

So, what are The Marches of Brittany? Where were they situated and why did they play such an important part in Brittany's fight for independence?

The Marches, known also as the Borders were situated in Department 35, the Ile-et-Vilaine. Imagine a line starting at the Baie du Mont St Michel, taking in Dol de Bretagne, down to Rennes, over to Vannes then onto Nantes. Not forgetting the fortified towns of Vitre and Fougères, which played an important part in this buffer zone.

With settlers coming from Cornwall and Wales in the 6th Century, Armorica became known as Little Britain or Brittany, Bretagne and enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence for 200 or so years.

Over in the east in Ille et Vilaine, thanks to the Marches, an independent kingdom from the rest of France, was established, founded by King Nominoë and succeeded by his son, Erispoe. Having the nearest border to France, the Ille-et-Vilaine was and still is more French than Breton, with its own language, Gallo, not Breton, then being widely spoken.

On a number of occasions the Normans attempted invasions but, although outnumbered, the Bretons kept them at bay and from the mid 10th- 14th Century, Brittany evolved into a feudal state with a vassal duchy. Kings and Dukes seemed to come and go with alarming and usually violent rapidity!

In spite of these battles in the east, the country dwellers over to the west led relatively peaceful lives, producing high quality dairy produce and an abundance of vegetables and fish- but that's another story!

Between 1342 and 1364 Brittany was ravaged by the warring of two families and this conflict became part of the 100 years war between France and England, although Brittany remained relatively neutral. John IV of Montfort and his English allies continued to support an almost independent Brittany, thus foiling the ambitions of the then King of France to subjugate the country.

The Breton state reached its peak of power in the 15th Century, with the Duke of Brittany enjoying the status of ruler after being crowned in Rennes and taking up residence in Nantes. This was the flowering of the Breton Gothic style, patronising artists and encouraging an interpretation of history that exalted Breton culture.

However, all good things come to an end and it was the Battle of St Aubin du Cormier, near Fougères, that sounded the death knell for Brittany's independence in 1532. The Treaty of Union of 1532 ensured the Bretons that their rights, freedom and privileges would be respected and Rennes became the regional Capital.

An important person and central figure in the history of Brittany was that of Anne of Brittany. Married first to Charles 8th, then to Louis XII, (12th) both Kings of France, she stood both for the duchy's independence and its integration with France. A patron of the arts, she aided the development of Breton culture, and even today, some Bretons revere her almost as a saint. Dying in 1514 at only 37 years old she achieved a great deal in her short life and that's where our story ends!