

## Osafune: The Real Fukuoka

Fukuoka City in the north of Kyushu takes its name from the Okayama hometown of one of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's closest advisors, Kuroda Kambei. The original Fukuoka (Bizen-Fukuoka) was at that time a bustling township and trade center in what is now the Osafune area of Setouchi City. At the height of its prosperity in the 1500's it was a large town with its own castle, but all was lost in 1591.

Bizen-Fukuoka centered on the marketplace of Fukuoka at the intersection of the Yoshiigawa River and the old Sanyo Road. The Sanyo Road connected the capital (Kyoto) to western regions, while the Yoshiigawa was a vital trade link with the northern province of Mimasaka. For more than 1000 years, skilled oarsmen on small boats negotiated the rapids coming down the river, and



A master sword-smith at work with three apprentices.

teams of men used ropes from the riverbanks to pull them back upstream again. One of the most important products on the river route was metal from the northern mines, which was then fired, beaten, bent and shaped into some of Japan's finest swords by craftsmen in Fukuoka. Bizen Swords were made of such good quality metal and produced with such skill that they were known as *Meito* (famous swords) and respected throughout Japan. More and more sword-smiths gathered in Fukuoka, and one document from the Muromachi Era lists more than 2200 sword-smiths as living and working in Fukuoka. Then in 1591, it was instantly wiped off the map by a massive flood.

The flood came at the end of several days of torrential rain. The sides of Mt. Kumayama gave way and a massive landslide spilled into the already swollen river. The wave created by the impact was likened to a *tsunami*, and it swallowed 1200 houses and killed more than 7000

residents. The river's course was permanently changed and much of the old town now lies under the river that had once supported it. A memorial stands on the site of the old Fukuoka Marketplace and the castle ruins are a golf course.

Today, local residents are trying to revive Fukuoka's history:

- ◆ This month there is a modern recreation of the Fukuoka Marketplace. Local farmers will sell products direct to consumers on the site of the old market. (See p.3)
- ◆ Next month, taiko troupe MeitoDaiko, formed 20 years ago as a new way to pass on the history of the township, will hold a special concert in Okayama City. (See p.3)
- ◆ Osafune Sword Museum has permanent displays showing how traditional swords were made as well as some of the finest examples of swords produced in Okayama. At special events, such as the FREE Meito-Matsuri, visitors can watch craftsmen give demonstrations on how the old swords were made (and used!) There is very little English language information, so take a friend who can translate for you. Entry costs ¥500 for adults.

English URL: <http://www.city.setouchi.lg.jp/~osa-token/english/>