Above: Waist deep in rubble, Vire's citizens discover that their famous porte-horloge is among the few structures left standing after the bombing raids of 6 June 1944. Throughout Calvados, only Caen and Lisieux suffered more severe damage than Vire in the Battle of Normandy.

Phœnix of '44

by Christopher Long

If visitors sometimes find our Norman towns a little lacking in old-world charm, there's a reason for that. Hundreds of mediæval and renaissance gems were flattened in 1944 and hurriedly rebuilt soon after.

As the Battle of Normandy rumbled over the countryside, hill by hill and farm by farm, scarcely a village was spared. Notoriously, ninety per cent of St Lô was reduced to rubble.

Eighty-four per cent of Vire was destroyed in the first few hours of the battle and for seventy years its survivors chose to 'forget' the trauma, pain and loss. Today a major exhibition commemorates its rise from the ashes.

The Price of Freedom

In the Spring of 1944, in southern England, the Allies assembled the greatest concentration of men, machines and munitions the world had ever seen. Add one more tank, it was said, and the whole country would tilt and sink into the Channel.

Here in Normandy no one expected our peaceful fields and hedgerows were destined for Armageddon.

Just before D-Day on 6th June, towns, railways and ports suffered massive strategic bombardments aimed at crippling the infrastructure and preventing the Germans from bringing reserves up to the coast.

As the invasion took place, astonished fishermen in Port-en-Bessin awoke to see 6,900 warships on the horizon and 4,100 landing craft heading for nearby beaches. Allied naval guns fired deep inland with devastating power.

Farmers milking cows at dawn near Lisieux were amazed to hear 12,000 aircraft rumbling over their thatched farmhouses and 1,000 transport planes dropping thousands of paratroops into their fields.

Drivers firing up their locomotives in Caen and dockers arriving for work at Cherbourg expected to be targets of some sort but their children were naturally dumbstruck by the 14,000 British and American aircraft sorties raining down 10,000 tons of bombs.

Only at the last minute did the people of Normandy learn that their towns were targets. In some cases, such as in Vire, Allied warning leaflets supposedly drifted off into the *Forêt de Saint-Sever* or warning messages were simply suppressed by French authorities busily collaborating with their occupiers.

Normans who had lived alongside German soldiers for four years, with scarcely a shot ever fired, found it hard to believe that their liberators would bomb them.

But strategic or saturation bombing paved the way for every Allied advance and in the first three weeks of the battle 850,000 Allied troops and 148,000 military vehicles were fighting their way south, town by town, street by street and farm by farm.

A month later a million Allied troops were locked in battle with German panzer

divisions in an area just 100 km wide, bordered by Avranches, Cherbourg, Caen and Falaise.

The destruction was truly terrible and most towns in Basse-Normandie suffered serious damage, some needing to be rebuilt from scratch.

Usually the damage occurred while they were being liberated. The battle would roll on and aid would move in from behind and rebuilding could start immediately.

The suffering in Vire was particularly acute because the damage was done on 6th June and two months went by before Americans fought their way through the ruins to liberate the remaining population on 8th August.

Since 1,200 of the town's 1,450 homes had been destroyed, those who had not fled were mostly homeless.

As the Germans retreated south-east, civilians were ordered to flee behind them to avoid British and American bombing and artillery assaults.

Most families walked with what they could carry though some had horse-drawn carts. Nearly all sought shelter in farm buildings or with relatives.

When it was all over the survivors often found the road home blocked by rubble with virtually every bridge destroyed. The home that awaited them was usually another pile of rubble.

In *Basse-Normandie* 13,600 French civilians were killed in the battle, the greatest losses being in Caen, Lisieux and – in third place – Vire.

The Ruins Of Vire

At 8 pm on 6th June 1944, 228 American B-24 bombers made their attack on Vire, followed six hours later by 167 British Lancasters, Halifaxes and Mosquitos. Local inhabitants insist that warning leaflets failed to mention the name of the target and were anyway blown away into the Forêt de Saint-Sever.

The aim was to prevent the Germans reinforcing the coast 60 km away.

The immediate consequences were the deaths of 358 civilians while one temporary hospital alone, at Truttemer-le-Grand, treated up to 800 wounded.

The bald facts are sobering: 84 per cent of the town was destroyed. Of its 1,450 houses, 1,200 were totally destroyed, 50 seriously damaged and 200 damaged but reparable. Of 245 shops, 232 were ruined and all the rest damaged. The town lost 17 of its 44 public buildings and another 25 were damaged.

The museum's collection was entirely destroyed by fire including 264 pictures by artists such as Corot, Géricault, Poussin and Chardin.

The flames destroyed the library's 70,000 volumes of which 500 dated

from the 16th century. A collection of ancient manuscripts survived only because they had been sent for study in Caen (of all places!). Even the bells of Notre-Dame church melted, along with all the town's stained glass.

Needless to say, all public utilities were destroyed but the rubble-blocked roads even prevented aid from reaching the town. Feeding the survivors became a serious problem and in the first weeks of 1945 canteens were supplying 3,000 meals a month.

When 350 German prisoners were set to work clearing the streets, they too needed to be fed and housed.

Below: Providing board and lodging for the labour force put added pressure on a town struggling to feed and shelter its own refugees. Men like these, in Place Sainte-Anne, were sometimes housed in railway carriages beside the station.

Above: Vire in June 1949, five years after the Allied bombardment. Dominated by the surviving porte-horloge, the main square still looks like the start of a construction site. Towns all over Normandy took advantage of the destruction to introduce modern facilities such as mains water supplies and drainage as well improved schools and hospitals.

Le Confort Moderne

Interestingly, the exhibition *Permis de (Re)construire: Vire 1944-1965* puts paid to any illusions that the bombing of Vire destroyed a mediaeval gem. A 19th century visitor said the hill-top town was 'picturesque' but the mediaeval ramparts had been pulled down in 1630 and only the *donjon* was preserved by a decree of 1805.

The exhibition suggests that by mid 20th century standards the industrial town of Vire was a grim and grimy huddle of small, uncomfortable lodgings in often poorly maintained buildings, separated by insalubrious alleys. There were certainly a few very interesting houses, but the idea that it was a 'pretty town' is a myth!

Nobody would suggest the bombing was a good thing, but having shifted the rubble to create a vast, level market place – the *Champ du Foire* – Vire's architects could now lay out a new town with wide streets, spacious flats and imposing new public buildings, hugely improving living standards for the post-war generation.

Instead of a privy in the corner of a small yard and water from a doubtful well, modern plumbing and sanitation was introduced. Domestic space was now large enough to be furnished separately as living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens.

Factories, offices and workshops needed to be rebuilt, so working conditions also improved for most people.

As elsewhere in Normandy, the new style was stark – very '50s – strongly influenced by the then fashionable 'socialist realism'. It may look rather brutal to foreign visitors driving south in search of quaint *provençal* villages, but these 'new' towns were born out of a brutal conflict and are memorials to great suffering and the high price paid by Normandy for the Liberation of France as a whole.

Below: The exhibition does an excellent job of reminding some of us of bright new 1950s interiors and 'le confort moderne'.

Above: Pre-fabricated timber housing, like this in Vire, could be seen throughout war-shattered Normandy in 1945. Many were still occupied in the 1960s. Some communes had prefab hutments as 'salles des fêtes' for marriages and communal gatherings.

Hut Happiness

Allied bombing drove around 6,000 of Vire's population from their homes. Most sought shelter with friends or family in the countryside. But following its liberation on 8th August 1944, a humanitarian crisis developed as 4,000 refugees returned to their ruined homes.

Many camped in these insanitary ruins under buildings which threatened to collapse. A further 728 people wisely chose to wait it out until the town could provide new homes for them.

The solution was hundreds of prefabricated timber hutments set up on areas cleared of rubble near the town centre. Huts produced in France were rudimentary but those imported from the USA and Sweden gave citizens in Normandy their first taste of 'modern comfort'.

Until this time it was quite usual in the countryside for a whole family – perhaps including granny – to live, eat, sleep and wash in a single room of about 30 square metres, known locally as *la maison.*

The huts were more than twice this size (63.5 square metres) and consisted of a small hallway, two bedrooms, a dining-room, a kitchen and a bathroom – with a bath! This was privacy and comfort unknown to most families in Normandy. Ironically, the hut-dwellers had a taste of the future long before the minority whose houses had survived.

By the end of 1947 there were 332 huts of this sort in Vire and a further 62 under construction. They were fitted out with modern furniture and household goods sold in more than eighty similar hutments, designed as temporary shops, on today's *Champ de Foire*. Many people remember happiness and their first taste of small luxuries in these humble homes.

The destruction of Vire led directly to an improved quality of life for many people. Washing machines, which transformed women's lives, could not have worked without the newly laid mains water supply.

Below: A Norman housewife's dream in 1950! The interior of emergency housing in Vire looked something like this. A direct effect of the destruction of Vire was that the town was forced to modernise.

The exhibition *"Permis de (Re)construire, Vire 1944-1965"* is at the Musée de Vire (2 Place Sainte-Anne, 14500 Vire) until 4 November 2012 (Wednesday to Sunday 10h–12h30 and 14h–18h). Tel: 02 31 68 10 49.