



# Fresnay-sur-Sarthe

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Local Heritage



# Fresnay-sur-Sarthe, sentinel of Maine-Anjou on the edge of Normandy

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The town is built on a rocky hill at the site of a ford overlooking a meander of the River Sarthe. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, its strategic location on the border between the County of Maine and the newly founded Duchy of Normandy led to the construction of a castle. A castle town was created surrounding the area.

Throughout the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when this stronghold was administered by the viscounts of Beaumont and vassals of the counts of Maine, the town was besieged several times by William the Conqueror, who temporarily succeeded in bringing Maine under his authority. At the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, through his marriage, the Count of Anjou Foulques V annexed the province of Maine which then became part of the Plantagenêt Empire.

The town experienced a period of relative prosperity between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this period, it continued to develop within a fortified town wall and the church was built.



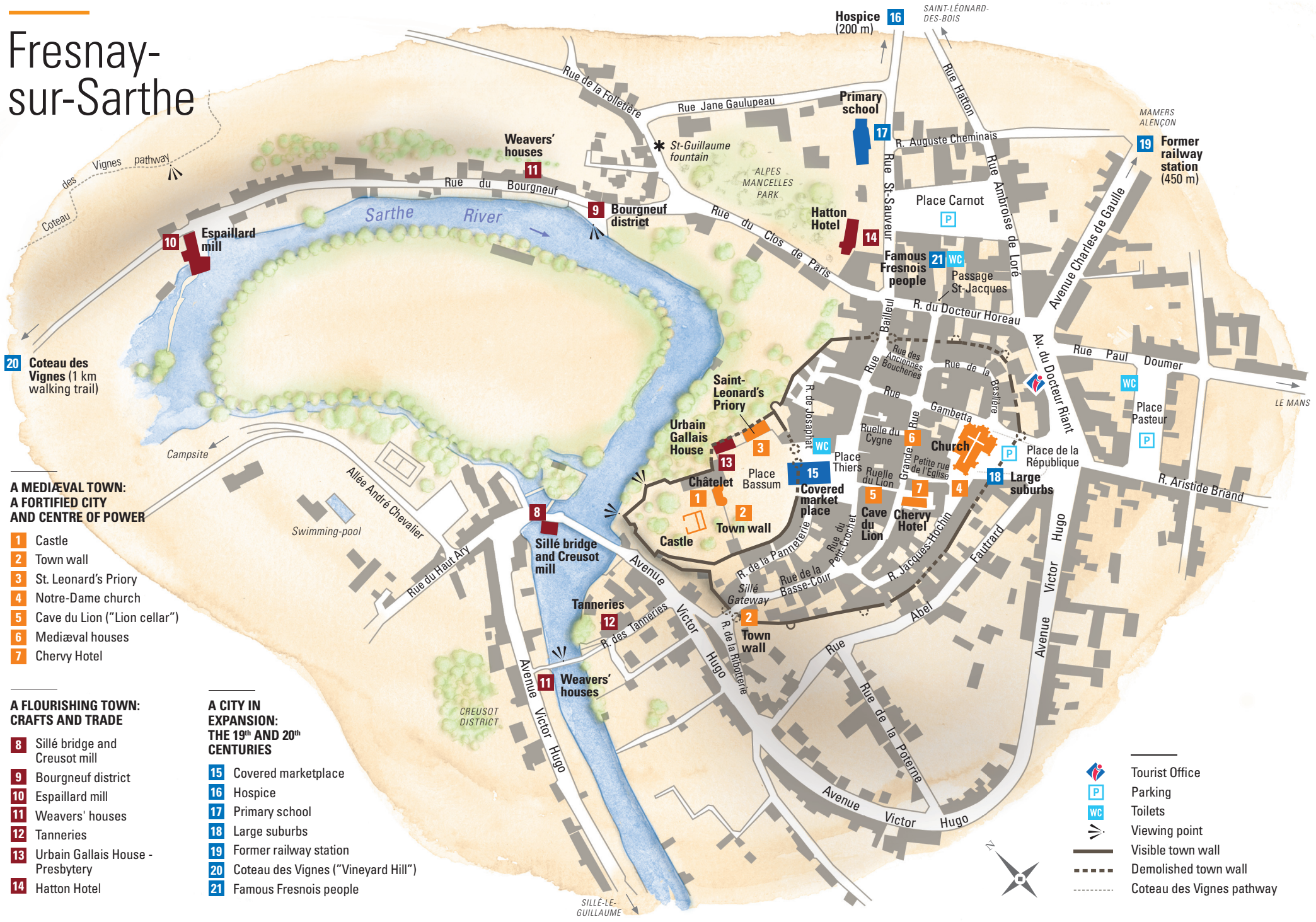
In 1371, the marriage of the Viscountess of Beaumont to Peter II, the Count of Alençon, brought the town back under Norman control. The Hundred Years' War opened an eventful period in the history of the Fresnoise people, with the town becoming a major stake in the power struggle between the kingdoms of France and England. In 1420, the English took control of the city for a period of thirty years.

From 1450 onwards, the counts of Alençon, who had become dukes, were the masters of the city and its territory until the reign of King Henry IV. In 1701, Louis XIV, his descendant, wanted to enlarge his estates at Versailles and Marly. The land that the king coveted belonged to René de Froulay de Tessé, the Count of Tessé, with whom he exchanged the town. This situation lasted until the Revolution.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the town expand. The cloth industry, which had been in existence since the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and for which the town was famous, regained momentum and ensured its wealth as it gradually entered the industrial era. A growing population led to a profound change in the urban fabric: the gates and part of the mediæval wall were destroyed, the church was enlarged, a covered marketplace was built, and thoroughfares were opened. However, after the Great War, the weaving industry declined. At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the town is now dedicated to preserving and promoting its remarkable heritage.



# Fresnay-sur-Sarthe



**20** Coteau des Vignes (1 km walking trail)

## A MÆDIÆVAL TOWN: A FORTIFIED CITY AND CENTRE OF POWER

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- Parking
- Toilets
- Viewing point
- Visible town wall
- Demolished town wall
- Coteau des Vignes pathway





1a. Châtelet / 1b. Vestiges of the salt storehouse / 1c. Park of the castle, photographer Jules Gencey, 1906

## A mediæval town: a fortified city and centre of power

**The appearance of the town bears witness to the importance of its status as a frontier town. Situated in a strategic position, it is equipped with a fortress and imposing defensive means to ensure the protection of the intramural population.**

### 1 The castle

The castle, the origin of the town, was probably built in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by the viscounts of Beaumont, whose overlords were the counts of Maine. In the Middle Ages, they maintained garrisons there under the command of their vassals. During these periods, the castle was enlarged and redesigned several times. After the English occupation (1420-1450), its military function declined. The castle remained under the custody of local lords, to whom the king entrusted it (the engagiste lords), until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the castle was no longer maintained and the buildings fell into ruin, with the exception of the châtelet (1a) and the salt storehouse (1b) given by Louis XIV to the town to serve as prisons and a court. In 1900, the town bought the entire site to create the current public garden designed by the landscape architect Dupuy, a pupil of Alphand (1c).



2a



2b

2a. Plaque dedicated to Ambroise de Loré, sculpted by Alexandre Cottereau (1901) / 2b. Aerial view of the castle and the site of the old bailey

The successive destruction that brought the castle to a state of ruin made it easy to restore to its original appearance. The remnants of chimneys and at least three floors can be seen. The castle was built with local materials: limestone, schist, and roussard stone for the quoins, door, and window frames.

The castle is in the centre of a courtyard enclosed by a wall (curtain walls) with towers against which service buildings were leant and a chapel, most of which have now disappeared.

## 2 The town wall

The entrance to the town is via a châtelet with two towers and a drawbridge, whose current appearance dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Today, a plaque commemorates the valiant captain Ambroise de Loré, who tried to resist the English from 1418 to 1420 (2a).

Beyond the dry ditches, you enter the castle's bailey, a semi-circular space where, to the east, the outbuildings and St. Leonard's Priory are located. The bailey itself is fortified and surrounded by a wall with a gateway to the town (on the site of the present-day marketplace).

The town developed in the Middle Ages on the same rocky hill as the castle, and was enclosed by walls with three gates (2b). The gates provided access to the main roads to Alençon, Le Mans, and Angers via Sillé-le-Guillaume. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the gates were destroyed.



3



4a



4b

3. Old St. Leonard Priory / 4a. Traditional representation of Jesse, father of King David / 4b. West façade of the church, drawing by Albert-Émile Prisse d'Avennes in 1845

### 3 St. Leonard's Priory

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the viscounts of Beaumont founded a priory in the castle's bailey with a chapel dedicated to Notre-Dame and Saint-Leonard. The whole complex was ceded to the abbey of Saint-Aubin-d'Angers. The priory was sold during the Revolution, the prior's house was destroyed to make way for the current houses, and the chapel was transformed into a barn and partially rebuilt in the 1920s.

### 4 The Notre-Dame church

Built in the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the church, in Romanesque style, originally consisted of a single nave ending in an apse. Its vaulting, completed at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, has ribbed crosses in the Angevin style. The church was built with local limestone and sandstone

The semi-circular west portal, decorated with diamond points and various decorative motifs, is closed by two carved oak leaves dating from 1528, the work of the local Dienis family of artists. On the left is the tree of Jesse, representing the genealogy of the ancestors of Jesus (4a), and on the right the twelve apostles below Christ resurrected on a cross.

Following a fire that destroyed part of the bell tower (4b), the church was restored and extended in 1865. A transept with two apses gave it its present Latin cross shape.



4c. Interior of the church; romanesque-byzantine paintings by L. Renouard in 1870 / 5. Interior of the Lion's cellar / 6a. Timber-framed house

In the following years, it was entirely decorated with murals by Louis Renouard and stained glass windows by the Hucher workshop (4c). The furniture in the choir was made by the famous Sarthe company, Reboursier. The north side door to the old cemetery was not cleared until 1925.

### 5 Cave du Lion ("Lion Cellar")

Dated by its style to the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this vast rib-vaulted room was originally the cellar of a seigneurial house, of which it is the only vestige. The upper part, rebuilt after the Hundred Years' War, now houses the Headdress Museum run by the linen sellers of the association "La bise-moi vite" ("Kiss me quick") who restored the old headdress collections. The name of the cellar is probably linked to the Hotel du Lion d'Or, a famous establishment located nearby.

### 6 Mediæval houses

Many Mediæval houses are located on both sides of the Grande Rue, which was the main artery of the town in the Middle Ages. At no. 21 there is an example of a timber-framed house (6a), at no. 35 is the entrance to ruelle du Cygne with its mediæval bridge (6b) and at no. 10 is the doorway to the house of the Lieutenant General of the Police (6c), which was built in 1702 by Urbain Lefebvre and opens onto Rue Jacques-Hochin. Along the Grande Rue and adjacent streets, the heart of the old town, most of



6b. Ruelle du Cygne / 6c. Triangular fronton at no. 10 of the Grande Rue / 7. Façade of the Chervy Hotel

the houses were rebuilt or modified during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, many details allow us to date certain houses back to the mediæval period such as the steep roofs, and the shapes of the doors and windows.

### 7 The Chervy Hotel

The house known as "La Grande Cour" became the residence of the de Chervy family in 1572. Jehan de Chervy was the bailiff, a royal officer in charge of judicial, administrative and fiscal functions in a territory of 28 parishes (the baillage). After the departure of his last descendants during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the hotel fell into disrepair and was divided into small dwellings during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the hotel has a 16<sup>th</sup> century pavilion complemented by an older, but much altered, main building on the street.

Originally, these buildings formed the right wing of a large U-shaped complex with a mediæval urban manor house at the back of the courtyard and a wing on the left. This dilapidated building disappeared in the 1980s to make way for a small garden. The buildings were connected by a spiral staircase, traces of which can be seen at the corner of the pavilion of the Chervy Hotel.



8a



8b



9a

8a. Creusot Bridge / 8b. Creusot mill and bridge at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century / 9a. Bourgneuf district

## A flourishing town: crafts and trade

With the military power represented by the castle, the town became an administrative and commercial centre. It is thanks to its crafts and trade that the town developed and grew wealthier from the Middle Ages onwards. Markets and fairs allowed for the distribution of local products and imported goods. The monuments bear witness to this.

### 8 The Sillé bridge and the Creusot mill

The ford which gives access to the town under the direct supervision of the castle was equipped with a wooden bridge from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The road leading to Anjou was very busy, which is why the bridge was rebuilt in stone in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (8a). A mill installed on an islet in the Middle Ages had two wheels and ground cereals. It was destroyed in 1876 after a fire. The present mill was immediately rebuilt with a single wheel and operated until the 1970s (8b).

### 9 The Bourgneuf district

The Bourgneuf district is an old district crossed by two roads which led to the Gateil manor and Assé-le-Boisne. However, most of the houses date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The houses are closely connected to the rock and face the river (9a).



9b. The Couture meadow, on the right, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century / 10. Espailard mill / 11. Weavers' houses

On the other side, the huge meadow of La Couture, which belonged to the Mancelle abbey of the same name, extends (9b). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a laundry house was set up here, of which a ruined building remains.

### 10 The Espailard mill

In the Bourgneuf district, which has been dedicated to crafts (cloth weaving, tanneries, and laundry houses) from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, a fulling and tanning mill was set up. Crushed oak bark was used in the nearby tanneries. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became a wheat mill and, in the following century, a carpenter's workshop, before ceasing its activity in the 1960s.

### 11 The weavers' houses

Scattered throughout the town, weavers' houses still bear witness to Fresnay's cloth-making past. They can be recognised by their stone staircases and cellars, which are sometimes semi-buried but always lead onto the street. The cellars sometimes housed several looms. The clay floor and low light levels allow the high humidity necessary for the work of the yarn to be maintained. Linen, hemp, and metis (a mixture of hemp and linen) cloths were produced here. Fresnay's specialty is the weaving of 5.40 metre wide canvases for the navy and for large paintings (Delacroix).



12



13



14

12. The old tannery / 13. Detail, 18<sup>th</sup> century painted canvas in the former salon of Urbain Gallais / 14. Hatton Hotel

### 12 The tanneries

Two or three tanneries were in continuous operation from the end of the Middle Ages until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They supplied an important local trade in leather (shoes, carriages, etc.). Downstream from the bridge, the last tannery in the town was operated by the Bouton family until the Great War. Today it is used as a place to take electric boats.

### 13 The Urbain Gallais House - Presbytery

Built in 1771 in the former bailey of the castle, the house, overlooking the Sarthe, became the symbol of the social ascension of Urbain Gallais, master tanner. His tannery is located below, at the foot of the rock. Painted canvases from the 18<sup>th</sup> century still adorn its interior.

### 14 The Hatton Hotel

This mansion was built in 1764 by François Hatton. The son of a Fresnay lawyer, he left at the age of 26 to make his fortune in Santo Domingo in the cotton trade. On his return to France, he acquired two positions at the court of Louis XVI. His fortune enabled him to build a richly furnished hotel in Fresnay and to take up the post of mayor in 1784. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the house became the property of the wine merchant, Arsène Chardon. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the town bought the property and turned the garden into a public park.



15a. Portico of the marketplace / 15b. Detail, the word "sewing" painted on one of the pillars of the marketplace / 16. The new hospice around 1910 in the Saint-Sauveur district

## A city in expansion: the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

**In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city, until then enclosed by ramparts and narrow streets inherited from the Middle Ages, experienced a strong urban expansion. The infrastructure developed and adapted to the new economic and social conditions.**

### 15 The covered marketplace

The original building, built on posts, had a double function: to facilitate trade and to house the court in a high room called the "auditorium". In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the town hall envisaged the construction of a new covered marketplace, and in 1848 the present building was built on the site of the old one (15a). The new marketplace was used as a grain market on the ground floor and as a cloth shop on the first floor around the year 1900. Traces of the former activity are still visible on some of the pillars with the words "Blé" and "Mouture", which mean "Wheat" and "Milling" respectively (15b).

### 16 The hospice

The hospital establishments, which were numerous in the town in the Middle Ages, were brought together from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards in the Hôtel-Dieu, located in what is now Rue Jacques-Hochin.



17a



17b



18

17a. Primary school / 17b. Class photo 1945-1946; two of the children are wearing clogs / 18. Calvary Square before 1920

The hotel consisted of two small houses that could accommodate up to eight patients.

In 1849, these buildings were in danger of ruin and were "badly distributed, inconvenient and unhealthy". Dr Hatton's bequest in 1883 enabled the construction of a new, larger hospice in the Saint-Sauveur district, including a chapel and large ward for patients.

### 17 The primary school

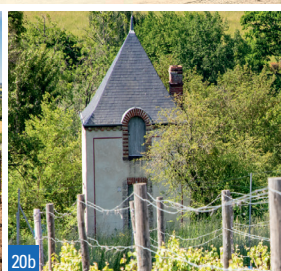
Although education for boys has existed in Fresnay since the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the education of poor girls is linked to the creation of the hospice where, from 1702, a Sister of Charity provided it to them.

In 1884, two schools for boys, one public and one private, and a special school for girls, still under the auspices of the hospice, coexisted in rue Saint-Sauveur (17a). After 1921, the public schools, Notre-Dame and Saint-Joseph, moved to numbers 25 and 29 of avenue Victor-Hugo (17b).

### 18 The large suburbs

At the end of the gateway to Le Mans, a large space called "Place du Calvaire" (known today as Place de la République) is the starting point for the major roads from Fresnay to Alençon, Le Mans and Sillé-le-Guillaume.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, three large avenues were created and lined with residential houses with gardens: avenue Charles-de-Gaulle, rue Paul-Doumer, and avenue Victor-Hugo.



19a. Former railway station transformed to a circus school / 19b. Vehicles parked in front of the station garage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century / 20a. Coteau des Vignes ("Vineyard Hill" ) / 20b. Vineyard

### 19 The former railway station

The arrival of the train in 1881 led to the creation of a peripheral district dedicated to industry, including a station (19a), gas plant, sawmill, cannery, textile factory, hotels, cafés and garages, as well as a tramway station from 1914 (19b).

The site of the station is now a place of living culture that hosts the circus school, Mimulus.

### 20 Coteau des Vignes ("Vineyard Hill" )

Vineyards and wine production in Fresnay date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, although probably much further. The main vineyards cover the Bourgneuf hills, but vines are also planted in Beaulieu and Beauverger. They were destroyed by phylloxera at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (20a).

In 2013, vines were replanted in this Sensitive Natural Area, and two vineyard houses were restored (20b).

### 21 Famous Fresnois people

Georges Durand (1864-1941), who was born in Fresnay into a family of fabric manufacturers, is famous for being one of the founders of the Automobile Club de l'Ouest, and in 1923, the 24 hours of Le Mans. A pioneer in the field of tourism, he founded the Alpes Mancelles Tourist Office in 1904.



21a



21b



21c

21a. Georges Durand in 1926 / 21b. Camille Bardou, great film star of silent cinema / 21c. View of the Sillé bridge and the Creusot mill, a painting by Philippe Gautier bought by the town in 1959

Under his impetus, the prosperity and fame of Fresnay and the Alpes Mancelles, which is considered to be "the closest mountains to Paris", increased thanks to the use of new means of transport and communication (advertising) (21a).

Born in Fresnay in 1872, Camille Bardou (1872-1941) became a well-known silent film actor. He appeared in more than 150 films. His last film appearance was in 1934. He was then dethroned by talking pictures. The media library bears his name (21b).

Philippe Gautier (1928-2004), born in Fresnay in 1928, entered the Paris School of Fine Arts in 1948 in Jean Dupas' studio, then in 1952 in Raymond Legueult's. In 1951, he exhibited his first works. Initially inspired by Corot, he evolved towards a cubist style and finally created his own very structured and colourful style (21c).

Writers and artists have described or painted the town of Fresnay during their stays, including Maxime Du Camp, André Quellier, and Maurice Brianchon.

# Visitor Information

- **Town Hall**

2 place Bassum - 72130 Fresnay-sur-Sarthe  
Tel. 02 43 97 23 75 - [mairie.fresnay@wanadoo.fr](mailto:mairie.fresnay@wanadoo.fr)  
[www.fresnaysursarthe.fr](http://www.fresnaysursarthe.fr)

- **Alpes Mancelles Tourist Office**

19 avenue du Docteur Riant  
72130 Fresnay-sur-Sarthe - Tel. 02 43 33 28 04  
[contact@tourisme-alpesmancelles.fr](mailto:contact@tourisme-alpesmancelles.fr)  
[www.tourisme-alpesmancelles.fr](http://www.tourisme-alpesmancelles.fr)

## To see, to do

- **Headdress Museum**

(Open from April to the end of September)  
Ruelle du Lion - Tél. 02 43 33 28 04  
[contact@museedelacoiffe-fresnay.fr](mailto:contact@museedelacoiffe-fresnay.fr)

- **Guided tours for individuals (July - August)**

- **Guided tours for groups all year round (by reservation only)**

Reservation at the Tourist Office

- **Night tours (July - August)**

- **Electric boat trip**

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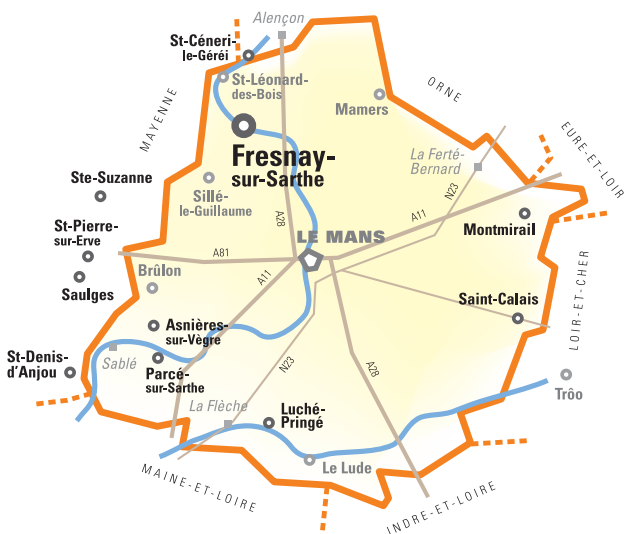
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Petites Cités de Caractère®  
des Pays de la Loire



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