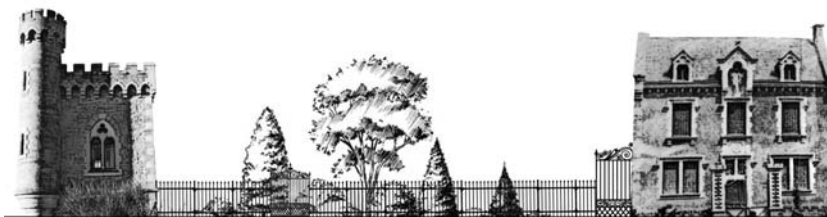


CHAPTER 1



TREASURE HUNT

My journey from England, though enjoyable, had been long and tiring, both for the Ford campervan I was driving and myself. Though the van was old, it had done well but could not have guessed what was to become its cruel fate in the future. It was not pretty to look at but as it had only cost me four hundred pounds, bought from an Australian couple that had driven it around Europe. I thought it was money well spent.

The van, now seeming to sense that my destination was finally drawing near, meaning it could at last have a rest, made an attempt to hasten its tortuous journey up the steep hill leading to my journey's end, the small French village of Rennes-le-Château. I watched in amazement as the speedometer needle slowly crept up towards the fifteen m.p.h. mark. I was just about to change into third gear, when the engine, deciding the effort was just too much, gave up and the needle rapidly dropped back to a steady nine miles per hour. At least the slow speed gave me ample time to admire the passing scenery. In fact, if the materials had been to hand I could have painted the view, so slowly was it sweeping by. I was just glad no one was walking up the hill in case I was overtaken. With nothing else to do I sat back to take pleasure in the slowly passing landscape as I rose ever higher towards the small hilltop village.



Rennes-le-Château Village—Saunière's Domain is on the right

As I rounded yet another sharp corner, I caught a glimpse of a building perched high up on the hill. A construction I immediately recognised, although it was the first time I had seen it in the flesh so to speak, I had gazed upon its distinctive shape in photographs. Like so many others, I had Henry Lincoln to thank for that. It was while, as was my habit—much to the annoyance of my wife, flicking rapidly through the sky television channels that I stopped on the image of Henry Lincoln. I have no idea why he captivated me enough for me to lift my finger from the remote control. Maybe it was his made for radio face, or the fashion statement thrust upon me by his beige sleeveless safari jacket, that fitted him like a six-fingered glove on a four-fingered hand. However, I expect we have all been guilty of a fashion faux pas at sometime in our lives; this was definitely Henry's. The jacket, on closer inspection seemed to be made entirely of pockets. Just why one would need so many pockets seemed as big a mystery as the subject of the documentary he was presenting. Whatever the reason, hover on the photogenic fashion conscious Mr. Lincoln I did. My life would never be the

same again—that jacket had left scars that would never heal.

I found myself instantly hooked by the subject of the documentary concerning the antics of a mysterious priest, Bérenger Saunière. Coming to my senses, I dived for the television and scabbled through the pile of video-tapes stacked untidily beside it, searching for one I could use to record the remainder of the program.

Unfortunately, with none of the haste I felt, my wife forbade me to use any of the tapes I selected. Her reasons were that she had not watched the episode of some soap or hospital drama recorded on that particular tape. Even though they had been recorded weeks ago and she had seen every episode since, she still wanted them saved: I suppose the dust had to settle on something. Knowing I could be missing some important facts and details of the mystery, I plucked a tape at random and shoved it into the video recorder, reassuring my wife it was one of my tapes. Praying that it was not a recording of one of the kids' birthdays or school plays, I pressed the record button and sat back down to watch the remainder of the documentary. I watched engrossed as the camera panned away from Henry, always a good move I think, and came to rest on a building built by the priest. A building that would become an icon for Rennes-le-Château and instantly recognizable to all those already interested in the mystery and the thousands that would join them in the future. Gazing at the Magdala Tower for the first time, I knew even then that someday I would climb the steps to the top.

By the time the programme had ended, my wife, obviously not a fan of Mr. Lincoln, had left the room; maybe he should try his brand of charisma on Coronation Street or Casualty. Now free to rewind the tape I watched it again. Though I had missed the beginning, it was easy enough to pick up the thread of the story. Apparently, a priest by the name of Bérenger Saunière had arrived at the remote hilltop village of Rennes-le-Château back in June 1885. His new posting was to be the neglected and run down church of Mary Magdalene. The many holes in the roof did nothing to prevent the rain entering the building to form puddles on the uneven flagstone floor.



Tour Magdala

Eventually the priest raised enough funds to carry out some essential repairs. This is where the story gets interesting; it was while these renovations were being carried out that the priest apparently found some parchments in one of the two Visigoth altar supports. It is said that his discovery in the church, whatever it was, in due course turned him from a penniless priest into a very rich man.



Abbé François Bérenger Saunière 1852 to 1917

Saunière, it seemed, had wasted no time in spending his riches. With no expense spared, he renovated the church to his exact design. He also purchased the land around the church for the grand building projects he had planned, which we can still see today, including the Tour Magdala and a villa.

Saunière died on January 22nd 1917, leaving alive only one person with whom he shared his secret, his faithful housekeeper Marie Dénarnaud. Though she would live on for many years, Marie would never reveal the source of Saunière's wealth. She took that secret to the grave with her when she died on January 29th 1953.

The story had everything a good mystery should: mysterious characters, unexplained deaths, secret parchments and equally secret societies, but most of all the promise of treasure.

Rumour has it that the decorations Saunière was so particular about in his church were in fact a treasure map pointing to his remaining hoard and the original source of his wealth.



Marie Dénarnaud 1869 - 1953

The sometimes strange and intriguing decorations did hint that their sole purpose might not just be to convey the religious symbolism for which they were originally designed. Did they contain clues to a treasure? I had no option but to investigate further—and so my treasure hunt began.

Discovering that a few books written on the subject were available and one had been co-written by none other than Henry Lincoln, I bought a copy of *Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*

As this was my pre-internet days, I had used the computer at my local library to carry out some further research. Although the information was not as prolific as it is today, there were a few sites

dealing with the subject that enabled me to view several pictures associated with the mystery.

Due to family and work commitments, it was almost a year before I travelled to Rennes-le-Château for the first time. It would only be a fact-finding trip, although I already had some ideas, I needed to see inside the church for myself. In addition, the Saunière museum would be an essential visit as it contained some of the artefacts connected with the mystery and I thought they might hold a clue.

Though I had to wait a year to get here, I would soon find out it would be worth the wait: disappointment would not be an issue.

Finally arriving at the top of the hill it was with a feeling of excited anticipation that I drove into the small hilltop village for the very first time. The first person I saw was an old man who raised his walking stick at me as I passed. Whether it was in greeting or anger I had no idea but I left him in a cloud of grey exhaust fumes as I slipped the van into third gear and sped away, managing to coax another couple of miles an hour out of the vehicle.

Driving through the village the shuttered windows of the few houses lining the street gave no hint of any life within. It was hard to believe that once hundreds of people lived here, but now apparently the population was reduced to fewer than one hundred. I wondered where they were all hiding. (In 2007, the figure was 37).

All was going well until I reached a particularly narrow gap between two buildings and realised why the sign just outside the village forbade large vans and coaches from entering, a sign I had duly ignored, I was British after all; it's what we do!

I stopped to judge the distance between the two houses. It would be tight but if I folded back the wing mirrors, the van should fit through. Forever the optimist, I stepped down from the van to tread on the hallowed soil, well Tarmac, of Rennes-le-Château for the first time. Walking around the van, I folded back the mirrors. Job done! As I climbed back inside I saw the old man with the stick appear around the corner, a purposeful look on his face as he hurried towards me.

Fearing he was going to stop me driving through the village, I quickly slammed the van into gear and cautiously inched forward. A dark-haired woman stepped out of the village bookshop and stood there watching me: that was all I needed, an audience.

Suddenly I heard a loud bang, and thinking I had hit something, I rammed on the brakes causing the van to lurch and shudder, spilling a few unsecured items from the shelves. There was another loud bang, and as I was now stationary, the noise could not have been caused by me. Suddenly the face of the old man with the walking stick appeared at the window and all became clear. I was in no doubt that I now had two stick shaped dents in the side of my van. I watched in disbelief as the man, unable to squeeze through the small gap I had left between my van and the side of the buildings, clambered up onto my bonnet. The sound of metal bending out of shape from the man's weight was clearly audible in the cab over the sound of the noisy engine. I wondered what he was doing but thought maybe he owned one of the buildings I was trying to squeeze between and he meant to stop me from going any further least I damage it.

I watched as he sat down on the bonnet and slid onto the front bumper, which I expected to break free from its rusty supports at any moment. Thankfully, with bumper still attached, he stepped off onto the ground. I then watched and waited, wondering what this mad Frenchman would do next.

Hearing voices behind me, I turned to see three women and a man standing in the street looking at my van. I was obviously the cause of some excitement to them because they gestured towards me with their hands, shaking their heads as they spoke.

Another rap on the van from the Frenchman's walking stick startled me. A dent was clearly visible on the bonnet through the insect splattered windscreen. I glared at the man as he started to speak rapidly in a heavy French accent. Though I could speak and understand some words of French, I understood not a word that spewed forth from his grey beard covered mouth. I shrugged and said in my poor French, "*Non parlez vous Français,*" then pointing

to myself, "*Anglais.*" He raised both his hands in understanding, the metal tip of his stick narrowly missing one of my headlights. Next, he walked from one side of the van to the other looking at the gap I was trying to drive through, and then with another rap on my bonnet with the walking stick, he waved me forward. I glanced at the second dent in my bonnet and then back at the Frenchman. Not wanting to further antagonize the Anglo-French relationship, I resisted the urge to press down hard on the gas pedal and run him over. Instead, I slowly inched forward. The sound of scraping metal on stone caused by the bracket of my left hand wing mirror making contact with the wall of the building caused him no concern at all. Glancing in the direction of the sound, I could see dust and bits of stone falling to the ground but still the Frenchman waved me forwards, obviously it was not his house. I tried not to look at the gouge in the stonework I was leaving in my wake. (The mark was still there the last time I visited the village, along with a few more.)

As the gap widened with the angle of the buildings, the screeching thankfully stopped and soon I was through. The old Frenchman pointed towards the car park with his stick that I had come to look on as more of a weapon than an aid to walking. Although there were many things I would rather have said to the Frenchman as I passed, all were sarcastic, I instead shouted out my thanks.

Struggling up the final small steep slope, I entered the area with the village water tower at its centre and then turned right into the empty car park. I parked under the shade of a tree only a few yards from the Magdala Tower.

Switching off the engine, I was sure the van let out a sigh of relief as it rattled into silence. I knew just how it felt; I too was relieved to at last be here. I climbed out of my van and stretched my aching bones. Like most people who visit the village, I walked over to the edge of the cliff and stared at the exceptional view. It was almost like looking at an aerial photo with the villages, roads, and fields stretching out for miles in all directions far below me. The snow-capped mountains of the Midi Pyrenees were clearly visible in the distance. Spain was just on the other side.

Even though the atmosphere of the place would change, as inevitable commercialism kicked in, the view would remain constant. It was breathtaking then and it is still breathtaking today. Turning to look at the tower perched on the edge of the hill, I saw that the wrought iron fence that surrounded Saunière's domain had suffered from years of neglect. Battered by the harsh wind and rain, what still remained was rusty; any paint that still managed to cling to the corroding surface was peeling away. Its use as a barrier, if left unchecked, would become non-existent as I was sure it would eventually collapse. Walking alongside the fence, I entered through the matching rusty wrought iron gate. To my right was the Villa Bethania Saunière had built, and opposite me there was a restaurant in the garden, the many tables and chairs positioned around the area, were testament to how many tourists flocked to this place during the busy season. For the moment though the place was deserted, peaceful.

After returning to my van to collect my camera, I explored Saunière's garden soaking up the atmosphere and taking many photographs of everything I saw. When Saunière was alive, the garden had been home to many exotic birds and animals, including peacocks and a monkey.

It was late in the day so I was not surprised to find the tower door locked. I walked down to the local bookshop I had passed in the village, as I needed to buy a map of the area. As I approached, I saw the woman I had seen earlier, who had watched me squeeze through the gap, taking an advertising sign into her shop. Fearing that the shop was about to close I quickened my pace.

She was just swinging the door shut as I arrived. I put my hand out to stop it from closing, nearly losing a few fingers in the process. Surprised, she opened the door slightly to stare out at me.

"*MAP*" I exclaimed loudly, as one does in a foreign land when unable to speak the language, as if the loudness helps the person you are speaking to understand.

"*Oui*?" she replied.

See, it works! I watched her reach back into the shop and take a map from a hanging wire frame that I could see just inside the entrance.

“*Okay?*” She said in a heavy French accent.

I examined the map. It was a Pyrenees map 9—1:50 scale, but it meant nothing to me. Trusting in her judgment that this was the map I needed, I replied, “*Oui, bon.*” Yes good. I would have liked to enter the shop to browse through the many books I could see taunting me through the small gap, but I could tell by the way she was barring the door she was impatient to close. Paying the sixty-three francs for the map, Euros were still some years away yet, I thanked her and left, I would return tomorrow to examine the books.

Feeling hungry, I returned to the van and opened the fridge to see what gourmet delights lay inside for me to choose from. Reaching in, I pulled out half a pack of sausages that had travelled with me from England. They had started off frozen but had thawed out days ago in the dodgy freezer compartment. Unwrapping them I had a cautious sniff of the slimy pink meat, although I had smelt fresher, I didn’t think they had gone off yet, I probably had about half an hour before that happened. I realised I should have stopped at the grocers shop I had passed in Couiza at the bottom of the hill to replenish my supplies, but I had been impatient to get to the village. Therefore, sausages it was. Not that I minded, sausages were a favourite of mine: English ones anyway. Placing the sausages in a frying pan on a low heat, I peeled a few potatoes and put them on to boil.

Thirty minutes later I was sitting outside on the grass next to the Magdala tower eating sausages and mash with baked beans, all covered in thick gravy. Washed down with a couple of vodka and cokes, alas no ice, it was one of the best meals I have had for a long time. Whether this was due to the sight of the sun setting in the distance, framing the perfectly magnificent view that stretched out before me or due to the mature flavour of the sausages caused by their far from ideal storage conditions, I neither knew, nor cared.

Sitting there for a couple of hours, I had a few more drinks and gazed up at the heavens. The sky was so clear that the stars seemed only an arm's length away and I had never seen so many.

Staring up at the star abundant sky, I saw my first shooting star. Watching the fireflies glowing in the dark, England, work and the rat race seemed a million miles away. I felt contented and relaxed for the first time in a long while. Later I retired to my comfy campervan bed, and slept a deep and restful sleep.

