the Station Master and staff, then fished and eaten at the time of the annual tank emptying!

### **12 – LE PARAY (*route de la Gabrière*):**

So many people here to watch the train pass! Next stop Subtray or St.Michel, situated at 4km in either direction...After enjoying splendid prosperity in the 1930s and the modernisation of the network with fast diesel railcars coming into service, the use of the B.A. steadily declined in favour of the less expensive and more practical cars, lorries and buses. Nevertheless the creation of this line had enabled women, men and goods to get around. "Paray" means a wall of a building or as a boundary. Here it designates the area near where remains of a Roman villa were discovered, testimony to the presence of humans here since about the 4th century A.D.

### **13 – LE PONT SUR LA CLAISE ET LE LAVOIR = The Claise bridge and the open air laundry:**

The former 'lavoir' can still be seen in this photo. There used to be 3 in the village. None of them has been preserved. There were numerous washerwomen to keep their masters' (often landowners') washing clean.

### **14 – VUE GENERALE = General view:**

The capital of the Brenne, Mézières is today a thriving village with 1001 inhabitants. Numerous pedestrian walks and bike or horse rides are suggested by the tourist office. They allow you to discover, undisturbed, some 3,300 étangs (lakes) which give rise to the Brenne's reputation as the fourth largest wetland and second largest freshwater fish-producing region in France. High quality

restaurants offer local produce such as morsels of deep-fried carp, goat's cheese and also lentils, of which the county (département) is the largest producer in France.

#### **15 – RUE DE L'ÉGLISE = Church Road (*rue du Château*):**

The name of this road is incorrect on the photo. The Rue de l'Église is further on. On the right is Jules Chartier, the tailor's, shop. At No.10 René Jouannet, the saddler and mattress-maker, had his workshop until the mid-1950s. On the left is Brenne Box, opened in 2016, it has been part of Maison France Services since 2020, offering the general public free help with all their administrative applications, in partnership with other agencies, such as the employment office, health authority and the family benefits and agricultural social security agencies. Next door is a "cyberspace", to enable the acquisition and use of computer skills and a co-working/home-working space, intended for self-employed and independent workers to have access to professional equipment to help develop their businesses (eg a 3D printer).

#### **16 – LA MAIRIE ET LA PLACE = The Town Hall and Square (*place Jean Moulin*):**

On the left, on the site of Brenne Box today, used to be the Café de la Réunion, which also sold seeds, fertilizers and.....underwear! The latter possibly made by the shirt makers, Louis Bouquet and Hippolyte Liot, who probably had their workshops on this square. To the right of the town hall a cart is waiting to be repaired by the cartwright, Alexandre Jouannet.

#### **17 – AVENUE DU CHAMP DE FOIRE = Fairground Avenue (*rue du Château*):**

In the background you can make out some huge Plane trees, cut down in 1972 because they had become dangerous. There were 44 of them, admired by passing tourists and affording welcome shade to the locals. On the right is the former Café du Commerce, today turned into a house, but the café has moved next door. Since at least 1899 there has been a bar here, at various times containing a pâtisserie, a restaurant or a tobacconist's.

#### **18 - LA PLACE = The Square (*place du Général de Gaulle*):**

Called Monument Square in 1934, then Market Square and today General de Gaulle Square, this is the centre of Mézières, through which people have passed since Medieval Times. Numerous agricultural shows and fairs (on the first Thursday of each month) took place here. On the left there used to be the entrance to the castle with its drawbridge and a bell and clock, at the top of a small tower. The café Maupomé was taken over by George Pinard, a pastry chef, who, until 1972, made the locally famous "échaudés" (small puff-pastry triangles). You can still sample these, in the spring, at the butcher's whose sign you can see. On the photo, on the same site is a saddler's and mattress maker's. Eugène et Eugénie Luthier, with their daughter Solange, are standing in front of the Café du Commerce, which they ran.

### **19 - PLACE DU MARCHE =The Market Place (*place du Général de Gaulle*):**

On the right is the grocer's; it is still one today and has been here for more than 120 years. In the past it was called Docks du Centre, managed by Georges Mercier, who sold seeds, ironmongery, liquor, hats and poultry all at the same time! In the background, to the left of the road, Antoine de Cassan used to repair chairs, before Philothée became a milliner there in the 1920s. Daniel Bescos, the fishmonger until 1977, sold, among other fish, those from the Brenne, kept cool in nets submerged in the canal!

### **20 – HÔTEL DU BŒUF COURONNE = The Crowned Bullock:**

Formerly a post inn and in existence since 1648, this is the oldest business in the village. People have found board and lodging here for almost 4 centuries....today the restaurant offers high quality dishes, prepared with local produce. The origin of the name is thanks to the tradition of crowning a fatted bullock with flowers, presenting it to the inhabitants before making a feast of it, all together, to celebrate the end of Lent. The car belonged to the doctor, Paul Raoulx.

### **21 – RUE DE LA PAROISSE = The Parish Road:**

Go down this road to discover, on your left, the former hospital, founded in 1429 by Jean VII d'Harcourt. Administered by the church, it cared for the destitute, orphans and pilgrims. The property underwent many changes during the Revolution. If you continue on to the bottom of the street you will find a stone staircase, the only remaining part of the former chapel of Saint Elisabeth, which no longer exists. Turning back, on your left, you will see the site of the old cemetery.

### **22 – LE VIEUX CHÂTEAU =The Old Castle:**

The name is not accurate. In fact it refers to the outbuildings of the castle, known as la Guillotière. They date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Until 1971, customers passed under the arch on the right to collect the poultry prepared for them by Marcel Raphalen, an egg and dairy merchant. Louis Perrot preceded him in 1921. The birds, their eggs, but also goats and butter were collected from all the nearby farms.

*Beware, in the interest of unity, postcards Nos. 23, 25 and 26 have been grouped together!*

### **23 - 25 - 26 - RUINES DES SERVITUDES DE L'ANCIEN CHATEAU = Ruins of the outbuildings of the former castle:**

On the right, two windows side by side replace the former archway of the smithy, which was in use until 1978. Jean Viard was the last occupant ...and Louis Doucet, the first in 1901. A feudal castle was built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century on the site of the Place Jean Moulin (town hall) by the family known as "de Brenne". Used as a country residence, the castle was enlarged and embellished over the centuries by the Harcourt dynasty, up to 1445, followed by the Anjous and the Montpensiers. In 1669, the strange "Eminence grise", Mazarin and the Marquis of Mézières, Isaac Bartet, acquired the manor with all its outbuildings, forests and lakes. ...A century later the castle was no longer being

maintained. Its demolition, ordered by decree of the Convention of August 1793, was gradual. In 1836, the entrance gate, the keep, the chapel and outbuildings had disappeared. In 1839 the commune bought what remained of the castle, to turn into a town hall, offices of the justice of the peace, the primary school, the police station and a fairground. Apart from the 3 towers, there remain today only these charming outbuildings. From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, all the villagers depended on the lords of the manor for every aspect of their existence.

#### **24 – RUE DE L'ECOLE = School Road (*rue de la Maréchalerie*):**

This street was greatly enlivened by the washerwomen, cooks and servants carrying out their jobs in the homes owned or rented by inhabitants of the Brenne. It leads to the school, which will be described in No.36. On the right, until 1931, there was a men's shirt-making workshop, owned by Hortense and Amélia Clavequin.

#### **27 – LA GRANDE RUE (*rue du Pont Malientras*):**

Already described as the "main road" in 1414, the use of this route was inevitable in order to get to the centre. Its name - meaning bad entry - describes the bend behind you and the narrowing of the road at the little bridge, which really annoyed the coachmen of the Middle Ages, long before the lorry drivers of today. On the right of the photo is the grocery and haberdashery shop run by Marie-Céline Moury, right up to the eve of the Second World War.

#### **28 – RUE NEUVE= New Road (*rue Elisabeth et André Plateaux*):**

This street owes its original name to the fact that, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was a new road round the centre of the village, improving the link between Châteauroux and Châtellerault. This road, being a through road, rapidly became very commercial, with a clockmaker/jeweller's evolving into a shop selling bicycles, cream separators and sewing machines, a hotel-restaurant, a grain and animal feed merchant's, the inevitable café, a baker's, a grocer's, a hairdresser's, a solicitor's, a clog maker's, a cartwright's, a milliner's....

#### **29 – RUE DE L'EGLISE = Church Road:**

The bakery and cake shop, which you see, has been here, since at least 1899 without a break. Numerous apprentices, from the same family (or not) have taken over as owners. This was the case for the Poquet family and the Sarazins. The grocery/off licence on the left of the postcard remained like this until 1990. On the right the state-run care home « Résidence de la Brenne » accommodates 85 people. It was opened in 2009, taking the place of a retirement home, itself built on the site of a hospice, and run by the nuns of La Puye (86) until the middle of the 1970s.

### **30 – LES BORDS DU CANAL = The Banks of the Canal:**

Look at the explanations in No.3. The blue signposted route No.42 allows you to follow the length of the canal up to where it joins the River Claise. After crossing the footbridge over the barrage, this easy 4 km walk goes through the woods and, after two right turns, brings you back into Mézières, route de la Gabrière. The verdant, pastoral scenery is very relaxing.

### **31 et 32 - L'ÉGLISE SAINTE MARIE-MADELEINE = Saint Mary-Magdalen Church:**

This ancient collegiate church, consecrated on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1339, was built on the initiative of Alix de Brabant, owner of the castle and niece of the king, Philip the Bold. Known as one of the most beautiful gothic churches in the Indre, the building has features from three gothic styles. The stained glass windows from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries tell the family histories of the various lords who ruled the Brenne, from the Middle Ages up to the Renaissance. Being listed in 1842 as the number one historical monument in the Indre, enabled the delicacy and sparkle of the colours and designs of the Master window makers to be well preserved, as well as the lightness of the splendid stone chapel of the Ducs d'Anjou. You can also discover the restored sundial, inaugurated in 2019.

Explanatory panels and printed guides for the church are available inside and for the sundial, on the outside. Guided visits can be arranged by asking at the tourist information office of Destination Brenne.

### **33 – LA POSTE = The Post Office:**

The first post office was opened about 1824, with daily traffic between Le Blanc and Mézières. The second one, in front of you, took the place of the former boys' school, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time the rural postman thought nothing of covering 25km, in all weathers, to distribute the letters. Curiously the département number until 1920 was 35, not 36 as it is today. The solicitor Armand Lenoir was the first resident to be connected up to the new telephone network in 1910. At that time there were only 22 subscribers in the Indre.

### **34 et 35 – RUE DU BOUT DU MONDE = End of the World Road:**

What a strange and mysterious name... There are two explanations: either that it described an isolated place – here the centre is only a short way away - or to encapsulate the idea of one's last journey between the church and the cemetery. There are few businesses in this long road of houses; some cottage industries were carried on in the back courtyards, like clog making, dress making or copper boiler making. Some merchants and a discount banker, by the name of Auguste Cassot, carried on their business deals in the backs of these typically Berrichon workers' houses, originally built to house the forge workers from Corbançon, a few kilometres away.

### **36 – L'ECOLE COMMUNALE = The state school:**

Designed by the county architect Louis Dauvergne, this new school opened in 1908 on a site acquired by the commune from the widow Massé and from Messrs Gaultier et Moury. Before that the nuns taught a few of the daughters of the poor in the hospice. The boys went to the state school at no.11 rue de l'Eglise and the remaining girls were educated in the old town hall. Today this school is made up of five mixed classes, two nursery and infant classes and three primary ones.

### **37 – LA GARENNE:**

The beautiful house situated on the left has always been here. It borders a small wood, surrounded by walls, probably the origin of its name. "Garenne" means a hunting place reserved for the lord of the manor. In fact it is a wood surrounded by walls and hedges, devoted to the breeding of small game. The former Hotel-Restaurant de la Promenade had its glory days under various names. Jean-Claude Crochet was the iconic owner when it was the Auberge des Brennoux, with its menu full of local produce. Before him Gilberte Richar used to cook in the "old house where everything is good". There are still some gourmets who remember with delight, the pâtés made by Mireille Nuens.

### **38 et 39 – RUE NEUVE – RUE DU MARCHE (*rues Elisabeth et André Plateaux et du Nord*):**

*Look out! These two photos are opposite each other.*

This very busy crossroads was the ideal place for a hotel, as shown on the right of the postcard. At first a Post Inn, it was run by Gion et Journeau. The advert for Meunier chocolate (photo 38) suggests the possibility of buying sweets in the Reneault bakery.

You have reached the end of this history walk, which allows us to imagine the life of a Brenne village at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. There are undoubtedly fewer businesses today, but they are still thriving and dynamic. The inhabitants make it a point of honour to give them their business because they want them to survive for a long time to come. In doing so, they bring life to the village.



You can continue your discovery of Mézières and the Regional Nature Park by consulting:



Office de Tourisme  
Destination Brenne  
02 54 28 20 28 (7j / 7)  
accueil@destination-brenne.fr  
www.destination-brenne.fr

**Bureau d'informations touristiques de Mézières-en-Brenne**

6 place Jean Moulin – 36290 Mézières-en-Brenne  
02 54 39 20 06

To return to your starting point, follow the 'Office de Tourisme' sign. Take the Rue du Nord and the Mill (Le Moulin) is 100m ahead.

English translation by Avril Growcott.

NB: all the historical sources consulted in producing this document can be requested from the Mézières Cultural Association.

