

# CASTLE OF VILLEBOIS LA VALETTE



Among the numerous medieval sites that exist in the Charente, the château of Villebois Lavalette stands out as one of the finest. At first sight one is struck by the harmony between the countryside and the magnificent architecture that rises above it. Each year, thanks to the owner of the site, archaeological campaigns have revealed fascinating secrets that have been hidden since the Middle Ages.



seigneurs of Villebois would have lived.

During the last thousand years four successive castles have been built on this hill; a long period which archaeological intervention is currently seeking to unravel.

## ***Stage one : towards the end of the first millennium***

At the southeast border of the county of Angoulême (the Angoumois), close to the Boisé Way (the ancient road between Périgueux and Saintes) on a promontory controlling the approach to Angoulême, rose the first construction, a castle keep, completed around the year AD 1000. The lords of Villebois, allies of the counts of Taillefer, raised a tower on an artificial hillock in order to boast their power. This motte has been rediscovered and is in course of excavation under the direction of the archaeologist, Adrien Montigny,

## ***Stage two : the feudal period***

Between the close of the 12th and the first half of the 13th century the castle passed from one family to another: First the Villebois family, then the Plantagenêts and finally the Lusignans. The original buildings were constructed in stone but now they were extended and enclosed within a curtain wall with seven defensive towers, two of which formed the fortified entrance. As is usually the case, the curtain wall also enclosed the castle courtyard. It is not known which family was responsible for building the seigneurial residence, termed the castle 'keep' or 'donjon', when it was fortified. The exact form it took is not known either but it would have comprised a vast building of several storeys surmounted by circular turrets resting on the original castle motte.



The exceptional, recent discovery of its lowest room has intrigued archaeologists and historians alike. It is more than 30 metres long and vaulted in stone, longer than any of the donjons in the Angoumois: (Marthon, Montignac and La Rochefoucauld). Its architecture is comparable with that of the donjon at Niort built by the Plantagenêts, the achievement of this building represents a distinctive link in the history of castles and fortresses!



Within the enclosing wall the romanesque porch of the chapel, which assured the spiritual protection of the castle, is still visible.

### ***Stage three : the end of the Middle Ages***

At the close of the Middle Ages (end XIV- XV c.), the barons of Mareuil built another seigneurial residence on the site of the feudal habitation, which was partially levelled and served as foundations for the new building. The defense system was reinforced with the introduction of two drawbridges and the towers were adapted to deal with the new threat posed by artillery. In 1597, Jean-Louis Nogaret de La Valette, duke of Epernon, governor of the Angoumois, having led the last assault on the castle during the wars of Religion, now purchased it and carried on the defense works. In 1622 the land of Villebois was raised to the status of a peerage and became a duchy named after its beneficiary : La Valette.



### ***Stage four: the XVII c. The classical epoch***



Philippe de Montault de Bénac, duke of Navailles was responsible for the fourth residence constructed on the consolidated remains of the preceding buildings. The new residence was a 17<sup>th</sup>. Century château in the classical style, a delightful residence set in an attractive park. The château comprised four wings enclosing the main courtyard; a wing was crowned with a dome, which recalled the

creations of some of the great architects such as Salomen de Brosse, François Mansart, and Louis Le Vau. This last château constituted one of the very rare examples of classical architecture in the Charente. The Navailles couple also enriched the village with a fine covered market place (a classified Historic Monument) and they endowed a convent of Ursuline nuns.

### ***Nearer to our own time...***

Following the Revolution the proud château became a prison, then a police station and then a school. In 1882, the 17<sup>th</sup> century residence was partially destroyed by fire.

In the twentieth century Bernard de Fleury, actor and singer-songwriter known by his stage name of Bernard Lavalette, joined with the Association of Friends of the Château in an attempt to restore its former noble appearance. Since 2000, Norbert Fradin, a patron who really loves the château, is engaged in restoring it while at the same time permitting the archaeological excavations, which are indispensable if we are to obtain any further knowledge of the site.

Due to its long, tumultuous history and the exceptional quality of its architecture it is no wonder that each year the site attracts new visitors. The exemplary treatment of historical and archaeological research, which has greatly benefited the restoration work, also encourages visitors to return to see new discoveries and view the progress of the works. The château of Villebois Lavalette is now classified, in its entirety as a Historic Monument, in effect it is classed as one of the major historic sites in the department of the Charente. Each year the community of communes of the canton of Horte-et-Lavalette, commission a guide-lecturer from Via patrimoine to show visitors around the château during the summer season. Bring your friends, come and discover or, rediscover this fascinating site.



*Marie Faure, historian and guide-lecturer.*



Office de Tourisme du pays Horte et Tardoire



ANTENNE DE TOURISME  
D'HORTE ET LAVALETTE

#### **GUIDED TOURS of the Château of VILLEBOIS-LAVALLETTE and of the Village**

**During the Summer :** from July 1st to August 31st, Tuesdays to Sundays from 3 to 7 p.m.

**On Mondays:** guided tour of village and castle **in english** at 14.30 and **in french** at 16.30

Wednesday, Friday : guided tour of village and castle **in english** at 11.00

(departure at Tourist Office).

**Juin et septembre :** Monday, Wednesday, Friday : guided tour of village and castle **in english** at 14.30 and **in french** at 16.30, departure at Tourist Office. Booking only.

**For out of season guided tours :** Contact the Tourist Information Office to organize group visits (8 people mini) on request.

**Admission :** 3€ (2€ for under 18, unemployed , students) no charge for children under 12  
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