

Towns and Regions of Art and History  
The Coëvrons-Mayenne Region

Architecture is frozen music.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)

Discover the **Story**

of the Hercé  
and Cheverus Squares in

**Mayenne**

# The Hercé and Cheverus Squares

Located in the upper quarters of the town of Mayenne, the Hercé and Cheverus Squares were the political and social heart of the city in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## A new political centre

### Mayenne, property of Cardinal Mazarin

Prince Charles III of Gonzague, Duke of Mantoue, sold the duchy of Mayenne to Cardinal Mazarin on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1654. Two years later the king gave the cardinal permission to establish the posts of mayor, aldermen, civil and criminal judges, police officers, and a Water and Forestry administrator. A palace was constructed to give all these new officials a place to work, while the sale of positions encouraged numerous noble and bourgeois families to settle in Mayenne. The Cardinal sent Colbert, then his right-hand man, to supervise the reorganization of the duchy. Concerning the town, the future superintendent of finances wrote to Mazarin: "This country is inaccessible by coach. There can be no walkway, park, or garden. There are no buildings and none can be here. The city is very dirty, very ugly, and the people unpleasant." After this harsh judgment, the construction projects he undertook changed the face of the town.

### The creation of the squares

When Colbert first arrived, today's Hercé and Cheverus Squares consisted of a single street which was widened at one end. There the monks of Fontaine-Daniel Abbey had built a wooden covered market. This lower sector was enlarged to create a square, first named Place du Palace. It acquired its current name in 1854, when the city decided to honour the memory of Louis de Hercé, mayor of Mayenne (1816 to 1830) and deputy of the Department. Another square, first called Place Haute, was created in 1691 and re-named Place de Cheverus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- 1 The Barre Ducale
- 2 The Mazarin fountain
- 3 Statue of Cardinal Cheverus
- 4 L'hôtel Chappedelaine
- 5 L'hôtel de Hercé
- 6 L'hôtel Chasteloger
- 7 L'hôtel Montpinçon
- 8 L'hôtel Baglion
- 9 L'hôtel Brossard
- 10 L'hôtel Clinchamp
- 11 L'hôtel Le Forestier



Detail of a cadastral map of Mayenne (Mairie of Mayenne)



Sundial on the facade of the Barre Ducale.



Crow perched on the statue of Armand de la Meilleraye, second Duke of Mayenne.



The meridian line.

## The Barre Ducale 1

Its construction began under Colbert in 1660, on a piece of waste ground above Hercé Square. Mazarin died in 1661 well before the building's completion in 1668. The Barre Ducale served as city hall and law court until 1854, when the judiciary was transferred to a new building. The two-story structure is built of granite and topped by a bell tower and a statue of Armand de la Meilleraye, second duke of Mayenne and husband of Hortense Mancini, niece of the Cardinal. He holds a sword in one hand and scales in the other. A dove, symbol of wisdom, is placed above his head. In 1690 a clock was installed on the facade overlooking Hercé Square. Wrought-iron balconies on the first floor were added in the 18th century, as were the sundial (1783) and meridian line (1785). The City Council ordered that the symbols of freemasonry: compass, square and globe, be represented. Also inscribed are quotations from the Gospel of Saint Luke: "*Unam time*" (only one time) and "*Qua hora not putatis veniet*" (this hour will come when you don't expect it).



## What is a meridian line?

The meridian line allowed the inhabitants of the city to adjust their watches to the solar hour indicated by the gnomon\*.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century people lived according to solar time. Since the Earth does not go around the Sun at an unchanging speed, true solar time varies a few minutes according to the season and the locale. Noon, therefore, did not occur at the same moment in Nice as in Brest.

La Barre Ducale as seen from Hercé Square.

Meridian lines were indispensable to allow the owners of watches to put themselves "at the time of the place". This habit disappeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because the developing railroads required an identical timetable at all stations. "Mean solar time" was therefore established.

\* **Gnomon:** the part of a sundial which casts a shadow.

# Fountain and statue

At the end of the 18th century a fountain was installed on the future Hercé Square to enhance the perspective. The statue of Cardinal Cheverus was erected in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the High Square, which was renamed in his honour.

## Mazarin fountain ②

This pentagonal fountain was built in 1683 to supply water in case of fire and to grace the square. Water pours into the basin from an obelisk-shaped central structure topped with a flame-urn. A plaque commemorating the laying of the first stone was discovered in 1990 during work on the square. The fountain was then moved and the mayor of Mayenne reinstalled the commemorative tablet at its base and added another. This fountain is duplicated on Saint Vincent Square, above Cheverus Square. These two elements give an architectural coherence to the ensemble.



Fountain at Hercé Square

## The statue of Cardinal Cheverus ③

Another work of art decorates Cheverus Square: the statue of Cardinal Jean de Cheverus. It was created in 1844 by David d'Angers, one of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century sculptors. His work is characterized by his pursuit of realism and idealized facial features are remarkably absent. Depicting Cheverus in his cardinal's robes anchors him in his time. His importance is reflected in the massive base on which bronze plaques show the principal elements of his life and work, including the evangelization of the Indian populations of North America.

## The work of Jean de Cheverus

Cardinal Cheverus was born in Mayenne on January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1768, in a house at 40 Rue du 130<sup>e</sup> RI. He was inducted into the clergy in 1780 by Lord Hercé, Bishop of Dol and uncle to Louis de Hercé. He was accorded a grant to study at the Louis-le-Grand school in Paris and was among the last priests ordained in 1790. On returning to Mayenne he was appointed vicar of Notre-Dame-des-Miracles, but the Revolutionary Committee forbade religious worship, so he was driven to celebrate clandestinely. Because he refused to pledge allegiance to the civil Constitution of the Clergy, he was denounced and interned before escaping to England. From there he went to America to evangelise Indian tribes.

He also oversaw the construction of the first church of Boston in 1803, while Pope Pius VII named him bishop of that city. Ill-health forced him to return in France in 1823. He became bishop of Montauban, then archbishop of Bordeaux, State Councillor and Commander of the Holy Spirit. He created the first establishment for the vocational training of young people. Appointed cardinal on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1836, he died in Mayenne on July 19<sup>th</sup> of the same year.

Fountain at Hercé Square



# The Mansions

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Hercé and Cheverus Squares formed the most beautiful quarter of Mayenne.

The city's finest mansion is in Cheverus Square

## L'hôtel Chappedelaine (11 Cheverus Square) 4

This 17th-century townhouse was built before the square was established. On one side of its facade is a corbelled turret with a small dome covered in triangular and scale-shaped slates. Openings include a mullioned window and a Renaissance dormer. René-Gilbert de Chappedelaine ( 1679-1730 ) served as a Mayenne civil judge in 1706. Jean-René, born in 1766, was a page for the Count of Artois and an officer of the Barrois regiment. He also served in the Chevaliers Catholiques (elite royalist soldiers) in 1795 during the emigration of those loyal to the monarchy. Under the Restoration he became a brigade general.

## L'hôtel de Hercé (19 Cheverus Square) 5

The Hercé family mansion was built in the second half of the 18th century. The facade is imposing. Three levels are set off by bands, impressive cornices and differing window dimensions. Finally, the central axis of the roof is marked by a cupola, simple outside but with woodwork and sculptured panelling within. The history of the department is marked by the life and work of several members of the family. Urbain de Hercé was born in the townhouse. He became Bishop of Dol and was shot in 1795. Louis de Hercé was mayor of Mayenne

from 1816 until 1830. When he resigned that office, he gave the Barre Ducale, which he owned, to the city. It housed the town hall until the late 20th century, when the mayor's office was transferred some meters away to the Rue de Verdun. Jean-François de Hercé, Louis' brother, married even though he had intended to become a priest. He went on to serve as mayor of Saint-Ouen-des-Vallons and Laval. After the death of his wife and the marriage of his daughter, he did become a priest and later Bishop of Nantes.

## L'hôtel Chasteloger (14 Cheverus Square) 6

This was the residence of officials from Rennes, Le Mercereul de Chasteloger family, after which the mansion was named. In the 19th century it was owned by the Hauteville family. It is a sober, L-shaped building with numerous windows and whose main facade is aligned with the street. A window over the carriage porch lets light into the corridor beyond. The roof line and dormer windows of the townhouse resemble nearby constructions and suggest that it was built in the early 18th century.

L'hôtel Montpinçon:  
historic courtyard and garden.



## L'hôtel Montpinçon (22 Cheverus Square) 7

The Mesnager de la Dufferie family built this mansion in 1666. It was bought and enlarged in the 18th century by the Montpinçon family. The building is separated from the street by a large courtyard, enclosed on one side by railings and by large walls on the other sides. Behind the house is a park. This arrangement of courtyard and park was inspired by Parisian mansions. The depth of the courtyard emphasizes the importance of the main facade, composed of a central body flanked by two square elements. The front door is slightly off-centre, perhaps for easier access to the interior.

# The Mansions

The townhouses on Hercé Square, like those on Cheverus Square, offer an example of urban architecture which reflects the lifestyle of well-to-do families in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Hercé Square

## Hôtel Baglion

(6 Hercé Square) 8

This house was built in about 1660 by the Billiard de Lorière family. Guy Billiard de Lorière, a protégé of Armand de Mazarin, became a criminal judge then lifetime mayor. In the 18th century the Baglion family bought the property. Of Italian origin, the Baglions had been in Mayenne since at least the 15th century. The building has two floors and a very sloping roof. The facade of masonry-covered stone is austere, undecorated except for some molding around the windows.



L'hôtel Baglion.



## Hôtel Brossard

(10 Hercé Square) 9

The Baglions built a house next to theirs for their daughter, Charlotte, on her marriage to François de Brossard in 1771. It is a rather narrow three-storied construction. Unlike the Hôtel Baglion, the street facade is of finely masoned granite. The slope of the roof is gentler and accommodates a dormer. The entrance is a sculptured wooden portal decorated with a hammer in wrought-iron.

L'hôtel Brossard (second building from the left), built by the Baglions for their daughter Charlotte, on her marriage with François de Brossard.



The turret of the hôtel Chappedelaine on Cheverus Square.



**L'hôtel de Clinchamp.** It was the site of a fashionable literary salon before the Revolution.

### **L'hôtel Clinchamp (16 Hercé Square) ⑩**

Just next door to the Barre Ducale, this mansion was built in the 16th century and today houses the Treasury Department. It was first inhabited by the Le Nicolais family, linen traders raised to the nobility. In the 18th century, Pierre Le Nicolais de Clinchamp also acquired the castle of Bourgon in Montourtier. Under the reign of Louis XVI, his daughter Victoire hosted a literary salon in her mansion. It was modelled on the Parisian salons of Madame du Deffand

and Madame Geoffrin. Thanks to her liberal ideas, she was able to stay in Mayenne and keep her home during the Revolution. The building is square with a staircase tower situated at the back. The entrance gate combines Gothic and Renaissance elements. The upper part is composed of an ogee arch surmounted by a pinnacle and decorated with leafy designs characteristic of Gothic art. The door posts, on the other hand, are Renaissance-style pilasters with capitals bearing entablatures. In the late 17th or early 18th century, a wing was added to the left of the main facade, thus doubling the size of the house. The attic was also fitted out and lighted by dormer windows. In the 19th century Verdun Street was created, cutting through the property.

### **L'hôtel Le Forestier ⑪**

This townhouse was owned by the Lagrange family in 1730. They ceded it to the Le Foresters during the Revolution, retrieving it later. The three-storey house adjoins the Barre Ducale and stands out among the other mansions on the Square due to the size of its facade. The building runs all its considerable length along the street. It is organized symmetrically around the door, while the windows' alternating curved or triangular pediments create a rhythmic effect.



**L'hôtel Leforestier** distinguishes itself from other mansions on Hercé Square by the dimensions of its facade.



Let's tell you the story of **Coëvrons-Mayenne**, a region of art and history ...  
... in the company of a guide-lecturer autorised by the ministry of culture.

The guide will welcome you. He knows all about Coëvrons-Mayenne and will give you the vital elements required to understand the scale of a landscape, the story of the region in its different areas. The guide is there for your benefit, feel free to ask any questions you may have.

#### The heritage mediation service

runs the region of art and history Coëvrons-Mayenne. It organises events throughout the year for individuals and groups (adults and school children) .

#### If you are with a group

Coëvrons-Mayenne offers visits throughout the year subject to reservation.

#### Coëvrons-Mayenne is part of the **national network** of towns and regions of art and history

The Ministry of culture and communication attributes the name of “towns and regions of art and history” to local communities which promote their heritage. It guarantees the skills of guide-lecturers and promoters of heritage and the quality of their activities. From Prehistoruy to XXI<sup>st</sup> century architecture, the towns and regions present their heritage in all its diversity. A network of 167 towns and regions is currently in existence throughout France.

#### Nearby sites,

Laval, Le Mans, Angers, Vitré, Fougères, Nantes, Guérande, Fontenay-le-Comte and Saumur have been granted the name “town of art and history”; the Perche Sarthois, the Vallée du Loir and the Pays du vignoble nantais have been granted the name “region of art and history”.

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