

Saint Trinity Abbey



The Church of Lessay

One of the oldest abbeys of Normandy

Founded in the eleventh century, a century which saw a genuine proliferation of



monasteries, the Abbey of Lessay is one of the oldest of Normandy. It is even older than the famous monasteries of Blanchelande, Hambye and La Lucerne, all of them situated in the department of La Manche, but it was built after the abbeys of Cerisy-la-Forêt and the Mont-Saint-Michel. The founders were the barons of the mighty seignury bordering on La-Haye-du-Puits. On a marshy ground, along the South Shore of the Ay river, in the middle of the haven, Turstin Haldup, whose name reveals his Nordic origins, and his son, Eudes, had set up monks coming from

the large Abbey of Bec-Hellouin. They were followers of the Benedictine rule which, being less vigorous than the older rules, took a strong foothold in Normandy after the Norman invasions.

The Abbey of Lessay knew its greatest splendour and wealth during the two following centuries. Finished in large part before the end of the 11th century, it had been lavishly funded by the most prominent lords of the shire at its foundation, in 1056, and during the following years. Most of them signed its founding charter with King-Duke William the Conqueror, his sons and the most illustrious bishops and archbishops. This splendid scroll was the pride of the Departmental Archives of La Manche until its disappearance during the bombings of Saint-Lô in June 1944.

The Monastery of Lessay

Barbey d'Aurevilly visited the abbey in 1864. We know that the Constable of Letters Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly had never come to Lessay before he described huge and wild moors

with highly astonishing realism in his 1852 novel *L'Enfermée*. He only came to the village with his cousin Bottin-Desylles a dozen of years later, in 1864. The little village which had been rebuilt for the greater part in the middle of the 18th century did not make a good impression on him despite its elegant little country houses and the scattering of other old and luxurious houses along Rue Froide and Rue du Hamet. And yet, the wide market, then called Rue de Jérusalem, did not lack character with its wooden covered market which was soon to disappear and its lovely houses with vaulted lintel openings. None of them, or almost none of them, were covered with slates at that time. The dismal weather and the December mists did not highlight the village which had been settled—gradually seven or eight centuries earlier in the shade of the Benedictine abbey founded by the baron of La-Haye-du-Puits. The ancient cemetery which is still used today is the only remnant of the original village which was situated half a league to the Northwest, on the path to Vesly. The village was called Sainte-Opportune.



Barbey d'Aurevilly had come especially to visit the Romanesque Sainte-Trinité Abbey. His friends and family had talked to him about it a great deal, like his friend from Caen, Trébutien. Trébutien was very familiar with Charles de Greville's studies. This archaeologist scholar was born in a neighbouring parish and died fifteen years earlier. As soon as he made out the monastery, Barbey d'Aurevilly was attracted by the purity and majesty of the building. He found it stern, impressive and worthy of what had been said about it overall. "The whole thing is very big and beautiful!" he exclaimed in his Fifth Memorandum. He preached on the altar, "the only stain of this austere and vast harmony", and admired the black oak stalls of the choir which had no sculpture, but regretted that the monument was a little too bare, white and bright for his taste. "What we could get with this church if we could darken it!"

A splendid block of flats inhabited by a puny Parisian

Leaving the church through the small Southern door, opened after the French Revolution, Barbey glimpsed "the huge carriage entrance" on his right leading to the private property. In the background stands the tithe barn and the yard in which hundreds of poor people were led for the distribution of alms in olden days. Barbey did not want to enter into it. Actually, the monks have not inhabited the huge abbey buildings since they were driven out in 1790 because of the laws concerning the religious congregations and the state's seizure of monastic possessions. "There is some sort of hospitality which is despicable", he wrote. In 1864, the abbey—that the people started to call wrongly "the castle"—was inhabited by the Perrins who had owned it since 1803. They had bought it from a Parisian speculator, Pierre Thiers, who had bought it to the former earl of Créances, Louis Perrochel, who had become a

revolutionary member. He became the first purchaser of the national good to the tribunal of the district of Carentan for a little more than 143 000 francs of the time. During his visit, Barbey did not meet the owner. However, he knew his name, M. Perrin. The man did not find



favour with the writer who did not mince his words and who had lots of enemies. “This magnificent residential propriety is inhabited by some journalist who lives here just for the summer; this puny Parisian makes me think of a beetle under the shell of some huge turtle of the lost continents in this sumptuous and vast residence”. The Perrins of Grainville sold the abbey in 1900 to the Dehau-Jeansons who are still the owners.

The Saint-Croix Fair is nearly a thousand years old

The donations that soon spread through about forty parishes of the surroundings as far as the actual Calvados and even England, consisted of lands, forests, moors, churches, mills and private incomes. Willing to see the populating of the small village that started to be developed around its buildings, Saint-Trinity Abbey did not remain isolated from the commercial movements which started to come back to life at the beginning of the second millennium. There is no doubt that the Abbey founded the Saint Croix Fair in September thanks to the decision of the abbot, a mighty lord and sovereign on his lands, and with the authorisation of the Haytillon baron and the Norman duke. Thus it helped the area to develop economically and the monastery to become richer. The precise date of the foundation of the fair is unknown and is often the topic of wrong and fanciful assertions. The oldest text referring to it is the charter of Baron Richard of La Haye-du-Puits, written just before 1126—that is, nearly twenty years after the end of the construction of the Abbey. Moreover, the fair was not mentioned in the charter of foundation of the Abbey whereas the fair of Créances was mentioned. We can thus reasonably date the creation of the Saint-Croix Fair back to the very beginning of the 12th century or at least a few years before the end of the preceding century.

The day the Abbey was wrecked and wounded

Today, when we admire the Abbey of Lessay, we can barely believe that it had been several times devastated and damaged over the course of its history. In 1356, during the Hundred Years War, a fire lit by the English and Navarrian troops ravaged the nave and the tower before spreading to the monastic buildings. The restoration of the Abbey to its original

state was only achieved at the beginning of the 15th century. The religious wars which damaged the Cotentin in the 16th century did not spare the Abbey which was then occupied by the Protestants for three months. However, the damages did not extend to the structural work fortunately. This period of troubles left the monastery in the worst state of neglect. The long period of decadence which had begun with the installation of the regime of the commendams went on—the abbots were elected by the king and not by the monks anymore. The ill-kept convent buildings went to wreck and ruin little by little in such a way that the new Maurist monks introduced by Abbot Léonor II of Matignon, decided to raze them to the ground and to build up in 1752 instead those that we can see today.



The French Revolution chased away the last monks but the closing of the monastery in 1790 did not lead to the destruction of the church



as it was the case in La Lucerne or, above all, in Savigny. The Church was sold as a national property that was often used as stone quarry. In Lessay, while the convent buildings were sold to a private individual (they have always remained private properties), the church was attributed to the town hall by the Assemblée Nationale to replace the old parish church of Sainte-Opportune, situated far from the city which was falling into ruins. The monument was safe and sound.

Nevertheless, it was in 1944 during the battles for the Liberation of France that the beautiful Roman Abbey underwent the cruellest ordeal. It had already been severely damaged during the American bombings of Lessay on June 7th and 8th and, weakened by the Germans before their retreat, fell on July 11th.



The admirable construction

Can we imagine the pain that the inhabitants of Lessay felt when they came back from exodus and discovered the tragic sight of their ruined church? Who could have dared imagine that its restoration was possible one day? The damages were considerable: the vault and the bell-tower had fallen down, the

western gable had been pulled down and the northern aisle had collapsed... The debris almost reached the level of the capitals. However, the people from Lessay did not lose their hope and eventually, after many delays, the administration of the Historical Monuments decided to open the site for restoration. It was a crazy bet, a monumental work assigned to the gifted and passionate young architect in chief Y-M Froidevaux. Twelve years were necessary to clear it out, to look at the archives, to consolidate, to hew stones, to rebuild identically and patiently the walls, arches, ogive crossings and capitals. It was like a genuine medieval building site.

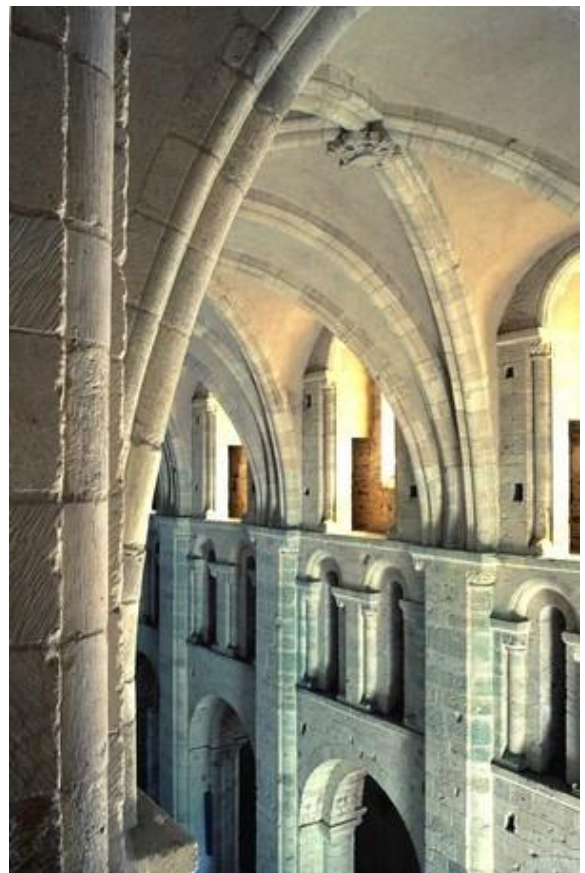
Day after day, year after year, the town of Lessay was rebuilt and at its core stood the Abbey a part of the nave of which was given back to the cult the first of May 1950 (it concerned the five first bays). The inauguration of the Abbey, entirely restored, only took place on the 1st of May, 1959, with grandiose ceremonies. Let's pay tribute here to the two mayors of the time, Albert LE GRAND and René LECOCQ, and to Canon GOSSELIN, priest of Lessay, who devoted themselves body and soul with faith and audacity to make the masterpiece of the 11th century live on again.

There is much more to say about the encountered difficulties, for instance, problems of stones and manpower, bells, furniture, choice of roofing, paving, stained-glass windows, statues, lighting... There were also difficult and grave decisions to make concerning architecture and especially the possible abandonment of some elements which were not true to the original design.

A Roman art jewel

The restoration of the Abbey of Lessay is today unanimously acclaimed as an exemplary success and many visitors who admire the unity and purity of the building are stunned when they learn that its history was so tumultuous. We need to have a well-prepared eye to read the different periods of its construction in the stone and in the presence of some architectural elements. The deliberate decision to abandon the former dome, dating from the 18th century, and to adopt a pyramidal steeple instead, along with the removal of the rare clashing elements that had been added throughout the centuries, allowed the architect to communicate the beauty, the sobriety and the primitive character of the monastic church again.

We would like to tell the reader —who



could ignore the primordial interest of Lessay in the history of architecture— that Saint-Trinity Abbey is certainly the first big building to achieve a complete vaulting on ogive crossings at the beginning of the 11th century.



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“Les Heures Musicales de l’Abbaye de Lessay” Festival

Since 1994, the association organises every summer from 14 to 16 concerts and welcomes renowned international bands, for example the Arts Florissants or the Cercle de l’Harmonie. The concerts take place in the church of Lessay, in the barn of the Manoir de Gonfreville and the church of Canville-la-Roque.

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