

Château de Domfront – Discover the French History

The origins of Domfront, a ruined castle in the Orne département of France, go back a thousand years. Today, many elements of its historic past still stand proudly on the rock and provoke the admiration of all the visitors.



The remains that we can see today were erected by Henry I Beauclerc, third son of William the Conqueror and King of England, to protect the southern border of the Norman Duchy, after the Domfront area was added to Normandy around 1050. The site is situated 80 meters above the level of the river Varenne and was quite convenient to prevent incoming assaults from Brittany and Maine, the major enemies at the time.

The whole site was surrounded by thick walls and round towers. The castle was composed of a strong square keep approximately 25 meters high, a great hall to receive vassals and organize banquets, a chapel reserved for the lord and his family, stables, pigsties, chicken coops as well as a fruit and vegetable garden and orchards so it could survive under siege. Many important people stayed in Domfront: Henry II Plantagenet, Richard the Lion Heart, John Lackland and Alienor of Aquitaine.

In the 13th century, the eastern side was reinforced with a corridor-shaped basement pierced with arrow-slits. It is perfectly preserved and its 60 meter length makes it the longest in Europe. These galleries linked the two towers that flanked the drawbridge leading to the city. Visitors like to wander there and are always surprised to discover that each tower has four little rooms in the basement, each provided with arrow-slits.

The ruins of the chapel are quite interesting because its chancel collapsed in the 13th century and everyone had forgotten about it. Domfront had to wait to 1980's to literally re-discover that chancel and the rest of the church thanks to archaeological excavations.



But the other treasure of the castle is its breathtaking view–point. Strategically situated, it allows a view as far as 80 km south–west. The visitor can freely enjoy that view of the bocage, a type of landscape inherited from the middle ages describing fields separated by hedgerows usually planted with trees. This vantage point reveals most of the local centers of interest: the river for fishing and canoeing, the hills for rambling, the orchards of pear and apple trees of which the castle produces two different types of cider, the old railway track turned into a walking, cycling and horse riding path, the biggest camembert factory in the world and the jewel in Domfront, the 12th century church Notre Dame sur l’Eau. This Romanesque and Norman building keeps murals from the 12th and the 13th century, wooden and stone statues and an effigy inside. One can also try to decipher the 16th century gravestones displayed outside around the chancel.

After crossing the castle drawbridge, the visitor enters the medieval town. It was protected by curtain walls and 24 towers with arrow–slits and machicolation. 11 of the towers still survive and most of them are inhabited. The city was entered through one of the four main gates and a toll had to be paid when passing them. Inside those walls, the streets are narrow and give access to paved courtyards, covered passages, towers, timber–framed facades, houses with overhanging first floor and town houses.



The town house was a secondary property for nobles living in the surrounding areas who had business to do in town. This is the reason why so many manor–houses can be found around. All of them correspond to nobles who had served their lord well and were rewarded with land on which they built their own manor–house: Montchauveau, la Guyardière, la Saucerie, la Chaslerie, la Bonelière, la Tour de Bonvouloir, Mebzon... All of them are inhabited today or being restored but visitors are more than welcome to go round and have a look at these elegant buildings.

By Tourist Information Office of Domfront

To get more information concerning all the activities and sites to see, please visit our web site www.ot-domfront.com or contact us to book for a guided tour in English from the 15th of June to the

15th of September and “boldly go where no man has gone before...”

<http://www.ot-domfront.com>

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