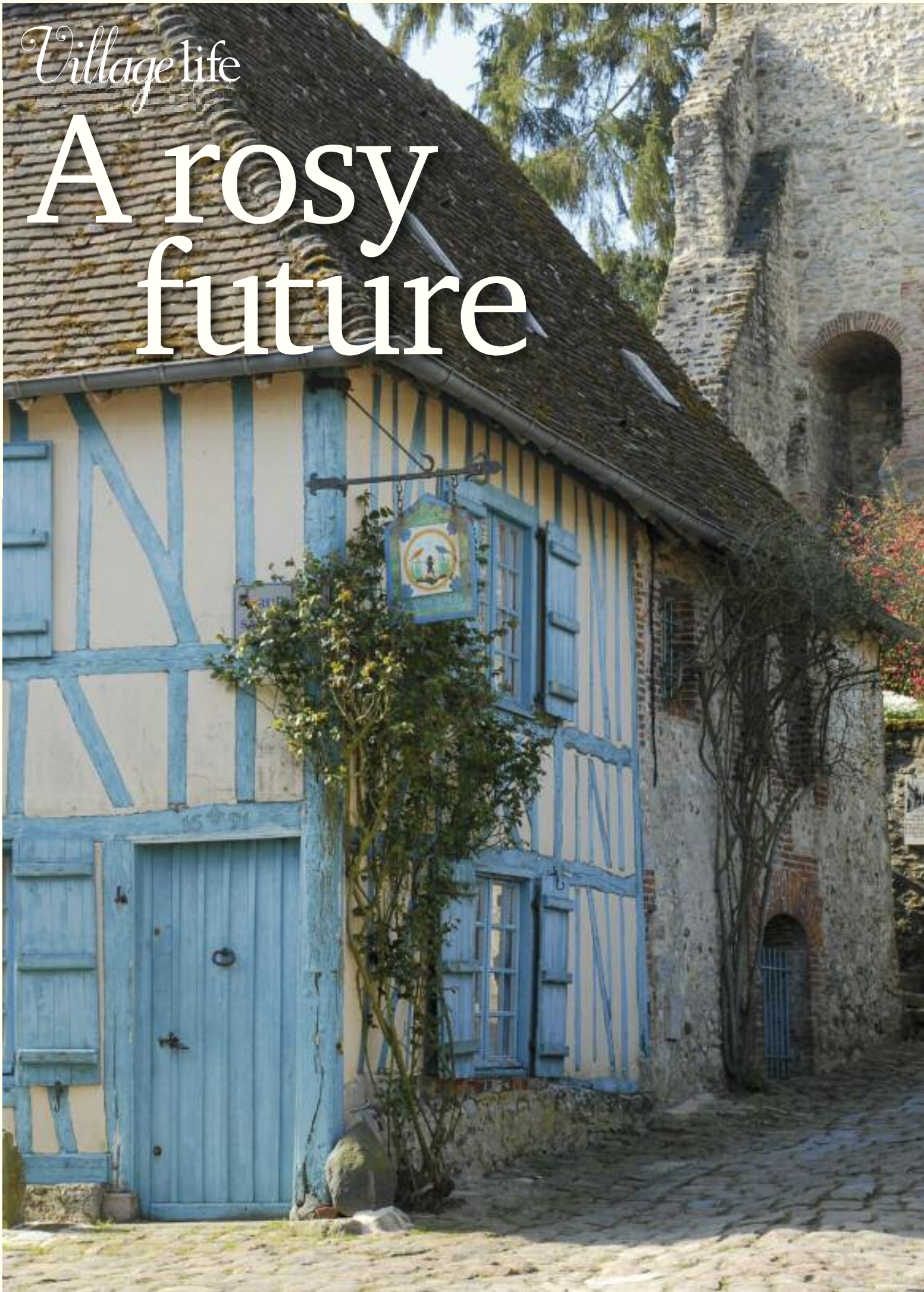


Village life

A rosy future





LEFT: The Blue House and castle wall
 ABOVE: Restaurateur Jean-Pierre His has spearheaded the transformation of the pretty village of Gerberoy



For decades the village of Gerberoy has remained unchanged, but now its vineyard, rose gardens and artistic heritage are being lovingly restored, writes **Rosemary J Brown**

History is not standing still in medieval Gerberoy. No time warps here – this captivating *cit * perched on a hilltop where Picardy, Normandy and  le-de-France converge, is enjoying a 21st-century renaissance. Gerberoy hasn't experienced a revival like this since post-Impressionist artist Henri Le Sidaner awoke the sleepy hamlet in 1901, adorning it with roses and transforming the remains of its crumbling ch teau into an exquisite Italianate garden.

This friend of Monet, Rodin and Sisley was seeking light and inspiration. What he discovered was a treasure chest of 17th- and 18th-century architecture, embraced by historic ramparts. Gerberoy was to become Henri Le Sidaner's muse, a classified site and one of the country's first *Plus Beaux Villages*. Home to the artist for 40 years, the *cit * is immortalised in 200 canvases found in museums around the world. In this enchanted place, 80 kilometres north of Paris, Le Sidaner's paintings come alive.

Following in the artist's footsteps a century later, a handful of Gerberoy's 115 citizens are polishing up its *patrimoine*, led by restaurateur Jean-Pierre His, honorary mayor Louis Vallois and  tienne Le Sidaner, grandson of Henri Le Sidaner. They are supervising a restoration which has seen the artist's glorious gardens bloom again, an ancient vineyard produce its first wine in centuries and the birth of two new festivals – *Les Moments Musicaux de Gerberoy* and





LEFT: The red rose of Picardy can be seen around the village CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The gardens of Henri Le Sidaner; Étienne Le Sidaner; Work continues; *La Table au Soleil* by Le Sidaner

a medieval fair – complementing the annual *Fête des Roses* founded by the artist in 1928.

“We are honouring Gerberoy,” says Étienne Le Sidaner. “We must protect it and at the same time try to develop creative, cultural and gastronomic activities to share with visitors.” Guided by his grandfather’s legacy and his own generosity, Étienne proffered the keys to his garden and bestowed land for the vineyard.

An artist and poet himself, Étienne spends weekends in his grandfather’s beloved home. “My grandfather spent his life making paintings of his house and gardens,” he says. “His soul inhabits this house. He is in the walls, the beams, the windows, the fireplaces.”

He is also in the gardens. Replicating the original

plan, a determined group of local amateur and professional gardeners are lovingly restoring the artist’s white garden, Italian terraces, Temple of Love and treasured rose gardens. More than 2,500 roses,

hydrangeas and perennials have already been planted.

“My grandfather’s paintings have sprung to life,” says Étienne, who created a small museum on the site paying homage to his grandfather.

Nothing has changed since the death of the

painter, says Jean-Pierre His, who runs the *Ambassade de Picardie* restaurant with his wife, Danièle. “The atmosphere in Gerberoy is just what Henri Le Sidaner would remember. The houses, the rooftops, the view – it’s where he positioned his easel, it’s what he painted.”

It was Jean-Pierre His’ vision that sparked

“We must protect Gerberoy and at the same time try to develop creative, cultural and gastronomic activities”

Gerberoy's resurgence. With Étienne's blessing, he created the two associations that guide the restoration of the garden and the vineyard.

"It takes passion, energy and opportunity," he explains. "I want to ensure that this heritage is passed on to future generations."

The vineyard Clos Gerberoy heralded the renaissance in 2006. Located at the end of the Rue des Vignes, 900 pinot noir vines are thriving in the care of volunteer viticulturalists, who come to mow, water and weed under the watch of Gerberoy's 15th-century collegiate church. Indeed, it was the Collégiale Saint-Pierre's early canons who planted the original vineyard. History repeated itself in April 2009 when Clos Gerberoy produced its first vintage.

If he's not among the vines, you'll find Louis Vallois tending the Le Sidaner gardens. As treasurer of the two associations charged with their rebirth, he divides his time between working the land and reckoning the accounts.

Historical roots

"We're putting a little life back in the village," says the honorary mayor who served Gerberoy for three decades. He had the foresight to conceal the electrical pylons and cables which ensured its eligibility as a *Plus Beaux Village*.

The family of his wife Denise can trace their roots here as far back as the French Revolution. Her father, Louis Brissard, was mayor of Gerberoy during the era of Henri Le Sidaner and helped him establish Les Amis de Gerberoy in 1909, which to this day offers guidance on conservation and restoration.

"I think that everyone wishes to protect Gerberoy and safeguard its unique charm," says Étienne.

"Finding a balance between maintaining the authenticity that defines Gerberoy and the harsh realities of today is not always easy. But for my part, I have the responsibility to uphold the memory of my grandfather and all that he wished for Gerberoy."

You might think there's enough history in a place such as Gerberoy; the Romans built an oppidum here in 57BC, William the Conqueror fought his own son, Robert Curthose, here in 1077, King Philippe-Auguste proclaimed it a city in 1202 and Henri IV rode through it in 1591. But the citizens of Gerberoy are making their own 21st-century history. Step by step, year by year, they are recapturing Gerberoy's vibrant past to enhance its future. 🇫🇷

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Half-timbered houses in the village streets; The gardens of Henri Le Sidaner are a popular destination for visitors; Typical blue and white houses; View from the gardens of Henri Le Sidaner towards the house





FRANCOFILE

GETTING THERE

By road: Gerberoy is a two-hour drive from the Calais ferry port and a 90-minute drive from Paris.



By rail: Trains run regularly from Paris to Beauvais (one hour), taxi to Gerberoy (30 minutes).

WHERE TO STAY

Le Logis de Gerberoy

4 Rue du Logis du Roy
60380 Gerberoy
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 82 36 80
<http://lelogisdegerberoy.free.fr>
Double room with breakfast: €60

Les Jardins du Vidamé

4 Impasse du Vidamé
60380 Gerberoy
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 82 45 32
<http://lesjardinsduvidame.monsite.wanadoo.fr>
Double room with breakfast: €65

WHERE TO EAT

Ambassade de Picardie

2 Allée du Jeu de Tamis
60380 Gerberoy
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 82 16 50
www.ambassade-de-picardie.com

Bistrot de Pays et Salon de Thé

Les Jardins du Vidamé
4 Impasse du Vidamé
60380 Gerberoy
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 82 45 32
<http://lesjardinsduvidame.monsite-orange.fr>

WHAT TO VISIT

Les Jardins Henri Le Sidaner

Tel: (Fr) 3 44 82 36 63
www.lesjardinshenrilesidaner.fr

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Point d'Information Tourisme

Hôtel de Ville
60380 Gerberoy
Tel: (Fr) 3 44 82 54 86
www.gerberoy.fr

LES PLUS BEAUX VILLAGES

L'Association des Plus Beaux Villages de France started in 1982 in Collonges-la-Rouge, Corrèze. It consists of 152 villages with no more than 2,000 inhabitants, in settings of exceptional beauty.
www.les-plus-beaux-villages-de-france.org