

Jeu de mail in France

Région Île-de-France

The region Île-de-France counts eight departments:

- Essonne (91)
- Hauts-de-Seine (92)
- Paris (75)
- Seine-et-Marne (77)
- Seine-Saint-Denis (93)
- Val-de-Marne (94)
- Val-d'Oise (95)
- Yvelines (78)



Essonne (91)

Evry-Courcouronnes

In Evry-Courcouronnes, there are eight street names with the word Mail: Mail du Marchais Guesnon, Mail Jean Zay, Mail de Thorigny, Mail René Clair, Mail de l'Ami du Peuple, Mail Maurice Genevoix, Mail du Temps des Cerises, and Mail Jules Ferry.

I did not find any information about the history of the names of these streets. As for the number of Mails, there is certainly no connection with the ancient game. For example, the Mail Jean Zay was named after World War II. Jean Zay was a French politician, imprisoned by the Vichy government from August 1940 until he was murdered in 1944.

Similarly, the Mail Maurice Genevoix is named after the French author and WWI veteran, who died in 1980.

Orsay

In the town of Orsay, there are a Rue du Mail and a Pont du Viaduc du Mail. Further information is not available.

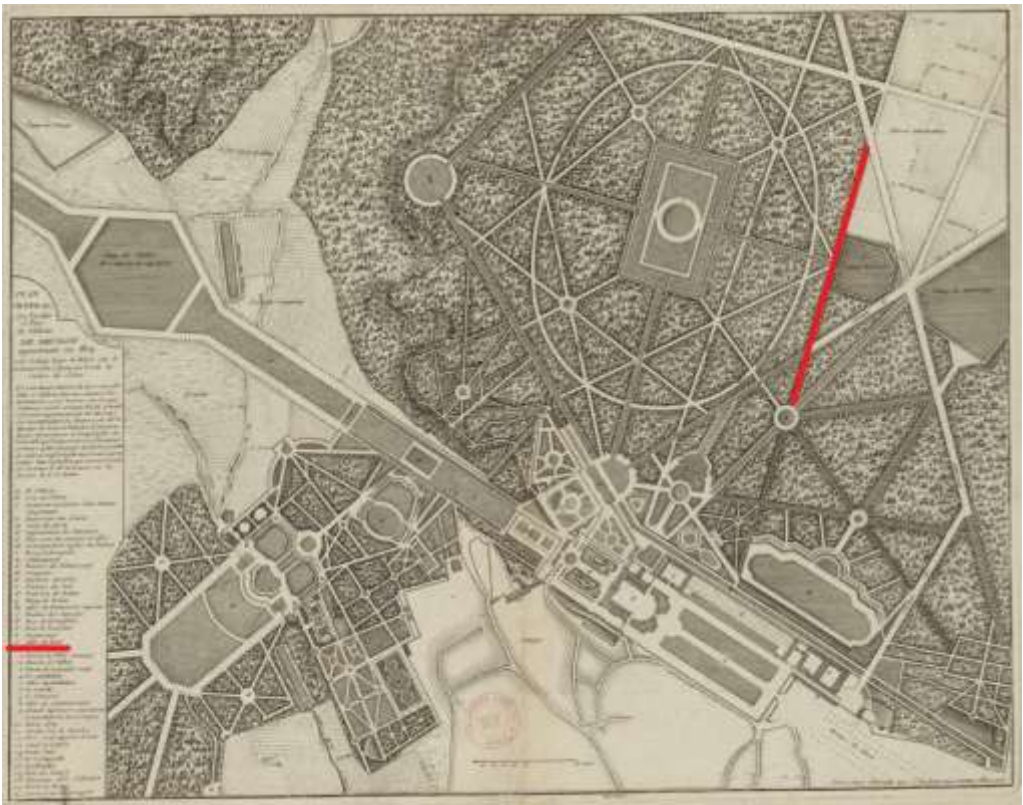


This ancient postcard shows a slope too important for the game of mail. — <https://cartespostalesdecollection.com/>

Hauts-de-Seine (92)

Meudon

The Domaine de Meudon, originally a medieval mansion, was transformed into a Renaissance castle by the cardinal of Lorraine in the 16th century. He became a royal residence under Louis XIV, who stayed there regularly. The castle was embellished by Louvois, then by Monsignor the Dauphin, who built the Château Neuf there and built sumptuous gardens by André Le Nôtre. These gardens, organised in terraces and gardens, offer exceptional views of Paris and the Seine. It is not clear when the mail alley was laid out. (<https://museedupatrimoine.fr/>)



*Already in the 17th century, the Allee de Mail was laid out. King Louis XIV, an avid mail player, visited the castle regularly. 'Plan général des jardins et parc du château de Meudon appartenant au Roy...', 18th century, edited by Pierre-Jean Mariette –
Bibliothèque nationale de France*

Neuilly-sur-Seine

In the past, there were three castles on the present territory of Neuilly-sur-Seine: Château Neuilly (owned by the king and the nuns of Longchamp), Château de Villiers, and Château de Madrid (also named Château de Boulogne or Château de Faïence).

The **château de Neuilly** is a former château in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France. Its estate covered a vast 170-hectare park called "parc de Neuilly". It was built in 1751. Today, only one wing of the château survives. The **château de Villiers** seems to have only been a bourgeoise *grande maison*, despite having 24 rooms and a beautiful garden divided from the parc de Neuilly proper by a palisade. It was subsumed back into the parc in the first years of the 19th century.

The castle was built in 1751 and was largely destroyed in 1848. One wing of the former castle remains and was integrated into a new convent building in 1907.

The **château de Madrid** was built by François I, and was completed during the reign of Henry II of France, about 1552. It was one of the privileged castles of Catherine de' Medici. Around 1610, Louis XIII still visited it every now and then. All these royals were players of the mail game, but a detailed description of the gardens fails.

In 1657, the castle was already in bad condition, and it was in ruins before the French Revolution. In 1793, it was demolished.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org> and <https://fr.wikipedia.org>)

The Porte Maillot used to be the main entrance in the Bois de Boulogne, and owes its name certainly at the jeu de mail that once existed there. In 1856, the Porte Maillot was surrounded by pubs and restaurants. From there, alleys lead to the ponds, Longchamp and Madrid, so possibly the jeu de mail was part of the Madrid Castle.

(‘Les environs de Paris illustrés : itinéraire descriptif et historique’, Adolphe Joanne – Paris, Typographie de Ch. Lahure, imprimeur du Sénat et de la Cour de Cassation, 1856)

Saint-Cloud

In 1703, the Duc d'Orléans spent 10 days at the castle of Saint Cloud. In this delicious house, there were, during the stay of the prince, all kinds of divertissements: hunt, music, jeu de mail, and other games.

(*Mercure galant*, Paris, 1703-06)

Bottom next page: ‘Paris et ses monuments’, Louis-Pierre Baltard & Amaury Duval, 19e century – Bibliothèque de l’Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art, collections Jacques Doucet



Top: The red line indicates the former mail alley – ‘Plan général du château, jardins et parc de Saint-Cloud, appartenant à S. A. S. monseigneur le duc d’Orléans’, edited by J. Mariette (Paris), 16.. – Bibliothèque nationale de France



Paris (75)

Between the gates of Saint Honoré and Saint Denis, there were two 'jeux de pallemail,' overseen by the Florentine Raphael de Salvety. The first stretched from the Saint Honoré Gate to the Montmartre Gate, measuring nearly 590 metres long and about 6 metres wide. The second extended from the Montmartre Gate to the Saint Denis Gate and measured 480 metres. On both sides of the alleys, rows of elm trees were to be planted at intervals of approximately 3,5 metres. On the last one, no trees were planted. A hedge or fence was not allowed, and the branches of the trees should not be lower than 3,5 metres.

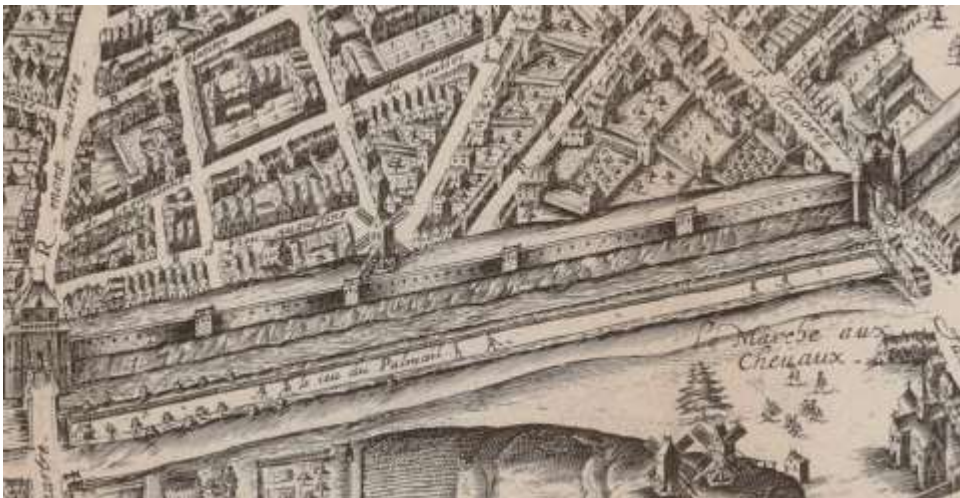
In 1597, Mr De Salvety secured a twelve-year lease. In case the town had to defend itself, it could regain possession of the grounds without indemnification..

(Registres des délibérations du bureau de la ville de Paris. T. 12, 1598-1602, Paul Guérin,, 1909, texte édité et annoté par François Bonnardot, Alexandre Tuetey et Léon Le Grand , Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1883-1921)

De Salvety kept the lease for the first two decades of the 17th century.

The year 1630 marked the end of the playing grounds near the Montmartre Gate, leaving space for new houses.

(‘Le jeu en promenade: les terrains de pal-mail dans l’espace urbain des villes modernes françaises (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)’, Kévin Bourniche, 2017 – www.academia.edu)



On the Palmail near the Montmartre Gate several men are playing the game. – Detail of the 'Portrait de la Ville. Cité et Université de Paris avec les Faubourgs dicelle, Nicolay Vassalieu, 1609 – Bibliothèque nationale de France

A Rue du Mail was opened on the ancient jeu de mail in 1634, according to a decree of 23 November 1633.

(Procès-verbaux / Commission municipale du Vieux Paris – Paris, Imprimerie municipale, 1913)

Up to today, the name has not changed and can be found in the second arrondissement (district).

In 1604, Mr Louis Retard obtained a 99-year lease for a 6-metre-wide

paillemail along the Arsenal wall, to be established at his own expense. He was to plant two rows of elm trees, spaced 3.5 metres apart on both sides, by the riverside, and construct 1-metre-high fences along each side of the alley.



Louis Retard was permitted to build a small shelter to store clubs, balls, and players' coats and suits.

Each year, he provided a mail club and six balls: one set went to King Henri IV at the Louvre and another to the Grandmaster of the Artillery, fulfilling his obligation.

On the Arsenal Jeu du Palmail, four groups of two people play the game. – Detail of the 'Portrait de la Ville. Cité et Université de Paris avec les Faubourgs dicelle, Nicolay Vassalieu, 1609 – Bibliothèque nationale de France

Retard was required to maintain the alley or pay a 500 écus fine to the king. He benefited from the lease for only one year before his death. His widow and son-in-law succeeded him.

(Les actes de Sully passés au nom du roi de 1600 à 1610 : par devant Me Simon Fournier, notaire au Châtelet de Paris, dont les minutes sont conservées en l'étude de Me Henri Motel, notaire à Paris, Maximilien de Béthune Sully –Recueillis, publiés et annotés par Fernand de Mallevoüe, 1911)

During his reign, King Henri IV built the mail and the garden, which the public, who could visit, enjoyed. Sometimes the king joined the game himself.

(‘Etude biographique sur Sully’, Louis Dussieux – Paris, V. Lecoffre, 1887)

Since 1599, the Artillery Grand Master has lived in the Arsenal, where at first only he and his guests played the game of mail.

In contrast, unlike Raphael de Salvety, who was a true ‘maître palemardier’, the Arsenal Mail’s licencies were businessmen rather than specialists.

(Kévin Bourniche, 2017)

By the middle of the 18th century, the mail became accessible to the public. Players could participate for 8 sols, while a broken shaft cost 20 sols and a broken club 30 sols.

(‘Les Curiositez de Paris, de Versailles, de Marly, de Vincennes, de Saint Cloud, et des environs. T. 1 / ; avec les antiquitez justes et précises sur chaque sujet : et les adresses pour trouver facilement tout ce que ces lieux renferment d'agréable et d'utile. ’, M.L.R. Nouvelle edition, revûe, corrigée & augmentée, auteur Claude-Marin Saugrain, 1742-1753)

However, by 1756, the mail had fallen into disrepair and continued to deteriorate. Over the following years, it was gradually dismantled, and by 1774, it had ceased to exist.

(Kévin Bourniche, 2017)

Royalty

In 1633, during the reign of Louis XIII, Cardinal Richelieu, his minister, constructed the Royal Palace. That same year, he added a large space for jeu de mail on the 'Allée de marronniers'.

His son Louis XIV (1638-1715), known as the 'Sun King', liked playing mail and enjoyed the view of the mail alley. When he was young, he learned the game of mail in the Royal Palace gardens.

Later, during his reign (1661-1715), Louis XIV further enlarged the playing court in the Tuileries Palace gardens.

However, I did not find when the original mail was first built; that detail remains unknown.

Similarly, his successor Louis XV, who ruled from 1715 to 1774, also enjoyed jeu de mail. His house accommodated several 'porte mails' (jeu de mail caddies), and in the Tuileries Palace gardens, he replaced the open-air theatre with a jeu de mail court.

(Description de Paris, de Versailles, de Marly, de Meudon, de S. Cloud, de Fontainebleau, et de toutes les autres belles maisons & châteaux des environs de Paris, Jean-Aymar Piganiol de La Force, 1742)



In the paintings, the three Louis around the age of 10, when they were probably already playing the mail game. From left to right:

*Louis XIII by Frans Pourbus the Younger, 1611 –
Galerie Palatine, Palais Pitti, Florence*

*Louis IVX, attributed to Jean Nocret, probably around 1650 –
Private collection*

*Louis XV par Rosalba Carriera, 1720/21 –
Gemäldegalerie, Dresden*

Seine-et-Marne (77)

Fontainebleau

At the end of the Maintenon Alley the rests of the jeu de mail of Henri IV are still visible.

(Kévin Bourniche, 2017)

In the past, the Allee Maintenon was the only access to the castle, avoiding a traverse of the town. It was also the preferred point for going to and returning from the hunt, as well as the alley to play the game of mail, as confirmed by one of its ancient names, Mail Henri IV.

(<https://www.fontainebleau-tourisme.com>)

Claude Emmanuel Loullier ou Lullier (1621-1686), surnamed Chapelle, was once invited to supper in Fontainebleau by the prince. In the afternoon, he took a stroll on the mail to whet his appetite. He saw people playing, and before supper, he rolled up his sleeves and took a few strokes.

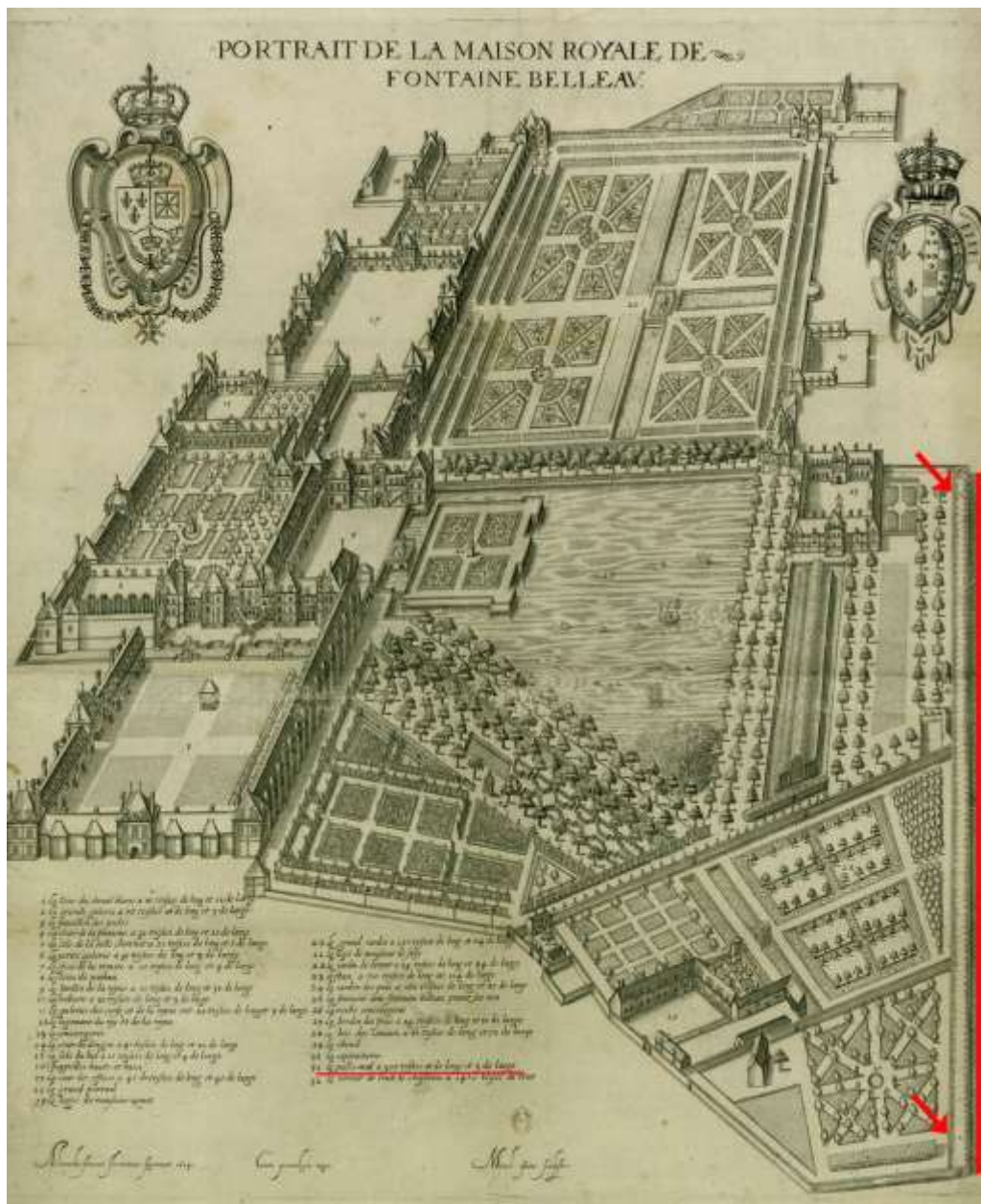
(‘Enseignes de Fontainebleau’, F. Herbet, avec un supplément par E. Thoison, 1898)

The family Nivelon worked as gardeners at Fontainebleau Castle: Bonaventure worked in the park (1671), Zébulon was gardener on the mail (1677), while Jean had a certificate for the maintenance of the mail (1695).

(<https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr>)



Allée Maintenon dates from the 16th century. The alley was restored at the beginning of the 21st century; the maple trees were replaced by the original lime trees. – <https://falrc2.blogspot.com/2010/08/fontainebleau-et-sa-foret.html>



Left from the red line is the 'passe-mail', being 300 'toises' long (ca 600 metres) with a width of 3 toises (ca 6 metres). The two arrows point to the touchstones or other goals to touch or to pass. –

'Portrait de la maison royale de Fontaine Belleau', Alessandro Francini, cartographie; Micael Asinius, graveur, 1614 –
Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fossard (today municipality Esmans)

In 1814, the little village of Frossard, at 21 km from Fontainebleau, had no other meaning than a stopping place for numerous vehicles. There were two inns, facing each other, both open day and night. One of them had a big advantage, because the country had appointed it as supplier of horses, carts and postilions. Like the other inn, it offered good food. Moreover, the father of the owner had bought during the French Revolution the neighbouring convent and garden for next to nothing. The shadowed alleys, groups of lilacs, wild chestnuts planted in quincunx, lawns surrounded by weird and wonderful cut box trees, a shooting range and a jeu de mail were loved by drinkers, players and people in love with the region. All these advantages made it difficult for the other inn.

(‘Le démon de Montchevreuil’, Adolphe de Lescure – Paris, E. Dentu, 1880)

Monceaux-lès-Meaux

The Monceaux Castle, known as le ‘Château des 3 Reines’ (castle of the 3 queens) was the property of Caterina de’ Medici, followed by Gabrielle d’Estrées et Marie de’ Médici.

Caterina is known as the person who probably introduced the jeu de mail en France. The exceptional wooden fence around the jeu de paillemaille caught one’s attention.

(Les Grands architectes français de la Renaissance. P. Lescot, Ph. de l’Orme, J. Goujon, J. Bullant, les Du Cerceau, les Métezeau, les Chambiges, Adolphe Berté, 1860)

Caterina redesigned the castle from 1558 onwards. Being in her own castle, she wants to receive the king, her husband, without his mistress. Already in 1557, she constructed the Cave Pavilion on a slope at the end of the mail alley. From there on had a good look at the games played on the lower placed mail alley.

After the murder of her husband, the Queen Mother resided numerous times at the castle.

The demolition of the castle started in 1799. Today only ruins of the royal castle remain.

(<https://www.chateaudemontceaux.fr>)



These ruins are all that remains from its splendid life in the 16th century, when Caterina de' Medici held sway.—

<https://www.communes.com/mag/chateau-montceau-les-meaux>

Seine-Saint-Denis (93)

Rosny-sous-Bois

I found no traces of a jeu de mail. Only in June 1830, during a conversation between nobles on the terrace of the castle, the Duc de Bordeaux remembered a bookseller named Seguin, who had sent him a mail club and balls, as well as a little booklet explaining how to play the game, which he liked very much. ('Une matinée à Rosny', Auguste Séguin, 1832)

It is possible that Séguin invented the scene, just to mention his own name.

Today, Rosny-sous-Bois counts four Mails: du Centre Ville, Ambroise Paré (a 16th century barber surgeon), Jean-Pierre Timbaud (executed in 1941 by the Germans), and Claude Bernard (a 19th century physiologist). There seems to be no relation to a former mail alley.

Val-de-Marne (94)

Choisy-le-Roi

At the castle, there are big square gardens with beautiful flowerbeds and high fences with several alleys. At the end of the garden is a fishpond, and from there, one can enter the Palmail alley. At its end is the park with its wood, and next to this garden is an enclosure with fruit trees.

(Bulletin de la Société archéologique et historique de l'Orléanais, 1857-04-01)

However, on the existing maps of the garden, there are not enough indications to locate the Palmail.

The Château de Choisy was a royal French residence in the commune of Choisy-le-Roi. The commune was given its present name by Louis XV, when he purchased the manor of Choisy and its château in October 1739. He was an avid mail player, so one can assume that the Palmail must still have been there.

Fresnes

In 1620, the chancellor of France and Navarra, Nicolas Brulart de Sillery, and the gardener Hugues Barla signed a contract about the tasks the latter had to fulfil as caretaker of the castle of Berny in Fresnes at the time of Louis XIII. The contract describes in detail what Brulart had to do (from page 688 onwards). One of the details is taking care of all the alleys, promenades, and the pallemaille. One can conclude that in 1620, in spite of the additional income, the function of a caretaker & gardener is not a sinecure.

(XVIIe siècle : bulletin de la Société d'étude du XVIIe siècle, Édouard-Jacques Ciprut, 1956-12)

Saint-Maur-des-Fossées

In 1577, Caterina de' Medici restored the Saint Maur Castle. She ordered the carpenter Lyon Liebert to construct a paille-maille in the big alley with the pine trees. In total, she spent 254 écus on the woodwork.

(Archives nationales, cote KK 124, fol 1. à 71)

The mail alley was about 341 'toises' (600 metres) long. Numerous gentlemen, along with the queen's sons and daughter Marguerite, played the game together.

(‘Histoire de Saint-Maur-Des-Fossés depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours: l'abbaye, le château, la ville’, Émile Galtier, 1913)

On Monday, 21 September 1609, Madame de Montglat visited the castle to see the crown prince Louis XIII, who later led her for a walk to the Palemail. (Le Vieux Saint-Maur (1923-1979), Éditeur F. Champion, Paris, 1950)

During the French Revolution, the state nationalised the Château de Saint-Maur and emptied its contents. Real-estate speculators then divided up their terrains. The structure was demolished for the value of its materials; virtually nothing remains.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint-Maur-des-Foss%C3%A9s>)

Val d’Oise (95)

Sannois

In Sannois is a school named La Tour du Mail, whose name has nothing to do with the game nor the later promenades called Mail. I mention it all the same, because there was a Château du Mail or May’.

The castle, built around 880, gave an immense view all around, and was well situated to survey the movements of the Vikings. It was destroyed by King Jean already in the 14th century to avoid it being taken by the English during the Hundred Years’ War.

The name Mail probably comes from ‘Mallus’, in use under the kings to define a constellation of the nobles, the clergy and the municipalities, that presented themselves as a common unity.

The name May’ could refer to the month of May, when the troops came back to the valley.

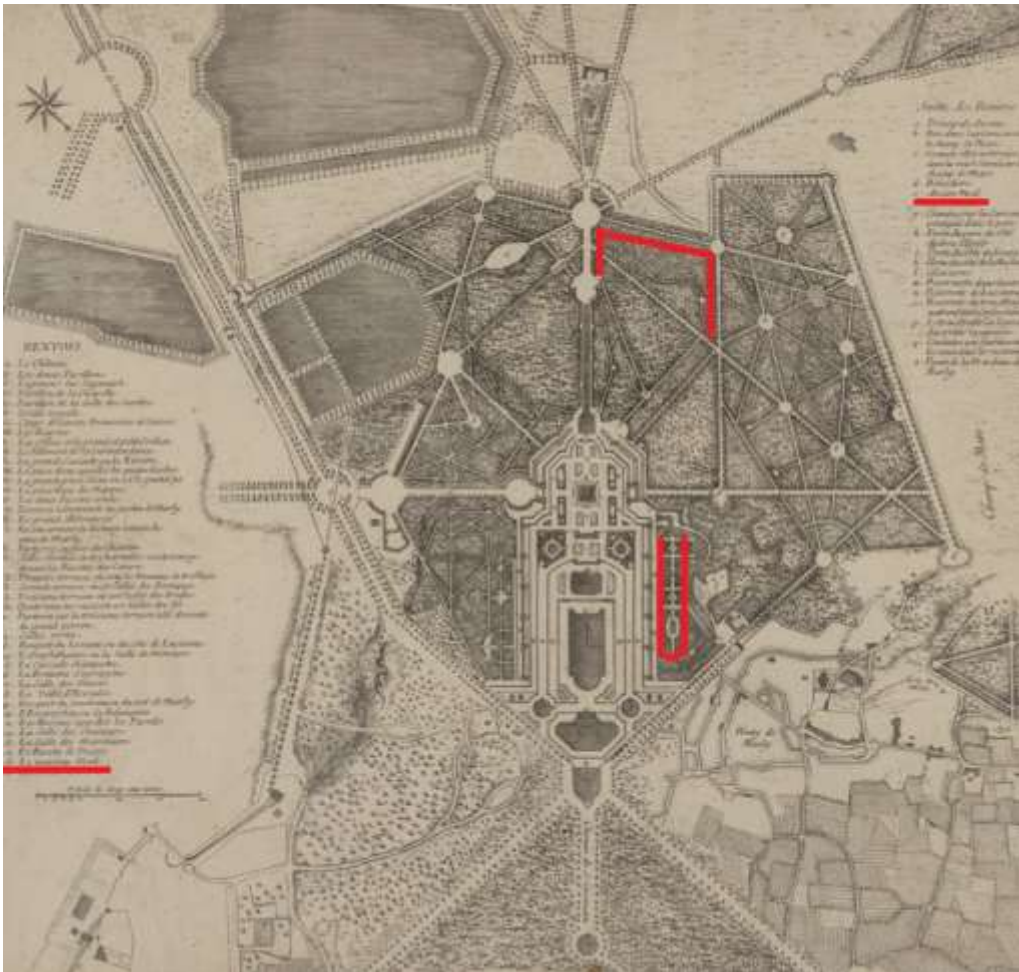
(Mémoires de la Société historique et archéologique de l'arrondissement de Pontoise et du Vexin, 1964)

Yvelines

Les Clayes-sous-Bois

Today, there is still an Allée du Mail, a Mail des Ecoliers, and a Residence du Mail, a modern nursing home. Any historical information is not available. One can only imagine that in the past, they were former promenades.

Marly-le-Roi



In his memoirs, the Duke of Saint-Simon frequently described the king as an avid mail player.

(Stanis Perez, 'La santé de Louis XIV: une biohistoire du Roi-Soleil', 2007)

In 1685, after experiencing his first attacks of gout, he had to stop playing mail and began playing a kind of indoor mail or table billiards instead. Notably, Louis XIV continued to regularly visit the mail courts to watch skilled players, while he showed less interest in table billiards.

In 1706, the king spent several stays at Marly Castle, known as his intimate domain. During these visits, he regularly went to both mail courts to observe the players. On some occasions, he travelled in a barouche to the large mail court, accompanied by the Countess of Bourgogne and many ladies-in-waiting, where they enjoyed a magnificent light meal.

(Journal du marquis de Dangeau. Tome 11 / publié en entier pour la première fois par MM. Soulié, Dussieux, de Chennevières, Mantz, de Montaignon – Marquis Philippe de Courcillon Dangeau [1638-1720])

Saint-Germain-en-Laye

On the 1st of January 1585, a “regulation of the house of the King” appears, giving details about the daily life of the occupants of the castle in Saint Germain-en-Laye. Thursday is defined as a day of sports, with in the morning the mail game or the ‘jeu de paume’ (hand-tennis). On Sunday after Mass and dinner, the afternoon is again for playing mail and hand-tennis. (‘Le château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye’, Georges Lacour-Gayet, 1935)

From the pavilion of the New Castle, one could enter a noble garden and park, where there is a ‘pail-maill’, in the middle of which is, on one side, the chapel Saint Michel. John Evelyn wrote this in 1644.

(‘The diary of John Evelyn,... : from 1641 to 1705-6’, edited by William Bray)

On 20 April 1682, Louis XIV left the castle in Saint-Germain-en-Laye forever to install himself in Versailles. Six years later the chapel and the mail alley were destroyed.

(‘Le château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye’, Georges Lacour-Gayet, 1935)

Page 16: On this map, the red lines show the two mail alleys. The mail alley on top is called ‘Ancien Mail’ under character e., and the lower one with a return path is called ‘Le nouveau mail’ under number 15. Regarding the ‘Journal du marquis De Dangeau’, the ancient mail is the one on top, regarding the fact that King Louis XIV goes in a barouche to the great mail. The new mail allowed the players to avoid walking back to the entrance without playing. – ‘Plan général du château, jardin, parc et dépendances de Marly’, T.F.E. Monnot, 17.. – Bibliothèque nationale de France

Between 1679 and 1682, a Swiss régiment dugged a pond which still has the name ‘Pièce d’eau des suisses’. It was created to water the royal vegetable garden. Part of the soil was used for the construction of a mail alley, situated along the pond.

(‘Versailles, résidence de Louis XIV : Versailles et la cour de France’, Pierre de Nolhac, 1925)

In 1706, the son of the chief maître d’hôtel, who worked as a page in the stables, received a stroke of a mail at his head. It looked as if he would succumb to the wounds, but he survived, due to the fact that pages were ‘bullheaded’, remarked Marquis de Sourches slyly.

(‘Georges Mareschal, seigneur de Bièvre, chirurgien et confident de Louis XIV, Comte Gabriel Mareschal de Bièvre, 1906)

On the previous page, you see two mail alleys. Several sources speak of a third mail in the Orangerie, but I did not find a map on which it is designed.

Page 18: The line along the ‘Pièce d’eau des Suisses’ line indicates where the old mail was situated before its destruction. The other line situates the new mail. – ‘Plan général de Versailles’, Jean-Baptiste Scotin, engraver (1668-1740) – Bibliothèque nationale de France