

#### WELCOME TO NOIRLAC

Throughout its eventful history, the abbey has always shown its ability to adapt to changing times. It has successively been a monastery, a factory, a field hospital, a refugee reception centre and, since 2007, a Cultural Meeting Centre. Thanks to the determination of the Cher Departmental Council, and the help of the French Government and the Centre Val-de-Loire Region, it has remained a living place open to the needs and issues of its time.

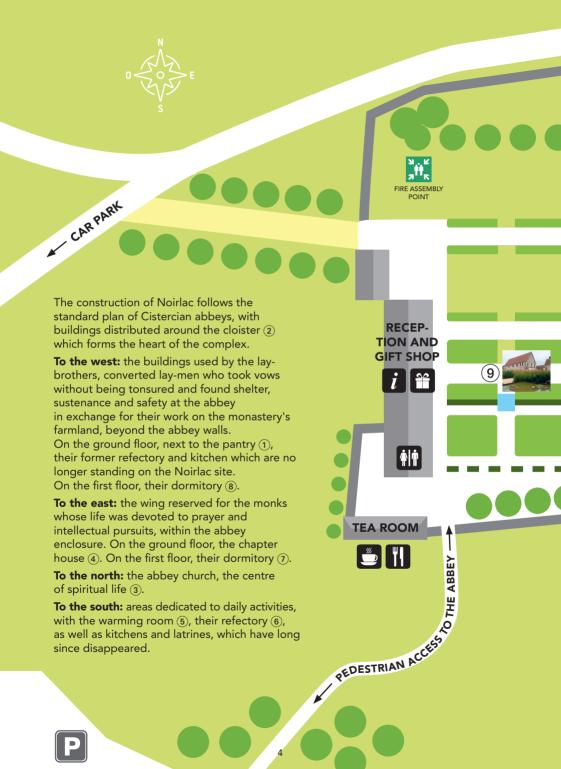
In today's world, we are all inundated with many messages and comments, media is omnipresent and saturated, our attention is divided, and therefore communication eventually becomes inaudible. The strength of this monument - where at one time silence was just as important as word – and the beauty of its environment, make Noirlac particularly conducive to attentiveness and dialogue, to mediation and wonder.

# AN ABBEY RECOGNISED AS AN "HERITAGE SITE FOR ART AND CULTURE"

That's why listening, the spoken word and the landscape form the heart of an artistic and cultural project which is both strongly rooted in its territory and yet open to the wider world.

Because conviviality is just another word for culture, Noirlac aims to be a place of hospitality, sharing and attention for all

those we welcome: those who are searching artistically, those who have come to taste the beauty of the exceptional architectural and natural heritage, those on a business retreat or seminar or those who wish to discover the concerts, shows, workshops and walks offered from February to December.









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#### **NOIRLAC, THE HISTORY OF AN ABBEY**

**1136:** arrival of a Cistercian community from the abbey of Clairvaux (Aube) at a place called "La Maison-Dieu" (the House of God).

**1150:** donation from Ebbe de Charenton for the benefit of the monks, finally making it possible to consider building an abbey.

**1189:** confirmation of the donation by a formal act. The abbey prospers. It receives tithes, rents and seigneurial revenues.

**1290:** the abbey takes the name of Noirlac.

**1423:** to protect it from the armed gangs ravaging the countryside, the abbey is fortified. Construction of a keep, surrounded by moats, as an extension of the pantry.

**End of the 15th century:** the community of Noirlac faces a deep moral crisis. There are records of an apostate\* monk as well as of a murderer within the community.

**1530:** Noirlac fell under secular rule. The abbot would henceforth be appointed from outside the community by the King.

**1651-1652:** the buildings are seriously damaged in the fighting between royal troops and supporters of the Prince of Condé during the Fronde.

**1712:** reconstruction work. The monks' wing is substantially modified.

**1791:** sale of Noirlac as a National Asset to Jean-Amable Desjobert for 150.000 livres.

**1822:** transformation into a porcelain factory, owned from 1854 onwards by the Pillivuyt group, porcelain manufacturers in Foëcy. The monastic buildings house workshops, workers' homes, ovens and warehouses.

1837: Prosper Mérimée visits the abbey.

**1860:** the abbey is listed as a Historic Monument.

**1894:** first refurbishment. Removal of the industrial facilities by Abbot Pailler who buys the premises with the intention of setting up an orphanage, a project he is later forced to abandon.

**1909:** acquisition by the Cher Department.

**1918:** the American Expeditionary Force sets up camp at Noirlac.

**1939:** Noirlac offers shelter to Spanish Republican refugees.

**1940:** Noirlac takes in elderly patients from the Saint Amand hospice.

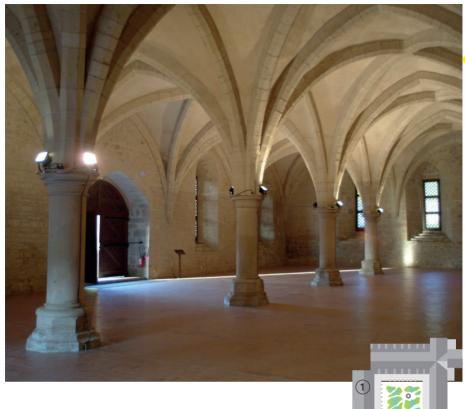
**1950:** start of the restoration under the guidance of the architects Ranjard and Lebouteux, who are part of the team officially charged with safeguarding national monuments.

**1980:** end of the restoration work by the architect Jean Dedieu and creation in 1977 of contemporary stained glass windows for the church and refectory by Jean-Pierre Raynaud.

**2008:** the abbey obtains the national label "Heritage site for art and culture".

**2019 :** construction of the gardens designed by Gilles Clément

<sup>\*</sup>a monk who broke his vows



#### THE PANTRY

In the pantry, the lay brothers organised the conservation of foodstuffs such as cereals, pulses, fruits, fish and wine from the vineyards on the complex's northern slope and their wine cellar in Venesmes (20km to the west). From the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, the abbey owned over 3,000 hectares (7,400 acres) of land (forests, pastures and arable land).

The walls are thick, the room dimly lit, with openings shuttered by wooden screens which allow for ventilation and would originally have been covered by oiled canvases. The floor was of bare clay, the only material capable of resisting the regular violent floods from the neighbouring Cher river.

The lay-brothers were charged with cultivating the land and managing the barns, mills and other agricultural facilities. However, by the end of the 13th century it had become difficult to recruit them. They were gradually replaced by a paid workforce, and later the lands were tended by tenant farmers.

The walls of the pantry probably date from the second round of works (1170 - 1190); the mighty vault would have been added later (in the early 13th century).



The cloister was built in several stages. The first building was enlarged in the 13th century. The west and north galleries (which respectively run alongside the pantry and the church) are flanked by arches surmounted by oculi and bearing 13th-century capitals depicting vine and oak leaves, amongst other elements. The east gallery is of rayonnant Gothic style: quadruple arcades, timpani perforated with roseshaped motifs (from the early 14th century, heads of men and women on the capitals facing the chapter house. The south gallery (early 14th century, significantly reworked in the 19th century) remains an enigma. It was probably covered until the 18th century but the absence of buttresses colonnettes suggests that the roofing was probably not made out of stone. Uncertainty remains about the presence of a sink (fountain) facing the refectory where it would usually be located.

#### THE CLOISTER

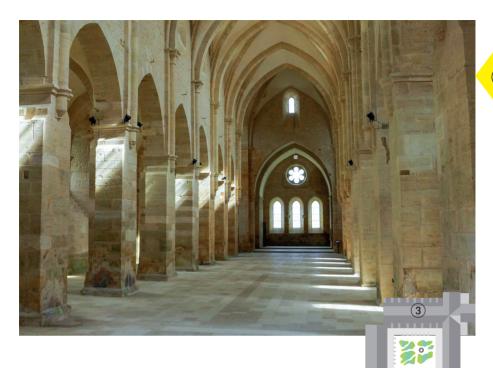
Saint Bernard, the great Cistercian spiritual leader, saw abbeys as "prisons with open doors". The cloister was the heart of this citadel, strictly reserved for clergy.

Even within the monastic boundaries, monks and lay-brothers had little contact with one another. The latter could enter the far end of the church without going into the cloister, through a walled alleyway on the pantry side. This alleyway was demolished in the 13th century.

The various galleries were the corridors connecting the different rooms of the abbey. The north gallery is called the "Collatio or Assembly Gallery". Here, the monks gathered to read every evening before the Compline office.

The "lectio divina", individual reading, was carried out mezza vocce rather than silently, for it was believed at the time that the word of God, to reach a person's soul, had to travel via his or her ears: individual readings were therefore whispered.

The cloister garden was also and above all a symbolic garden. A place of silence, meditation and reading, this green courtyard represented the Garden of Eden. In the cloister's east gallery, near the church, you will notice a stone arch in the wall. It marks the location of a 12th century crypt, which was almost certainly the burial place of Abbé Robert, the abbey's founder, who died around 1163.



#### THE ABBEY CHURCH

The abbey church exhibits the classic minimalism of Cistercian art, in accordance with St Benedict's rule asceticism and precepts. This spiritual journey requires detachment from all worldly goods. Nothing could distract the monks from their prayers: eight offices structured their day. Almost all of them were sung. The psalms had to rise to God. Built with Gregorian chants in mind, Cistercian abbeys often have exceptional acoustics.

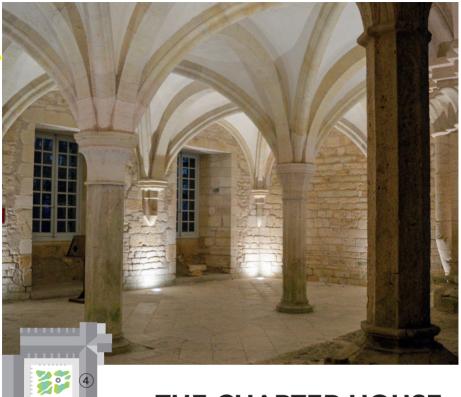
Note the contemporary stained-glass windows, designed by visual artist Jean-Pierre Raynaud, and made by Jean Mauret, master glassmaker; they stay true to the spirit of simplicity with their graphics and understated hues. "Thanks to all this silence and simplicity, we transform ourselves, moving from clarity to clarity", said Gilbert de Hoyland, Abbot of Swineshead (1110-1172).

Crossing the nave, towards the sanctuary, you will in turn pass through the lay-brothers' choir and the monks' choir. Today, a row of transverse floor slabs mark this separation.

At the end of the north arm of the transept, the "door of the dead" led to the cemetery behind the chevet of the church.

The church (59 m x 16.45 m high) was built in three different stages, carried out from 1150 to the first half of the 13th century. Its floorplan is shaped like a Latin cross. The flat chevet sanctuary east of the church, and the salient transept follow the Clairvaux model. In the imposing nave with eight bays, the colonnettes were truncated, so that the wooden stalls could lean against the pillars.





The chapter house (late 12th century) communicates with the cloister gallery through an opening flanked by twin arches resting on a low wall. Inside, two multi-faceted columns with "water-leaf" capitals support the side vaults.

#### THE CHAPTER HOUSE

Only monks were allowed into this room since they were the only members of the community who were involved in the management of the abbey. The life of the monks was governed by the Rule of St. Benedict (6th century).

In this room, they gathered every morning for the dayly agenda: the reading of a chapter of the Rule, denouncing faults and managing the community's business. It was also in this room that vows were taken, the weekly chores schedule was arranged, and abbots were elected.

Contrary to other orders, all Cistercian abbeys were autonomous and completly operating independently. However, they maintained quasi-family relationships, with "motherabbeys" (Clairvaux) acting as guardians over their "daughters" (Noirlac, for example). In addition, at the end of every summer, abbots from all the abbeys would meet at Cîteaux, in Burgundy, for the General Chapter of the Order. In that case, the prior stood in for the absent abbot.



#### THE WARMING ROOM

The wing located south of the abbey was originally reserved to accommodate the monks' daily life. During the Middle Ages, the monks' room was used for domestic chores but it could also serve as a writing room. The presence of a chimney made working conditions more comfortable. Each monk had his own specialisation, line tracer, copyist, proof-reader, illuminator or binder... The colours used by the monks were obtained from natural pigments: insects, plants and minerals. Some were very expensive and imported from the Orient, while others were found in the abbey gardens.

It took about a year for 12 people to copy one Bible, considering that one man was able to copy up to forty books during his lifetime.

The parchments used for writing were made from the skins of sheep, goats, lambs and stillborn calves (vellum), raised on the nearby land. Noirlac was probably not an important centre for manuscript production.

In the warming' room (late 12th century) the large windows were an 18th-century addition. This significantly modified room has however retained its groin vaults. The mantel over the fireplace features a carving of two abbot's crosses back-to-back.





This vast refectory is magnificently lit from the south by four lancet arches surmounted by two rose windows. As in the abbey church, the windows are signed Jean-Pierre Ravnaud and contribute to this exceptional lighting. Transformed in the eighteenth century and divided half-way by a wooden floor, the refectory at that time housed a beautiful staircase leading to the guest apartments situated upstairs.

The restoration returned the room to its original volume and the staircase was moved to the 18th-century hall. At the time, the hall was added to connect the monks' room and the refectory. The reader's pulpit carved into the wall was removed. A vast kitchen to the west was demolished around 1725, as as well as the lav-brothers' refectory.



#### THE REFECTORY

The remarkable dimensions of this early 13th century refectory (9 m high) show that the meals were, more than earthly food, a moment of spiritual nourishment and elevation of the soul. These meals were taken in silence, the monks never faced each other, and listened to a reading from the holy books.

Simple food on fasting days, or a more substantial "prandium", meal were mainly composed of bread and vegetables. Since it was believed to entice passions, meat was forbidden, only allowed for the sick and on bleeding days. Fish, on the other hand, was an essential part of their diet, as were fruit and wine.

After washing their hands and face, the monks would wait for the abbot to take his place. Then, after the Blessing of the food, they would sit down. Along the walls, you can see the stone benches on which the monks would settle for their meals (panelling covered the benches as well as the walls up to mid-height to protect the monks from the cold and humidity).

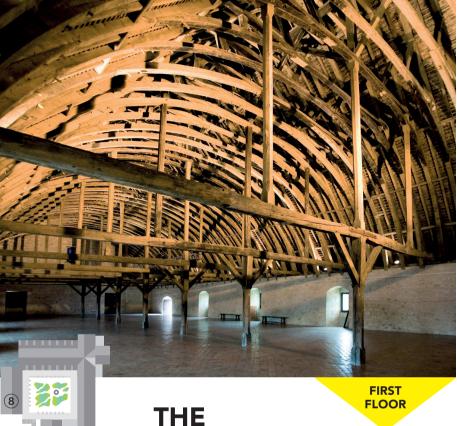
Today, artist residencies, recordings and concerts take place in the refectory.



**DORMITORY** 

Initially this large communal dormitory was probably adjacent to an infirmary and latrines, now gone. The Cistercians would sleep fully dressed on a "bat-flanc", a bed made of an inclined wooden shelf topped with a straw mattress. From the 17th century onwards, this dormitory was partitioned to create cells that became comfortable alcove rooms in 1712.

The presence of niches and small bays from the 12th century testifies to the early inauguration of this communal dormitory.



The superb oak roof structure was largely restored in 1952. Built as a barrel vault, its weight is entirely supported by the outer walls, which lends a great sense of lightness to this space. Wooden cladding would originally have been nailed to the roof structure to insulate the room.

## THE LAY-BROTHERS' DORMITORY

The former lay-brothers' dormitory serve many purposes: a granary in the 14th century, (when it became impossible to recruit enough lay-brothers), an annex to the keep in the 15th century (one can see the holes in the west wall left by culverin cannonballs), then the home of commendatory abbots in the 16th century until they were officially granted the Saint-Vic mansion in Saint-Amand-Montrond in 1703, and a concert hall today.



### OF GILLES CLEMENT

Three functional gardens were located around the monastic buildings: the kitchen garden, the herb garden (producing medicinal, aromatic and dyeing plants) and the orchard/ graveyard.

The latter was converted into a French formal garden in the 18th century. The majestic, bicentennial linden trees listed "Remarkable trees" were planted by the first owner after the Revolution, Jean-Amable Desjobert, who used the abbey as a second home for fifteen years. Since the end of 2018, the entire abbey's historical park has been the subject of an ambitious redevelopment project designed by the celebrated landscape garedener Gilles Clément. This new project aims to showcase the harmonious connection between the built heritage that is the abbey and its natural environment. It's composed of the forecourt with its bassin, its soapberry trees and decorated by miscanthus, the part of changing roses, the cloister garden, with blue tints, reflections of the sky, and the eastern garden, with white hues.

The eastern facade of the abbey is very different today from how it would have appeared in the Middle Ages. The original small semi-circular openings have been replaced by 18th-century doors and large windows, creating a classic castle facade.

Monument open from 1st February to 21st December in Berry, in the Cher, 40 min. south of Bourges

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