

Le Buis des Mévouillon

Route to follow (in yellow)

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Origins: why Buis-les-Baronnies?

Buis could come from:

- **BUXUS**, a Latin word which means box-wood, or **BUXUM**, a forest of box. Either is possible, since box is a very common, naturally occurring shrub or small tree in this area.
- **BUCSUM**, a word found in ancient texts. The root **BUC** or **BUK** is a very old word meaning **mountain**, and there are certainly traces of human occupation on St Julien, the rock which dominates the village: worked flints, fragments of jars, tiles and ceramics, coins and rock carvings.

Baronnies:

This probably means it was land owned by a **Baron**. However, it should be noted that in ancient texts the word Baron wasn't used; the Latin *Dominus* was more current for denoting a master or land owner.

ANTIQUITY and the MIDDLE AGES

There is evidence that around 30,000 years ago Neanderthal man lived on the banks of the Ouvèze. Much later the Gauls, here called the **Voconces**, also settled along the river, probably soon joined by Romans. Up to now, no Roman building has been positively identified at Buis, all traces no doubt long buried or lost, or indeed used in later buildings. However, it is reasonable to suppose that Romans lived here, given the number of artefacts that have been found, for example a **Dedication to Jupiter** from the end of the 1st Century AC, unearthed in 1890.

Towards the end of the Roman era Buis was part of the diocese of Vaison la Romaine, but there is little information about this time or the centuries that followed. After the fall of the Roman Empire the region fell under the influence of the Burgundians and Franks, then a series of minor lords, one of which was the **Mévouillon** family.

BIRTH AND EVOLUTION OF A TOWN

The first mention of Buis was in **1205**. The register of property ownership (*Cadastré*) of the time shows a structure spreading from a central point which is now the old town water source (*fontaine*) in the **Place du Paty**, in the north-west of the town. It was on the left bank of the Malguéri stream and is now defined on its north side by a 13th Century rampart and the 14th Century Tour de Safre. Here we have the first, small beginnings of urban development. Two **defensive outposts** (rudimentary structures of earth and wood) probably also existed at this time, one on the north flank of St Julien (*Pendais*) and the other to the west of the town, on the site of *Le Palun* (marsh). Fortifications were as simple as this in the Middle Ages!

The Mévouillons probably came to Buis at the end of the 12th Century, making it the **capital** of their small “State” which was semi-independent and which was to become the **Baronnie**. They built their castle on the highest point of the small village.

In the 13th Century the Baron, in need of money, sold a **Charter of Freedom (1288)** to the inhabitants of Buis, which regularized their rights in the community. Along with the Statutes of Wine of 1317 this Charter indicates considerable economic activity along the banks of the Ouvèze river (or *Ovidie*), for example, in **1282** new grain mills were constructed. These documents also show us that it was in 1309 that the Monastery of the Preacher Brothers was founded just outside the walls close to the Bridge of Liars (which crosses the Malgueri stream at the western edge of the town). It was also at this time (14th Century) that a new rampart was built to complete the protection of the Place des Arcades.

The middle and end of the 14th Century mark the transfer of the Baronnie to the Dauphins of Viennois, in **1317**; then, in **1349** the area became part of the Kingdom of France, and Buis the seat of a separate administrative entity (**baillage**).

MODERN TIMES

The Wars of Religion brought their share of misery: in **1562** the convent of the Dominicans was left in ruins; in **1567** Buis was taken and partly destroyed, the church being totally razed. The last siege was in **1621** and the following century was a time of active rebuilding: the reconstruction of a larger church, a new Monastery of the Dominicans in the centre of the

town (**the end of the 16th Century**), the Convent of the Ursulines (**1643**) and its chapel (**17th Century**) and the construction of the New Bridge across the Ouvèze in 1690.

The Treaty of Peronne (**1641**) saw Monaco replace the protection of Spain and the Prince of **Monaco** became, as the Duke of the Valentinois, Baron of Buis.

Between **1770 and 1777** a dyke was built along the north bank of the Ouvèze, thus putting an end to the frequent floods which destroyed the town and giving hope of further development. However, the 18th Century was dominated by the uncertainties of the impending Revolution. The town had always supported the King and after the Revolution lost its administrative role (this being transferred to republican Nyons); the loss of the Court of Justice and all judicial authority left the town to decline in obscurity.

ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Safre Tower

The tower dominates the oldest part of Buis. It was built in the 14th Century, as an addition to the ramparts which had been built a 100 years earlier. Built slightly proud in the NW corner of the town wall, the tower faced the courses of the rivers Malaudrie and Jonchier, which served as the route to Buis from the valley of the River Eygues. Given that the main road passed around the town to the north, the Tower no doubt served an important role in protecting the town. The tower is square with a large open base; it is similar to other towers built in the region in the 14th Century, for example at Carpentras and Avignon. It is 13 metres high and built on three levels. The lowest part is a high (8 metres) hall with a vaulted ceiling of tufa. There is a hole in the ceiling giving ladder access to the upper levels. The second level is a room 5 metres square which probably had a wooden ceiling, with a terrace rather than a roof above. Unlike other parts of the building, which are built of hard limestone, here the material used was a rather soft sandstone (*safre*) – hence the name of the tower.

The tower was modified, probably in the 16th Century, by the addition of holes in the walls to allow the use of more modern weaponry.

The Ursulines' Chapel

Ursuline Nuns arrived from Gap in 1643, at the request of the town council, in order to teach the girls of the town. To begin with they established the school in borrowed buildings while their church and convent were built. The church was inaugurated in 1653 but today only the porch remains. It was built on the lines of Greek or Roman architecture, with columns and capitals in the Ionic style, with garlands beneath; there are triangular pediments above two windows which lit the gallery inside. Access to this gallery from the convent on the other

side of the road was via a corridor incorporated in the arch above the road. There is a niche between the two windows which probably contained a statue of St Ursula. The curved arch above the door was an aesthetic feature increasing the height to the doorway, since at the time it was built this wall was one and a half times as high.

The Dominican Monastery

In 1294, with the support of his uncle the Archbishop of Embrun, the Baron of Mévouillon asked for the right to found a monastery at Buis. In 1310 the monastery, housing 21 monks, was established just outside the town. In 1371 it was fortified on the orders of the Governor of the Dauphiné. The monastery rapidly became an important land-owner and economic force in the town and surrounding area. This is no doubt one of the reasons that it was burnt by Protestant forces in 1562. The Dominicans took refuge inside the town until it was occupied by Protestants in 1568. They returned around 1580, being housed in the former St George's Chapel, and soon began acquiring neighbouring buildings. They moved to the building which became the Baron's castle, first the northern part and afterwards the southern part where today we see the cloisters. In 1594 the Bishop of Vaison awarded them the lordship of St Denis of Proyas; the seminary of the diocese was established at the monastery, on the condition that they taught the boys of Buis. The refectory and the cloisters were built later, in the second half of the 18th Century. During the Revolution the Dominican Order was dissolved, their buildings confiscated and sold to the town, which used them as a school.

The Parish Church of our Lady of Nazareth

This church is first mentioned in 1222. Probably founded in the 12th Century in the diocese of Vaison, the church was modified several times, either to enlarge it or to save it from ruin. The oldest part is certainly the lower portion of the bell-tower – square, massive and built like a defensive tower, it was one of the first buildings in the town, built around the end of the 11th or beginning of the 12th Century. At the foot of the tower are the remains of a Romanesque church – the first two chapels on the left, when entering the church. They probably date from the late 13th or early 14th Century and were modified in gothic style, as seen in the ribbed vaults and key stones decorated with Lambs of God - one has even kept some of its original gold leaf decoration. Also noteworthy are the carved bases of the ribs. After ten years of work, finished in 1437, the tower was raised with arches which now house the bells. In the 16th Century the church still had only two bays and these were seriously damaged in 1568, during the Wars of Religion. Only the choir, two chapels and a few walls remained, without vaults or roof. In the first years of the 17th Century the church was reconstructed and enlarged by the addition of two bays to the west. After the Revolution, during which the church was used for non-religious purposes, it was abandoned. It was only

in 1837 that reconstruction started – the original choir was demolished, a new entrance was created in its place and a bigger choir was built on the west side (sufficient to house the Dominican monks). The church had achieved its present form. Finally, in 1875, the imposing stature of the Virgin was added to the bell-tower.

Market Place

The original part of the Market Place was a covered road alongside the river, with a 13th Century wall to the west. It was only in the second half of the 14th Century that the Place was closed by a second wall or rampart, which served also as a dyke, and on which new buildings were constructed. A stream crossed this newly formed area, which was also planted with trees. The narrow lanes of the old town led down to it. In the 17th Century, when Buis was the seat of the Court of Justice, the Place became a residential area where lawyers and nobility built large, elegant houses. Several fine entrance doors, on the less commercial side of the Place, are witness to this period of prosperity. When houses were raised by one or more stories, the extra weight necessitated the building of buttresses against the arcades, which can be seen to this day..