



# Sillé-le-Guillaume

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# Sillé-le-Guillaume, where the hills and the steps of the Maine County meet

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If the roots of the town's name, 'Silliacum', suggest a gallo-roman presence, the parish of Sillé, gathered around its Saint-Étienne church is attested since the beginning of the VIII<sup>th</sup> century. In the first half of the XI<sup>th</sup> century, Guillaume the First Lord of Sillé, had the castle built. The castle, as well as the town, contributed to defending the Normandie border of the Maine County, since they were located at a communication crossroads and held control over the Montois Path. It was the head of a great and powerful barony, under the authority of the Count of Maine, as well as the Baron of Mayenne and the Bishop of Le Mans. In the XII<sup>th</sup> century, the foundation of a chapter composed of twelve canons allowed the barons to display their political power. In the XIV<sup>th</sup> and XV<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sillé-le-Guillaume found itself in the midst of the Hundred Years War. Between 1363 and 1434, the fortress changed ownership six times. The barony was restituted to Anne de Sillé in 1450, and then sold in 1463 to Bertrand de Beauvau. His son Antoine initiated the castle's reconstruction. The barony was then bequeathed to allies until the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, a time during which it belonged to the Princess of Conti and her heirs.



During the Middle Ages, the pilgrims' passage allowed the town to develop. Before the Revolution, Sillé-le-Guillaume was one of the most important markets from the Haut-Maine area, thanks to its salt storehouse and its weaving house. People exchanged products from local businesses (leather goods, fabrics, canvases), from the forest, and from various agricultural and livestock operations. Several fairs were organised each year, the most important one being the fair of Saint-Michel. In the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, the town's commercial reputation was reinforced by the arrival of the train. The construction of the railway station dramatically changed the urban landscape. From 1849 on, meadows around the station began to be urbanised.

The strategic location of Sillé-le-Guillaume was reinforced in the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries: in January 1871, the town was temporarily used as a refuge for the prefecture of the Department of the Sarthe, and as headquarters for General Chanzy. During the First World War, Sillé-le-Guillaume was the first training location of the Polish Army in France.

From the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, Sillé's lush environment and castle began to attract tourists and artists. This environment has been depicted in numerous French illustrated postcards, thanks to their inventor Léon Besnardeau, who was born and raised in Sillé. In 1925, the forest was sold to the Domains by Simone de Crussol d'Uzès, Duchess of Luynes (1870-1946) who was the heir of the Sillé lands. The foundation of a lakeside cafe along the beach in 1923-1924, by Gabriel Richefeu, also known as Coco, has since been attracting visitors looking to recharge in a natural environment.



# Sillé-le-Guillaume

## ALONGSIDE THE RUBAN STREAM

- 1 Saint-Étienne square.
- 2 Puits-Vallas alleyway.
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- 11 Railway station.
- 12 The station's galleries.
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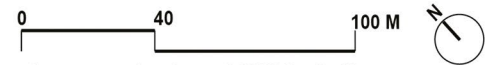
- 14 Arsène Le Feuvre (1863-1936).
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 Haut-Éclair belvédère .



Axonometric view of Sillé-le-Guillaume  
© Damien Cabiron / Anne Holmberg





1. Roman gable on Saint-Etienne Square / 2. Puits-Vallas alleyway and its half-timbered house

## Alongside the Ruban Stream

**Sillé-le-Guillaume was the headquarters of the barony and gave it its name. It was divided in two parishes separated by the Ruban Stream: Saint-Etienne and Notre-Dame. This layout forged the heart of the city.**

### 1 Saint-Etienne Square

From the VIII<sup>th</sup> century, a church and its parish, both dedicated to Saint Etienne, were mentioned. Together, they covered the whole length of the current square. Behind them stood the hospital. We can observe a wall section with twin roman windows and their window seats. The initial intention of this building is unknown. Inns found around the church gave their names to the following streets: the Bold Rooster, the Black-Head. The most important one was the inn of the Great-Turk (today, n°2, 6 and 8). The dismantling of the church in 1792 created a square – soon surrounded by shops – which hosted the market. A wheat hall was built between 1816 and 1836.

### 2 The Puits-Vallas alleyway

The Puits-Vallas alleyway is a good example of medieval urbanism: a narrow paved street, bordered by a medieval house featuring timbered corbels on a stone substructure (half-timbered house). In the heart of the street, the puits Vallas was one of the drinking water points in the town. In 1870, the wells were all transformed into standpipes.



3. Sillé Castle / 5. The gothic portal of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption church

### 3 Sillé Castle

Founded in the XI<sup>th</sup> century by Guillaume the 1st, Lord of Sillé, the fortress was the headquarters of Sillé's barony. The castle was damaged by six attacks during the Hundred Years War. The family de Beauvau bought the barony in 1460 from the last heir of Sillé. Antoine de Beauvau decided to rebuild and repair the castle from 1466 on. The castle overlooks the town with four corner towers and two main buildings dating from the XVI<sup>th</sup> and XVII<sup>th</sup>. The original entrance and its drawbridge were protected by a barbican and an artillerie tower. The tower is adorned by the coat of arms of the builder. In 1781, the biological children of Louis the XIV<sup>th</sup> became owners of the castle: the Count of Vermandois, then his sister the Princess of Conti. In 1793, the castle was confiscated and became national property following the emigration of the Duke and Duchess of Châtillon, heirs of the Princess. In 1804, Napoleon granted ownership of the castle to the municipality of Sillé. A high-school settled there until 1971. The castle is classified as a Historic Monument.

### 4 The Minimes Monastery

On May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1623, François de Cossé, Duke of Brissac, Baron of Sillé, founded the Minimes Monastery. The monastery was constructed for a dozen clerics. The monks were expelled during the French Revolution and the chapel became the Temple of Reason. The monastery was then turned into a hospital, which is still operating to this day.



4



7



6

4. The Minimes Monastery's Chapel / 6. The houses of Saint-Martin along the old path leading to the castle / 7. Ruins of the Deffays castle at Sillé-Plage

#### 5 The collegiate church of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption

Former seigniorial chapel, the church of Notre-Dame-de-l'Assomption is located in the inner bailey of the castle. An arched porch from the XII<sup>th</sup> century leads to a low chapel: the crypt. Robert II de Sillé, spouse of the beatified Jeanne-Marie de Maillé, is supposed to have been buried there. Above, lays the collegiate church of the XIII<sup>th</sup> century. It's occidental gothic portal depicts the Last Judgement. The collegiate church contains stalls from the XVI<sup>th</sup> century and stained-glass windows from the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries. The church was classified as a Historic Monument in 1911, apart from the bell tower.

#### 6 The canonical houses

At the foot of the castle, the canonical quarter and its wealthy lodgings rise. The "houses of Saint-Martin" with their ogee windows and a turret (at the rear) are the oldest. Some of these houses used to have their own chapel: here, a gothic gable window (on Beauvau street), designates the chapel of this house.

#### 7 The old Deffays castle

On the beach of the big Lake, lays a small castle in ruins surrounded by moats. This edifice, whose function is not fully clear, was built in the XII<sup>th</sup> century. Was it to control the forest, to protect the domain's mills and the fishing spots? It was abandoned during the Hundred Years War.



8a



8b



8c

8a. The destruction of the halls in 1866 / 8b. Tower house on Livestock Market Square / 8c. Street corner sign of the Pilier-Vert (Green Pillar)

## A commercial crossroads

The town of Sillé-le-Guillaume was built at a crossroads of which the main road is the Montois Path. It became the place of an important market. Famous for its different commercial activities, Sillé-le-Guillaume was also known for its fairs. The most important one, the fair of Saint-Michel, persisted until the end of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. A big flea market has now replaced it.

### 8 The Livestock Market Square

The Livestock Market Square was very important to the citizens of Sillé up until the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Since the Middle Ages, a big hall stood on the side of the Montois Path (Mayenne Street). It was used as a place to conduct business, as a hearing room for the bailiff, and as a quality control office for canvases. It was demolished in 1868 (8a). Around the square, many cafés and inns were very important. Some old street signs can still be observed such as the corner sculptures (8c) of the medieval inn the Pilier-Vert.

### 9 The Boulay Hosiery

Sillé-le-Guillaume was famous for its canvas and cloth business. Weavers, seamstresses and knitters used to live between the Canvas Quality Control Office and the Sheep Market Square. The house and shop of a cloth merchant were built in 1861 (n°5 of the street) at the heart



9. Inside the Boulay Hosiery / 10. The chimney of the Châtillon Tannery / 11a. The railway station's passenger building

of this district, opposite the location of the former public bread oven. In 1922, an industrial hosiery settled there: the Boulay Hosiery. Until 1953, about twenty female workers used to make knitted items with around fifteen flat-bed knitting machines.

### 10 The Châtillon Tannery

Built in 1850 and expanded in 1860 by François Cebert, the tannery owes its name to the Châtillon family who settled here and took over the tannery's operations in the XX<sup>th</sup> century. The tannery completely stopped its activities in the sixties. Today it is a library and has kept the skylights of its drying room, the chimney used to activate the steam machines, and the courtyard where the tannin tanks used to be.

### 11 The railway station

The Le Mans-Laval line was opened on August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1854. The arrival of the train dramatically changed the physiognomy of the town with the emergence of a new district. The passenger building of Sillé-le-Guillaume's railway station is polychrome, with a great arched hall, the center of which is topped by a clock (11a). In 1858, Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie stopped in Sillé-le-Guillaume's station and were greeted and cheered by the enthusiastic population.





11b



12



13

11b. The station's freight crane / 12. The station's galleries / 13. The market on Place de la République

Nearby, an 1888 crane (11b) acknowledges the importance of Sillé's freight station.

### 12 The station's Galleries

The station's Galleries were founded in 1912 and associate the classical architectural elements of large stores: skylights, monumental staircase, diverse construction materials (iron, stone, ceramics...). The façade is inspired from Art Nouveau with its wavy patterned balustrade and its colored flowery ceramics.

### 13 La place de la République

In 1855, la place de la République was installed on the Meslier Meadow – where the gallows used to be in the Middle Ages - by Darcy, an architect born and raised in Le Mans.

Originally, the project planned a great hall which was never built. Quickly, cafés and trade shops settled around the square. One of them had the bell announcing the opening of the wheat market on its façade.

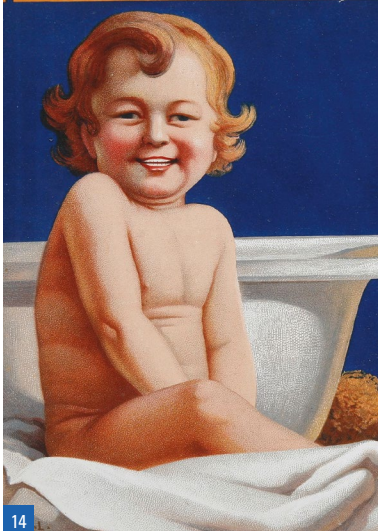
The arrival of the train would only reinforce the commercial importance of this Square.



15a



15b



14

14. *Bébé Cadum* / 15a. Léon-Besnardeau municipal hall / 15b. Facsimile of the first postcard illustrated by Léon Besnardeau

## An arts and leisure destination

At the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century, the city was a modern town where tourism began to develop. The newly wealthy public figures were inspired by the styles à la mode to build and decorate their houses. These public figures, alongside the lush environment, attracted renowned artists such as the enameller Robert Barriot or the novelist Paul Brulat.

### 14 Arsène Le Feuvre (1863-1936)

Arsène Le Feuvre was born on May 6th, 1863 in a place known as Haut-Éclair. The works of this artist decorator range from eclectic styles such as Art Nouveau and Art Deco. His political career led him to become Mayor of Le Mans between 1925 and 1931. He created the famous *Bébé Cadum* in 1932. In 2010, his studio collection was given to the town, and has since been exhibited in the castle.

### 15 Léon Besnardeau (1821-1914)

Léon Besnardeau, stationer and bookseller in Sillé-le-Guillaume, invented in 1870 the first French illustrated postcard. This allowed the Breton soldiers in the military camp near the town of Conlie, deprived of everything, to write to their families (15b). His name was given to the municipal concert hall built in 1929 in the Art Deco style by Foubert and Tassier, at the location of the former trough. The Square just next to it bears the name of Paul Brulat.



16. The Rossignol Cement Factory and its façade imitating a roman palace / 17. Villas with seaside inspirations / 18. Coco-Plage lakeside café in a former military barrack destroyed in 1944.



### 16 The Rossignol Company

Founded in 1893, Alphonse Rossignol's company, shaped like a roman palace, shows the expertise of this cement-manufacturer, awarded in universal exhibitions. His successor Amilcar Zocchetto developed the art of rocaille (the imitation of natural elements) in cement. The yard's big fountain is an example of this art specific to public gardens, which developed amongst the private inhabitants of Sillé between the two wars.

### 17 La rue de Bretagne villas

In the 1930s, la rue de la Bretagne began to urbanize. The local public figures had their houses built in styles à la mode. Several houses look like the anglo-normand villas built on the sea side. They combine an individualized and complex architecture with the use of wood, brick, and concrete. The modern movement can be seen on a dwelling claiming to be simple, geometrical, and structurally consistent. In 1940, one of the public figures in town would bring the best French enameller, Robert Barriot, to decorate the interior of his house.

### 18 Sillé Plage also known as Coco Plage

In 1924, Gabriel Richefeu, known as Coco, opened a lakeside café along the beach in a military barrack bought during the dismantling of the training camp of the Polish Army (1917-1921). This place, under the name of Coco Plage or Sillé Plage Leisure Park, helps attract tourists in the area.

# Visitor Information

- **Town hall**

Place de la Résistance  
72140 Sillé-le-Guillaume  
Tel. +33 (0) 2 43 52 15 15  
mairie@sille-le-guillaume.fr  
www.sille-le-guillaume.fr

- **Tourist Office of the Champagne Conlinoise area and of Sillé County**

Place de la Résistance  
72140 Sillé-le-Guillaume  
Tel. +33 (0) 2 43 20 10 32  
contact@tourisme4cps.fr  
www.destinationcoco.com

## To see, to do

- **Sillé-Plage Leisure Park**

Sillé Plage  
72140 Sillé-le-Guillaume

- **Sillé-le-Guillaume Castle**

Place des Minimes  
72140 Sillé-le-Guillaume  
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