

Roots and Routes – the Brittany Ferries back story

Brittany was an impoverished region in the 1950s. Its roads were poor, its communications networks were rudimentary and the farming community – the region’s lifeblood – danced to the tune of markets driven by movers and shakers in Paris.

To its citizens, Brittany felt like a forgotten outpost.

For hard-working farmers the final straw came in 1958. Prices plummeted and anger mounted during the so-called artichoke crisis. A whiff of revolution took to the air.

Step forward Alexis Gourvennec, founder of Brittany Ferries. A Breton pig-farmer and firebrand, he refused to accept the status quo and emerged as the figurehead for a movement. This wasn’t just about the price of produce grown in the fields he loved though: this was a fight to free a region from poverty and isolation.



Fellow farmers and regional cooperatives lined up behind him. They took to the streets of Morlaix in Brittany and Alexis ended up in jail as a consequence. But he continued to lobby tirelessly for the things he believed in: he fought hard and refused to give up. Not for nothing did he earn the nick-name “The Bulldozer”.

The goal was nothing more than a step-change in infrastructure, education and transport, including the development of a deep-water port in Roscoff.

Running a ferry company however was never part of the plan. Investment in Roscoff port was meant to be an open invitation to an established operator. But, despite clear opportunities, no one was interested in coming to the port.

Undeterred, the farmers resolved to charter their own ship. They approached banks on both sides of the Channel for financing, but here they met derision: those crazy peasant farmers with such grandiose ideas!



Finally, they raised the money themselves. A converted Israeli tank carrier called Kerisnel was chartered and Britain’s entry to the common market was the spark to ignite her engines. On 2 January 1973, Kerisnel left Roscoff bound for Plymouth. Its cargo: Breton artichokes and cauliflowers grown in the fields of the farmers destined for British homes.

The rest, well *c’est la belle histoire*, as they say.

Five decades on, Brittany Ferries is still largely owned by the farming cooperatives of north west France. The business model remains unchanged. It is a social enterprise built on a culture that reflects the spirit of the regions. This includes a commitment to French seafarers, excellence in customer service and a drive to share the wealth it creates.

Today the biggest export market is tourism. Brittany Ferries carries over 2.5 million holidaymakers in a non-Covid year, serving five destinations in France, three in the UK and two each in Ireland and



Spain. Eighty per cent are British and travel on luxury cruise-ferries which are a world apart from Kerisnel and her contemporaries.

After a turbulent couple of years, the company is now looking towards a cleaner greener horizon, with four new LNG powered vessels scheduled to join the fleet. Its brand position remains clear too: to reveal more fabulous destinations in the regions it serves.

Freight is still part of the mix of course. However it now accounts for around 20 percent of turnover. Cargoes still include market garden produce like artichokes and cauliflowers grown in the Brittany region.

Some are served on board. Some might even have been grown on the farm of the company's president Jean-Marc Roué who - like his predecessor Alexis Gourvennec - is a working farmer

And just like Alexis, Jean-Marc is an iron-willed Breton with his eyes on the future. He is the man intent on steering the company towards less stormy seas and onto the next 50 successful years.

