Saint-Germain-de-Confolens

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

Exploring

Saint-Germain-de-Confolens

From the left bank of the Vienne, on the Sainte-Radegonde side, the link between the castral site and the village which grew up at its foot is clear to see.

This map from the 17th century, which is held in the Creuse County Archives, shows the contours of the province of La Marche. Confolens is included within the limits of the province, which does not correspond to the reality of the Middle Ages.

Saint-Germain-de-Confolens over the centuries

«A powerful barony linked to the province of La Marche, the village occupied a strategic position in the heart of the region.»

A supposed ancient occupation

The valleys of the Issoire and the Vienne would have been occupied since the Neolithic period. The relief of these areas, which was very advantageous from the defensive point of view, would lend credence to these suppositions.

Excavations have uncovered necklaces of teeth and red earthen vases on the heights of Bellevue.

A legend also says that a stone discovered near the pond of Sèches bore the following Latin inscription: «In hoc loco triginta milia hominum inter sese truciderunt» (In this place, 30,000 men killed one another).

The origins in the High Middle Ages

At this time, a castle called Savenne Castle was supposedly built on the site of the current castle.

The word "Savenne" may come from the Gaulish word cebena which means "steep slope". While Leonid Babaud Lacroze claims in his book "Pages confolentaises" that Savenne Castle was taken by the Saracens in 732, nothing proves this fact. It seems in any case that a castle was present here around the year 1000, because a construction ex nihilo in the 12th century is not very likely, and a village had already grown up at its foot.

A dark history until the 14th century

The lack of medieval written sources makes it difficult to know the history of the village of Saint-Germain. Those that have been preserved illustrate the close link between Saint-Germain and the province of La Marche. This province was formed in the 10th century at the edges of Poitou and the former county of Limoges at the instigation of an ancient lineage. Its boundaries moved over time and it is estimated that the province stretched from Charroux to Guéret and Aubusson. In the 10th and 11th centuries, the counts of La Marche were in conflict with the counts of Angoulême
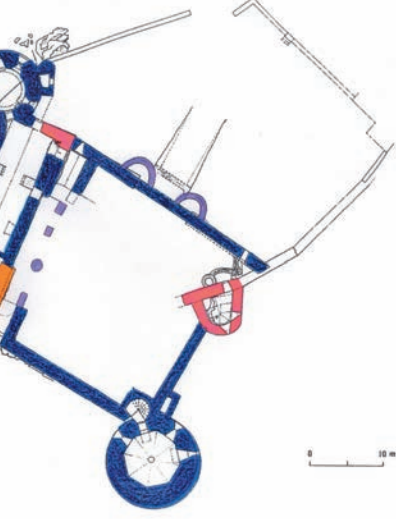
The present castle dates mainly from the 16th century (in blue on the map) This building incorporates the vestiges from the late 12th - early 13th century (the keep in orange) and 15th century (the well tower in pink).

The ground floor of the *logis* or hall, which connects the Small and Big Towers, housed the *aula* (court and reception room), whose large windows overlooked the Vienne valley.

The parts used for habitation include several features of comfort : a chimney (on the right), a large window, an oratory and latrines on each floor.

and the principality of Chabanais which included the castle of Confolens. Because of its border position, Saint-Germain played a strategic role. The castle was founded by the counts of La Marche at the time of the creation of the province and would have served as a base for its expansion. The first lords of the place, Hélie and Conis, are mentioned in the cartulary of the Saint-Cyprien Abbey of Poitiers. The lords of Saint-Germain also appear in an act of the bishop of Poitiers. These few elements, however, indicate that the lords of Saint-Germain were important characters.

The first lord about whom information is available is Guillaume de Mortemart in the second half of the 12th century. As a result of matrimonial alliances, Saint-Germain entered the fold of several large families of the area: the Mortemart-Rochechouart (12th and 15th century) and the d'Archiac, originating from Saintonge, in the 13th century.
The territory becomes at an unknown period a barony of La Marche. At the beginning of the Hundred Years War, the province was divided between Upper and Lower Marche. Saint-Germain was part of the castellanies of the Lower Marche with Charroux,

Bellac and the Dorat. The Lower Marche, a border area, would have been hard hit during the Hundred Years War. Presumably Saint-Germain and its castle were affected; traces of fire were also identified during surveys. The castle became the property of the Brisay family in the early 15th century. In 1492, Jacques de Brisay sold part of his seigneury to the lord of Brillac. In 1498, the Pérusse des Cars family recovered the entire barony. The Count of La Marche also gave up the rights of the barony by donation, thus allowing the lord to become Baron of Saint-Germain.

The apogee of the barony under the Pérusse des Cars

The political and territorial apogee of the barony was around the 15th and 16th centuries under the Pérusse des Cars family, originally from the Limousin. The first lord of Saint-Germain, Gautier Pérusse des Cars, was the first chamberlain of Pierre de Bourbon, count of La Marche and someone close to King Charles VIII. These close ties ensured him a comfortable fortune and the position of seneschal of Périgord, Marche and Rouergue. These same links enabled him to buy Saint-Germain. Gautier built the present castle to mark his arrival at the head of the barony.

This old photograph shows the tanners' district along the Vienne. The other tanners' quarter was located along the Issoire. The soaking basins were constructed directly in the river.

The castle chapel (present church) was integrated into the defensive system of the castle. Like the castle, it was damaged during the fighting.

Jehan Louis de Nogaret de la Vallette, better known as the Duke d'Épernon, drove the Protestant troops from the castle in 1589.

In addition to Saint-Germain, the barony included the lands of Lessac, Benest and Pleuville in part, Alloue, Oradour-Fanais, Brillac, Esse and Lesterps in part and the castellany of Mortemart composed, among other parishes, of Saint-Christophe and Montrollet. The barony was under the control of Poitiers for tax purposes and Limoges in religious matters. The economy of the barony was based on tanneries from the Middle Ages onwards. The tanners, who were landowners, bore the name of their farms in the manner of lords and made matrimonial alliances with the petty bourgeoisie of Confolens.

The impact of the Wars of Religion

This troubled and documented period particularly affected Saint-Germain.
In 1569, before the Battle of Jarnac, the Swiss of a Catholic troop were billeted in the castle. The year 1570 was turbulent as the castle fell into the hands of the Protestant troops. On 20th April, a troop attacked the castle by surprise. The lord of Saint-Germain, Jean des Cars, reacted forcefully to this under-taking : he gathered troops, set off from Limoges and recaptured the castle from its attackers. To protect the site, Jean des Cars installed a governor, François de Rousiers, and a gar-rison. It was maintained by the inhabitants of the barony.

This Protestant troop is said to have pillaged the chapel and destroyed the dome. In 1589, the castle was again besieged by a Protestant troop commanded by the chief Leaguer Puisferrier. This time, it was the Duke d'Épernon who freed the site and had the leaguers executed. Two cannonballs originating from this confrontation are kept at the town hall. This fight was the last siege of the fortress. Undoubtedly very badly damaged, it was restored through the efforts of Jean des Cars.

The 17th and 18th centuries : first records

Some documents give an idea of the state of the barony in the 17th and 18th centuries. Thus, there is a mention of consuls in Saint-Germain in the 17th century, without knowing precisely the date when this mode of government was crea-ted. The consuls, as in Confolens, were to compose a town corporation.
This system of administration gave the right to vote to heads of families as well as to heads of trades grouped together in seve-ral colleges. However, it is diffi-cult to understand how this town corporation functioned as the consular registers and books of accounts have not been found.

The Duke d'Epernon drove out the Protestant troops by cannona-ding the castle, causing great damage. Visible in the walls, this epi-sode is also remembered thanks to two cannonballs kept at the mayor's office.

The Charrauds mill, standing on the Issoire, was one of three flour mills in the village. It disappeared in the early 1970s.

It was also in the 17th century that the barony returned to the de Rochechouart family. The first description of the lands of Saint-Germain dates from the reign of Henry IV. Another description of 1612 provides clues to the economic life of Saint-Germain. In addition to tanneries, vines were an important sector of activity. Being the only clearly mentioned cultivation, it was mainly located on the left bank of the Vienne. The importance of the vine was underlined by the establishment of a right of press, which was rare in the Confolens area. In the barony were the mills and common ovens used by the population in return for seigniorial rights or banalities. From the point of view of the administration, the lord of Saint-Germain exercised his right of justice and possessed a court and prisons located at the castle. On the social level, tanners still made up the elite of the barony while millers, not owners, occupied a lower social position. As for the workers of the land, they were few in number because of the small arable surface. As the lord did not reside at the castle all year round, he entrusted the management of the barony to farmers general.

The barony was run by the Saint-Nectaire family, or Senecterre, from the 1730s. This family originally came from Auvergne. Jean-Charles, who held the barony of Saint-Germain, obtained the distinction of Marshal of France in 1757. The barony enjoyed a stable economic situation despite several demographic crises in the 1770s and 1780s. On the eve of the Revolution, the barony reduced in size by refocusing on the lands close to Saint-Germain.

The Revolution or the creation of the commune

As the *cahiers de doléances* or lists of grievances has disappeared, information about this period is fragmentary. One notable event was the replacement of parishes by *communes* or municipalities. The commune of Saint-Germain benefited from arbitrary divisions and increased in area with the addition of the northern half of the old parish of Négrat on the left bank. This parish under the control of the diocese of Poitiers was designated as a priory-cure. It had a church and a cemetery, both of which have disappeared. It also acquired the locality called Pardoucie or Partoucie, which was under the control of a lord
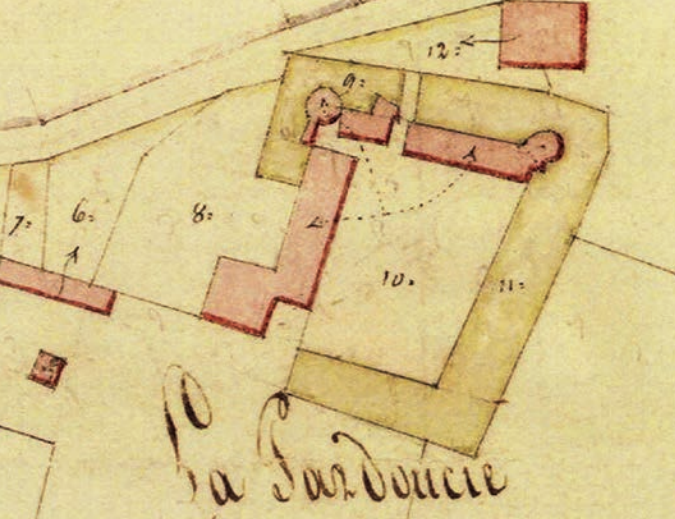
On the Napoleonic cadastral plan of 1825, the castle of La Partoucie has two corner towers, vestiges of the original quadrangular fortress. The moats are always marked on the map (in green).

The cadastral plan of 1825 shows the old main road of Saint-Germain, through the rue Marchedieu and rue Verre de Gris.

The arrival of new means of transport made the crossing of the village complicated and dangerous. Accidents were common, as shown by this photo taken at the bridge over the Issoire.

and had a quadrangular fortress with corner towers, moats and a drawbridge.

The new *logis* or manor house, built in the 18th century, can still be seen. Some hamlets were also detached from Esse and incorporated into Saint-Germain (Le Chambon, Ribière, La Grange Baudou).

In 1791, the project of merging the commune with Lessac was proposed for the first time but was not pursued. In the same year, the island of Saint-Germain or Sainte-Madeleine was incorporated into the village of Lessac. Under the Reign of Terror, the village was renamed Saint-Germain-sur-Vienne. It is during the Reign of Terror that

the church served for some time as a prison for the Spanish soldiers. In 1793, following the decree of the Convention to raise 300,000 men in the country, the village rose up in revolt but the National Guard repressed the riot. At this time, the castle was emptied, its archives were burned and it was sold as national property. The commune was the chief town of a canton which included Saint-Germain, Brillac, Lessac and Oradour-Fanais but this short-lived canton disappeared in 1800.

The transformations of the 19th century

The study of municipal registers of the 19th century shows that the limited financial means of the commune made it impossible to implement many projects. Yet, some have marked the appearance of the village. The first is the creation of the royal road linking Angoulême to Nevers in 1831. The last town gates (Porte Marchedieu and Porte Saint-Vincent) were destroyed, and there was a major realignment of facades in the town. The fairs of the village played an important economic role, attracting merchants from Normandy, Touraine and Bordeaux. The fairs took advantage of the creation of the

railway linking Confolens to L'Isle-Jourdain at the end of the 19th century as an opportunity to develop. The population was at its peak in the second half of the 19th century, with an average of 380 inhabitants. The tanneries slowly declined and disappeared in the 19th century. This disappearance coincided with the beginning of the demographic decline of the commune. The 19th century was a destructive century for the castle of Saint-Germain. Already very badly damaged during its sale as national property, it was transformed into a quarry and lost most of its cut stones and sculptures. In 1834, Lessac proposed to Saint-Germain to make an

The bypass, constructed at the end of the 1980s, made it possible to stop heavy goods traffic in Saint-Germain by building a new bridge over the Vienne. It is the only bridge built in the 20th century in the Confolens area on this river.

The Issoire Dam (also known as the Bellevue Dam) has made it possible to create a drinking water reserve of approximately 750 000 m³. It is managed by the Syndicat d'Eau Potable utility company, as is the water treatment plant located in Bellevue.

Promoting the living environment

The 20th century was marked by several developments contributing to the improvement of the living environment, the main one being the construction of the Lessac bypass and a new bridge over the Vienne. Newspapers and other photos of the time show numerous traffic problems with the cars and the trucks.

The bridge over the Issoire was too narrow and did not allow vehicles to cross. Some houses in the town even had their facades rubbed by the vehicles' bodywork. Inaugurated in August 1988, it aimed to remove heavy goods traffic and make the town centre safer. In 1973, the Issoire dam was built, making it possible to create an large reserve of drinking water which feeds a large part of the Confolens area. The dam was built at a place called Charraux, at the exact location of the Charraux mill. Construction of the dam resulted in a number of expropriations as well as building up of the left bank and the construction of a new road to replace the old rural road. 15 m high and 67.5 m long, it can supply 19 communes with drinking water. The castle, which had been neglected for many years, is at the heart of the action of the association Les Amis du château de Saint-Germain (Friends of the Castle). From 1973 onwards, it set up volunteer worksites to restore the site.

The Confolens Community of Communes, which became the owner in 1995, finished the conservation of the site by planning several restoration campaigns in the late 1990s. Finally, the natural wealth of the village is clearly recognized with the classification of the Issoire valley as a Natura 2000 site.

exchange of land between the left bank and the right bank, so as to simplify the respective boundaries of the communes. But this idea was rejected by Saint-Germain because it was disadvantageous in terms of tax revenues. Similarly, Saint-Germain opposed the proposal by Lesterps to create a new canton, wanting to remain attached to the canton of South Confolens.

When the village is viewed from Sainte-Radegonde the two groups formed in the Middle Ages are clearly distinguishable: the castle and the church standing together, and the village itself.

The expansion of the village was limited both by the promontory and the river but it was able to benefit until the 18th century from the wealth produced on the lands of the barony.

Changes to the layout and buildings

« From the Middle Ages to today, Saint-Germain has developed in close connection with its environment. »

The medieval configuration

The village of Saint-Germain developed at the foot of the castle between the rocky promontory, Vienne and Issoire. This physically very constrained positioning conditioned the very shape of the village and its possibilities of expansion. While the medieval aspect of the village is unknown, we know that it was protected by ramparts, defensive towers and town gates. Since the Middle Ages the buildings of the village have been set along the main street (present rue Verre de Gris and rue Marchedieu) which corresponds to the road linking Confolens to Bellac. Just like Confolens, the village maintained a close link with the Vienne but also with Issoire.

Thus, it was in the Middle Ages that the bridge over the Vienne and the bridge over the Issoire were built.

These two bridges were toll bridges. The bridge over the Vienne was a priori covered with houses as in many other medieval towns. However, there is no evidence that these bridges had towers or drawbridges. They played an essential role both in the protection of the village and the castle but also in its economic development.

A village in "paradox" with the barony

While the village itself had to adapt its morphology to the constraints of the land, it was not the same for the barony. At its peak in the 15th and 16th centuries, it covered a vast area from Benest to the castellany of Mortemart in Haute-Vienne. In 1789, the surface area of the barony was reduced but remained spread over three departments: Charente, Vienne and Haute-Vienne. The boundary changes carried out at the creation of the communes resulted in the disappearance of the barony and its direct contributions in agricultural and artisanal products. At the same time, the commune of Saint-Germain grew in size thanks to the incorporation of part of the

The promontory provided the building materials of the village. The south entrance (see photo) was also occupied by a quarry.

Here, the junction between the winding medieval street and the rectilinear road of the 19th century. The war memorial stands at this intersection.
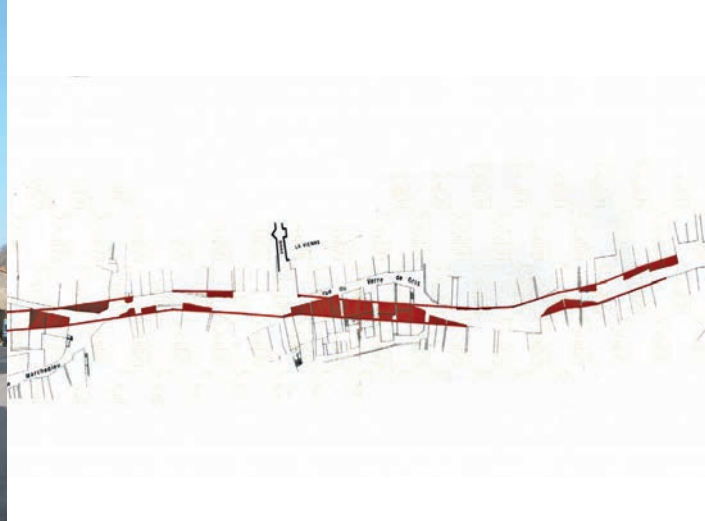
The creation of the royal road was accompanied by a major realignment of facades. This plan by Mr. Boulanger shows the extent of the realignments, with the total or partial disappearance of some houses and the last town gate.

old parish of Négrat (left bank) and some hamlets previously linked to Esse. These changes enabled Saint-Germain to keep several quarries on its territory and to gain some arable land, albeit limited. The town today is still divided in a complex manner, with land on both sides of the Vienne and interlocked with those of Lessac.

The upheavals of the 19th century

The decisive event in the physical modification of Saint-Germain remains the creation of the royal road linking Angouleme to Nevers. When the road was created, the organization of the buildings in the town was modified. In the Faubourg Marchedieu, to the south, the traffic was rerouted away from the rue Marchedieu and the town gate known as Marchedieu was destroyed. At the rue Verre de Gris, technicians dug into the buildings and turned the old medieval main street into a parallel road. While the northern part of the village was not affected, nevertheless, the town gate known as Saint Vincent was destroyed.

This opening up was accompanied by realignments of facades. It led to some unusual shapes of houses, like the one at the corner of the voie royale (royal way) and rue Verre de Gris. In order to improve traffic flow, the bridges on Vienne and Issoire were widened. While the village underwent transformations, the castle became more dilapidated, being used as a stone quarry by the inhabitants. Stones from the castle can be found in the surrounding buildings.

The challenge of the 20th century

The royal road, which provided greater accessibility in the 19th century, became a source of problems in the 20th century with the arrival of cars and trucks.
Heavy goods traffic was particularly great because of the quarry activity.
Accidents or problems of vehicles passing one another in the town were regularly reported. In the 1980s, the Lessac bypass and a new bridge over the Vienne were built. By removing most of the road traffic, the village is now away from the main roads without being completely isolated.

The geological map of the Charente Limousine clearly shows the contact between the granitic bedrock in the east and the limestone zone in the west, with the basin of the Vienne as the line of demarcation.
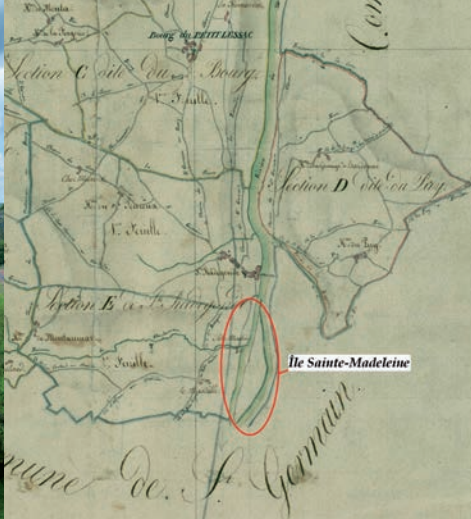
This view of the Issoire valley taken from the viewpoint at Bellevue illustrates the exceptional landscapes that this Natura 2000 site possesses. The dam is located further on, to the left of the photo.

The castle, from where played a decisive role in of the village.

The landscapes

« Spread over 467 hectares, the village of Saint-Germain-de-Confolens is located in the granite sector and has remarkable hilly landscapes.»

Geology

The Confolens area is a zone of contrasts at the junction between the sedimentary lands of the northern Aquitaine basin in the west, formed in the secondary and tertiary era, and the crystalline lands of the Massif Central in the east, formed in the primary era. The boundary between these two basins is the watershed between the catchment basins of the Loire (Vienne valley and its tributaries) and the Charente. Saint-Germain-de-Confolens is located on the edge of the granite zone and the edge of the Vienne valley. The old village and the castle are located on the rocky outcrop at the confluence of the valleys of the Vienne and the Issoire.

The soil consists of metamorphic (mainly gneiss) and magmatic (granite or diorite) rocks formed in the primary era around 600 million years ago. This rock is used in most of the constructions in the village. When extracted, the granite from Saint-Germain is not in the form of large blocks but rather granite mica, that is to say, mineral particles. This granite is still being extracted today and is renowned for its resistance; it is used in ballasts and foundations.

The Issoire valley, a Natura 2000 area

The Issoire, a tributary of the Vienne, rises at Blond in Haute-Vienne (87). The valley of the Issoire is very deep with many often inaccessible meanders. Recognized for the richness of its fauna and flora, the valley has been protected in turn under the law of 1930 on natural sites and then classified as a Natura 2000 area. The Issoire valley is one of the most remarkable natural sites in the area, with nine rare species and seven rare habitats of community interest. There are different species of bats, woodpeckers and even otters.

the photo is taken, and the Vienne
the establishment and the development

The Sainte-Madeleine island, originally attached to Saint-Germain-de-Confolens, entered the fold of Lessac in 1791. The Napoleonic cadastral plan shows the way the territories of the two communes are interlocked (Lessac on the left, Saint-Germain on the right) and the border position of the island.

This image of the turn of the 20th century shows the unusual shape of the Saint-Madeleine dolmen.

In addition to its environmental impact, the Issoire valley plays a major societal role as a catchment area. The Issoire proved to be the only source sufficient to supply the Confolens area with drinking water. In fact, the granitic soil did not allow the formation of groundwater. A dam was built in 1973 to provide a large drinking water reserve. This reserve, with a capacity of 750,000 m^3, supplies a total of 19 communes. The dam can be seen from Bellevue.

The Vienne valley

The Vienne rises on the plateau of Millevaches, in Corrèze, and ends when it flows into the Loire. With its wide bed and its steep-sided valley, it crosses the Charente Limousine area from south to north. Its name could mean "vigorous river" or "glittering river". Calm in appearance, the Vienne turns out to be capricious and prone to flooding. Even though its shallow depth and its rocks make it non-navigable, the Vienne played a major role in the establishment and development of towns such as Confolens and Saint-Germain-de-Confolens.

The Sainte-Madeleine island

The Sainte-Madeleine island lies in the middle of the Vienne, upstream from the medieval bridge. Covered with meadows and arable land, it has no bridge linking it to Saint-Germain or Sainte-Radegonde. It has a site named Dolmen of Sainte-Madeleine.

This dolmen was transformed in the Middle Ages into a chapel, with columns surmounted by carved capitals. Excavations carried out in 1878 made it possible to discover a medieval burial ground with a jug and a terracotta altar-cruet. This unusual chapel was classified as a historic monument in 1900. According to legend,

St. Madeleine arrived on the island carrying the table of the dolmen on her head and the columns in the pockets of her apron. When she ran up to leap over the arm of the Vienne and reach the island, she pushed against the bank and her foot impressed itself in the rock. A mass was celebrated in honour of the saint on 22nd July. The "Sainte-Madeleine footprint" is visible today, near the place called Les Marteaux. The Sainte-Madeleine island, also called the Saint-Germain island, has been part of the commune of Lessac since 1791.

This island is now private and not open to the public.

From the bottom of the access road, the logis and the Small and Big Towers can be clearly seen. The large openings of the towers correspond to the residential areas.

The church of Saint Vincent, as a former castle chapel, stands next to the bailey. The Greek cross plan of the building is partly concealed by the presbytery, built in the middle of the 19th century.

**Although
carried o
operation**

From one place to another

« From the castle to the tanneries via the bridges, Saint-Germain-de-Confolens lets you discover its history.»

1) The castle

Situated on the rocky spur at the confluence of Vienne and Issoire, the castle was part of the province of La Marche. It served as an advanced post in Confolens and the principality of Chabanais. The castle and its seigneury were controlled by families such as Rochechouart-Mortemart, Pérusse des Cars or Sennecterre. Except for the Romanesque keep (late 12th - early 13th century) and the Well tower (15th century), the castle dates mostly from the 16th century. Sold as national property during the Revolution and used as a stone quarry, it was in a state of ruin in the 20th century. From 1973 onwards, the association Les Amis du Château led worksites of young

volunteers who saved the castle. It has belonged to the Confolens Community of Communes since 1995 (today Community of Communes of Charente Limousine).
The castle forms a quadrilateral with a round tower at each corner and is set around a high and a low bailey. A main building connects two of these towers; it housed the *aula* (court and reception room) and a room corresponding to the 12th century keep. The upper levels of these towers and the main building had a residential function (large windows, oratories, chimneys) while the cellars were used for storage and defence.

2) Church of Saint-Vincent

This former 12th century castle chapel became a parish church in the 15th or 16th century, under the patronage of Saint Vincent. The building has a Greek cross plan, which is exceptional for the Confolens area. It is notable for its extreme simplicity, its lack of carved decoration and its limited number of openings. This is explained by its original incorporation into the castle enclosure. The bell tower, built on the square of the transept, was destroyed and then rebuilt to a level lower than the original one. It doubtlessly participated in the defence of the site. The nave is a simple square covered with a slightly pointed barrel vault.

At the transept crossing, the old cupola over pendentives was replaced at an unknown date by a wooden frame. Some attribute this destruction to the Wars of Religion. Among the remarkable interior features, in front of the absidiole of the north arm is the tombstone of a knight (reused) adorned with the patty shield, the spear and the sword. In the south arm of the transept can be seen the outline of a now walled door, used by the lords to access their chapel. The church still has its cemetery to the side.

3) The granite quarry

Situated at the southern entrance of the village, it began operating in the 1920s. A granite known for its resistance was extracted and used for ballasts and foundations. The quarry employed a large workforce until the 1970s. But it was confronted with two problems: firstly, it had limited scope for expansion because of its position. Secondly, its operations caused nuisances for the inhabitants of the village. So it was therefore closed. There is another quarry in operation: the quarry at Négrat, on the left bank of the Vienne.

4) The fairground

Originally, the first fairground was located near the quarry. It was intended for the cattle trade. The current fairground was purchased by the commune on 1st July 1858 to provide a better place for the fairs, which were very popular and held on the 8th of each month. At the end of each fair the animals were transported by the railway line connecting Confolens to Roumazières and L'Isle-Jourdain, to the railway station in Saint-Germain-Lessac. From 1935 onwards, with the decline of the fairs, the space was used for other purposes and, in 1974, was finally transformed into a rest area for tourists.

5) Rue Marchedieu

Rue Marchedieu, the former main street in the Middle Ages, leading on from the Rue Verre de Gris, has a house dating from the end of the 15th or the beginning of the 16th century. The door is surmounted by a recycled carved stone representing four human faces at the corners. Two faces are visible, the other two are hidden in the wall. This street was the site of the last medieval gate in the village, the Marchedieu gate, until the 19th century. Its destruction was scheduled during the creation of the *voie royale*.

Some sources claim that a cemetery, located in a garden on the other side of the street, was paired with this chapel.

In front of the old town hall is the place des bancs where the fair was held. Named place Jean Teilliet, it was redeveloped between 2011 and 2012.

The bridge over the Vienne is an old toll bridge. It would have been covered with houses, like many medieval bridges. No description of the bridge exists before the 19th , so it is not known if it had towers.

6) Rue de l'Ancienne Chapelle

While Saint-Germain-de-Confolens had several chapels, only one is still clearly visible in the rue de l'Ancienne Chapelle. Located on the left side of the street, it is recognizable by its openings with semicircular arches made of brick which have now been walled up.
This chapel may date from the modern era. It was transformed into an outbuilding and openings with limestone architraves were added. A holy water basin, set in one of the interior walls, testifies to its former role as a place of worship.

7) The old town hall

Situated in Place Jean Teilliet, the town hall occupied a house dating back to the 16th century. In 1825, it belonged to Dr. Peyrot, a doctor in Confolens. The commune bought it in 1862 to set up the presbytery. But, given the refusal of the priest in charge, it housed the girls' congregational school of the Sisters of Providence until 1904.
When the school closed, the house served as accommodation for the postmaster. From 1920 to 2016, the town hall occupied the building. On the other side of the square is a 16th century half-timbered house called Maison du Sabotier.

8) The medieval bridge

This bridge dates from the 12th century. Before its construction, the Vienne was crossed by means of a ford located at the Saint-Germain island. It is approximately 115 meters long and consists of nine arches. The seventh arch (starting from Sainte-Radegonde) seems more recent, because it is built of limestone while the bridge is built of granite. It may have replaced a drawbridge.
In 1882, major works led to the levelling of the pier fenders, the disappearance of the refuges above the fenders, the levelling of the roadway and the installation of metal railings.

9) Rue Verre de Gris

This former main street of the medieval period may take its name from the sign of one of the cafés where the famous "gray wine", a mixture of red and white grapes, was sold. Most of the shops were there, recognizable by their openings in the form of a basket handle. A porch was used by the washerwomen to go to the Vienne. The construction of the voie royale in 1831 relegated the rue Verre de Gris to a secondary road, which made it lose its businesses. Since 1925, the war memorial has stood at the intersection of these two roads.

Although it has been reworked, the basket handle shape of this opening reflects the former commercial nature of this building in the Rue Verre de Gris.

One of the characteristic features of the tanneries is still set in the wall of this house: the cattle horns which were used to stretch the skins.

When spring arrives, the roc branlant or wobbly rock is largely concealed by vegetation, which does not prevent it from towering over the Issoire.

10) The old schools

These buildings were bought in 1883 by the commune and substantially altered to accommodate the town hall and the school. An external staircase separates the North building which was reserved for the town hall, and the South building which housed the school. This South building included a single classroom, the teacher's accommodation and an annexe. Outside there were two yards, a covered courtyard and a garden. The school, which was mixed, became a boys' school in 1912. The town hall moved to new premises in 1920. The school closed in 1978. It is now used as a village hall.

11) The tanneries

The tanneries were installed along the Vienne and Issoire rivers. This proximity to the water allowed the establishment of bank mills to grind the oak bark, as well as soaking basins for the skins. These tanneries are recognizable by the cattle horns set in the facades to put the skins to dry. It was not the polluting nature of the activity that caused its disappearance in the area, but its inability to modernize. The decline affected the village in the 1880s and led to the disappearance of all tanneries.

12) The Issoire bridge

The other bridge in the village, the bridge over the Issoire, also probably dates from the 12th century. It served as a toll bridge until the middle of the 18th century. The texts mention a "town" gate at this bridge, the Porte Saint-Vincent, whose date of construction and destruction is unknown. Work in 1828 doubled its width and modified the fenders upstream of the Issoire. In 1988, the central pier was damaged by a thunderstorm and repaired. The bridge is built of granite on the upstream side (old part) and limestone on the downstream side. It was the scene of several spectacular accidents.

The Roc branlant and other places of legend

Among the legends that have been handed down, there is one about the Roc Branlant, a large rock towering over the Issoire. It is said that it moves at midnight on Christmas Eve. Another legend says that a wheel of torture was set up on a piece of land at the foot of the kitchen tower : the Roude or Rouade meadow. Other places of legends, originally on the lands of Saint-Germain, are today in the commune of Lessac, like the tomb of Auguste Pressac and the Sainte-Madeleine dolmen.

Castles and manor houses

« The castle of Saint-Germain, seat of the barony, remains the flagship building of the village. But it also has other beautiful homes. »

The castle of Saint-Germain-de-Confolens

If the legend tells that there was already a castle here in the 7th century, the castle which can be seen today has been built in several stages from the 12th century onwards.

The oldest part is a Romanesque square keep. The Well tower and some parts of the ramparts were built in the 15th century. Apart from these parts, the castle dates mainly from the 16th century: three towers, the main building, the cellars. The castle of Saint-Germain was the seat of one of the seven baronies of the province of La Marche. Apart from the fact that it served as an advanced post against Confolens, it also made it pos-sible to control traffic on the bridges over the Vienne and the Issoire. The first lords of Saint-Germain are mentioned in the cartulary of the abbey of Saint-Cyprien of Poitiers.

It was not until the second half of the 12th century that real information appeared on a lord of Saint-Germain, Guillaume de Mortemart.

After a passage in the d'Archiac family, the barony had two different owners between the beginning and the end of the 15th century: the Brisay family and the Pérusse des Cars family, who started the present castle. Gautier Pérusse des Cars, who had to deal with one of the two Protestant attacks during the Wars of Religion (1570), ordered the construction of the castle between 1500 and 1525. This family was to remain at the head of the castle until the 18th century and the successive arrivals of the Rochechouart-Mortemart and Sennecterre families. At this time, the castle was relatively dilapidated. During the Revolution, the castle was seized and sold as national property, first to Michel Saulnier, then Antoine Sylvain Prevost-Dumarais, owner of the Boisbuchet estate. The site was transformed into a stone quarry. In the course of the 19th century, the castle became the property of the priests of Saint-Germain, then of the Diocesan Association of Charente in 1937.

St-Germain. — Le Château

Until the middle of the 20th century, no maintenance work was done on the castle which was overgrown by vegetation, as shown in this postcard.

The castle of La Partoucie now consists of a main building, a barn and a stable. The house was built in the 18th century by François de Lagrange, after he had razed the medieval castle.

All that remains of the castle identified in the 1825 cadastral plan are the moats (on three sides) and the base of the north-east corner tower, next to the stable.

Under the impetus of the association Les Amis du Château de Saint-Germain, the ruins were stabilized. The last major conservation campaign dates back to 1998-1999. The castle forms a quadrilateral with a round tower at each corner : the Well Tower, the Kitchen Tower, the Small and the Big Towers.

The main building connects these two towers between them and incorporates the remains of the 12th century keep, identifiable with its high granite walls. In front of the main building, on the courtyard side, there are pillars supporting a gallery built in the 17th century.

In the centre of the quadrilateral is the high bailey, a refuge for the inhabitants in case of attack. The low bailey below was occupied by stables, millers and other craftsmen. The two courtyards communicated through a drawbridge, replaced in the 17th century by a gatehouse and an earthen ramp. The bases of the castle towers can still be seen. In terms of architecture, the castle is a mixture of the codes of medieval military architecture and the aspirations of the Renaissance. Medieval architecture did not play a concrete role here but symbolized the power of the lord.

The castle of La Partoucie

The fief of La Partoucie (or Pardoucie), situated on the left bank of the Vienne, existed already in the 15th century and it belonged to the Perdoux family. While the fief was, in political terms, under the control of the barony of Saint-Germain, in spiritual terms it was attached to the parish of Négrat. Originally, the castle was a quadrangular fortress with corner towers, a drawbridge and surrounded by moats. In 1615, the stronghold returned to Jehan Pastoureau de la Rie. In the 18th century, the castle was razed by the new owner, François de Lagrange, who built a new main building. He was a merchant tanner of

Confolens, and he entered the nobility by buying a position as adviser to the king.

However, he retained the two corner towers to the north and the moats, which can be seen on the cadastral plan of 1825. In 1790, the parish of Négrat was abolished and the locality called La Partoucie was attached to the commune of Saint-Germain-de-Confolens. Today the castle consists of the present main building, a stable and a barn. All that remains from the medieval building is the base of the north-east tower.

When viewed from the wall of the high bailey, the church has a minimalist profile which shows how it used to be part of the defensive system. The lord entered the building directly through a door in the south arm of the transept (now walled up).

The floors of the castle towers are equipped with private oratories. They are notable for their intersecting ribs resting on carved pendants.

The statue of Saint Anthony, as well as his pig, are works of Jean Teilliet. They are now kept in an adjacent building.

Religious heritage and beliefs

« Saint-Germain-de-Confolens is a village marked by spirituality, between religion, traditions and legends. »

The church of Saint-Vincent

Mentioned in 1185, the church is commonly identified as the old castle chapel. According to a recent hypothesis, it was a church for an aristocratic quarter adjoining the castle. It would have become the village church in the 16th century when the new castle was built. Two facts could explain this change of attribution : the setting up of private oratories in the towers of the castle rebuilt by Gautier Pérusse des Cars and the necessity of replacing the parish church which was falling into disrepair. Its Greek cross plan and its extreme simplicity in terms of decoration and openings make the church of

Saint-Vincent unique in the Confolens area. The murals that were in the church, an infrequent feature in the region, have unfortunately disappeared. It possesses little furniture but contains some beautiful pieces. Thus, there are several funerary slabs, including one with a shield, a spear and a sword. But above all, the church houses, in the nave, a war memorial made by Jean Teilliet, a Limousin artist who lived in Sainte-Radegonde. He also carved a statue of Saint Anthony with his pig, now preserved in an adjacent building.

The chapels

The commune had several chapels. The Saint-Antoine chapel was situated on the heights of Bellevue. Considered to be the first place of worship in the village, it was surrounded by a cemetery which was in use until the 18th century. The chapel was demolished at about this time. Another chapel, the Sainte-Anne chapel, was located near the Issoire bridge. It may date from the 15th or 16th century. It was sold as national property in Year IV (1795 or 1796) and its walls served as a basis for the construction of a house. The door of the chapel, with its abutments of Pressac limestone, can be seen on the edge of the street. A third one can be seen

From the outside, only this door, with its abutments of Pressac limestone, reveals the existence of the Sainte-Anne chapel. Rib brackets are visible inside.

The Font Gallou is situated along a hiking path outside the village. The flow of this spring is constant, even in summer. It has been the subject of landscaping work.

The tomb of Auguste Pressac is an unusual site in the region. It has undergone restoration work as part of a project carried out with the backing of the local authorities.

in the village, in the rue de l'Ancienne Chapelle. With no patronage, it is recognizable by its door and its two windows set under semicircular arches made of brick, which, have now been walled up. A chapel of Notre-Dame-de-Pitié, quoted in texts, may have been located near the Issoire. Finally the chapel on the Island of Sainte-Madeleine is a case apart, since it is a dolmen which was transformed in the Middle Ages into a chapel with a cemetery. The discovery in the 19th century of medieval ceramics in tombs confirms this dating. The chapel was listed as a Historic Monument in 1900.

Fountains of devotion

Saint-Germain-de-Confolens had several fountains of devotion. The first, the Font Gallou, was outside the village on the road to Esse. Nestled in the heart of a wooded area, it treated the colic of humans and animals. To cure a human, it was necessary to throw a piece of clothing into the water; to cure an animal, a tuft of hair or a flock of wool. This fountain still exists and is situated along a hiking path. The second, the Saint-Antoine fountain, was attached to the chapel of the same name on the heights of Bellevue. It was frequented for removing spells but especially for children who were slow to walk.

The children were plunged into the water, especially on 23rd August, the votive feast of Saint Anthony. There is also mention of a fountain at the Grange Terroux. Young girls threw in pins to know if they would get married in the year. Among other beliefs close to devotions, mention can be made of the shepherdesses who, in order to protect their sheep, brought the sticks of hazel, used to drive the herds, to the Saint-Georges cross at a place called La Grange Terroux, on All Saints Day.

Places of legend

Saint-Germain-de-Confolens has several places associated with legends that have been handed down for several generations. The most emblematic is along the Issoire : the Roc Branlant. This rock, nestled in the vegetation, is difficult to reach. There is another place of legend, now attached to Lessac : the tomb of Auguste Pressac. This person asked to be buried in his wood, sitting on a chair with his rifle and a bottle of red wine. In his will, he bequeathed 42 ares (100 square metres) of land to the commune, there are 8 left today.

Situated at the confluence of the Vienne and the Issoire, these former tanneries were restored in the early 2000s. Combining stone with timber frames, they still have their cattle horns set in the walls

This old photograph shows the importance of the fairs in Saint-Germain. The railway line made it possible to bring cattle in large numbers.

Each year, the association Les Amis du château organizes the grape harvest and produces about a hundred bottles.

Savours and know-how

«Proud of its traditions, Saint-Germain has kept alive the unifying elements of its identity.»

The little capital of leather

Economic activity was strongly dominated by tanning and leather work, which earned the village this title. In the census of 1841, there were 15 tanners. The skins worked were mainly bovine skins because they gave the best leathers. Unlike the tanneries of Saint-Junien, those of Saint-Germain did not industrialize and collapsed at the end of the 19th century. They are nevertheless present in people's memories, thanks to the houses built along the Vienne and the Issoire.

The mills

The village had several mills that had different uses : fulling mills for cleaning cloths, grain mills or oil mills, bank mills for the processing skins. While there is no precise indication of the number of fuller or bank mills, the town had 3 grain and oil mills : the new mill or burnt mill, the Ribières mill and the Charraux mill. Today only the burned mill remains. The former common oven of the lord of Saint-Germain is presently used as a dwelling. The dam on the Vienne and the mill race can still be seen.

The fairs

Saint-Germain-de-Confolens had several fairgrounds or market squares, one for each animal species. The fairs on the 8th of each month were particularly famous and attracted merchants from Saintonge, the Bordeaux area and Normandy. The activity of the fairs was strongly linked to the presence of the Confolens-L'Isle-Jourdain railway line and to the station in the commune of Lessac. The commune leased rights for the allotment of sites as well as slurry and dung rights for 3 or 5 years. The last fairs of any real importance took place in the second half of the 20th century.

For many years the association Les Amis du château has contributed for many years to the attractiveness of the site, organizing every 1st May great festivals which combine medieval inspirations and the participation of local cultural players.

In addition to the young volunteer projects, the association Les Amis du château has participated in several archaeological digs on the site. These excavations have brought to light a rich and varied range of objects.

The exploitation of granite

The village, built at the foot of the rocky promontory, has local granite as its main material. But its industrial exploitation only started around the 1920s. There were two quarries : the Gaudence quarry at the southern entrance of the village and the Négrat quarry on the left bank. The extracted granite was used for ballast and foundations. However, as the Gaudence quarry was too close to homes and unable to expand, it ceased its activity in the 1970s. The Négrat quarry is still in operation.

An underdeveloped agricultural sector

Because of the limited area of Saint-Germain, the primary or agricultural sector has always been poorly represented. The existing old documents suggest the cultivation of wheat, rye or oats, but without any indications of place or surface area. Similarly, censuses report several farmers or day labourers. The size of the barony suggests that these workers were employed in the surrounding communes, and that these communes supplied the cereals to the various mills in Saint-Germain.

The specific case of the vine

Vine growing was clearly mentioned in the documents from the time of the Ancien Régime onwards. It was concentrated on the left bank of the Vienne. The right of press of the lord of Saint-Germain, which was very rare in the Confolens area, underlined the importance of the vine in the area. The wines of Saint-Germain, which were quite famous, were exported at the beginning of the 19th century to Haute-Vienne. As a reminder of this vanished activity, in 2002 Les Amis du château de Saint-Germain replanted the vineyard at the foot of the castle, on land called "vines of the castle".

Les Amis du château de Saint-Germain

The life of Saint-Germain, and especially the castle, has been marked by the action of an association : Les Amis du château or Friends of the Castle of Saint-Germain. Created in the 1970s, it organizes work projects of young volunteers to clear undergrowth and stabilize the ruins. These work projects go together with archaeological excavations. While the site now belongs to the Community of Communes of Charente Limousine, the association remains an important player, especially with the May Day celebrations and the harvest in September.
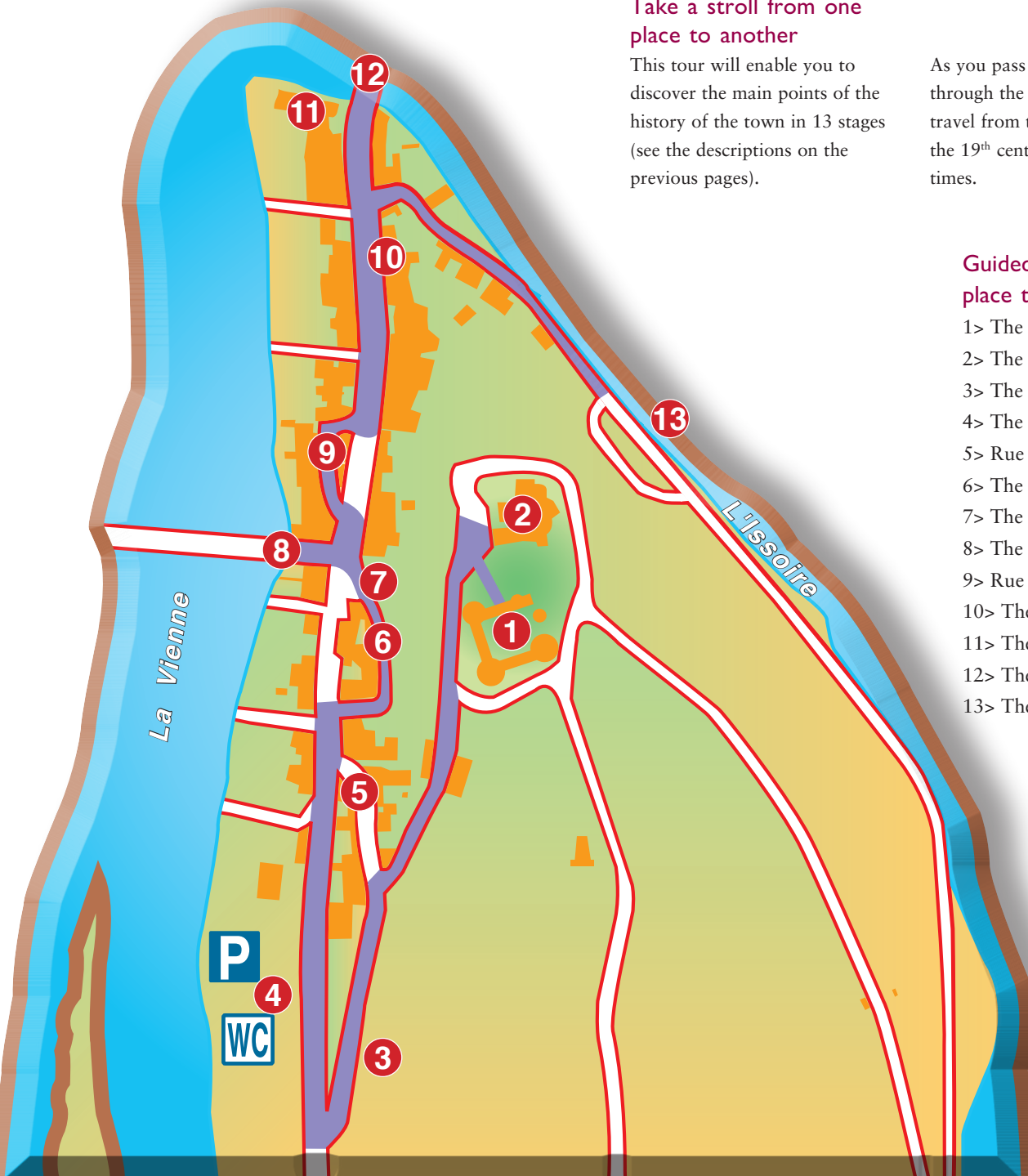
Take a stroll from one place to another

This tour will enable you to discover the main points of the history of the town in 13 stages (see the descriptions on the previous pages).
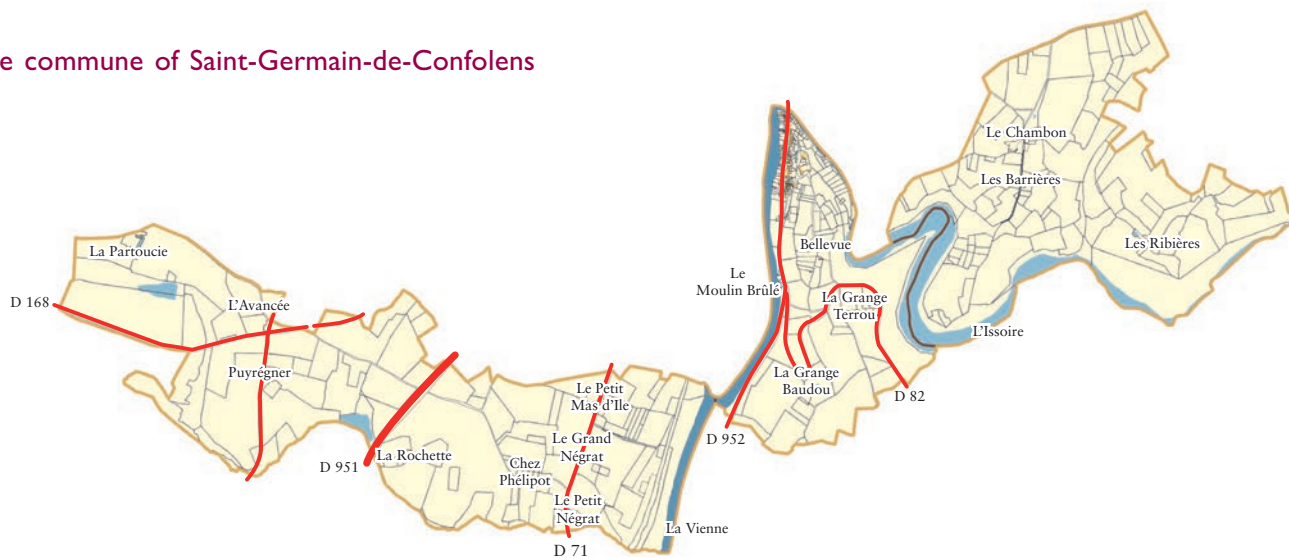
As you pass by buildings and through the quarters, you will travel from the Middle Ages to the 19th century to modern times.

Guided tour from one place to another

1> The castle
2> The church
3> The granite quarry
4> The fairground
5> Rue Marchedieu
6> The chapels
7> The old town hall
8> The medieval bridge
9> Rue Verre de Gris
10> The old schools
11> The tanneries
12> The Issoire bridge
13> The roc branlant

La Vienne

L'Issoire

P

WC

The commune of Saint-Germain-de-Confolens

Map labels:
Le Chambon
Les Barrières
Les Ribières
Bellevue
Le Moulin Brûlé
La Grange Terrou
L'Issoire
D 82
La Grange Baudou
D 952
Le Petit Mas d'Ile
Le Grand Négrat
Chez Phélipot
Le Petit Négrat
D 71
La Vienne
La Rochette
D 951
Puyrégner
L'Avancée
La Partoucie
D 168

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- The Confolentais.
- Confolens.
- The abattoir, between history and contemporary creation
- The Limousin ostensions at Abzac and Esse
- The sculptures of Morice Lipsi at Abzac and Brillac
- The murals of Félix Périn at Ansac-sur-Vienne.
- The works of Roger Baleix in the Confolens area
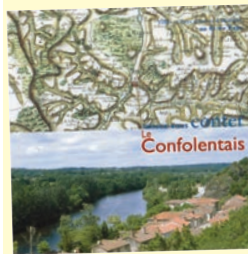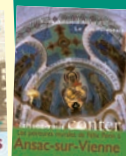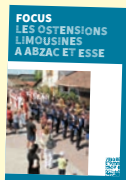
This brochure has been produced thanks to the results of the heritage inventory, carried out between 2003 and 2006 by the Communauté de Communes du Confolentais and the department of the general inventory of the cultural heritage of the Poitou-Charentes region. To contact this service : Tel. 05 49 36 30 07.

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CHARENTE LIMOUSINE

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VILLES & PAYS D'ART & D'HISTOIRE

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www.charente-limousine.fr, tab Pays d'art et d'histoire

«From the top of the towers, the eye sweeps down the wide and laughing valley of the Vienne and the deep gorge where the Issoire, flowing from the mountains of Blond, twists in sudden meanders at the foot of the formidable rocks as if reddened by a fire.»

Quotation from the book by M. Ardouin-Dumazet / Voyage in France, 15th series / 1905