

# *Jeu de mail in France*

## *Région Normandie*

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The region Normandie contains the following departments:

- ◆ Calvados (14)
- ◆ Eure (27)
- ◆ Manche (50)
- ◆ Orne (61)
- ◆ Seine-Maritime (76)

In the department Eure I did not trace a mail alley.

This report on the jeu de mail is just about the alleys my late husband Geert and I came across during our research. It does not pretend to give a complete overview of all the alleys that have existed. It remains the tip of the proverbial iceberg.



## *Calvados (14)*

The harvest in Calvados is not rich. Even at the many castles, I found no trace of mail alleys. The only one was in the town of Caen, today the prefecture of the department of Calvados.

### *Caen*

There is a pleading of 1602 from Maguerite Fleury, widow of Michel Le Boulanger, musician at the royal court, against, amongst others, Sir De Bellefonds, Governor of the Caen Castle, about her rights of exploiting the mail alleys in Caen and Rouen.



*On a map from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a jeu de mail existed in the north of the city near th  
Caen Castle. –  
Jacques Gomboust, ing. du roi, delin – Bibliothèque nationale de France*

Henri IV permitted Marguerite Fleury to construct for herself, her children, and her (legal) successors a public jeu de mail in Caen and Rouen, where people could play for 4 'sous' ('five-cent piece').

She only had to provide an alley according to the standards.

This particular privilege was not just a generous gesture to the widow, but an arrangement for the king to pay his debt of 480 'écus' for wages and 550 écus for the costumes of the late Le Boulanger without opening his wallet (Bulletin). Another source speaks of a debt of 3090 'livres', about the same value as the above-mentioned écus (Plaise à Monsieur).

Sir De Bellefonds, Governor of the Caen Castle, constructed a jeu de mail for the exercise of his soldiers along the foss of the town at two hundred paces from the castle. Madam Fleury offered to pay to De Bellefonds the amount he had paid for the alley, including interest, until she has the means to pay him off. The interest was paid in the form of free access to the alley for De Bellefonds and his soldiers as much as they liked. The yearly revenues of the alley were about four/five hundred 'livres', which was the only income for the widow to feed herself and her children.

(All information about Caen derived from:

'Plaise à Monsieur ... conseiller du roi en sa cour de parlement ...', 1706 –  
Bibliothèque nationale de France

'Bulletin de la Commission des antiquités de la Seine-Maritime – Rouen/  
Luneray/Fécamp, Commission départementale des antiquités, 1882' –  
Bibliothèque nationale de France)

## *Manche (50)*

### *Pontorson*

Near the castle was a jeu de mail. The castle was demolished in 1627 and became a quarry. The former structure was only recognisable by the irregularities in the soil and expressive names, like Douves (moat), Eperon (buttress), and Pal-Mail.

('Avranchin monumental et historique', Volume 2, Edouard Le Héricher, 1846)

Today, there still is a Rue (street) des Douves and a hamlet, Pailma, a corruption of Palle-mail.

('Revue de l'Avranchin : bulletin... de la Société d'archéologie, de littérature, sciences et arts d'Avranches et de Mortain', 1886)



*The 'Ferme (farm) de Pailma' was outside the city, as is today the hamlet of Pailma.  
- <http://www.archives-manche.fr>, Cadastre napoléonien, Pontorson, A2-3, 1817;  
Contexte : a011276094169oBmHvT – Archives départementales de la Manche*

## Orne (61)

### *Courtomer*

The only document about the Courtomer Castle is a record of a visit by an esquire, dated 7 November 1620. He describes the entrance of the castle, a long alley of over 16 metres broad with sycamore trees planted on both sides. A part from this alley, there is another of the same width with oaks planted alongside, and several smaller ones of 8 metres wide, where there are an old and a new paillemail, planted with lime trees that already give good shade. He gives a detailed description of the premises, but the above is all about the mail alleys.

(Bulletin de la Société historique et archéologique de l'Orne – Alençon, Société historique et archéologique de l'Orne, 1909)

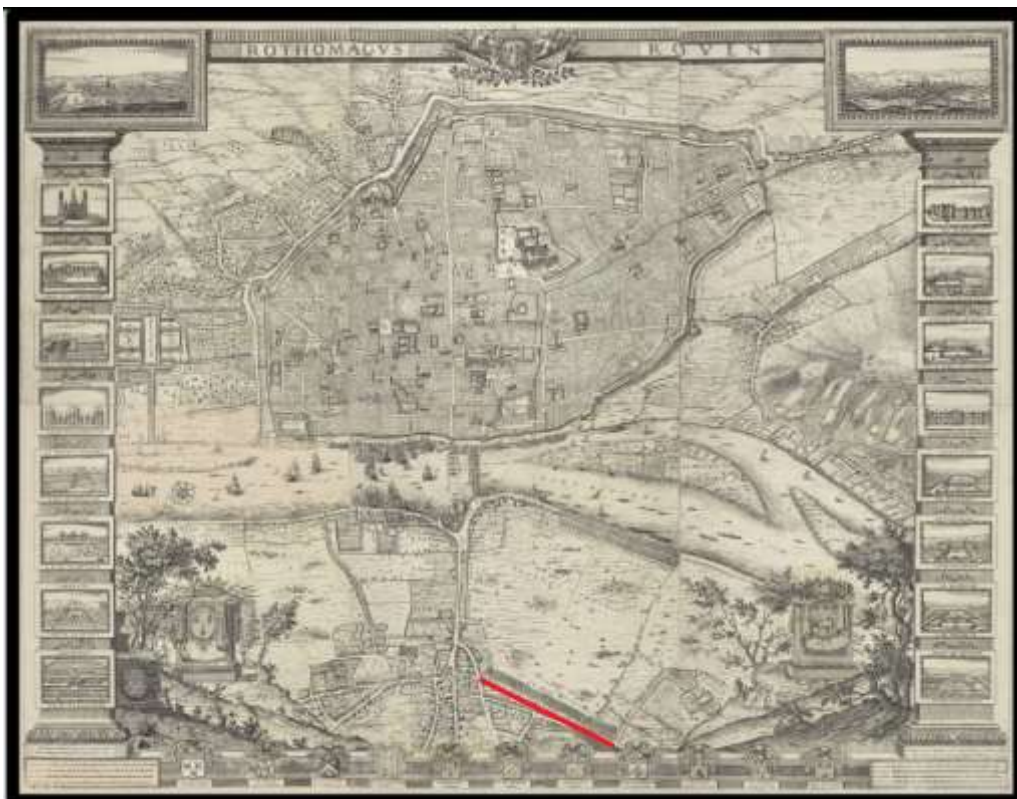
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## *Seine-Maritime (76)*

### *Rouen*

In the same pleading of 1602 from Maguerite Fleury (see Caen) about her rights of exploiting the mail alleys in Caen and Rouen, also concerned Mr Jaques De Bernage and Eustache De Saint-Yon. Both gentlemen had constructed a mail alley.

In 1602, Jacques De Bernage, chaplain to Henri IV, laid out a jeu de mail for the bourgeois de Rouen with the consent of the king, who broke his promise to Mrs Fleury that only she could exploit a public mail alley. It was situated near the priory. In a decree, De Bernage was permitted to have all the profits during his life.



*The red line situates the palle-mail in Rouen. –  
'Rothomagus - Rouen [avec la] Description des antiquitez et singularitez de  
la ville de Rouen', Jacques Gomboust, 1655 –  
Bibliothèque nationale de France*

He leased the ‘palle-mail’ to a certain Enguehard on the condition that he and some of his acquaintances could play for free.

After De Bernage’s death, the palle-mail went to the manor of Grandmont, which became part of the gift to the Jesuites.

Another mail was laid out by Sir Saint-Yon in a garden near Rouen. He offered her a great sum, hoping that she would renounce the promise of the king.

Both De Bernage and Saint-Yon took advantage of the fact that the resources of the widow were limited, as well as the fact that they had more power. They took advantage of the mail alleys without paying her. The costs of the lawsuits ruined her.

(Sources, see Caen, page 2)

Today, Rouen still has a Rue du Mail, the former Avenue des Chantiers, given this name to hold the memory of the jeu de mail alive.

(Dictionnaire Indicateur et historique des rues et places de Rouen, Nicétas Periaux, 1870 –

<https://www.archivesdepartementales76.net>)

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