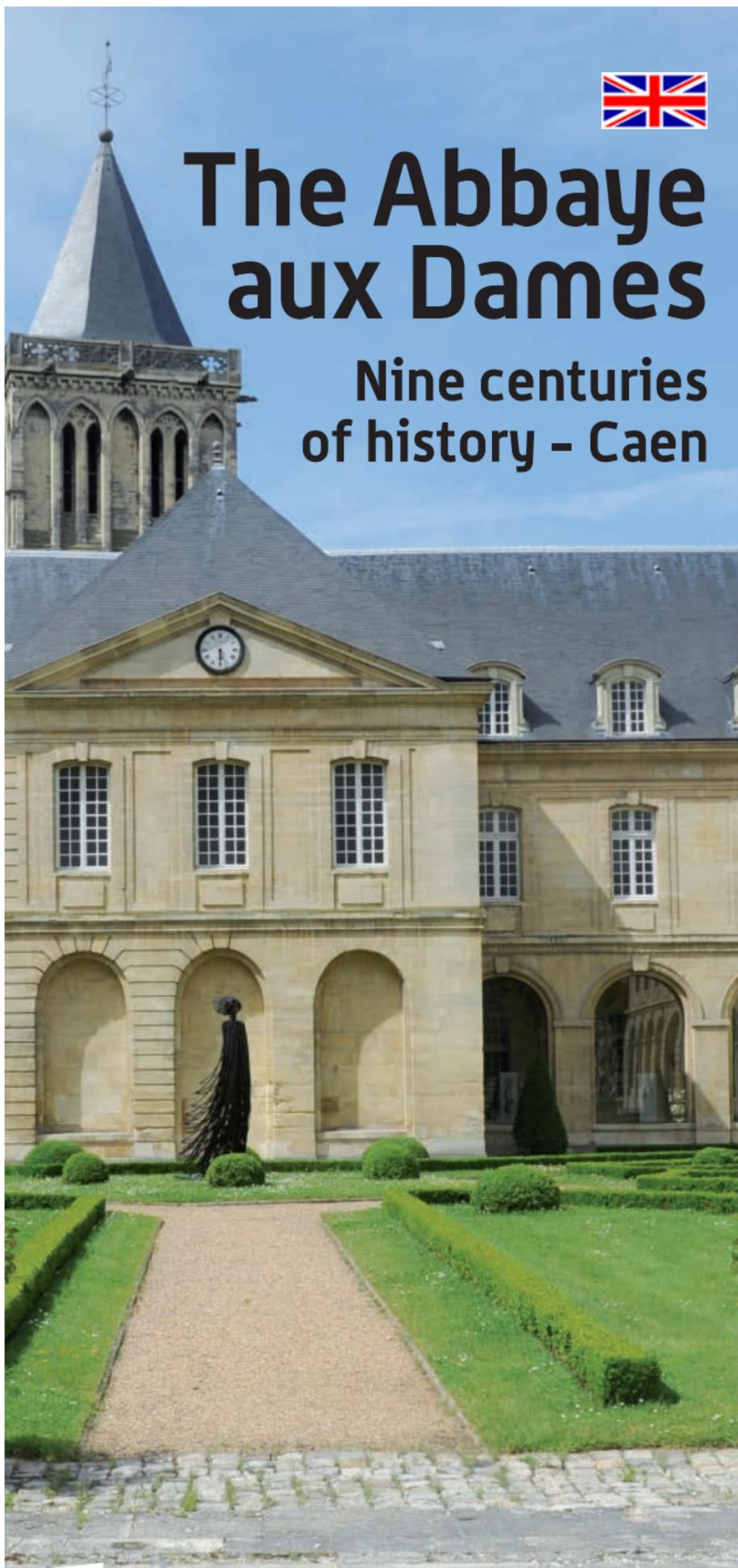




The Abbaye aux Dames

Nine centuries
of history - Caen



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[Nine centuries of history...



The Abbaye aux Dames was founded in **1060** by Queen Matilda of Flanders, wife of William the Conqueror, and consecrated on **June 18th, 1066**, under the name of the Holy Trinity.

Until the French Revolution, this Benedictine abbey was home to young ladies of the Norman aristocracy, whose families paid a dowry to the Abbey in exchange. Over the years, the convent's buildings gradually deteriorated, until, in the early 18th century, the abbess, Madame Froulay de Tessé, decided to rebuild it. She entrusted the project to a Benedictine architect, Dom William de la Tremblaie, who was working at the Abbaye aux Hommes at the time.

Financial problems meant that it took nearly a hundred years to construct these magnificent buildings, which, to this day, remain unfinished, as the fourth wall of the cloister was never built.

1782 - 1789,
Charlotte Corday lived at the
abbey. She was secretary to
the last abbess, Madame de
Pontécoulant.



«Charlotte Corday en condamnée à mort» ('Charlotte
Corday depicted as condemned to death')
Pastel by Brard. (18th century)
Caen Musée des Beaux-Arts

Permanent Exhibition

Painting in Normandy



The Painting in Normandy collection is an initiative of the Basse-Normandie Region in partnership with private individuals and organisations. It comprises over 100 works by artists depicting Normandy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and ranging from impressionism to fauvism, Monet to Jonkind, Corot to Boudin, Marquet to Dufy, and so on.

Open every day from 14:00 to 18:00, free admission.

The French Revolution resulted in the closure of the convent and the sale of all its property and furniture, which explains the lack of decoration, wood panelling or furniture. The church was turned into a fodder store and the convent into an army barracks.

In **1823**, the buildings became a Hôpital-Dieu (early type of hospital) and later, in 1908, a care-home.

The last nuns from the Hospice Saint-Louis care-home and their patients were to leave the property in **November 1984**, when it became the headquarters of the Basse-Normandie Regional Council. The local authority moved in after two years' work, led by the architect Georges Duval.

Since **May 26th, 2016**, the Abbaye aux Dames has been the headquarters of the Normandy Region, created when Basse-Normandie and Haute-Normandie were merged to form a single region.

[Convent buildings

These buildings, which were completely rebuilt during the 18th century, are testimony to the Abbaye aux Dames' riches.

The cloister was the perfect place for meditation.

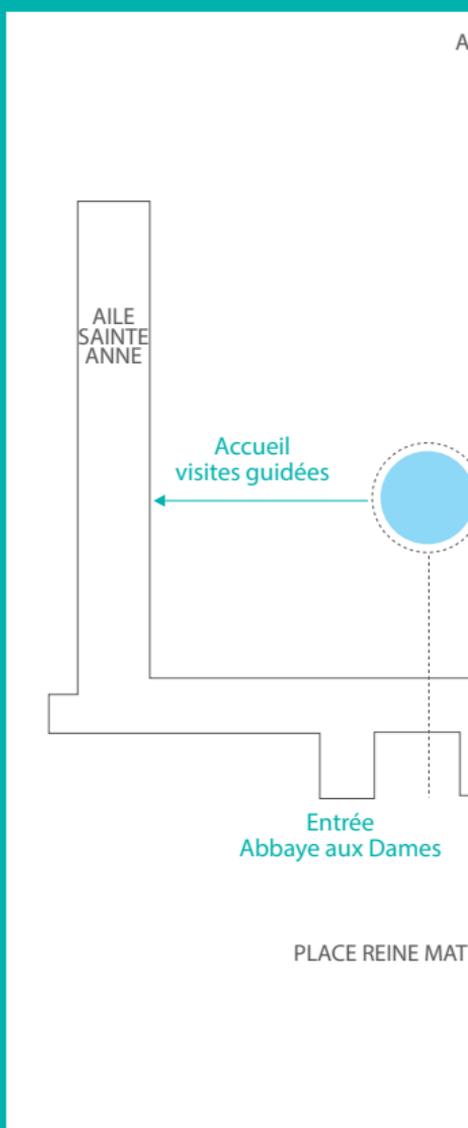
The north part of the abbey housed areas devoted to the day-to-day running of the convent, while the west 'clock' wing contained the refectory, the lavatorium and the kitchens.

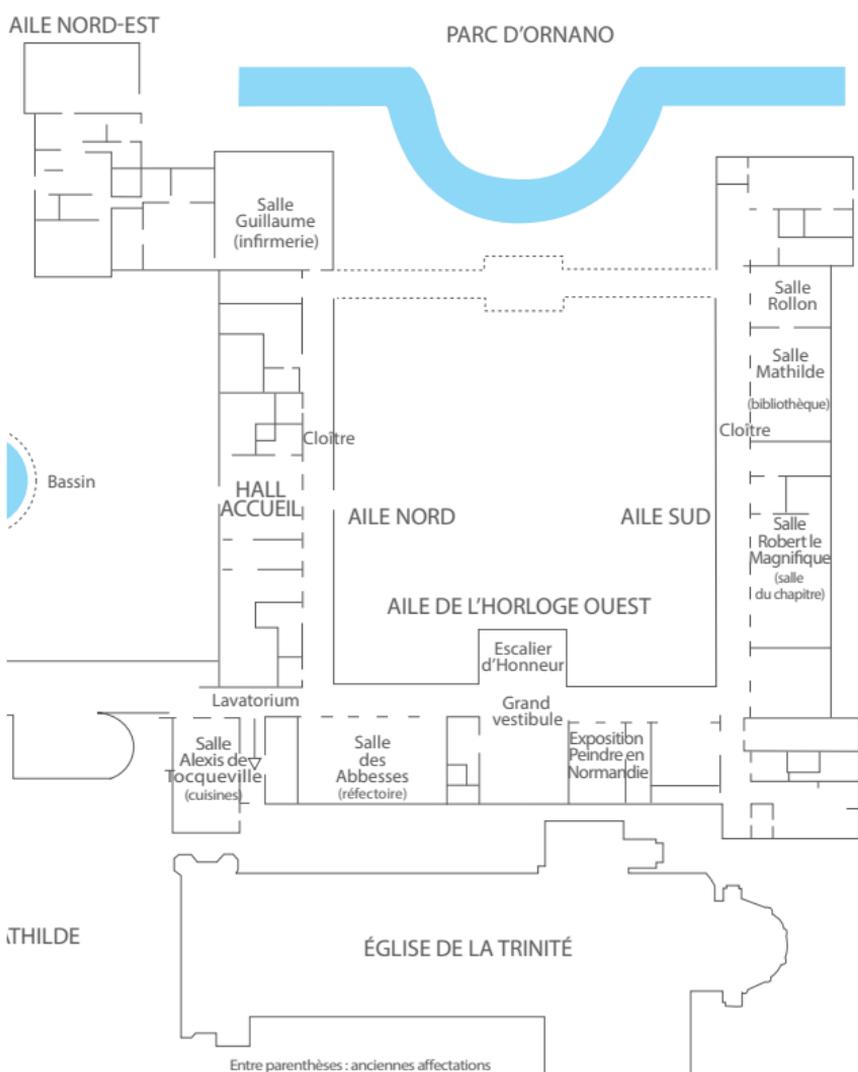
The south part was devoted more to cultural activities, with an archive, chapter house, library and possibly a study room for novices.

Today these rooms, which have all been given names that evoke in some way the history of Normandy, are used for meetings, receptions, and exhibitions.

However, one room remains in very much the same condition as when it was built: the main hall, opening into the abbey church, the cloister and the monumental staircase, was the very heart of the abbey. Its fan-shaped vaulting, supported by attic based columns, are a true masterpiece of 18th century architecture.

When the buildings were restored in 1984, an assembly room for the Regional Council was created at the far end of the north wing. The first floor originally housed the nuns' cells, which later became successively dormitories, communal areas, and, since 1986, the offices of the Regional Council. ■





The abbey church of La Trinité

Built between 1060 and 1080, this abbey church is a masterpiece of Norman Romanesque art. It underwent alterations in the 12th century, was restored in the 19th, and cleaned in the early 1990s.

Its long nave has three levels, in traditional Norman style, with false sexpartite rib vaults (1st half of the 12th century) that were the precursors of Gothic architecture.

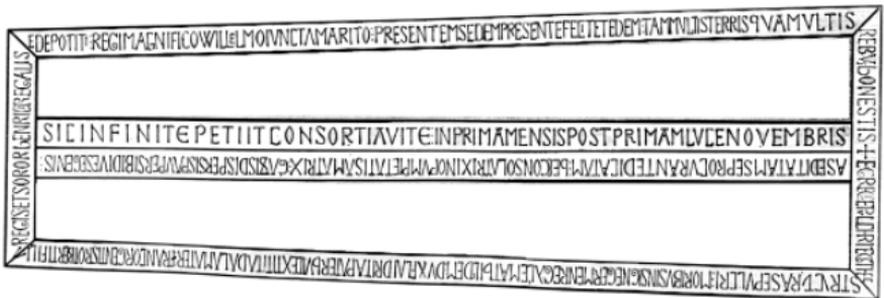
Beneath a Tournai black marble slab in the choir lie the remains of Queen Matilda, buried there

in November 1083. The epitaph praises her lineage and great piety.

At the end of the choir, the early 12th century semi-domed apse has many capitals decorated with mythical beasts, including a magnificent armed elephant.

The painting of the vault depicts the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (early 18th century).

Just before the descent into the crypt there is a 13th century Gothic chapel.



(Photo: Normandie Regional council)



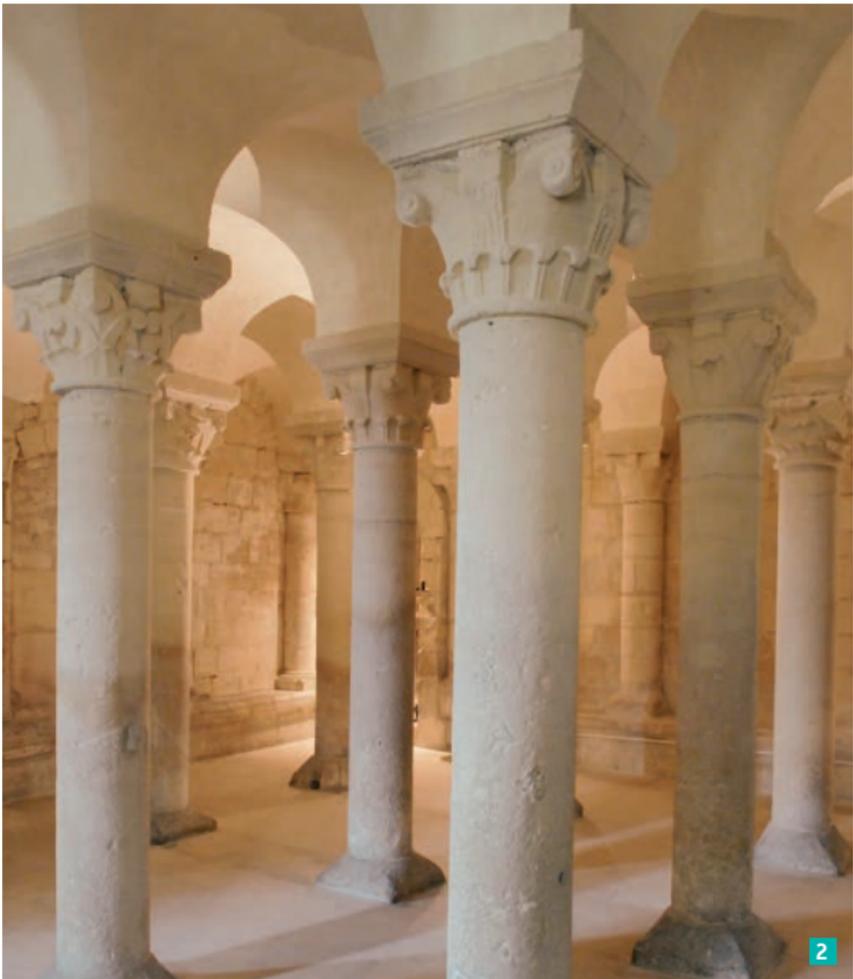
The crypt was probably added at the end of the 11th century, in order to support the apse and offset the effects of the unevenness of the plot. It contains a whole forest of columns supporting the groin-vaulted ceiling.

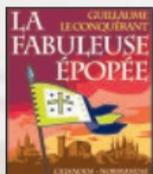
The varied leaf-decoration on the capitals shows that stone-masons enjoyed considerable freedom at this time.

In the entrance to the crypt, a figurative capital depicts the Last Judgement, with the Archangel Michael welcoming the dead as they leave their graves.



- 1 Nave of the abbey church of La Trinité
- 2 St Nicolas sous Terre (St Nicholas-under-Ground) crypt (late 11th century)
- 3 Capitals: sculpture depicting an armed elephant
- 4 Crypt: Last Judgement capital
- 5 Crypt: capital with leaf motif





William the Conqueror left his mark on a number of Normandy's towns and monuments.

PLACES CONNECTED WITH WILLIAM THE CONQUEROR:

- > Caen: the Abbaye aux Dames, the Abbaye aux Hommes, the Château Ducal
- > Bayeux: the Bayeux Tapestry, the Cathedral
- > Falaise: the castle

Abbaye aux Dames

The guided tour includes the former convent buildings (18th century), which are now the headquarters of the Normandy Regional Council, and the abbey church of La Trinité (11th and 12th centuries).

> **Free guided tours** (one hour) every day except 01/01, 01/05 and 25/12

Tours leave from the visitor reception hall at 14:30 and 16:00

> **Groups: please book in advance :**

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The abbey is a member of the Norman Abbeys network (www.abbayes-normandes.com)

