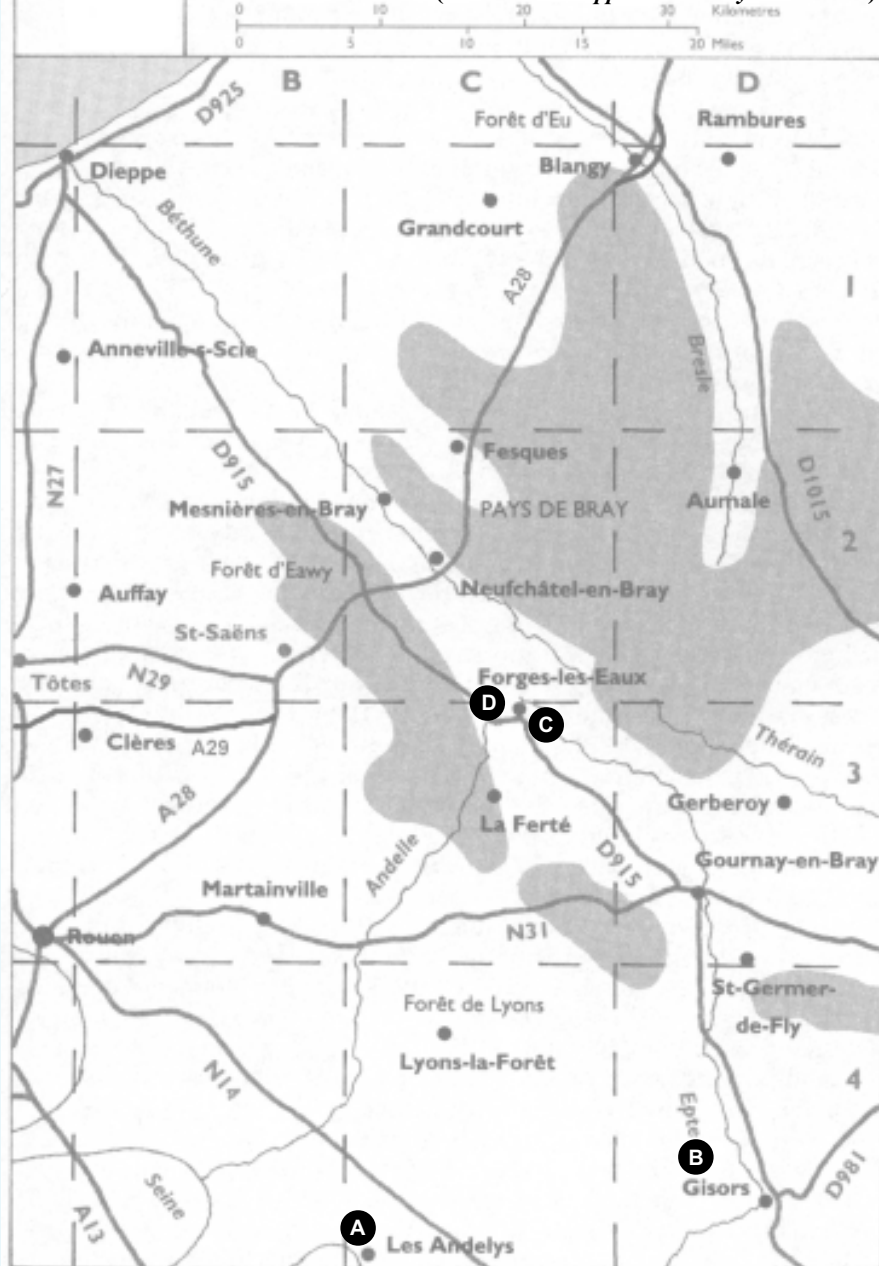


3

Pays de Bray: beech glades, cream cheese and apple tippie. The Lionheart, castles, a tiny, precious jewel, Normandy and half-timbered *maisons*. (Refer also to *Upper Normandy* on website.)



Most of the northern half of the countryside covered by the map on the left is known as the **Pays de Bray**. In sharp contrast to the open plateau of Caux (map 2), Bray is a land of broad river valleys, undulating hills, beech forests and emerald pastures. Increasingly hedges have been ripped out and some of the upland stretches now resemble prairies. To the south is the **Seine Valley** and the vast beech **Forêt de Lyons**. Streams and rivers abound, flowing both north and south. No wonder the area was nicknamed “The Paris Larder” in the last century.

Where do you start your exploration of this unassuming farming landscape? I suggest at one of the more off-the-beaten-track spots, a quiet corner where you will be reminded, in an unassuming, contemplative way, of the tragic loss of life in the Normandy countryside 50 years ago. Head for the Commonwealth War Cemetery to the north-east of **Grandcourt** (C1), one of the most unusual in Normandy. At Grandcourt there are only 58 graves, ten more than the smallest of the Commission’s Normandy cemeteries, at Jerusalem (see map 6). Study the register and the exceptionally interesting table and map which, together, explain how the 58 souls came to be buried at Grandcourt. You will not regret the minimal effort needed to seek out the inspiring spot.

Between the cemetery and the **Bresle Valley**, to the north-east, is the refreshing **Forêt d’Eu**. I have seen all the Bray forests in the spring when the beech glades are carpeted with bluebells. In autumn the same glades become crunchy copper carpets when the trees above shed their dying leafy cloaks. Explore the Forêt d’Eu and the varied flora and fauna. Seek out the viewpoint at the Poteau de Ste-Catherine, east of Grandcourt cemetery; walk the last few hundred yards.

The Vallée de Bresle is famous for glassware. The *verreries* range from huge factories at Hodeng-au-Bosc and Senarpont (D1), both south-east of **Blangy**, to smaller ones at Vieux-Rouen-s-Bresle (D1) and Blangy. The latter are renowned for their colourful perfume bottles, vases and lampshades. For factory visits call at the tourist offices in Blangy (tel 02 35 93 52 48) or **Aumale** (D2: 02 35 93 41 68).

One man-made structure is a rewarding detour: the château at **Rambures** (D1). There is no prissiness about this virile château: surrounded by trees is a small castle with broad, thick-walled towers built of red brick and topped with cone-shaped roofs. Built in the 15th century, the castle played an important part in the Hundred Years War (March to October, a.m. and p.m.; closed Wednesdays).

Now west to the heart of Bray, to **Neufchâtel-en-Bray** (C2). Bray is cheese country: *Bondon, Bondard, Carré, Petit Suisse*; there are many names and shapes but the version which is associated with the area more than any other is *Coeur de Bray*, a fruity-tasting, heart-shaped cream cheese. There’s a Route du Fromage de Neufchâtel; get a map from the Office de Tourisme, 6 place Notre-Dame, 76270 Neufchâtel-en-Bray (you can also taste the cheese here during the summer). You

can buy the cheese at the Ferme des Fontaines, on the D135 south-east of Neufchâtel and 200 yards before the left turn to Nesle-Hodeng (C2).

The hills on both sides of Neufchâtel are reputed for their wild flowers. The same tourist office (02 35 93 22 96) has laid out several walks and produced a map to identify where the routes go. In the nearby Eaulne Valley there's a small nature reserve, alongside the stream, at **Fesques** (C1/C2). Varying flora and fauna can be seen; details from the same tourist office or the *mairie* at Fesques (02 35 94 36 04). Of the man-made sites in the **Béthune** Valley the best known is the large Château de Mesnières (C2). A mixture of fortress and château, the Renaissance structure is a glorious building. Take my tip and approach **Mesnières-en-Bray** (C2) from Fresles (B2), much the best way to admire the imposing 15th-century château (open p.m. only at weekends from Easter to All Saints' Day). Bures-en-Bray (B2) is another attractive spot; again, much the best way of enjoying the view of the manor house and church is on the descent from the south-west.

The **Forêt d'Eawy** (B2) should be crossed and re-crossed; there's many a forest glade to catch the eye. So too will 'apple' country to the west; cider is the tippie hereabouts. The Varenne Valley is a sparkling scenic tonic. Be sure to include these two roads on your route: the climb from St-Germain-d'Étables to Le Bois-Robert (B1); and the climb on the D476 from Muchedent to Le Catelier (B2). If you want to buy cider then seek out the Cidrerie du Duché de Longueville at **Anneville-sur-Scie** (A1) or the Cidreries Mignard at **Auffay** (A2). The Scie Valley is lined with villages and churches and, at Heugleville-sur-Scie (A2), just north of Auffay, spare time for the commune's enterprising arboretum walk (June to mid October: details from the *mairie*).

On your way north to **Dieppe** detour to the Château de Miromesnil (A1). The handsome château has two utterly different façades: red brick and twin towers, capped with cone-shaped roofs, at the rear (not pepperpots M. Michelin); ornate richness at the front. As appealing as the man-made building is, I was as interested in the park and walled kitchen garden, an extrovert mix of flowers and vegetables.

Dieppe (A1/B1) is my favourite Channel port. Crammed with character there's much to waylay you: the bustling port, the wide promenade, the cathedral-sized Eglise St-Jacques, the narrow lanes surrounding the church and the castle-museum above the town. Sadly, the events of 19 August 1942 weigh heavily on the memory: the Operation Jubilee raids by the Canadians at Puys, to the east, and Pourville-sur-Mer, to the west, caused tragic loss of life. Do visit the Museum of 19 August 1942, on the D75 towards Pourville, which details the story of that horrendous day. One point of interest: the site of the present-day open-air swimming pool and tennis courts was once the home of Dieppe's casino, demolished by the Germans after the 1942 raid.

Leave the coast and head inland to **Forges-les-Eaux** (C2/C3). This small spa is as unassuming as the rest of Bray: a combination of woods, lake, park and varied

leisure activities give the resort a healthy vitality. The casino will attract some; for others the Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation will be much more interesting (p.m. March to September). Very much to my liking is the tiny hilltop hamlet of **La Ferté** (C3), south of the spa: the church and its yew trees, the *mairie*, the mix of old and new houses around a small green and the majestic small half-timbered Maison Henri IV combine to reveal the hidden face of Normandy, one rarely seen by the majority of tourists. The nearby *ancienne abbatale* at Sigy-en-Bray (C3) is another treat bypassed by travellers relying solely on small-scale maps.

Before heading south to **Lyons-la-Forêt** (C4) seek out three man-made attractions to the east. First **Gerberoy** (D3), a tiny, precious jewel of a village on an elevated site. Second, **St-Germer-de-Fly** (D3), south of **Gournay-en-Bray**, where a gigantic 12th-century *église* dwarfs the village below its high walls and tower. Third, to **Gisors** (D4) and an imposing castle; ruins now but the commanding position confirms just why the original structure was built by William the Conqueror's son at the end of the 11th century.

The **Forêt de Lyons** is best approached from Beauvoir-en-Lyons (C3); be certain to walk to the viewpoint marked on the map. Lyons-la-Forêt is a startling contrast to tiny La Ferté, mentioned earlier. The largish village, elegantly groomed and sophisticated, has many superb half-timbered houses. We've spent time in the past criss-crossing the forest's numerous roads. One mysterious spot is on the steep lane which climbs north-west from the Abbaye de Mortemer, south of Lyons: 300 yards from the abbey there's a monument to 11 Frenchmen killed on the 23/24/25 August 1944. (See *Upper Normandy* on my website.)

There's a ring of numerous sites to the east, south and west of Lyons-la-Forêt. The Château de Fleury, to the north-east, has a rose garden, handsome panelling, a display of dolls and an old kitchen. The ruins of the Abbaye de Mortemer lie in a delightful wooded valley site; a museum explains the Cistercian monastic life. The Château de Vascoeuil (C3), in the **Andelle** Valley, is more a stone castle housing an art exhibition; the gardens, river, stepped cascade and cottages win hands down (the Musée Michelet houses the historian's memorabilia). The nearby Château de **Martainville**, due west, is an intriguing Musée des Traditions et Arts Normands. At **Les Andelys** (C4), the ruins of the once commanding fortress, built by Richard the Lionheart, dominate both the town and River Seine. Finally, the Château de **Clères** (A3/B3), north of Rouen, is the site of a fine zoo in a natural setting and the home of a super motor museum (open every day).

Finally, **Rouen** (A3/A4). Our last visit was a traffic nightmare. Try to visit on a Sunday – the best time to absorb the many treasures: the fabulous Notre-Dame Cathedral, several churches, the old quarter with flamboyant half-timbered houses, museums galore, Les Jardins des Plants and the exquisite rue du Gros-Horloge. Write to the Office de Tourisme for information: 25 place de la Cathédrale, 76008 Rouen Cedex (02 35 71 41 77).