



ENGLISH BOOKLET

THE ESPLANADE "LA FRANÇAISE"

The La Française esplanade was inaugurated in 2006 incorporating lighting and water displays to create an activity area for open air concerts, exhibitions, including displays of some of the collection of agricultural machinery, sometimes working.

There is also a Christmas market in December with family activities for children and parents, which uses the whole space.

The brick and metal building which is the esplanade backdrop, was constructed at the beginning of the 20th century for the Société Française who made steam engines and farm machinery.

The building design was inspired by Eiffel (of the tower). In 1928 the building was extended using concrete, a modern material at the time. It has been preserved to create a multi-screen cinema and international congress centre. A bowling alley was installed in 2015 using part of the original building.

Above the museum building is a garden, which has a good view of La Française, accessed by stairs. There is a fountain there with a bust of Célestin Gérard who was the pioneer of agricultural mechanisation in Vierzon.

Next to the gardens, you will see Célestin Gérard's house built in the second half of the 19th century, which symbolizes his professional success: it has sculptures representative of the time.

Nowadays this house is a Michelin star gourmet restaurant.

Opposite Vierzon railway station, just along the road from the restaurant, is another building, originally an exhibition hall built of glass and steel to display the factory's products. Unfortunately, it was damaged and replaced with a more contemporary building which is now dedicated to economic development.

WELCOME TO VIERZON MUSEUM

The museum is situated in the heart of the former Société Française factory.

The former French industrial site was purchased by the (American) CASE Company in 1958.

It occupied a 7-hectare site right in the heart of the town, between Vierzon station and the Canal de Berry.

The factory closed in 1995 and the buildings are today protected as a National Historic Monument.

The facade on the building opposite the museum was restored in 2006.

The esplanade in front of the museum was the factory courtyard.

The foundry buildings date from the beginning of the 20th century. They were expanded, as required, during the growth of the company.

Today they house the cinema, the congress centre and the 10-pin bowling centre.

This museum was opened in 2013.

Materials for the industrial history of Vierzon in the 19th and 20th century have been gathered from various sources including some personal recollections.

The first room concentrates on ceramics: porcelain, glass manufacture, stoneware, and earthenware, as well as clothing and of course the Professional National School, which trained so many factory workers.

The items displayed in the showcases allow you to understand and appreciate the creativity and knowledge of these skilled workers. Some information guides are also available on request. There are interviews and statements taken by the ethnological film makers of Tours University who have produced a 20-minute film complete with subtitles.

The visit continues with the history of the railwaymen at the large Vierzon railway junction with its epic use of steam in the early days of the first locomotives.

A second documentary is available in French, English and German on request which explains the working conditions of those who controlled these beautiful machines.

Finally, the visit enters the most spacious part of the museum, which houses tractors, threshing machines, traction engines, objects relating to steam and railways, and other associated equipment.

A third documentary is also available with interviews subtitled in English with archive pictures.

Several factors favoured the establishment of industries in Vierzon:

*The vast forests surrounding Vierzon, able to supply the essential wood required for the manufacture of agricultural machinery.

*Vierzon being in the heart of an important agricultural region which was a ready market for agricultural machines.

*The opening of the Canal de Berry in 1835, connected to Montluçon, enabling the delivery of the coal needed for making cast iron, an important element in the manufacturing process.

*The construction of the railway in 1843 from Orléans to Vierzon.

*The position of the town in the centre of France, with the railway eventually going in several directions, facilitating easy transport to commercial outlets for products made in Vierzon.

The manufacturing sites were situated in the centre of the town with the canal and railway nearby for easy transportation.

PORCELAIN

Vierzon was an important china manufacturer for 180 years.

The first pieces were produced by the HACHE factory which opened in 1816. You can admire in the showcase the cup and saucer with a bird, which won a gold medal at the 1889 World Fair.

Another famous factory was LARCHEVEQUE: Marc Larchevêque established the ceramics section of the National Professional School of Vierzon.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Vierzon had 13 factories employing 1500 people.

In the 1950's, industries started to struggle with the availability of new household appliances and products which reduced the need for items manufactured in Vierzon.

After the world economic crisis of 1977, companies started to close their doors to manufacturing.

Most factories finally closed in 1997.

GLASSWARE

There were two famous companies: Godefroy and Thouvenin, making table glassware.

Alongside the articles made by the companies, glassworkers made similar original pieces in their break times: these pieces are called 'bousillés'. These were creations of the workers; this activity was authorized by the management.

The Thouvenin factory made glasses with a bee decoration on the stem. This factory, which employed 700 people, was situated in Vierzon-Forges, formerly a village and now a suburb of Vierzon, with houses built for the workers close to the factories.

The factories specialized in 'Gobeleterie' (glassware), cut, engraved, moulded and fused together.

EUGÈNE-HENRY KARCHER

Karcher was the sculptor of the pacifist "art-déco" War Memorial in the Vierzon Public Gardens.

The stoneware company DENBAC collaborated in the construction, with the attractive mosaic tiles around the memorial and in the pond. There are wood carvings of his dog and a couple, a 'bas-relief' (low relief sculpture) representing a hunting scene, realized in the 1920's.

CLOTHING AND THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

Women worked from home producing pieces for ladies' lingerie. The work included fine embroidery in the shape of small squares called "pavés de Vierzon".

The textile industry developed in Vierzon at the beginning of the 20th century. There were 25 companies actively employing 1,100 people in the early 1970's, but after 1975 the factories started to suffer due to their outsourcing of labour.

Unfortunately, there were no national companies interested in the Vierzon companies, so the textile industry gradually closed.

DENBAC: a beautiful collection of fired stoneware

Objects shown in the museum are only a small sample of the 670 items listed in the commercial catalogue.

The story of the factory began in 1909 when René Denert and René-Louis Balichon got together.

With the death of René Denert in 1937, the cessation of production during the Second World War and the death of the other partner in 1949, the factory suffered to the extent that it closed in 1952.

You can see the influence of the great artistic movements of the 20th Century:

- Art Nouveau (plant and animal motifs)
- Art Déco (geometrical lines)

These quite unique creations are notable for their glazes which incorporate crystals, brilliant colours and satin or gloss textures.

POTTERY (FAÏENCE): the Berlot Mussier and ODYV collection

The company was created by Mr Berlot and Mr Mussier and at first they produced 'Majolica'.

In 1930, the mark ODYV was created by combining the two first names Odette and Yvonne.

ODYV's busy period lasted 10 years from 1930 to 1940.

In the 1960's, facing economic difficulties and problems with sales, the company started to decline and closed in the 1970's.

We can see clocks with two matching pieces representing women with short hair dressed in a robe and accompanied by greyhounds.

The bears remind us of the famous White Bears of the French artist François Pompon; the other animals are lions, panthers, hinds etc.

THE NATIONAL PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL (École Nationale Professionnelle) of Vierzon

The National School was built for the training needs of the rapidly expanding industries in Vierzon.

Theoretical and practical education was taught at this time, including metalwork, woodwork, electricity, ceramics, aeronautical mechanics, boilermaking and foundry work.

The schooling was strict and there was a lot of camaraderie between the pupils which was considered important. The pupils organised a traditional parade and ball to commemorate their last 100 days at the school.

The pupils had to wear a navy-blue uniform.

Today it is a renowned high school for general, technological and professional education.

RAILWAYS

We are now going to enter the kingdom of steam to discover the memorial created by a former warehouse manager, Mr Laumônier and a former station master Mr.Jacquot.

It is thanks to the railway that the town of Vierzon developed with industries and manufactures taking advantage of this to create a thriving industrial base. Railways in France were originally run by private companies but in 1938, they were nationalised and became the S.N.C.F (Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Français).

Above the door is the macaroon with interlaced letters, which was the first logo.

The S.N.C.F created numerous jobs which are referred to below:

The linesman's tools are shown on the table; of course, the driver and the fireman used their expertise to tame the 'monsters' which were the steam engines.

The documentary: this short film was produced by the SNCF in 1940

A driver and a fireman were filmed during their working day driving the Pacific 2-3-1 (Pacific 4-6-2), the Queen of Rail.

At that time, they were working a 12-hour day, standing up all the time. They communicated by hand signals as they could not hear each other because of the intense noise.

They always had their heads out of the window, in all weathers, to watch the railway signals and to see that there were no obstacles on the line ahead.

The driver and the fireman were a team on the same engine, so they were aware of the engine's characteristics and idiosyncrasies, perhaps more than those of their wives, much to their regret!

Vierzon was a big railway junction, employing 500 men with more than 90 locomotives and supporting 2,000 family members.

As the traffic grew the infrastructure changed as we can see with the model of new Toulouse bridge.

There was also a metre-gauge railway called Le Tacot, which ran along the streets, and joined the 4 villages – Vierzon-Forges, Vierzon Saint-Martin, Vierzon-Bourgneuf, and Vierzon-Ville and also the surrounding villages.

This was used to transport people and merchandise as there were no buses, cars or lorries at this time.

On your right you will see panels and photos of the Resistance from the Second World War.

Vierzon was divided in two with the river Cher being the demarcation line. The North was in the occupied zone and the south was in the free (Vichy) zone.

A very difficult time for the town.

The first locomotives were made in England by Richard Trevithick and then followed by George Stephenson.

In front of you: this beautiful locomotive is called Eugénie and this prototype is the best of Louis-Charles Sangnier's work in 1840.

He was a pupil engineer in the national arsenal at Rochefort (Charente-Maritime).

He presented Eugénie for the examination at the end of his studies showing his system of power distribution, which demonstrated the reverse gear action. For this he obtained his diploma and the Legion of Honour.

As we are unable to show the original locomotives, which are in Mulhouse, we have small-scale models which are in working order and can be powered by steam.

The Mikado shown on the table weighs 200 kg whereas the real thing weighs 200 tons.

This generation of locomotives arrived after the 2nd World War, transported by cargo ships from Canada and the United States as part of the Marshall Plan to reconstruct Europe after it was destroyed by bombing.

The notation of steam locomotives is different between Britain and the United States on the one hand and France on the other: for example, the Mikado 1-4-1 in France was the same as the Mikado 2-8-2 in Britain and America.

It simply means that in France the axles are counted whereas the wheels are counted in Britain and America. Counting starts from the front in either case.

THE TOULOUSE BRIDGE

In 1846, a small bridge made of stone, 35 meters (38 yards) long was built across the railway lines. It was constructed with only 3 arches above 5 tracks.

Its name originated from the original railway which went from Paris to Toulouse, passing through Vierzon.

In 1910, Vierzon like other towns, was expanding with industrialization and the rail network was expanding, with more engines and engine sheds to cope with the increased movement of raw materials and export of manufactured goods.

In 1910 it was therefore decided to replace the original bridge with a new metal bridge to span 15 tracks. This was 97 meters (106 yards) long and took a year to construct.

In 1988 it was decided to paint the bridge in four bright colours to celebrate the Bicentenary of the French Revolution which took place in 1789.

It is still multicoloured today.

AGRICULTURAL MECHANIZATION

It all began with Célestin Gérard who established his workshop opposite the railway station in 1848.

He was a carpenter who made root-cutting and wheat-bran separating machines.

In 1861 he constructed his first traction engine to drive threshing machines.

This was the beginning of construction of steam engines in Vierzon.

In 1866, Célestin Gérard made the first French mobile threshing machine on wheels in his workshops.

In 1870, the factory employed 270 people and produced between 70 and 80 threshing machines and 30 to 40 traction engines every year.

In 1879, in spite of his commercial and social success, Célestin Gérard sold his company to Lucien Arbel and the Société Française de Matériel Agricole (French Society for Farm Implements) was created (SFMA)

In 1889, SFMA became SFMAI - Société Française de Matériel Agricole et Industriel.

In 1929, the Vierzon company explored the possibility of manufacturing tractors under the name of SFV – Société Française Vierzon, and was thereafter known simply as the Société Française.

In 1934, the first tractors were delivered.

The preferred design was a tractor run on fuel-oil, a semi-diesel 'hot bulb' engine, with a single horizontal cylinder, chosen for its robustness and ease of use.

The first tractors were painted grey with red wheels.

From 1946, the dark green colour appeared.

From 1952, the light green and yellow colours appeared.

The peak of production was in 1957.

22 tractors left the Vierzon production lines every day.

The company employed 1,740 employees and had numerous subcontractors in Vierzon and the surrounding region.

It was the largest private enterprise in the Berry region and the fifth largest national producer of tractors.

Between 1934 and 1958, the Société Française produced 19 different models of tractor to meet the demands of different farms.

In 1957, the Société Française started to realize the difficulty of competition from America so launched 2 new models on to the market, the 303 and the 403. These had two-cylinder engines, which subsequently had numerous technical problems.

In 1958, the American CASE company bought shares in the French company.

In 1960, Vierzon manufactured large tractors under the name of CASE.

In 1962, manufacturing changed from tractors to mechanical diggers known as backhoes (in America), JCBs (in Britain) or tracto-pelles (in France).

Due to strikes which halted production, CASE decided to close the Vierzon factory and transfer production to another unit in the Paris region.

The other companies manufacturing agricultural machinery were:

BROUHOT et Cie (1863 to 1955, absorbed by the SFMAI)

- *specialist in the pressing of straw and in feed

- *from 1902 to 1910, Brouhot produced cars

- *from 1908, 400 Brouhot taxis circulated in Paris and many would be among the 'Taxis of the Marne' in 1914

MERLIN et Cie (1879 to 1959), specialized in the production of threshing machines.

Other known establishments were:

Société Vierzonnaise de Construction, Del et Cie, Ruhlman, Carroy-Giraudon, Société Pierre Renaud.

You have just explored two centuries of the industrial history of Vierzon.

The discovery of these objects will have allowed you to understand the people, their skills and their environment.

We would like to thank you for your visit. We are here if you have questions and wish to know more.