



LE DÉPARTEMENT

ABBAYE OF LA CELLE



AN OUTSTANDING
MEDIEVAL
MONUMENT

VISITOR'S GUIDE

ABBAYE DE LA CELLE

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THE VAR, WITH YOU ALL THE WAY

The Benedictine monastery of La Celle, better known by the name the Abbey of La Celle, is an emblematic monument of 17th century Romanesque Provençal art. Classified as a historical monument in 1886, the abbey was acquired in 1996 by the county of the Var. Since then it has been undergoing restoration. A series of ongoing archaeological excavations have taken place at the same time, in order to fully discover the history of the site and to ensure the authenticity of its restoration.

The original building was home to nuns and monks under the authority of the Abbot of Saint Victor of Marseille. It consisted of two churches joined together, Saint-Mary for the nuns and Saint-Perpetua for the parish with two separate cloisters as well as gardens and annexes.

Two monasteries have been built on the site of La Celle. The one you see today was built between the late 12th century and the early 13th century, on top of the first construction, which dated from the late 11th century. The preserved areas were used by the nuns.



BEFORE THE ABBEY... THE ROMANS

The most ancient remains, found in the northern section of the monastery, date from the 2nd century BC - the end of the Iron Age. These were followed by a Roman villa – a farming property with a large estate. Its partial plan shows to the north a series of living areas (Pars Urbana) and to the south a wine making sector (Pars Rustica). The buildings of this villa were occupied up until the 6th century.

The walls of this era can be identified by red markings on the floor. The remains of a wine press can be seen in the monastery kitchen.

THE HISTORY OF THE MONASTERY

Due to the impetus of the Bishop of Marseille from 970 onwards, the Abbey of Saint Victor developed into the main religious order in Provence. In 1011, the Victorine monks were given a donation of agricultural land in the area of Brignoles on which a church dedicated to Saint Perpetua was built.

The monks were present from 1074, when the term "cella" – latin for priory, appeared. This would later give its name to the commune of La Celle. Nuns were present there from 1099.

A second church was built, dedicated to Saint Mary, as well as a first monastery built at the end of the 11th century. This last was replaced in the late 12th century by the present building. The priory of La Celle developed into an important female monastery, with an excellent reputation. It received young women from very high ranking families.

In a letter dated 10 March 1660, Mazarin, then Abbot of Saint Victor, moved the monastery of La Celle to Aix-en-Provence to re-establish its obedience to Benedictine rules as the nuns had moved gradually away from them. The nuns who remained at La Celle were unable to recruit new novices and the monastery suffered a slow decline up to the demise of the last nun at the end of the 17th century.

During the 18th century, despite the absence of monks and nuns, the building was maintained by local townfolk. In 1787, it was sold and was used as a farm. On the 3rd of April 1816 Abbot Brun, the Parish rector, re-established religious use in the church of Saint Mary. He had the present entrance door constructed in the western gable wall and brought the liturgical furniture from the old church of Saint Perpetua, which had been used as the parish church up until the Revolution, but was then in ruins. An octagonal Provençal bell tower was added above the main entrance.





1 THE CLOISTER GALLERIES (Cf Plan)

The Galleries open onto the central area of the monastery with Romanesque styled matching bays dating from the end of the 12th and 13th centuries. The Galleries are covered by barrel vaults punctuated by arch bands. They suffered damage from both the farming activity and from the removal of stones after the sale of the monastery in the 18th century. Currently three of the four galleries can be visited, the West gallery having completely collapsed. Only the twin bays of the North gallery have been completely restored. The capitals and bases of the columns are decorated with plant motifs and intricate moldings. The bases have claws decorated with leaves and some have a small curled up animal, designs which link them to Gothic works.

Sarcophagus chest dating from the late 12th or early 13th. Made from marble from Candelon, it has the *Agnus Dei* sculpted on one of its small sides and on its main side is the *Dormition of the Virgin* – the sleep of the *Virgin Mary* before her assumption. The presentation of the death of a woman, without doubt a nun, and the ascension of her soul to Paradise offered the sisters an image of monastic perfection. This 13th century work has been associated with *Garsende de Sabran*, Countess of Provence and Forcalquier, who took the veil at *La Celle* in 1225. although no direct connection has been established.



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2 THE CHURCH OF SAINT MARY

Built in 1056, this convent building, now a parish church under the patronage of Our Lady of the Assumption, was originally reserved for the women's community which met eight times a day for services following the rule of Saint Benedict. The current church is a reconstruction from the last quarter of the 12th century. The Romanesque nave, 20.5 m long and 7.8 m wide, consists of three bays with the barrel vault resting on solid walls 1.9 m thick to the north and 1.50 m to the south.

During the Middle Ages, access was only via the cloister (the opening in the façade dates from 1816.). Originally three doors opened directly onto the cloister. The east gate, nearest to the choir, was reserved for the nuns, while the west gate was used by the novices. Above, a third passage gave access by a stairway built into the wall to a gallery, now gone.

The simplicity of the Church of Saint Mary, characterised by the height and bareness of its walls, places it squarely in Romanesque art in Provence, like *Le Thoronet*, *Senanque* or *Silvacane*. The liturgical furniture was added in the early 19th century.



Pre Baroque High Altar

surmounted by a painting on wood representing the *Virgin and Child* dating from the early 17th century. On either side two crowned saints, probably *Felicity* and *Perpetua*, Christian martyrs persecuted in *Carthage* in 203 AD.



Baroque Altarpiece

bearing the date 1682. In the centre, a painted wood panel entitled "*Scene of the Cross*", dated to the start of the 16th century and inspired by an engraving by *Albrecht Dürer*.

Crucifix

sculpted in wood and probably produced in Italy in the Gothic era between the late 15th and early 16th century.



3 THE ORIGINAL MONASTERY

(LATE 11TH-EARLY 12TH CENTURY)

The location of the original walls is marked on the ground in beige in the east and south galleries of the cloister, as well as in the refectory.

Archaeological digs undertaken since 2010 by the County have uncovered the remains of the first monastery, razed to the ground towards the end of the 12th century when the present building was constructed. The most important discovery was that of a **circular washbasin**, used by the nuns for their ablutions, found in the south easterly section of the south gallery. With an inner diameter of 4.2 metres, it had been destroyed during the extension of the new cloister gallery.

4 THE CHAPTER HOUSE

The Chapter House was an essential part of the nun's lives: it was where the community met on a daily basis and where the prioress received important visitors.

It is entered by a door with a pointed arch with double roll resting on small columns topped with capitals decorated with flat leaves. On either side there are two large bays, each with three semi-circular arches supported by double twin columns. This restoration dates from 1962 and was inspired by the Chapter House at the Abbey of Le Thoronet, which dates from the same era. The interior, completed in 1228, measures 8 m by 12 m. It is divided into two aisles divided into three bays. The ribbed vaulting is supported by two squat columns whose capitals are decorated with water leaves and floral motifs, crosses and scrolls. The use of diagonal ribs in a Romanesque building was not unusual in the early 13th century. On the walls,



the ribs fall on brackets with an ogee decor with a button end. The east wall has three bays. Around the room, can be seen traces of the masonry benches used by the nuns during the service. From the late 18th century this room was used as a sheepfold, during the time that the abbey was used for agricultural purposes.



5 THE AUMBRIES AND THE PARLOUR

Exiting the chapter house to the left, the three recesses in the wall are Aumbries (armaria), originally cabinets with doors. The nuns had access to the books kept here, although few nuns were able to read.

Adjoining the chapter house, a corridor with doors at each end joined the cloister and gardens in the monastic enclosure. The nuns could converse in this space, which given its small size, did not encourage long discussion.



6 THE NUNS HALL AND THE WARMING ROOM (CHAUFFOIR)

Next to the parlour is a barrel-vaulted room with no defined function. Nowadays it is used as the Sacristy. The room next to it, which cannot be visited, is of similar size and making. The chimney found there has identified the last room to be the Warming Room, the only part of the monastery to which access was categorized by Benedictine code.

7 THE REFECTORY

This vast room had collapsed in the late 18th century and had been filled by 4 metres of rubble. It was cleared during a dig in 2011-2012. According to canonical custom the refectory, situated in the wing opposite the church, is next to the kitchen and linked by a serving hatch. The vast space of 23.4 m by 6.9 m has five bay windows to the south in similar style to those of the dormitory and the chapter house. The barrel vault, divided into three bays is supported by two arches and was fully restored in 2014. A door

opened outside the cloister towards the buildings and gardens which stretched out to the south in the monastic compound. Masonry benches edge the three walls. In the eastern section the raised seating and the stone flooring indicate places reserved for the prioress and senior nuns.

The size of the refectory (162 sq. m.); typical of the size of large regional monastic foundations, could accommodate the whole monastic community for meals. In 1227 the Abbot of Saint Victor limited the number of nuns at La Celle to fifty and this no doubt dictated the size of the refectory and the dormitory.



8 THE KITCHEN

Like the refectory, the monastery kitchen, in a state of collapse and filled with rubble since the late 18th century, has been cleared and excavated. The medieval kitchen had used part of the antique concrete floor, which had been used in the wine pressing area of the Gallo-Roman villa, plus a tiled area. Almost square and barrel vaulted, it measures 7.70 m by 7 m. The archaeological excavations have uncovered a number of elements to do with its uses over several centuries. The wall which separates the refectory from the kitchen is pierced by a serving hatch, called a "fenestra" during the Middle Ages. The walls have niches and fixing holes used to insert shelving. Much of the space was used for cooking hearths at ground level and these have left black traces still visible on the ground and against the west wall. A double central arcade was added during the 14th century, probably for smoke containment. Of this only the base of a pillar and fixing points in the north and south walls remain.

Against the dividing wall with the refectory, a conduit made of carved stone blocks brought water from a spring to the south of the monastery, called Font Vieille. A counterweight from the ancient wine press has been reused at the base of the conduit in the south-east corner.





9 THE CLOISTER GARDEN (PRÉAU)

The medieval origin of the French word “préau” was the cloister garden. This area had no utilitarian function. It was thus neither a kitchen garden nor a medicinal plant garden. Agriculture and gardening took place either within the monastery compound or on land outside the confines. This open space, reserved for meditation and walking, was a source of light for the galleries in an otherwise closed and sombre environment. It had also been used as a cemetery for the nuns up until the 12th century. It is in the southwest angle of the courtyard that one can best see the trapezoid shape of the cloister of La Celle. In fact the construction of the monastery during the 13th century had had financial problems and the original plan for the building to be orthogonal (right angled) had to be abandoned. The new construction therefore followed the direction of the original west gallery. Excavation of this area should provide a clearer understanding of the structure prior to its restoration.



10 THE UPPER GALLERIES

The terrace of the eastern gallery was directly connected to the dormitory and served at some point as an extended dormitory. In the north gallery, the wall of the church of Saint Mary bears traces of the fittings of a staircase giving access to the bell tower, added in 1840. A sundial, of which only the frame remains, is fitted in the wall below the gutter.

11 THE DORMITORY

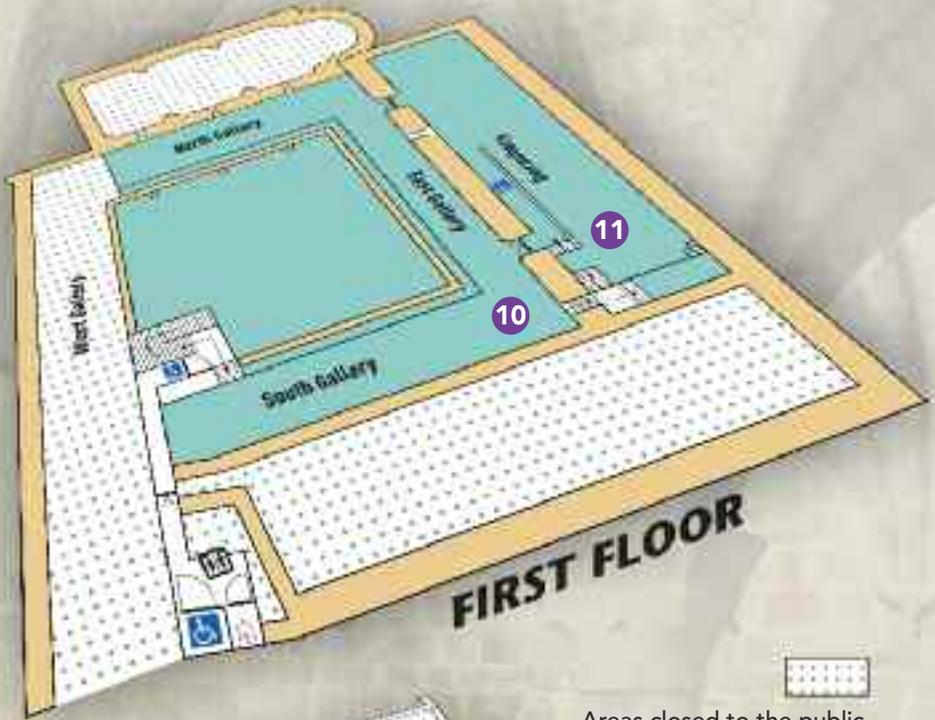
At the south-east corner of the cloister gallery, a wooden staircase or a miller’s ladder led to a door beneath the vault which gave access to the nun’s dormitory. This is a large room 28.8 m by 8.2 m, with a barrel vault divided into five bays by arch bands resting on simple brackets.

Two oculi (round windows) cut into the gable walls and four bays openings to the east towards the gardens, give light to the space. We have very little information about how the dormitory was laid out; however it is believed that the prioress had a private room in 1231. Sometime later the dormitory was divided into compartments to create cells. Opposite the current entrance, two openings which have been substantially modified, looked out on the suspended latrines above the garden. Like the refectory, the dormitory had been built for approximately fifty nuns. From the 14th century, the community of a hundred nuns had to be lodged in small houses built in the gardens. No trace, other than a plan from 1650, remains of these houses.





LE DÉPARTEMENT



FIRST FLOOR

Areas closed to the public



GROUND FLOOR