

The Sainte-Croix Fair will take place On September 9th, 10th and 11th, 2011.

The Sainte-Croix Fair has been taking place in Lessay for a thousand years on 'la Grand' Lande', a place dear to the Norman writer and poet Louis Beuve.

A little bit of history to remind the reader that the Sainte-Croix Fair was created at the time of the construction of the Abbey in Lessay and at the time of William the Conqueror's conquest of England in the 11th century.

If the creation of fairs was a sovereign right which was in the hands of the dukes and lords at the time of the Norman dukedom, other fairs had nevertheless been created on the initiative of religious men. It was certainly so in the case of the Sainte-Croix Fair in Lessay with the Benedictine monks coming from the famous Abbey of Bec to ensure the prosperity of Sainte Trinity Abbey in Lessay.

Some old papers confirm the existence of the fair which anticipated the commercial development of the Middle-Ages. Pope Urban III indicated in a bull dated 1186 the total amount of all donations made before the creation of the Abbey. Among them were Baron Richard of La Haye du Puits' donations generated from the profits accumulated during the fair.

In its early days, the Sainte-Croix Fair only lasted one day but throughout the centuries its development necessitated changes to permit wholesalers coming from very far areas to sell off their merchandise.

In 1671, at Abbot Léonor de Matignon's request (he was the sponsor of the Abbey of Lessay), King Louis XIV allowed the fair to last four days with an edict. Over several centuries, it was the monks of the Abbey who organised the fair. They were responsible for its smooth progress and had to deal with the conflicts created by such an event.

From the 16th century onwards, as the monks did not want to collect the place taxes from the merchants directly, they decided to lease 'the custom and the market stalls of all the fairs and markets in Lessay to one or several private individuals'.

After the Revolution, the organisation of the fair fell under the responsibility of the town council. The protests concerning the attribution of the commercial places forced the Mayor to take the decision 'that all the places would be from now on allocated to the highest and last bidder for three consecutive years'.

The number of communication routes increased with the arrival of the railway. Thanks to the construction of the station in Lessay in 1884 linking Sottevast to Coutances, the fair thus underwent a new rapid expansion.

The horse market was certainly at its highest level with more than 10,000 horses. The officers of the French Army bought half-blood horses for the year but after the First World War, and with the arrival of the motorcar, the sales of the remount recorded a significant decrease.

The Sainte-Croix Fair was not interrupted during the two world wars. These special periods distorted the event which existed nevertheless in a symbolical sort of way in September 1944 whereas the American troops had only delivered Lessay in July 27th, during the operation COBRA.

Neither the existence of the Sainte-Croix Fair nor that of the Abbey can be dissociated from Lessay, and they have remained its heart and soul since 1944. As before, thousands of visitors converge to Lessay the second weekend of September to meet exhibitors, merchants, companies and industrial stallholders gathered on the thirty hectares which were allotted to them for trade.

The visitors of the Sainte-Croix Fair park their vehicles over thirty other hectares on communal and private grounds used for parking. The overall is not obligatory uniform anymore and the Norman caps have disappeared. The Sainte-Croix Fair is resolutely modern and turns to the future.

This big meeting has the distinction of gathering nearly 350,000 visitors coming from different horizons to share one of the most festive moments in the region. It also brings to La Manche department a big economic window whose diversity is almost impossible to enumerate.

The fair starts on Friday with the traditional inauguration in the presence of the prefect of La Manche and several other elected representatives: the President of the Region, the President of the General Council in La Manche, regional councillors, deputies, senators, mayors and people in charge of state services.

The official procession led by gendarmes of the Republican Guard goes and meets the exhibitors—around 1,500 exhibitors coming from all the French regions.

The Sainte-Croix Fair consists of the most beautiful exhibition of agricultural material in the department of La Manche. As it is so important, it has become the inescapable meeting of manufacturers and farmers. They buy the latest model of tractor or the biggest corn silage-cutter.

On Friday morning, Low Norman stock breeders present more than 1,000 horses for sale on the fairgrounds. Local buyers as well as buyers coming from neighbouring countries haggle over the prices. Despite living in the Internet Age, they still shake their hands to seal a deal.

This year, several stock breeder associations set up a horse exhibition —Norman Cobs, Percherons, Sport Ponies, Anglo-Arab horses. Animations linked to horses will complete it. It will last throughout the three days of the Sainte-Croix Fair as it will be the case for the breeding departmental competition. The bovine and ovine stockbreeders of La Manche have been organising it for ten years at the fair in Lessay with the help of the dairy control of the farmers' association and numerous partners.

The stock breeders gather 350 bovines below a concourse built for the occasion. They are the most beautiful of the department of La Manche. They represent the Norman races, the Salers, the Blondes d'Aquitaine, the Prim'hoslteins and the Montbéliardes. Some of the

selected animals will then compete at the Salon International de l'Élevage à Rennes (the SPACE) and at the Salon de l'Agriculture in Paris.

The three ovine races of La Manche will be present: the Avranchin, the Cotentin and the Roussin de la Hague—this race had a dedicated room at the competition in Rennes in 2009.

A giant farm lives on the fairground in Lessay during the course of these three days. Peasants are honoured for their skills in the matter of bovine genetics.

The dog market—pedigree compulsory—takes place near the departmental festival of bovine breeding. Thousands of visitors pace up and down the paths of this sector in order to find the desired puppy. Sometimes, there is simply love at first sight for one of them.

The street where sellers roast meat is unmissable. The 350, 000 visitors of the fair eat there. The street is full of colours and odours.

Legs and shoulders of lambs are put on a spit and then grilled with wood fire in the open air like it has been for several centuries.

Moreover, there are all these shopkeepers with their stalls where everyone can buy the ingredients necessary for a good traditional meal of the Sainte-Croix Fair (roasted mutton, French fries, unpasteurised milk camembert cheese made in Lessay, melons and grapes...).

After that, the visitors sit down under the high marquees and taste these rural provisions with their families. This is a moment of exceptional conviviality for the regular visitors of the Sainte-Croix Fair. The moment is also unforgettable for those who are discovering this atmosphere, unique in Normandy, for the first time.

Throughout these days that extend into the night with the funfair and its thousand lights, Lessay and the Sainte-Croix Fair form another world where people meet to be transported in time.

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