

Thiers and La Vallée des Rouets

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Photos by Keith and Ruth Andrews

The most satisfying visit of our first week in France was prompted by a leaflet in the gîte where we were staying for a walk along **La Vallée des Rouets** at Thiers, a medieval town near Clermont Ferrand, famous for its cutlery and paper-making. We only discovered the rest of the town after we had failed to buy a ticket for a guided tour to the last mill still in use in the valley. We realised that there was also a cutlery museum, a town trail, and a walk through the **Vallée des Usines** (factories) alongside the river Durolle.

Thiers has masses of fast-flowing water (particularly on our visit following a thunderstorm the night before) and plenty of timber for charcoal, but no metal ore or sandstone, so it is unclear why it became France's chief centre for edge tool manufacture. However, from the 14th century the lower parts of the town were involved in tanning, textiles, and paper making, as well as knife making, a process which was only industrialised in the mid-19th century. As the town grew and its factories spread on to new sites, the original warren of medieval stone-built residential workshops and storage facilities remained undisturbed.



It is now a conservation area, and two of the cutlery craftsmen's shops have become an informative museum. We were given lots of information and assured that the Vallée des Rouets was an open site with free access, so we set out to explore.

A very steep and rocky footpath led down to an overgrown part of the riverbank several miles upstream from the town. A **rouet** is a small stone-built workshop or mill where knives

and similar edge tools were sharpened using a rotating grindstone powered by a vertical waterwheel. The **émouleur** (knife-grinder) would lie face down on a plank above the revolving grindstone, with his dog lying on his legs to keep him warm.

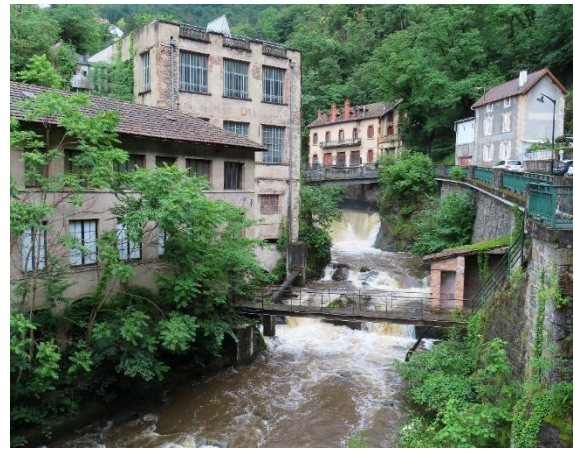
We explored 10 of these sites, only one being a recognisable building, Chez Lyonnet (*right*). M Lyonnet was the last émouleur, working until 1976. All the rouets had a narrow undershot metal wheel with curved metal paddles. I am a bit suspicious that they looked in quite good condition while the stone sheds themselves had been almost completely absorbed back into the undergrowth.



After staggering back up the stony track to civilisation (and the car!) we returned to Thiers for lunch at an excellent crêperie before setting off to explore the Vallée des Usines. Despite the rain we were able to photograph some of the 19th century paper mills, several of which were converted to cutlery manufacture, and which crowd every inch of the river bank.



The 1890 Du May factory was renovated in 2002 to house an 'Industrial Architectural Interpretation Centre' which would presumably have been very informative but it was not open on a Thursday.



We also did not visit the Creux de l'Enfer (Hell's Hollow) factory (*centre of picture*), a former cutlery factory converted in 1988 into a contemporary arts centre.

The factories dependence on water power was terminated by the construction of the Sauviat dam and hydro-electric scheme which came into use in 1903. The arrival of electricity in Thiers enabled a lot of the ancillary processes associated with cutlery manufacture, such as pressing spoons from thin metal sheets and making handles of wood, horn, or bakelite, to be carried out on a domestic scale. Ateliers (workshops) were added to the medieval buildings of the upper town, and were on all available plots of land. They are easily identified by their large windows.



Factories and workshops in the Sous Saint-Jean area, where the river is extremely narrow.



Derelict factories further downstream. Beyond these was Usine de Crospailhat, which produced Sabatier knives.

A big attempt has been made in Thiers to document the history, technology, and buildings associated with the cutlery industry. A most informative book *Thiers, Une Exception Industrielle* (ISBN 2-905554-26-6) was published in 2004; we were able to buy a copy of it from the museum (at the bargain price of 8€) and much of this article is based on it. Unfortunately it is in French!