



Coco Chanel, or the art of distorting the truth... about childhood

"My wonderful childhood? These words, usually spoken together, make me shudder." So said the creator of the famous "Chanel suit", and the equally famous perfume "Chanel No. 5". It is true, though, that the childhood of Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel (1883-1971) was not exactly rosy. So much so that she often chose to block it out, hiding her origins, embellishing reality, even weaving a veil of lies to hide a deep wound. While the years she spent in Courpière – her mother's birthplace – between 1888 and 1893 were not the most difficult, she could never find words harsh enough to describe this period of her life. The little girl from Courpière became a hard and inflexible woman, her personality marked by her years in the Auvergne. "The last volcano in Auvergne that is not extinct", she used to say.

Château de la Barge

In the 12th century, a feudal castle watched over the ford bridging the Dore river. During the Renaissance, the old castle underwent major refurbishment, adding a long gallery, terraces and, above all, replacing the chapel destroyed by the Protestants in 1568 with a new one, decorated with the exquisitely beautiful original stained glass windows. The 17th and 18th centuries saw extensive restructuring of the buildings, as well as the creation of a garden in the style of Le Nôtre. Gradually, the castle acquired the silhouette that we know today. It is still surrounded by a moat on three sides.

There are guided tours of the gardens and the castle chapel (1h30), from July 1st to August 29th, excluding Saturdays and Sundays, at 2 pm, 3.30 pm and 5 pm, and by appointment the rest of the year. Tel: +33 (0)4 73 53 14 51.

Manoir de Bélième

Not open for visits. Also known as the "Tour du Maure" (the Moor's Tower) because Châteaubriand is said to have completed his *Romanes Deux Emigrés* here during a visit to the Auvergne in 1805, Manoir de Bélième was originally a fortress guarding the Dore valley. This square building, flanked by a round tower housing the staircase, was built in the 15th or 16th centuries.

"My sister, do you still remember the castle on the banks of the Dore, and the old Moor's tower where the brass bell used to ring in the daybreak? Always! Always!" Châteaubriand

Eglise de Courteserre

Built in the 15th century, the vaults in the Eglise de Courteserre are decorated with coats of arms that recount the local history of three seigneuries, including the Hospitaller Order of the Knights of Malta, a 17th century altarpiece and several statues dating from the 17th and 18th centuries.



The Saint-Pierre institution

The Saint-Pierre institution derives from the first Jesuit school in France, founded in Billom in 1556. Converted into a school for troop children at the end of the 19th century by municipal decision, the college had to be transferred elsewhere, eventually ending up in Courpière, a dynamic town well served by a modern communication network (railway station built in 1875). The first stone was laid in September 1884. In 1890, on completion of the chapel, the new college was finally able to open its doors.



Courpière's springs

This refers not to the Dore river, but to the mineral waters found here, several springs of which were – perhaps – already known to the Gallo-Romans. Some of these springs, such as those of Layat, were already in use from the 18th century onwards. From 1860 to 1950, waters from the Salet springs, carbonated, iron-bearing and sodium bicarbonate dominant, were sent throughout France and even to the "colonies".

The region "aux mains d'or"

We often refer to Courpière's glorious agricultural and industrial past... Forgetting its equally deserving present. In the 1950s and 1960s, the favourable climatic conditions at the foot of the mountains in this region led to it being described as France's **strawberry capital**. Hundreds of tons of the "Madame Mouton" variety were sold all over France... and even in England. This demonstrated the innovation skills of the local farmers, who had a long tradition of market gardening, fruit growing and crop farming. Nowadays, **low-altitude cattle breeding predominates**, the meadows dotted with cows of the "Montbéliarde breed", the milk of which is used to make the farandole of Auvergne cheeses. Many exceptional beef breeds can be seen here, especially the local "Ferrandaise", currently making a comeback. Sustainable and organic farming is really taking off with **younger farmers who now offer a wide range of high-quality local produce for short gourmet circuits**. For the **CroUPIérois**, the working of raw materials remains an ancestral passion that urges them to **work harder, work harder to forge red steel with golden hands" as the song says**. Legacy of a flourishing, creative and ancestral craft industry, during "the thirty glorious years" industry blossomed, provided a wealth of highly qualified jobs. The **exquisite stainless steel smithery** of the Jean Couzon company lit up the town until the mid-2000s. Who hasn't seen the chiselled stainless steel basket and the cutlery set for newlyweds, famous the world over.

TOWNS AND VILLAGES OF CHARACTER IN THE LIVRADOIS-FOREZ

The heritage of the Livradois-Forez Regional Nature Park is rich. It is made up of a network of towns, and big and small villages. Economic activity consists of agriculture, forestry, crafts and industry. The spatial organization of these activities goes back, for the most part, to the Middle Ages and produced, from the 14th century on, an interesting, and sometimes remarkable, urban architecture. The Parc Naturel Régional Livradois-Forez assists the communes in their efforts to revitalize those urban centres that are particularly interesting.



Parc naturel régional Livradois-Forez
63880 St-Gervais-sous-Meymont
Tel: + 33 (0)4 73 95 57 57
www.parc-livradois-forez.org



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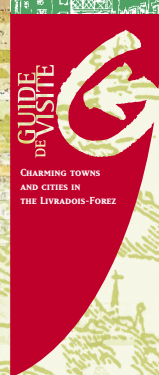
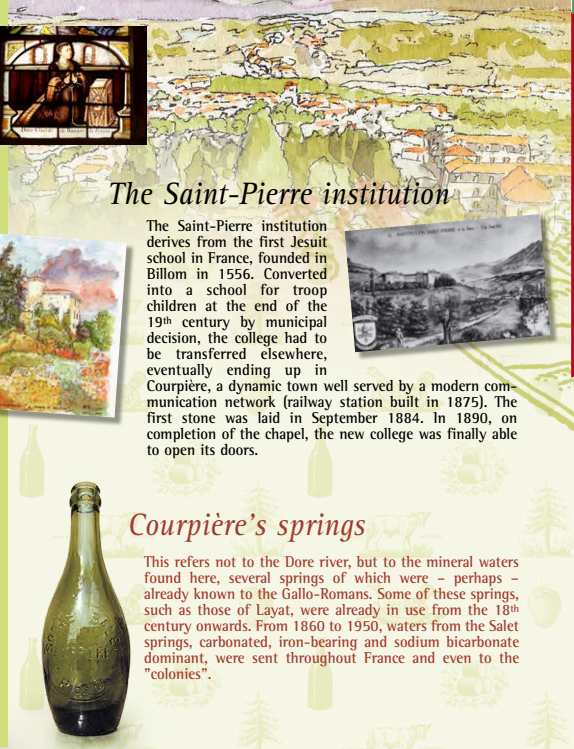
Maison du tourisme du Livradois-Forez
Bureau d'information touristique de Courpière
Place de la Cité administrative
63120 Courpière
Tel: +33 (0)4 73 51 20 27
https://www.vacances-livradois-forez.com

Mairie de Courpière
63120 Courpière
Tel: +33 (0)4 73 53 01 21
Mail: mairie@ville-courpiere.fr
Internet: www.ville-courpiere.fr

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Offspring of the Dore and the hills of COURPIÈRE



The Dore...

...as a transportation link

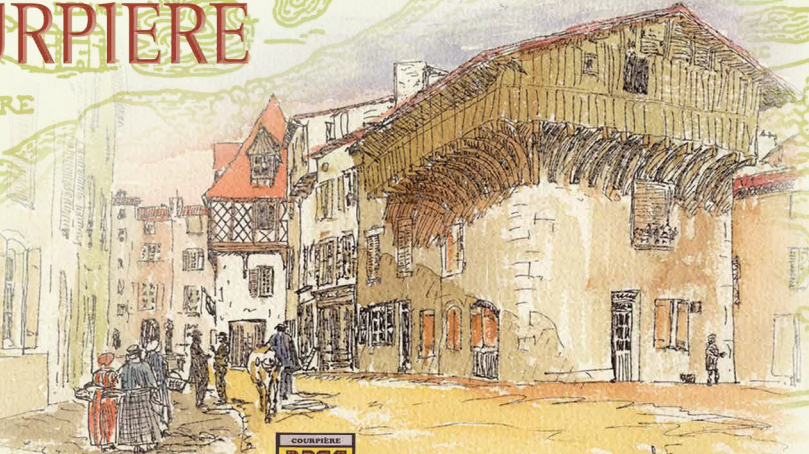
An unpredictable river prone to sudden, devastating floods, the Dore was never navigable upstream of Courpière. It was therefore from the port of La Barge, in the village of Lanaud, that a wide array of edible foodstuffs (cereals, vegetables, fruit, wine, etc.) and heavier products (peat, building materials, ores, etc.) were shipped to the Paris Basin, via the Allier, then the Loire. When the sapinières (flat-bottomed boats, as much as 24 metres in length and carrying up to 20 tons of goods) arrived at their destination – Orléans, Nantes, Saint-Nazaire – they were dismantled and used for firewood.

...as a source of energy

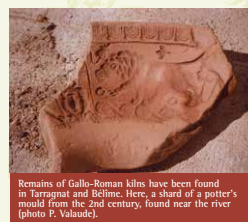
The Dore was also used to transport large quantities of wood by floating them downriver. In the early 20th century, this flourishing industry provided a living for six sawmills in the commune of Courpière alone. An inexhaustible source of energy, the waters of the Dore were also used to run several small-scale craft industries. This spanned the development of the mills, which in the 19th and early 20th centuries played an important role in the life of Courpière. There were at least eight mills, five of which were supplied directly by the Dore, and three by tributaries. The best known is that of Las Dommas, sitting at the foot of the ramparts that overlook the Dore (the first mill was built on this site in 1445). Fed by a bief (a channel used to divert water), the waters of which were also used for a washhouse and a tannery, this mill was destroyed in the 1960s.

...subdued at last

Today, the Dore certainly has less of an impact on Courpière's population than it did in the past. The mills are long gone or have been repurposed; rail and road links mean that the shipping of goods by water is now obsolete. And while the river does still sometimes flood, it is with nothing like its past fury. Over time, the Dore has become calmer, more restrained. Even so, it is inextricably linked to the history of Courpière.



The backbone of this "granite sheathed" region, the Dore has always attracted human populations. The first human settlements here date back over 3,000 years, with this wild and impetuous river providing local populations with a means of subsistence and natural protection.



Remains of Gallo-Roman kilns have been found in Tarragnat and Bélième. Here, a shard of a potter's mould from the 2nd century, found near the river (photo P. Valade).

WHEN, in the 9th and 10th centuries, the Norman invasions forced the small local lords to organise the defence of their fiefdoms, it was only natural that Curta-Petra (the shortened mound), an alluvial terrace a dozen or so metres above the Dore valley – located at the point where the river became wider and calmer – was chosen as the site of the first feudal mound. Courpière (or CroUPIère) came into being, enclosed within a wall of ramparts, watchtowers and ditches that could be filled with water.

Around 1130, Benedictine nuns established a priory in the town, part of the Order of Cluny. Using the taxes they collected from their vast domains, from the making of bread in the communal oven, from the cultivation of wine, wheat and hemp, from the mill, and also... from the crossing of the river, they contributed to the enlargement of the church of St Martin, making it a Romanesque church with 3 naves with help from the abbots of Moutier in Thiers, who were dependent on the Order of Cluny during the episcopacy of Aymeric, Bishop of Clermont.

In 1343, the town obtained the right to administer itself – thereby entitling it to plan its urban development as it wished, to levy taxes and to maintain a garrison. In 1588, it joined the very select circle of the *Bonnes Villes de Basse-Auvergne*. In 1605, King Henry IV issued a letters patent granting the town the right to hold four fairs per year and one market per week. This privilege enabled the town to develop as a trading centre, a reputation for which it would become famous.

By the early 18th century, Courpière was a stopping-off point on one of the busiest roads in the region. This route – linking Clermont and Lyon – was used regularly by armed troops, and also by peddlers and merchants from all over.

Following the turmoil of the French Revolution, during which the Priory was disbanded, the nuns dispersed, and the bell tower demolished by order of Couthon, a revolutionary figure, in order to suppress a religious symbol and recover its lead, farming took over as one of the main activities in Courpière.

The town also prospered due to its increasingly important role as a trading hub. Courpière's population lived according to the rhythm of the markets, with each square having its own "specialisation".

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the development of numerous – occasionally unusual – industrial or craft activities (see p. 4), carrying the name of Courpière far beyond the region.



