

Our heritage has future

**The heritage trails
Discovery Book**

**The two lives of
Fontevraud-l'Abbaye**

Fontevraud-l'Abbaye



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The source

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GARE
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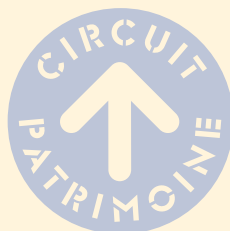
Rue Robert-d'Arbrissel
A village full of life **5**

The Dovecote
Vast privileges **4**

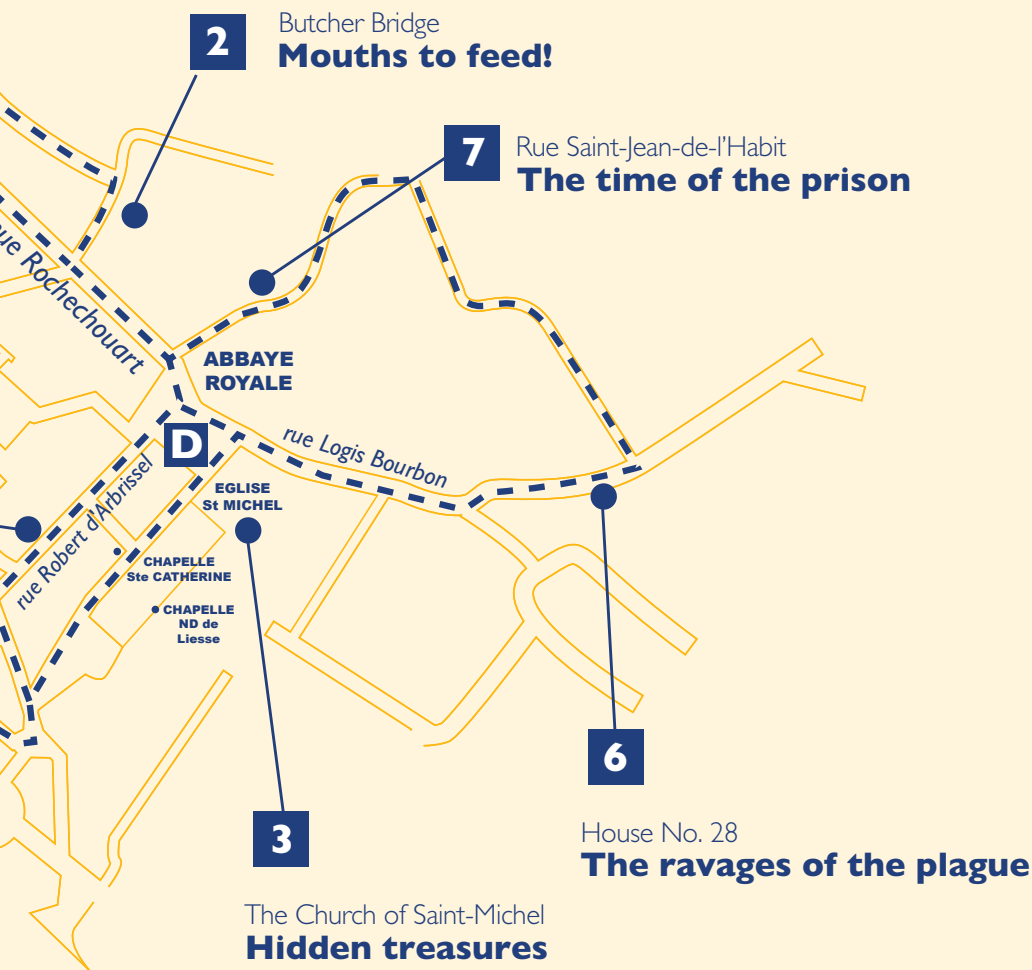
Fontevraud-l'Abbaye

The two lives of Fontevraud-l'Abbaye

**Go to the starting panel
and follow the markers**



Fontevraud-l'Abbaye
The story of the Abbey



This project is the result of a unique collaboration between the town of Fontevraud-l'Abbaye, its people and organizations, the Cultural Centre of the West, the Tourist Information Centre and the Loire-Anjou-Touraine Natural Regional Park.

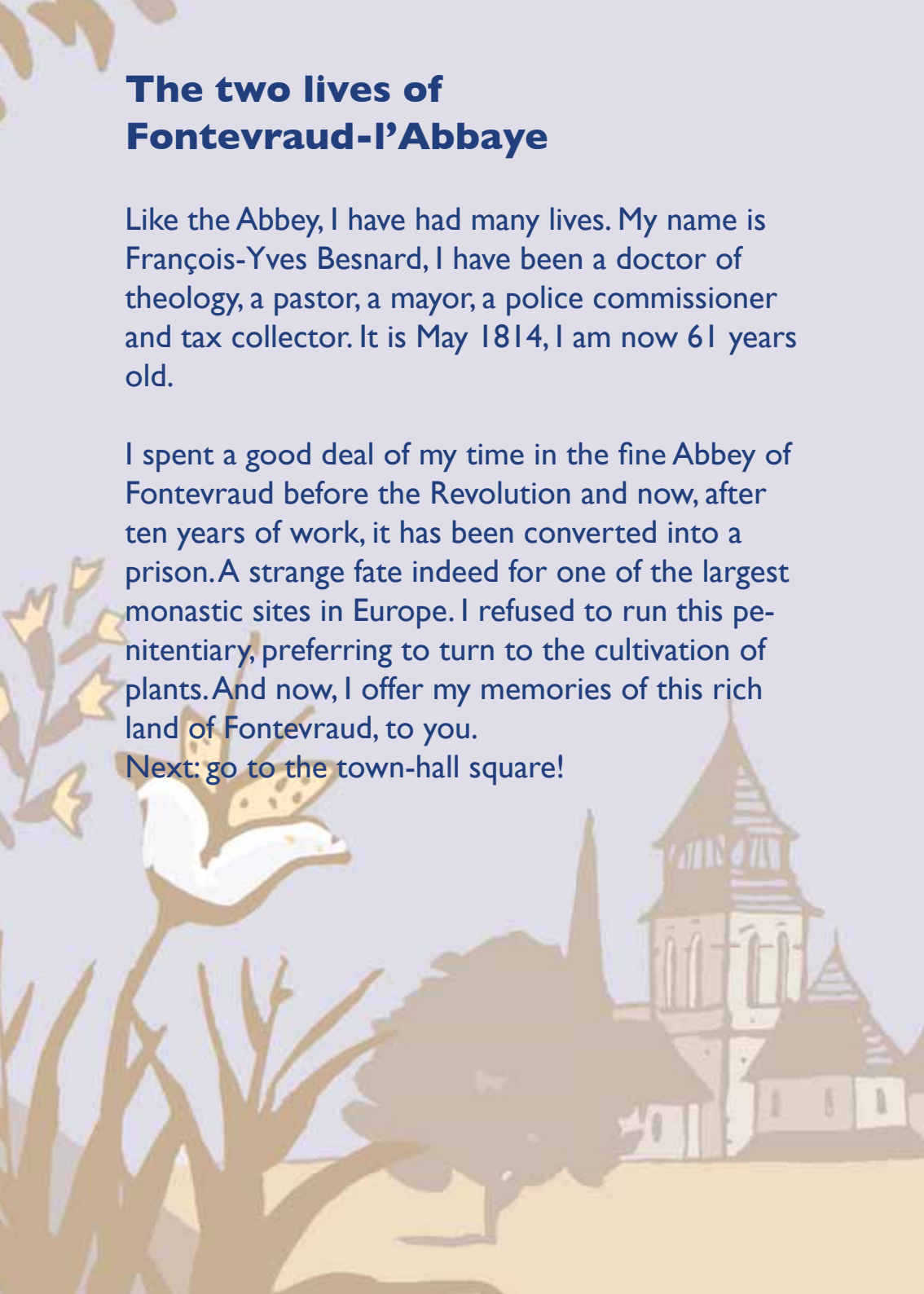


The two lives of Fontevraud-l'Abbaye

Like the Abbey, I have had many lives. My name is François-Yves Besnard, I have been a doctor of theology, a pastor, a mayor, a police commissioner and tax collector. It is May 1814, I am now 61 years old.

I spent a good deal of my time in the fine Abbey of Fontevraud before the Revolution and now, after ten years of work, it has been converted into a prison. A strange fate indeed for one of the largest monastic sites in Europe. I refused to run this penitentiary, preferring to turn to the cultivation of plants. And now, I offer my memories of this rich land of Fontevraud, to you.

Next: go to the town-hall square!





The source of the Abbey

«It was a long time before the Abbey was founded. You see this spring? Robert d'Arbrissel knew it was here. He was the charismatic cleric who established his community in this wooded valley in 1101. Surrounded by his disciples, this Breton priest was appointed preacher four years earlier by Pope Urban II. D'Arbrissel did not want a village established around the monastery but the workers building this monumental construction settled around it. The religious community, which included men and women, went from strength to strength.»



To help you to find stations.

Why did Robert d'Arbrissel choose the valley of Fontevraud to establish his community? Look at the drawing for some clues. (answers p. 20)



See, feel, imagine

■ Therapeutic qualities

Look carefully at this spring: used by the Celts and Gallo-Romans, it has supplied the inhabitants since the twelfth century and is said to heal sore eyes. The waters flow into the Arceau stream which, in turn runs into the Loire at Montsoreau.

■ Tender tuffeau

This area, nestled against the hillside, is known as 'les Roches' and takes its name from the extraction of tuffeau. The soft limestone was used in the construction of the Abbey which also resulted in the creation of troglodytic dwellings. Built in the sixteenth century, the Saint-Mainboeuf Chapel was on the site of the little house at No. 60 in the street of the same name.



Mouths to feed!

«It's difficult to imagine, but in my time this ancient Roman road was the main street of the village. Traders and visitors came up and down this winding road. There were a lot of mouths to feed at the Abbey! I remember bread, meat, fish and eggs were all delivered daily in astronomical quantities. In the year 1790 alone, the Abbey bought 7,549 eggs for the 200 monks and nuns living there! Fish was the staple diet.»





Circle the ingredients
that the Abbey did not
produce and therefore
had to buy in.
(answers p. 20)



See, feel, imagine

■ A vast domain

The house No. 24 was the former butchery of the Abbey. On the right, you can see the remains of an ancient abbey wall.

■ Fisheries: a plentiful bounty

In the Middle Ages, fish was consumed in abundance to feed the 800 nuns and monks. During the many days of fasting, the 'noble' lamprey, pike, eel and salmon were

chosen. The 'ordinary' fish such as herring, cod and sardines were imported in barrels. In addition to the ponds, which spread over five acres to the south of the Abbey, the nuns made the most of the many fisheries they had along the Loire, in mill ponds and surrounding reservoirs.



Hidden treasures

“To think that this church was first a chapel! It simply became too small and when the Pope agreed to give the village parish status in 1170, the building was enlarged and supplied with a priest so Mass could be held. In 1740, the Saint Joseph Chapel was added to the left of the altar. I feel rather emotional about seeing this beautiful golden altar which was formerly in the Abbey church. It is mainly thanks to Father Alexandre Guerrier who saved it from the looting spree during the Revolution, praise be to God! He also saved most of the art objects present in the chapel, like this strange ebony reliquary.”





«I live in a troglodytic dwelling in the rue Saint-Mainboeuf. If it takes me half an hour to walk 2 km, how long does it take to make the round trip to the following places:

- the church of Roiffé, where Mass was held before Fontevraud became a parish.
- the port of Montsoreau where I need to collect some merchandise." (answers p. 20)

See, feel, imagine

■ A position of entitlement

Sometimes, the abbess attended Mass on a cantilevered platform which has since disappeared. It was also used by the four youngest daughters of Louis XV who were educated at the Abbey.

■ The Plantagenet arch

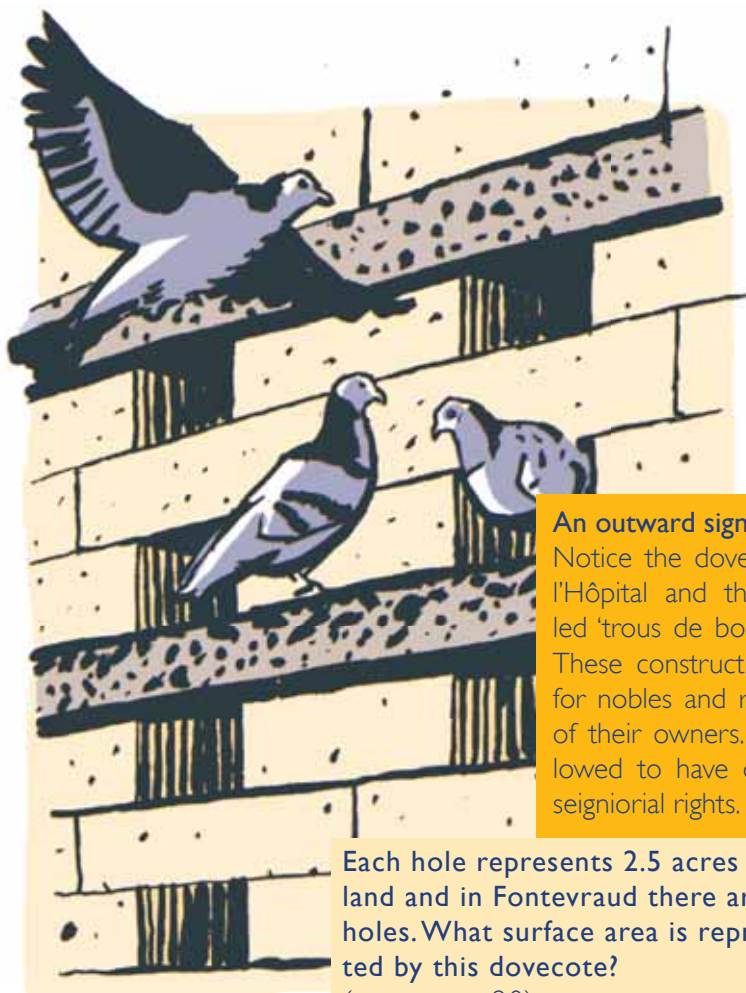
A grant from Henry II Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, Duke of Normandy and King of England, and his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, allowed the church to be enlarged. Their effigies lie in the Abbey. Look at their faces carved in medallions on the arch known as 'Plantagenet', right over the altar. This arch is characterized by its strongly convex, Angevin dome.



Vast privileges

«With a permanent invitation from the last abbess, I had every opportunity to enjoy the splendour of the Abbey. In 1789, it was one of the richest in France and owned vast lands, forests, vineyards, farms and salt marshes. Not only was the Abbey free from taxes, but it had the right to collect impressive revenues, annuities, pensions for the nuns, church gifts and so on. At the time of the Revolution, there were still 73 officials and servants in the service of the Abbey which was supporting the whole parish and indeed, the surrounding area.»





An outward sign of wealth

Notice the dovecote in the rue de l'Hôpital and the wall cavities called 'trous de boulins' (putlog holes). These constructions were reserved for nobles and reflected the wealth of their owners. The Abbey was allowed to have one because it had seigniorial rights.

Each hole represents 2.5 acres of land and in Fontevraud there are 310 holes. What surface area is represented by this dovecote?
(answers p. 20)

See, feel, imagine

■ Don't count your pigeons!

A prospective spouse could judge the importance of land owned by his future in-laws by counting the holes in the dovecote. But sometimes false holes were drilled and the suitor was 'pigeonner' (I've been taken for a ride). An expression still used today.

■ The hospital la Montespan

Read the inscription on the front of No.1, rue de la Corderie, where the old hospital of Madame de Montespan was. A favourite of Louis XIV, she did penance at Fontevraud with her sister, who was the 32nd abbess. She built this hermitage in 1687 and enlarged it into a hospital in 1689.



A village full of life

«The street leading to the Abbey did not always bear the name of its founder. Before the Revolution it was the 'Grand'Rue' (main street) and was very busy, with bustling shops and inns which I enjoyed frequenting. There was a harness-maker at number 37, the Escu Inn at Nos. 32 and 34, 'La Corne du cerf' (deer horn) at No. 4, just next to the 'Croix-Blanche' (White Cross). Pop into the courtyard of this establishment and have a look at the covered galleries which allowed access to the rooms. This former coaching inn dates from 1696!»





See, feel, imagine

■ Cabarets

Unlike inns, whose guests were wealthy travellers, the 'cabarets' attracted a local, popular patronage, where wine was sold and games played notably bowls. Two such places have been identified in Fontevraud: one in the 'Roches' district and the other in the present rue de l'Hermitage, then called the Asnerie district because of the farriers installed there.

There is a sixteenth century house at Nos. 32 and 34, rue Robert-d'Arbrissel which once housed the Escu Inn. **Some architectural elements from the nineteenth century house at No. 52 have been added in the drawing.** Can you find them? (answers p. 20)



The ravages of the plague

«Observe the front of the house at No. 28. I'd like to play a little game around its bas-relief (see facing page). And the beautiful chapel a little further on...? It's the chapel of Our Lady of Mercy. It was built by the officials of the abbess to thank the Virgin Mary for having saved them from the black plague that swept through Fontevraud in 1579. An understandable gesture as this highly contagious disease killed more than half the population of France. When another plague raged here in 1639, God, in his mercy, saved me from the scourge.»



Note the decoration on the facade of the house at No. 28 rue de l'Hermitage. It represents the archangel Michael, who protects the Abbey.

There are three archangels in the Christian religion: **Gabriel, Michael and Raphael**. These angels are superior to others. Of the four drawings below, which character is not an archangel? Can you name these four characters? (answers p. 20)



See, feel, imagine

■ A sparrow like no other

A southern species of sparrow which is little known in our region nests in the walls of the Abbey. It is the Rock Sparrow, which differs from its domestic cousin by a pale yellow patch on the chest. It nests in cavities. Watch carefully!

■ Every tree has its use

A good supply of wood was needed to build the Abbey. Different trees grow in different soils and these were used according to their qualities. Oak is resistant. It was used for interior woodwork, carpentry, barrels and wood for the kitchen. Hornbeam is versatile, very useful for hedges as it keeps its leaves during winter. It was also used to make workbenches, butcher blocks and wheel hubs.



The time of the prison

«Now my wanderings have brought me back to Fontevraud. The village has become a shadow of its former self. The nuns were expelled at the time of the Revolution, the Abbey neglected and abandoned to looting. The town closed the doors of this 'national treasure' and Napoleon decided to convert it into a prison. The first detainees - men, women and children - are beginning to arrive. I refused to take the post of Director. I have chosen to become a horticulturist.»





In the nineteenth century, certain objects were forbidden to prisoners. Are you a good jailer? **Do you recognize the contraband?** (answers p. 20)

See, feel, imagine

■ The hard life of the prison

The prison officially opened in 1814. In 1817 there were 700 to 1,000 inmates, including 250 women. Twenty years later 102 boys and 13 girls under 16 years old were incarcerated in separate quarters. The children were mostly accused of larceny.

Some inmates were political prisoners or murderers, sentenced to hard labour in the prison factory, every day, except on Sundays. Apart from farm work they also did weaving, spinning, sewing and carpentry. Considered by some to be harsher than other prisons, this penitentiary was a severe punishment for up to 1,750 inmates.



1 - Le Moulin de la Courvoiserie (water mill)

The St. Robert spring provided ample water for a stream, along which flour-producing water mills operated. At No. 91, Avenue Rochechouart, the Courvoiserie mill was owned by the Abbey and rented out with a lease established between the miller and the abbess. The name stems from the presence of a chicken yard, which provided poultry for the religious community. During the Revolution, the mill was sold as a national asset. In 1862, a description of the mill mentions a wheel, three pairs of grinding stones and a waterfall of 7 meters with a flow of 30 litres a second to power 2.4 hp.

2 - Le lavoir des Roches (wash-house)

This nineteenth century wash-house is fed by the fountain of St. Mainboeuf and was restored in 2000. The laundresses beat out their own laundry or that of clients here up until 1965.

3 - La gare (the station)

From November 1896 a train linking Fontevraud to Saumur carried passengers and freight (coal, tuffeau stone, wine ...). As a prison Fontevraud needed a supply of raw materials for the inmates' workshops but also transport to send off the goods manufactured there.

The line stopped at the junction of Avenue Rochechouart and Avenue des Roches. The water tower, sidings, points and scales have all disappeared. There is still a shed which serves as a workshop for the current garage and the slightly modified brick station building, which has been converted into a house.

Opposite the station is, of course the cafe, allowing travellers to quench their thirst at their departure and arrival! It subsequently took the name 'restaurant de l'Abbaye'. The Queen Mother, Queen Elizabeth had tea here with Princess Anne when visiting the abbey in the 1960s.

This is the only station out of the local network, which has remained standing since the tramway ceased operating in 1929.

4 - La Chapelle Sainte-Catherine and the lantern of the dead

It is a thirteenth century funerary chapel dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria. Alix de Bourbon, 8th Abbess of Fontevraud, was the founder. She wanted to honour the memory of Hersende de Champagne, daughter of the lord of Montsoireau and first great Prior of the Abbey of Fontevraud.

At the centre of the medieval cemetery, the chapel is topped by an octagonal tower, only 4 to 5 meters wide, the summit of which is a lantern. A lamp periodically lit here, inviting the faithful to pray for the dead. This chapel has been private property since the French Revolution.

5 - La Chapelle Notre-Dame-de-Liesse

A wall separates the old cemetery from the Bourbon Logis. Inserted in the wall is an old carved gateway which led to a chapel, since destroyed, Notre-Dame-de-Liesse, built in the Bourbon park. In the early seventeenth century, Eleanor of Bourbon built a bridge leading to her logis, the 'Vignerie'. By this route the sisters could go to the «Great Gardens» without leaving the enclosure of the Abbey.

6 - La Segrétainerie

The oldest house in Fontevraud-l'Abbaye is the 12th century 'Segrétainerie', located at 31 rue Saint-Jean-de-l'Habit. Its name comes from the fact that outside the enclosure it housed the sacristans of the Abbey and the retired brothers of Saint-Jean-de-l'Habit, the monastery monks. It was surrounded by the Abbey kitchen gardens.

The site was sold at the time of the Revolution as a national asset.

The building has vaulted cellars, an aqueduct and an underground well supplied by waters of the St. Robert spring, channelled from the Abbey.

Answers to the Quiz

Station 1 p. 5

The presence of abundant springs and three small streams was instrumental in the founding of the Abbey. They were used for fishing and milling. On the borders of Touraine and Poitou, Fontevraud was at the axis of two Roman roads. The proximity of the confluences of the Loire and Vienne also facilitated the transport of goods by boat.

Station 2 p. 7

The Abbey did not produce spices, citrus fruits, figs, or coffee, which originated from the Mediterranean, America or the Caribbean. However, it had fresh-water salmon, eggs and flour. It raised sheep, produced wine and got salt from its salt-marshes.

The nuns were exempt from tolls for all commodities transported.

Station 3 p. 9

About 3 hours for the round-trip to the church of Roiffé.

About 2 hours for the round-trip to the port of Montsoreau.

Station 4 p. 11

The average surface area of a property with a dovecote of 310 holes is $310 \times 2.5 = 755$ acres, equivalent to 143 football fields!

Station 5 p. 13

Copy the design of the sixteenth century house indicating the number that corresponds to each architectural element of the nineteenth century:

1. 'oeil de bœuf' (round window)
2. cartouches
3. moulding topped by a cornice
4. pilaster



Station 6 p. 15

It is the figure number 1 which is not an archangel. It represents St. George. The fourth century Christian martyr on a white horse who fought the dragon.

Regarded in the Bible as the messenger of God, the archangel Gabriel, figure No. 2, announces the birth of Jesus in the New Testament.

Saint Raphael, figure 4, is one of three archangels recognized by the Church. In the Bible, he tells Tobias to catch a fish, and then uses the gallbladder to heal Tobit, his father, who was suffering from blindness.

The prohibited items are: the metal bracket, the belt and the goblet that were considered too dangerous if made available to prisoners as they could be used as weapons. Finally, the pack of cards was also banned. The prisoners could be tempted to place bets and the card games tended to become too heated, often ending in a brawl.

Created in 1996, the first ligérien Park covers 270 858 hectares of departments of Indre-et-Loire (Region Centers) and from Maine-et-Loire (Region Country of the Loire).



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THE HERITAGE TRAILS

How do they work?

The marked circuit is constructed around a theme.
The discovery book takes you from station to station and helps you understand its landscapes, narrated by **an iconic historical figure**.

Go to the starting station and follow the markers

Fontevraud-l'Abbaye
**The two lives of
Fontevraud-l'Abbaye**

Go back nearly two centuries and let yourself be guided by François-Yves Besnard through the streets of Fontevraud-L'Abbaye. Learn how the French Revolution has changed the lives of this village whose activity was inexorably bound to the life of the Abbey.

Price : 1€

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