‘La Dourdannerie’is a partially hidden manor house back from the main road, recognisable by the high gables and mullioned windows of the main part of the house. A sinister story is linked to this house where grim reality gives way to legend. A lament was composed about it using the tune of “Geneviève de Brabant”.

In 1911 the abbot Godet, priest of Le Pas Saint-l’Homer, wrote: “ A tradition which seems to owe more to legend than to history states that at Dourdannerie a shrew cooked little children in a boiler, from which she drew off the fat to make remedies and curses. That this happened on one occasion, perhaps, but that it was repeated is not something we believe. It is said that this happened around the time of the revolution.”

Contrary to the tale, the legend is based in part on a real event, ensuring deep roots in the collective memory of the area. Concerning Dourdannerie, what happened, limited in time and space, is an anecdote which fueled the judicial reporting: the Gibory-Chauveau affair, the sordid story of infanticide.

Although she used ‘all means to hide her pregnancy’ Madeleine Chauveau, a 26-year-old housemaid, gave birth to a child in June 1822. Calling on Rosalie Gibory, an infamous abortionist, to whom she gave her new-born for it to be placed, supposedly, in the hospice of Nogent. Meanwhile a search, ordered by the public prosecutor, found the little victim “in an open cauldron filled with water and herbs”. The abortionist was suspected of having wanted “to draw off the fat from it”, according to the statement she made at the detention house in Mortagne in which she declared that “human fat was worth 24 francs an ounce”. She was also suspected “of using this substance to treat ailments and sores, the curing of which she claimed to be adept”. Proven guilty of the crime of infanticide, “the said girl Chauveau and the woman Gibory” were sentenced to death by order of the court of assizes on 13th January 1823. They were guillotined on the public square of Mortagne on 22nd March 1823.

The cauldron, an everyday object, plays a macabre role in this story. In everyday use in all homes, this cooking utensil was made locally. In the middle of the 16th century metallurgical activity, recorded in Bretoncelles from 1432, appears to have been carried on at Dourdannerie on the banks of the Corbionne. The presence on the site of slag (residue from iron-making) leads to the idea that a furnace could have been in operation there, begun as the initiative of the d’Angennes family, just as the one close by at Moulin Renaud (commune of La Madeleine Bouvet). These blast furnaces used an iron ore extracted from open air mines in the nearby woods and forests , which also served as sources of fuel. According to Delestang, the deputy prefect of Mortagne, the production around 1811 consisted of cast iron household objects: “cauldrons, boilers, round kitchen ranges, square cast iron stove, fish kettles, and grates, ‘cagnards’, mortars, log retainers”, and also objects used by different trades: “pulleys, paper makers’ plates, drain pipes and water pipes, nozzles for blacksmiths’ bellows, hot irons, grinders for cidermaking, torrefiers, etc”.