

Chapter 2



SAUNIÈRE'S DOMAIN

The following morning, waking refreshed from a good night's sleep, and suddenly remembering where I was, I sat up and pulled back one of the curtains covering a window of my van. I looked out to see the Magdala Tower; what a great view to wake up to. Scrambling out of bed, I put the kettle on a gas ring on a low heat setting to make a cup of tea. While it came to the boil, I slipped on a pair of jeans and nipped out to use the public toilet facilities situated in the car park by the village water tower.

On entering, the smell that greeted me was not something I would recommend at any time of the day, let alone first thing in the morning. After emptying my

bladder I had a quick wash and brushed my teeth, all this carried out whilst trying to inhale as little as possible. Walking outside I took large gulps of the clean smelling air. On my next visit to these facilities, I will be armed with a can of air freshener or at the very least, a large strategically placed peg. Thankfully, the toilets have vastly improved nowadays.

Returning to the van, I was greeted by the sound of my kettle whistling, indicating the water was boiling. I made a cup of tea and grabbing a Kit-Kat from the small fridge I sat down at the table. After drawing back all the curtains, I slid open one of the windows to let the fresh warm air enter. As I ate my breakfast, I stared at the panoramic view outside the window. I am a chocoholic and always eat chocolate in the morning with my first cup of tea. If it was not a Kit-Kat, it would be a Wagon Wheel and I had brought an ample supply of both with me. I glanced at the small LED clock stuck to a cupboard door; it displayed ten thirty. I had slept longer than I had planned; I blamed the long drive the day before and the fresh mountain air. Things were never my fault, not if there was something or someone else to blame.

With much to do that day, I finished my tea, grabbed my camera and a spare roll of film and went off to explore Saunière's world. Entering the garden through the half-

open gate, I noticed the restaurant was deserted again.

Walking through the garden and up the steps that led to the curved terrace, I saw the Magdala tower door was open so I wandered inside. I was now standing in what was once Saunière's library. The room consisted of wall-to-wall cupboards and shelves, broken only by the two windows, each with a small padded bench underneath and a door that opened onto stone spiral stairs, a fireplace and of course, the entrance doorway. It was easy to imagine Saunière sitting here in front of a roaring fire reading one of his books. Peering through the grimy glass doors of the cupboards, constructed by craftsmen long dead, I saw that the shelves were mostly empty with just a few books randomly spread out on a few of the bookshelves. I had read that his collection had disappeared so I was not sure if these books once belonged to Saunière or had been purchased just to furnish the shelves for tourists.

The room smelt musty from disuse and a film of dust covered every protrusion. Thick cobwebs covered the corners of the grimy windows. I wondered if it had been Marie Denarnaud, Saunière's housekeeper, who had been the last one to clean this room. By the thickness and abundance of dust, I thought it probably was. Checking the cupboard doors to see if they would open, I found only the low cupboards were unlocked. The reason being

that except for a few spider webs and more layers of dust they were just as I had expected, empty. Checking for any secret compartments, I found not a one. They were either too well hidden for me to find or they did not exist.

Climbing the narrow steep stairs, I pushed open the metal door at the top, the protesting hinges screamed out for some lubrication. Stepping onto the roof of the library, I stared at the view from every side. It was still impressive. A narrow metal ladder that lay alongside one of the low walls that acted as seats was, I deduced, used for access to the top of the small tower that gave this building its distinctive shape.

Looking over the sides of the crenel-topped tower, I saw the garden and car park were still deserted. Picking up the unwieldy metal ladder, I eventually managed to slot it into the brackets built into the top of the small tower to hold it in place. Now secured, I quickly climbed up the rusty rungs, hoping the metal under the rust was still strong enough to support my weight. I arrived at the top safely and clambered into the small space. Standing on the curved floor I admired the view. I was told that at one time a flagpole was situated here and no doubt, a flag was hung from it. Gazing out at the vista below me, I could imagine Saunière standing here just as I was now, looking out over the landscape spread out below. Wondering if he

had designed this tower so he could keep an eye on some particular location from this vantage point, I turned one hundred and eighty degrees.



Orangerie Tower

What was it Saunière had spied on from here? Knowing my eyes had probably passed over the location without

recognizing it, I took some photographs before quickly scrambling back down the ladder. With a loud clang that displaced some of its rust, I placed the ladder back down on the roof where I had found it. Leaving the tower, I walked along the ramparts towards the twin of the Magdala Tower, the Orangery.

But unlike the Magdala Tower that is built in stone, the Orangery Tower is constructed from glass. I stopped at a rope stretched across the terrace blocking my progress; a sign indicated the way forward was barred. Looking around the garden, I saw there was still no sign of life, so stepping over the rope I hurried forward before anyone appeared to stop me. I entered the dilapidated remains of the orangery, much of the glass was cracked, broken, or missing. Peeling paint still clung desperately to the rusting ironwork that made up its delicate structure. Weeds and lavender covered the crumbling brickwork; their roots now part of the wall and probably going some way to holding it all together.

This tower of glass is a mirror image of the Magdala Tower at the opposite end of the terrace. With the door leading to the lower level locked, there was nothing else really to see here, except another angle of the view through the spaces not blocked by the grimy weathered glass, I retraced my steps and after a brief walk around

the garden I headed for the Church, the main purpose of my visit.

The Church is small because it used to be the private chapel belonging to the Hautpoul family, one time owners of the nearby Château. There is a blocked up arched opening in the wall between the château and church gardens, which was probably used for access to the church from the château. Another church once serviced the villager's religious needs, dedicated to Saint Peter, and previously known as *St. Pierre aux liens*, but now little of it remains.

Apparently Catalan mercenaries attacked the village during the 14th century. They seemed to have a spy in the village or somehow had gained knowledge of its layout, as when they arrived they concentrated on bombarding one of the towers in the ramparts near to the church. This tower contained the village's gunpowder store and after a few well-aimed cannon shots, the gunpowder exploded with obvious destructive results. With the defences breached, the invaders poured into the village. Surprisingly they did not continue their attack on the village, as you would expect, but rushed straight towards St. Peter's Church. The story goes that they entered the vault beneath that church and took something out, but no records exist as to what this may have been. Having

got what they came for, the mercenaries left the village. If this story is true it is obvious that they came to the village for the sole purpose of getting their hands on something kept in the vault below the old church. Although the vault is probably still there, it is now full of hundreds of years of garbage. An attempt was once made to clear out the vault but the deep hole contained so much infill that it was a futile endeavour. It would need heavy machinery to empty all the material and thus gain entrance to the long lost vault under St. Peter's Church. It was some time after the 14th century that Saunière's church was re-dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene.

On arrival at the entrance to the Mary Magdalene Church, I examined the porch. The door, a solid looking wooden affair, was set back in the entrance. No doubt another design of Saunière's, if not the shape, certainly the decorations and wording he had ordered inscribed under the feet of the small statue of Mary Magdalene. This statue adorned centre position on the triangular shaped peak of the small roof. The inscription reads *Terribilis est locus iste*, which means, 'this place is terrible'. Mary holds in her hands a cross that pointed like an arrow towards some distant point in the landscape; I made a mental note to bring a compass with me next time to see if it led anywhere. I snapped off a few pictures and then stepped

forward to enter the church. Pushing on the door, I was surprised to find it locked. I had taken it for granted that the church would be accessible to the public. Worried that I may have come all this way to view the interior of the church but now would not be able to gain entry I tried again. It still did not open. I gave it a forceful shove with my shoulder, thinking the door may just be stiff from age. As I rubbed my now bruised shoulder I deduced that it was definitely locked.

Gazing around for someone I could ask about access to the church, I noticed a sheet of paper in a small glass-fronted notice board; it had obviously been there for some time as the once white paper had yellowed with age. It was advertising the opening times of the church. Unfortunately the top right hand corner had curled over enabling a spider to spin a web across to make a home, hiding some of the text. Bending down I tried to make sense of the faded lettering I could see. After reading it I discovered the reason for the locked door: It was only open for twenty minutes of every hour, something I had not known. A glance at my watch told me I had just over twenty minutes to wait. Relieved that my journey had not been in vain, I used this time to explore the garden by the church. Stopping at the entrance to the cemetery, I stared up at the skull and crossbones motif fashioned into the

metal arch above the gate. The origins of the ubiquitous skull and crossed bones motif are unclear. There is no doubt that the symbol itself is very old, appearing as a funerary symbol in Christian catacombs, also a common tombstone decoration in the middle ages.



Skull and Crossbones above graveyard entrance

It is believed that French Knights Templar used this symbol on the flags of their Templar warrior ships, later adopted by Pirates to adorn their flags. It became known as the Jolly Roger, though any merchant ship seeing this flag heading towards them, I imagine, would think it anything but jolly, quite the opposite in fact.

The significance of the skull and crossbones to the Templars is unknown, but interestingly, some Templar graves have been found with the leg bones removed and placed crossed on their chest. The skull and crossbones symbol is also an important Masonic emblem, symbolizing the transience of the material world, and used in initiation

rituals as a symbol of rebirth; boys and their toys.

The skull and crossbones Saunière saw fit to position here is to represent death and this symbol was once a common symbol used in churches around this area.

On a future visit made to Rennes-le-Château, Sandy Hamblett, a fellow researcher and editor of the *Rennes Alchemist*, now renamed *Rhedesium* (a publication covering the Rennes-le-Château mystery and related topics) and Bill Kersey, an author and publisher of Rennes-le-Château related books, and I, would visit the church in Cassaignes. There we noticed that the skull and crossbones picture stored in a back room with the Stations of the Cross which was the reason we were there. We asked the key holder of the church about the purpose of this gruesome image.

He told us that this symbol was often placed outside the church or the household of the deceased when a death had occurred in the village or a funeral was taking place in the church.

Saunière's Skull and Crossbones has twenty-two teeth, a number that seems important as it recurs often in this mystery, as does the number seventeen, both seemingly too often to be mere coincidence. Walking through the archway, I wandered into the graveyard that had been the location of some of Saunière's more clandestine and mysterious activities.



Church Funeral Sign

(Photograph:
courtesy Sandy
Hamblett of an
item found in
the sacristy at
Cassaignes church)

With Marie's help, the priest had, much to the dismay of the villagers, dug up some of the graves. They were obviously looking for something. When confronted by the Mayor, Saunière's explanation was that he was repositioning some of the older graves to make room as the graveyard was small and was becoming full; soon there would be no room left for any more burials. He had, he explained, carried out the work at night, in secret, so as not to upset those in the village. The mayor, obviously not impressed, ordered him to cease disturbing the dead.



Rennes-le-Château Church Rear, Bell Tower and Graveyard

Apparently, one night Saunière was seen entering the graveyard by one of the villagers. Following the priest into the graveyard to see what he was up to, the man was surprised to see no sign of the priest; he had disappeared. Spooked, the villager fled. Had Saunière, directed by one of the parchments he is said to have found, been excavating a lost entrance into the crypt below the church and this is where he had disappeared? Possibly, or he could also have noticed he was being followed and jumped over the wall at the end of the cemetery into his garden. This

was something he used to do to amuse his visitors. From the church garden he would send his guests to his garden saying he and Marie would meet them there shortly. As soon as their guests were out of sight Saunière and Marie, would enter the cemetery and scramble over the wall that backed onto the Tower garden. The visitors would then be surprised to see the two of them already waiting in the garden when there was no obvious way they could have arrived there first.

Stopping at the priest's grave, I stared at the simple memorial. I had expected something more... fitting, I suppose, for the man, rather than basically just a slab of concrete with hardly any adornments. What a sad memorial to such a charismatic man. I stared at the bas-relief depicting the head of the priest. It was not even that of Saunière but copied from a photograph of his brother Alfred. Maybe dying so suddenly Saunière hadn't had time to design his own monument, as I am sure he would have. I snapped off a photograph. His faithful housekeeper—and probably more—lay in a grave beside him, together in life, together in death, or so they thought. In September 2004, L'Huilier, the mayor of Rennes-le-Château at that time, had Saunière's body moved from the village cemetery to a fortified mausoleum in the garden of the refurbished villa. His body now lies in unconsecrated ground and you have to pay to see it.



Saunière's Grave
(Photo: courtesy Andrew Gough)

The Grotto had always intrigued me. The story goes that Saunière himself not only built the ugly looking thing but also carried every one of the rocks up the hill himself. I wanted to visit the place they had come from but at that point in time I was still researching the exact location, apparently it was somewhere near the Couleurs river at the bottom of the hill.

The rocks looked to me like some sort of coral or maybe volcanic, I am sure this type of rock has a name but I am unaware of it. Saunière's original grotto design, or at least part of it, had been destroyed over the years, maybe losing forever a clue to the mystery. It has since been rebuilt. Walking around the grotto I could see these unusual rocks were in abundance, no mean feat to have

carried all these up the hill. Just walking up is, as I was soon to find out, an arduous task in itself.



Saunière's Church Garden Grotto

Noticing how large some of them were I decided to test the weight of one of the larger stones; maybe they were made up of a light mineral. I soon discovered that this was not the case, though not as heavy as it looked I only managed to lift one end of the large rock. There was no way I could lift the whole thing, at least not without injury to my back. It would have been impossible for Saunière, unless he was an exceptionally strong man, to have lifted

it by himself, let alone carry it up the steep hill to the village. Even two men would struggle with the effort.



Mary Magdalene Church Entrance

After taking some more pictures, I glanced at my watch. It was time for the church to open so I made my way over to the church entrance. After a wait of a couple of minutes, a woman appeared holding a large key. I greeted her in French but she just nodded at me, probably insulted by my bad French. After unlocking the door, she swung it open revealing a gloomy interior. Stepping inside I heard the click of a light switch, she then stood sentry just inside. Peering through the open door at the dim interior, I wasn't sure if she had just turned the lights on or off. I paused for a second, savouring the moment. After such a long time since I first caught sight of it on Henry Lincoln's documentary, I was finally about to enter Saunière's' church.

Stepping through the doorway, like all who enter here, I was greeted by the sight of the devil. No not the woman standing by the door, the statue inside. After a brief comparison, its face though was friendlier than the woman's standing guard lest I attempt to vandalize the church as others had done in the past. For this reason, on this visit I found the devil encased in a glass prison.

The devil supports a basin of water. Maybe this is why he has a stooped appearance, the weight is pushing him down into the uncomfortable position we see him in. Above the basin are four angels, each in the process of making one of the signs of the cross.



Saunière's Church Demon

The woman sentry assessing that I was probably not a threat, wandered off outside leaving me alone to explore the church. This I decided was a good opportunity to get all the photographs I wanted without hindrance from other tourists, although so far I had seen none. Though I am not a religious person, walking around the church I sensed the lack of atmosphere that I normally experienced in most of the other churches I had visited.

Where was that particular feeling ones gets in a place of religious worship? I took photos of all the stations and statues, sometimes standing on one of the wooden pews to get a better angle.

Approaching the altar, well as near to it as the metal railings barring the way would allow me; I stared at the bas-relief for a moment before taking a photograph. Like the devil just inside the church, I had a feeling this altar painting was significant in solving the mystery. It was after all the only decoration Saunière thought important enough to paint himself. I had just finished taking the last picture when the woman reappeared and glared at me. Words were not required, I knew exactly what she wanted and so I exited the church. I would return later in the day to examine the rest of the decorations more closely.

I entered the courtyard between the back of the villa Bethania and the Presbytery and waited while the woman locked the large church door. I had intended to buy a

ticket for the museum. When she appeared I pointed to the sign advertising the museum ticket price. Translating, with her lack of understanding of the English language and with my lack of French, I concluded that the museum was closed, due to it being reorganised or renovated, or something beginning with 'R'. It would be open again in three days time. You can imagine the disappointment I felt on discovering this, as I would be on my way home by the time it reopened. This meant I wouldn't be able to view some of the artefacts associated with the mystery. Most importantly these included the stone pillar where Saunière supposedly discovered the parchments, and the knights stone that seems to have started Saunière on his road to riches

Glancing at the door to the museum I saw a pile of building materials, the door was partly open and I thought of wandering innocently inside. A glance back at the woman glaring at me from across the courtyard, as if she understood my intention, changed my mind. There was nothing I could do about the situation, so I returned to my van for a cup of tea, to work out what I was going to do next.

Deciding to explore the hill on which the village of Rennes-le-Château was built before, I ventured further afield, I set off down the path that ran beneath the Magdala tower. Knowing that Saunière once walked this very path added to the atmosphere that I had already gleaned from

visiting his domain. The day was ideal for walking; the overcast sky shielded the hot rays of the sun, keeping the temperature cool. An attempt to veer off the path in an effort to explore off the beaten track resulted in scratches from the thick and abundant thorny gorse bushes that seem to thrive in this climate. Forced back onto the path I continued down the hill until I eventually arrived at the road that wound down to Couiza. Retracing my steps, I made my way back up the hill, planning to explore the path in the opposite direction.

Spending a few hours exploring, the only thing of any interest I came across were a few stone shepherds huts, built of rocks but mostly in ruins. They reminded me of a story about a Shepherd I had come across during my research, which I thought may be a part of the mystery, but I had no idea if it actually happened. It concerned a Shepherd called Ignace Paris. He supposedly stumbled over a hoard of treasure while looking for a lost lamb on the hill of Rennes-le-Château, and the story is worth retelling here for its entertainment value if nothing else.

Ignace Paris—The Shepherd and the Treasure:

The legend is that in February, 1250AD, Blanche of Castille came to Rhedae (Rennes-le-Château) not to stay but to place the royal treasure into safekeeping as France was in revolt. Everywhere was

being pillaged and burnt, even Paris was threatened. Only Rhedae with its vast caverns and enormous stronghold was in a position to protect and conserve the Royal treasure.

Soon after her arrival the treasure was unloaded and carried down to an underground room of the keep along with ten prisoners whom she had promised liberty in exchange for their help.

In the floor was a stone with a thick iron ring set into it. The heavy stone was lifted to reveal a staircase leading down into darkness. The Queen ordered the men to bring torches and follow her. Entering the opening they climbed down the stone staircase that seemed to go on forever until finally they reached the bottom and stood in a sort of round rotunda from which dark and sinister passages led off.

Stopping at a certain point in the passage she opened a secret door made to look like the rock passage, almost impossible to notice if you had no idea it was there. The Queen retraced her steps to the waiting prisoners and ordered them to bring the treasure down and along the passage and into the secret room. When

all the treasure had been brought down and the ten men were still inside, she closed the rock door sealing the men inside forever.

The Queen left, ignoring the prisoners muffled cries of terror echoing along the passage. She returned up the stone staircase and had the stone slab replaced by her soldiers.

She left details of the treasure's location on two coded parchments, which were then hidden in the church at Rennes-le-Château as a fail-safe in case the secret was ever lost. Although she did pass the secret on to her son, St Louis, before she died, he died of the plague taking the secret with him. The Treasure of France seemed lost.

Over the coming years Rhedae was pillaged, burned and destroyed until it was little more than a ruin.

In 1645, in memory of the Queen Blanche of Castille, Rhedae was renamed Rennes-le-Château. Although the town was rebuilt it was never to its former size or glory.

Many, many years later a shepherd, called Ignace Paris, was tending his sheep on the hill of Rennes-le-Château when he

noticed one of his lambs was missing. He could hear its bleating but not see it. Following the sound, he arrived at a hole, which had formed in the soil into which the lamb had fallen. Peering into the opening, Ignace saw the lamb. After making a rough torch from some dried grass and a stick, he climbed down into the hole. Frightened by the flames of Ignace's crude torch, the lamb backed away further into the passage. Following the lamb Ignace soon arrived in a room hewn from the rock, which was filled with many chests. Ignace noticed a few gold coins spilling from one that was rotting away. As he pulled away some of the decayed wood a stream of gold coins spilled out. The Shepherd could not believe his eyes. He looked around at all the chests and then recoiled in fright as he saw skeletons scattered around as if guarding the treasure he had stumbled upon. Quickly he filled his cap with some of the gold coins. Scooping up the lamb he quickly left. Ignace realised he had stumbled upon a great secret, the treasure would make him a very rich man indeed. To hide the hole he carefully laid branches across the opening, and

then covered them with stones, finally spreading soil over the top until there were no signs to suggest that a hole was there. He marked the spot carefully and then rounding up his sheep, he returned home where he laid the cap of gold coins on the table before his wife, who at the sight of the treasure went into a flap thinking her husband must have stolen them. Ignace could not tell her the truth so he kept quite.

The neighbours, hearing the shouting, quickly came to see what was happening, seeing the coins one of them fetched the lord. Ignace was questioned and accused of stealing, killing and robbing a traveller, in the end he had no choice but to tell the truth and in a fit of rage of having been made to reveal his secret he rushed forward, intent on killing the lord but was instead killed by the guards. Though Ignace had told of the chests of gold, he never revealed the location, this he took to his grave. Though the Lord and his guards as well as the villages searched they never found the entrance, Ignace had hidden it so well. The secret was lost once more.

Whether the story is based on fact, and as much as I would like it to be, I doubt if this is a true account of what happened. It could though contain some elements of truth. It seems Ignace Paris was a Shepherd living in this area at the time; the remains of his house are apparently still visible on the hillside somewhere. The hill beneath the village is said to be riddled with tunnels, some are naturally formed and some man-made. Even some of the villager's cellars have evidence of past tunnelling. Perhaps proof that some of the villagers living here after the death of the priest, believed that Saunière had discovered something of value and were searching for it. Marie Denarnaud is reported as saying, "The villagers here are walking on gold." And it seems some of the villagers believed her.

As I wandered the hillside, I kept an eye out for any holes or shallow depressions that may be Ignace's alleged covered up hole. Unfortunately, the area has become so overgrown since the time of Ignace that unless someone finds it by accident again, it seems all but impossible to rediscover.

Bill Kersey believes he has found an underground cavern on this very hillside. Could it be the same cavern found by Ignace? Only time will tell. All is explained in his book '*Still Spins the Spider of Rennes-le-Château?*

By the time I returned to the village I was weak with the exertion of traipsing over the hill. Feeling refreshed after

a cup of tea, I drove down to Couiza to replenish my supplies. On my return, I visited the church again to take some more photographs; this time there were six tourists to keep me company. I passed another night parked in the car park and then spent the following day familiarizing myself with the surrounding countryside and visiting the nearby villages. Having taken as many photographs as I thought I would need and with time running out if I was going to catch my ferry back to England, I reluctantly left Rennes-le-Château.

I was now firmly hooked on the mystery and planned to return as soon as possible after I had carried out some further research.