

A postcard depicting Chamalières, the location of the Printing Works.

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An extraordinary tale of TWO RAIL HOLD-UPS

AS the tide turned against the occupying German Forces in France during World War II there was an ongoing requirement for increasing amounts of financial aid to fund the numerous resistance groups that were being formed to assist in the eventual liberation of the country. From the early years of the war, the Free French, based in London under the leadership of General Charles de Gaulle, were supported by the Bank of England and a number of other institutions. The funds raised help finance acts of passive resistance, later extended to active operations including the provision of containers filled with weapons and equipment which was parachuted to the resistance groups by the Royal Air Force to enable acts of sabotage to be carried out. These operations were extremely complex. There were five major groups, all of differing affiliations, from the “Ceux de la Libération” (a Right-Wing group), “Combat” (Christian Democratic), “Franc-Tireur” (Left-Wing), “Francs-Tireurs et Partisans” (Communist) and the “Libération Nord” and “Sud” networks (Left-Wing). It was in 1942 that the term “Maquis” appeared. They were rural guerrilla bands of Resistance fighters called Maquisards who lived rough, performing many acts of sabotage against the occupiers usually under the guidance of the British SOE.

The year 1944 was an important one; as “D-day” approached there was a surge of recruits to those groups which put the system under a severe financial strain. In January 1944 the strength of the Maquis was reported to consist of just over 5,700 fighters; by July of that year it had increased to over 25,000. A decision was made by their leaders, now under the command of newly appointed General Koenig of the Free French Forces that a series of hold-ups against banks and post offices must be carried out to boost its finances. Between February and September of that year there were 53 actions against 26 branch offices which provided much needed revenue.

Two incidents were of particular importance and must rate as the largest train robberies ever undertaken. The city of Clermont-Ferrand in the Puy-de-Dôme department lies 426 kilometres south of Paris and on its west side is the district of Chamalières, the location of the Bank of France printing works which dates from 1923 and still in use today. On February 9, 1944, a train containing a consignment of banknotes from the printing works destined to Corbeil near Paris for onward distribution to branch offices in the region was held up at the main Clermont-Ferrand railway station. The haul was contained in a wagon coupled next to the engine and included 40 bags of the 1,000 francs “type Demeter” and three bags of the 20 francs “type Pecheur” (Fisherman) banknotes with a total value of just over a billion francs. This figure reportedly equates to just over 150 million euros in today’s money. The bags were offloaded onto two vehicles and taken away. Some of the group, members of the FTP (Communists) who carried

out the robbery were later arrested and executed but the money was never recovered.

On March 30, the French Finance Ministry published a list of the serial numbers of the missing 1,000 francs notes stating that they would be deemed null and void. They all belonged to the alphabets (series) 7.755 to 7.828. An alphabet contained 25,000 notes; there were 74 alphabets listed, making a total of 1,850,000 banknotes. It can be seen that this number exceeded the total stolen from the train. As for owning one of them, a



A postcard of the railway station at Neuville-sur-L'Isle.

note from the 7,755 alphabet was sold in auction in Paris in February 2015 for 2,600 euros (approximately £2,000 at the time) but very few have come to light.

The situation became so serious that production of the "Demeter" ceased and was replaced, on May 19, 1944, by the earlier 1,000 francs type "Commerce et Industrie" (Commerce and Industry).

The "Demeter" issue was named after the Greek goddess of the harvest and agriculture. It was created by Lucien Jonas and engraved by Rita Dreyfus and Georges Hourriez and was issued on October 21, 1942, just over four months after its creation.

Its replacement, the 1,000 francs "Commerce et Industrie" had been created in October 1940, kept in reserve, and issued in May 1944. It was the work of Henri Cheffer who was also a postage stamp designer, and engraved by Camille Beltrand and Ernest-Pierre Deloche.

The 20 francs "Pêcheur" (Fisherman) was also the work of Lucien Jonas and engraved by Georges Beltrand and Charles Clément. It was issued in September 1942 and withdrawn in 1950.

France entered World War II using the 100 francs type "Luc-Olivier Merson" banknote. This was followed by the type "Sully", named after the Duc de Sully, King Henri IV's finance minister. It was issued in August 1940 designed by Lucien Jonas and engraved by Deloche. Contrary to regulations the designer inserted his initials "LJ" on the red wax seal on the bottom right corner on the reverse side. Its production was beset with problems and was supplemented by the type "Descartes", named after the philosopher and mathematician. The same two artists were employed for the work. This note had been created in May 1942 and issued in July 1944 but was only in circulation for a short time, being withdrawn in June of the following year. This denomination banknote became smaller in size as the years progressed as with a number of other low-value examples allowing more to be printed on a sheet.

The Bank of France stored a vast sum of its reserves at its vaults at Périgueux in the Dordogne region. A train regularly transported money from that location to the German Naval Authorities (Kriegsmarine) at Bordeaux. On July 26, 1944, at the railway station of the small town of Neuvic-sur-l'Isle some 30km from Périgueux, a heavily armed train carrying 2.28 billion francs (today £310 million) in 150 sacks was taken by members of four local Maquis groups of the Free French Forces (FFI). It is reported that the money had been scheduled to be loaded on to a German submarine at Bordeaux for onward transmission to Germany and then possibly to Argentina. The raid had been obviously well planned as the Bank of France officials on the train supplied the group with a receipt for the amount taken! As well as the banknotes referred to earlier the haul included many of the 500 franc "La Paix" (Peace) and the 5,000 franc "Victoire" issues and other undisclosed denominations. Part of the money was allocated to the Maquis groups in the neighbouring Limousin and Périgord regions but the vast majority of the haul was never recovered. The affair has remained politically sensitive to the present day.

Returning to the subject of the Chamalières printing works—on Sunday, August 23, 1944, following a tip-off to the bank officials, a detachment of German troops led by two officers arrived at the works with an order from Heinrich Himmler, Hitler's deputy, to seize all the printing plates from the banknote presses. The director at that time, Henri Guitard, was summoned to speak with them and he informed them that as it was Sunday there was no staff available to remove the plates. Over three hours later, with the Germans becoming increasingly impatient they asked for something else to take away. They were offered a crate of redundant items which they willingly accepted. The plates remained at the printing works. Two days later the German army fled the Dordogne region and a week after, Henri Guitard received a message stating that a group of children had been seen playing with some items which looked interesting. An investigation found that it included the

100 francs "Sully" (reverse side). The box shows an enlargement of part of the back of the note showing the initials "LJ" within the red circle.



1000 francs "Demeter" banknote.



1000 francs—"Commerce And Industry".



20 francs—"Fisherman" (Pêcheur).



Front of the 100 francs "Sully" banknote.





100 francs "Descartes".



10 francs "Miner" (Mineur).



50 francs "Jacques Coeur".



500 francs "Pierre And Marie Curie".

booty taken from the printing works. The German column had been ambushed and annihilated by the Maquis in the forests to the north of the region. All the items were gathered up and returned.

Henri Guitard, of the Bank of France, was the gentleman who, in 1957 "discovered" Pierrette Lambert the celebrated banknote designer who was a subject of one of my previous articles.

Banknotes were not the only items associated with Chamalières; in 1940 a quantity of uranium and heavy-water was transferred there for storage before being taken to Bordeaux to be put on a British ship. This happened two days before the German Army entered Clermont-Ferrand. The consignment ended up in England, reportedly at the Cavendish Laboratory Cambridge together with a number of scientists. The scientists and joint Nobel Prize-winners for Chemistry, Frederic Joliot and his wife Irene Joliot-Curie, were reportedly involved in the operation. Irene's parents, Pierre and Marie Curie, also recipients of the Physics and Chemistry awards, appeared on the final French 500 francs banknote created in 1994.

There were a few other notes that were in service during the war. Most of them have been the subject of my previous articles. There are a great many forgeries listed on eBay and other sites especially the French banknotes that carry German markings. They are to be avoided.

The affair concerning Jonas signing his note was "a hot potato" at the time. The relatives of Luc-Olivier Merson, who designed the previous issue, objected to his signature being used on his note after he died and took the Bank of France to court. Following that, the artist was forbidden to sign banknotes.

The two postcards were obtained by me from a person who knew the area well. He also provided me with a card showing one of the local ex-Maquis (on his 100th birthday back in 1990). Social history yes; coins and banknotes no!

References.

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