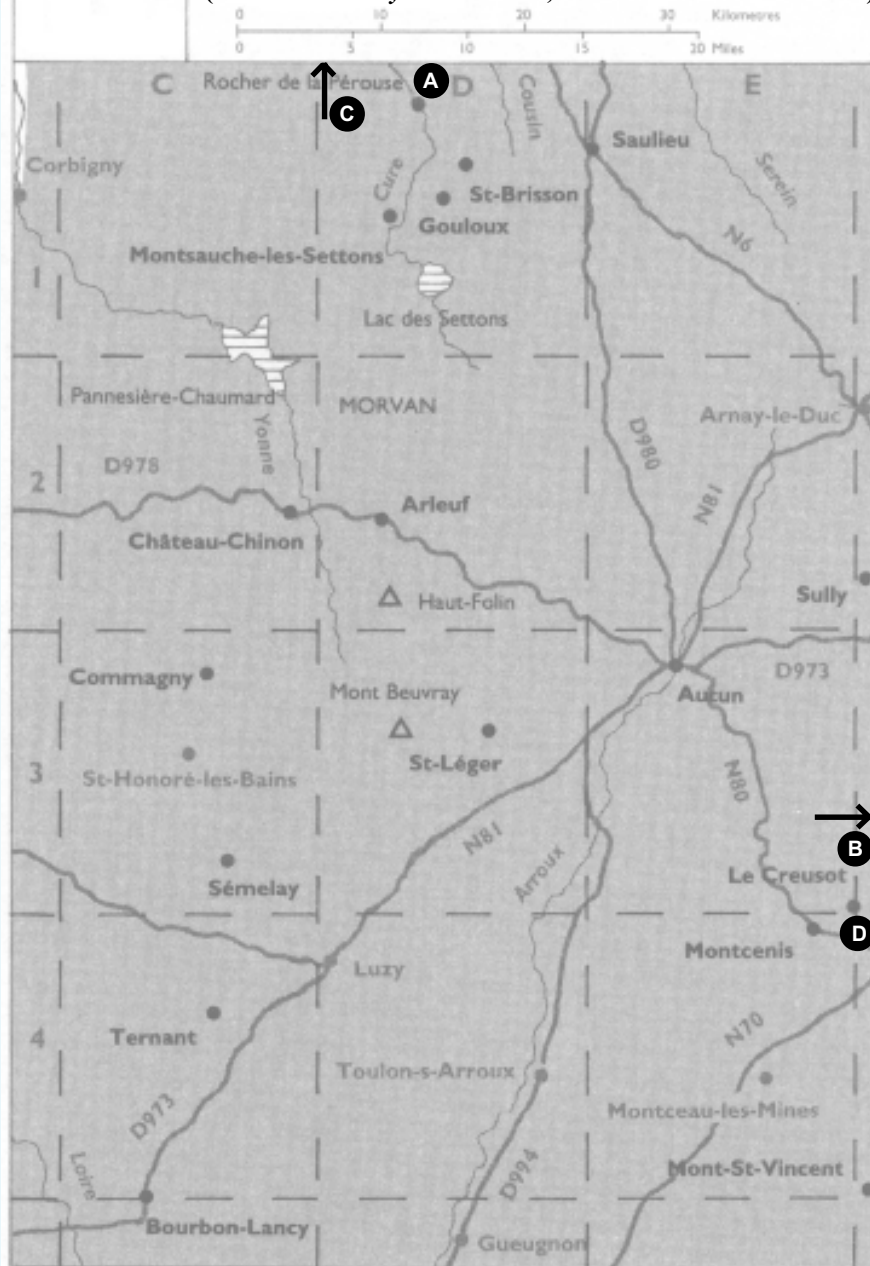


16

Morvan, Roman Autun, TGV, Salop-style and souls still alive.
Châteaux-Chinon; *table d'orientation* and Mitterrand.
(Refer also to *Sundry French Matters*, *SAS* and *Les Lavaults* on website.)



The opening paragraph for map sheet chapter 13 is even more valid for 16: few tourists venture to these Burgundian corners. I'll deal first with one of my favourite 'mountainous' areas in France – the Parc Naturel Régional du **Morvan** (C1/C3:D1/D3). Tomorrow, next week, in a month from now, I am always willing to return to the soothing calm of the park. At their highest point the granite "hills", a more apt label, rise to 2956 ft. The park, 40 miles long by 30 miles wide, is extensively wooded, in the main with broadleaved trees, and is notable for its many rivers, lakes and sylvan valleys.

I've seen the Morvan in every season. On one of my autumn trips I entered the park in the south, at **St-Léger** (D3), and climbed out of the village, along the D3, past several placards advertising *marrons à vendre* (chestnuts for sale). I drove the anti-clockwise D274 circuit to the top of **Mont Beuvray** (D3), 821 m. Once the Gallic oppidum of Bibracte, the fortified camp commands extensive views south and covers a large area of the summit. At several points on the heavily wooded mountain, archaeological digs continue. (A new museum, housing treasures of the European Celtic heritage, is open at the Col du Rebut, the start of the anti-clockwise run. See website's *Sundry French Matters*.)

Now head north to the **D978** (C2/D2). One option could take you past Glux-en-Glenne (D3), where the European Archaeological Centre moved into new buildings during 1994; through the spruce and fir trees of the Forêt de St-Prix – detour to the base of the communication tower atop **Haut-Folin** (F2), the Morvan's highest summit (901 m); and then on the D197, alongside the infant **Yonne**, and the D177 to **Arleuf** (D2). Alternatively, you could have driven through the Forêt de la Gravelle (C2/D3), further east. The panoramas, in autumn, are glorious: from afar the tops of beech, oak, sweet chestnut and silver birch resemble giant cobblestones of differing hues.

At Arleuf (D2) use the remote D500 north, along the Touron Valley: high hills, dense woods with handsome beech trees, and utter isolation will be your rewards. Aim for **Château-Chinon** (C2). Before visiting the two excellent museums, follow the signs for the *table d'orientation* high above the town (you'll have to walk the final steep 200 m). At the 609 m summit there's a hand-painted observation table, made in 1914; Morvan's wooded *monts* lie to the east and south; and, below you, the town's slate roofs are as dark as the backdrop of surrounding forests. Now follow the Promenade du Château sign, on a road which loops to the north: more views and, on the northern edge, a beech tunnel.

On the way to the *table* you'll pass two museums: the Musée du Septennat and the Musée du Costume. The former is 'entertaining' – housing all the many objects which Président Mitterrand received as gifts, from countries all over the globe, following his 1981 election. Some of the gifts are fabulous works of art, of all sorts and sizes (every day May to Sept; weekends rest of year but closed Jan/Feb). The second museum houses a fascinating 17th to 20th-century collection of French clothing and accessories (every day May to Oct; otherwise weekends).

Both the **Lac des Settons** (D1) and the lake at **Pannesière-Chaumard** (C2) are attractive and the roads around them are rewarding drives. Settons offers all sorts of watersport facilities. Pannesière-Chaumard is often emptied for cleaning and is usually only full during the first half of the year. Between the two man-made reservoirs is the tiny hamlet of Planchez (D2), alongside the D37. Here sniff out the most unpretentious café in France, Chez Millette, where simple, local fare is cooked and served by the owner: *jambon du Morvan*, *rosette* (pork sausage), *boudin blanc* and *crapinaude* (bacon pancake).

During the last war the Morvan was renowned for its many formidable Resistance groups operating from the protective wooded hills. One was the Maquis Bernard – the latter a pseudonym for the leader, Louis Aubin, who, before the outbreak of hostilities, had been a *gendarme*. The group operated around **Montsauche-les-Settons** (D1).

Drive south-west from Montsauche on the D977 and, at Le Boulard, follow the signs for Maquis Bernard Cimetière Franco-Anglais. In 1982, when I first ‘discovered’ this most unusual cemetery, the track was rough and there wasn’t a clue to its history. Today the lane is smooth and surviving members of the *maquis* have erected large boards along the route and at the cemetery explaining some of the events in the Morvan during 1943-44. What the signs do not tell you, and something I’ve only recently established, is that the bodies of the 21 *maquis* and seven RAF airmen, initially buried in the sacred ground, were moved in February 1947 to other cemeteries in France.

Nevertheless, there remains an overpowering air of pride in this secret wooded corner. During the last 20 years hundreds of readers, urged on by me, have visited the poignant spot. I know many of you have sensed a human ‘presence’ at this most overwhelming of memorials: one visitor remarked that “souls were still alive there”. (Be sure to read *SAS* on my website.)

In the days after the D-Day landings there was a huge increase in Resistance activity in the Morvan. The *maquis* groups were joined by many SAS teams, parachuted into the area between 6 and 22 June 1944. German soldiers were ambushed and killed. Revenge was horrific and savage. On 25 June Montsauche was put to the torch; 131 houses were burnt to the ground. The next day Germans murdered 17 inhabitants of Dun-les-Places (D1), north of Montsauche, including the mayor and *curé*; houses were burnt, women raped. Planchez, too, was destroyed. The story of the Morvan resistance is told at the *musée* in the Maison du Parc at **St-Brisson** (D1), north-east of Montsauche; open from June to Sept, the spot is well worth visiting for its park, lake and setting.

I had the most rewarding contact with a Beckenham reader, Betty Potter, who told me that one of the RAF crew of seven, Sgt Richold, had been a friend of hers. Returning from a raid on Dijon, on the night of 10/11 August 1944, his Halifax had been attacked over **Saulieu** (E1) and crashed two km north of **Gouloux** (D1). She also told me that a member of one of the SAS teams, a Church of Scotland

padre, J. Fraser McLuskey, had “paid the last honours” to the airmen at their initial burial. In turn I was able to put her in touch with Alex Muirhead, the leader of one of the SAS teams, who gave her the scorched remains of a silk ‘survival’ scarf found at the crash site. She cherishes the precious gift enormously because, after all, there’s a one-in-seven chance that the scarf belonged to her friend. (See *RSC* on my website’s ‘Home’ page. *RSC* also flew a Halifax on the Dijon raid. Betty’s husband, Ron, helped me more than any other to research *RSC*’s story.)

Gouloux has two attractions: to the west, the River **Cure** drops 10 metres over the Saut de Gouloux – a worthwhile walk from the D977; and the clog-maker’s shop belongs to the mayor, who once gave me some useful information about the Maquis Bernard cemetery. Be sure, too, to make the rewarding drive and not-too-steep and not-too-long climb on foot to the hand-painted tiles on the observation table at the **Rocher de la Prouse** (D1); the panorama is quintessential Morvan.

What’s south of the Morvan? Start at **Mont-St-Vincent** (F4). Climb the 20-ft-high observation tower with its five separate ceramic tile panels: the views are great. Visit the 12th-century granite *église*, once a Bénédictine priory, which lost its tower over the transept in 1794. Nearby, at Gourdon, is another granite Romanesque church. Admire the perched site from the D164 to the north; and seek out the striking stone sculptures 50 metres beyond the *église*.

You can track the TGV railway line across the length of map sheet 16. Why not take a ride on a bullet train? Board the TGV at **Le Creusot** station (E3) – to the south-east, at Les 7 Ecluses (F4). Leave at 9.20, arrive Lyon at 10.02; leave Lyon 11.00, arrive back 11.45. Or leave 14.27, arrive Lyon 15.08; leave Lyon 16.07, back at 16.45. Check times!

Montcenis (E4) is an idiosyncratic hill-top town with handsome paved streets. The D47 run to the west is a south Shropshire-like drive with gentle hills, woods of oak, beech and chestnut, hedges, views, conkers, farms, châteaux, cattle, sheep and few cars. Detour to Uchon (E3) and another great viewpoint, the Signal d’Uchon. Further west seek out two Romanesque treasures: at **Sémelay** (C3), in peaceful, pastoral terrain, the 12th-century *église* has a long nave and barrel-vaulted apse with carved decorations; **Commagny** (C3), further north, has a 12th-century priory church above the tiny hamlet – admire the handsome apse and some fine capitals. Detour to the 15th-century Flemish triptychs in the small church at **Ternant** (C4), north of **Bourbon-Lancy**, a super small spa.

Now to a treasure-chest town. **Autun** (E3) was once called the “sister of Rome” by Julius Caesar. Relish the 800-year-old St-Lazare Cathedral, a glorious Romanesque work of art (the tall spire is 15th century); the theatre, Temple of Janus, gateways and town walls from its Roman past; the many medieval and Renaissance sights; and the richly-endowed Rolin Museum (closed Tues and pub hols). Finish at the 16th-century chateau at **Sully** (F2), to the north-east, once described as the “Fontainebleau of Burgundy” (open every day Palm Sunday to Oct).