

SAINT-HILAIRE

ABBÉY

T O U R G U I D E



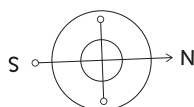
SAINT-HILAIRE ABBEY







WE OFFER YOU THIS GUIDEBOOK
TO HELP YOU EXPLORE SAINT-HILAIRE:
THE ABBEY, THE VILLAGE AND
THE BEAUTY OF ITS NATURAL
SURROUNDINGS. IT WILL SHOW
YOU THINGS WE FIND BEAUTIFUL,
CURIOUS OR INTERESTING...

IF YOU'RE CURIOUS TO SEE AND FIND OUT
MORE, YOU'LL FIND VARIOUS OTHER TOOLS
AVAILABLE HERE.

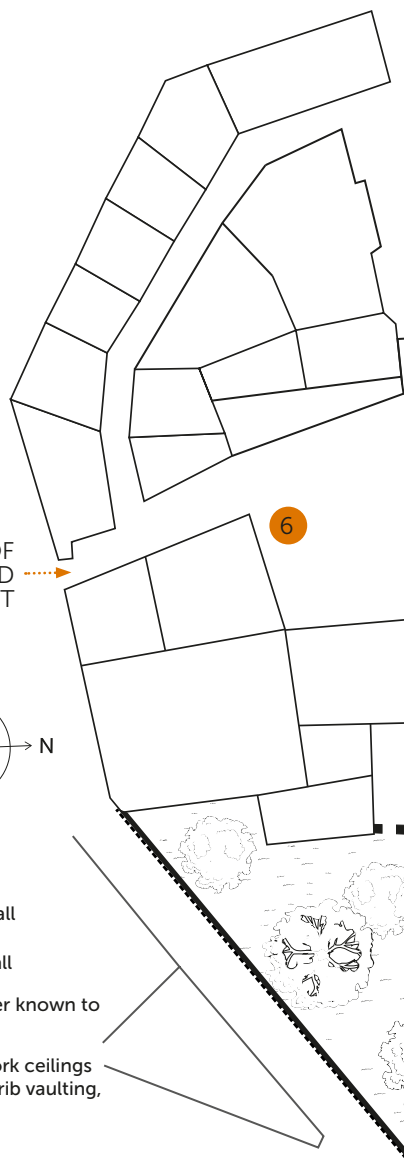
MAIN DOOR OF
THE VANISHED
FORT

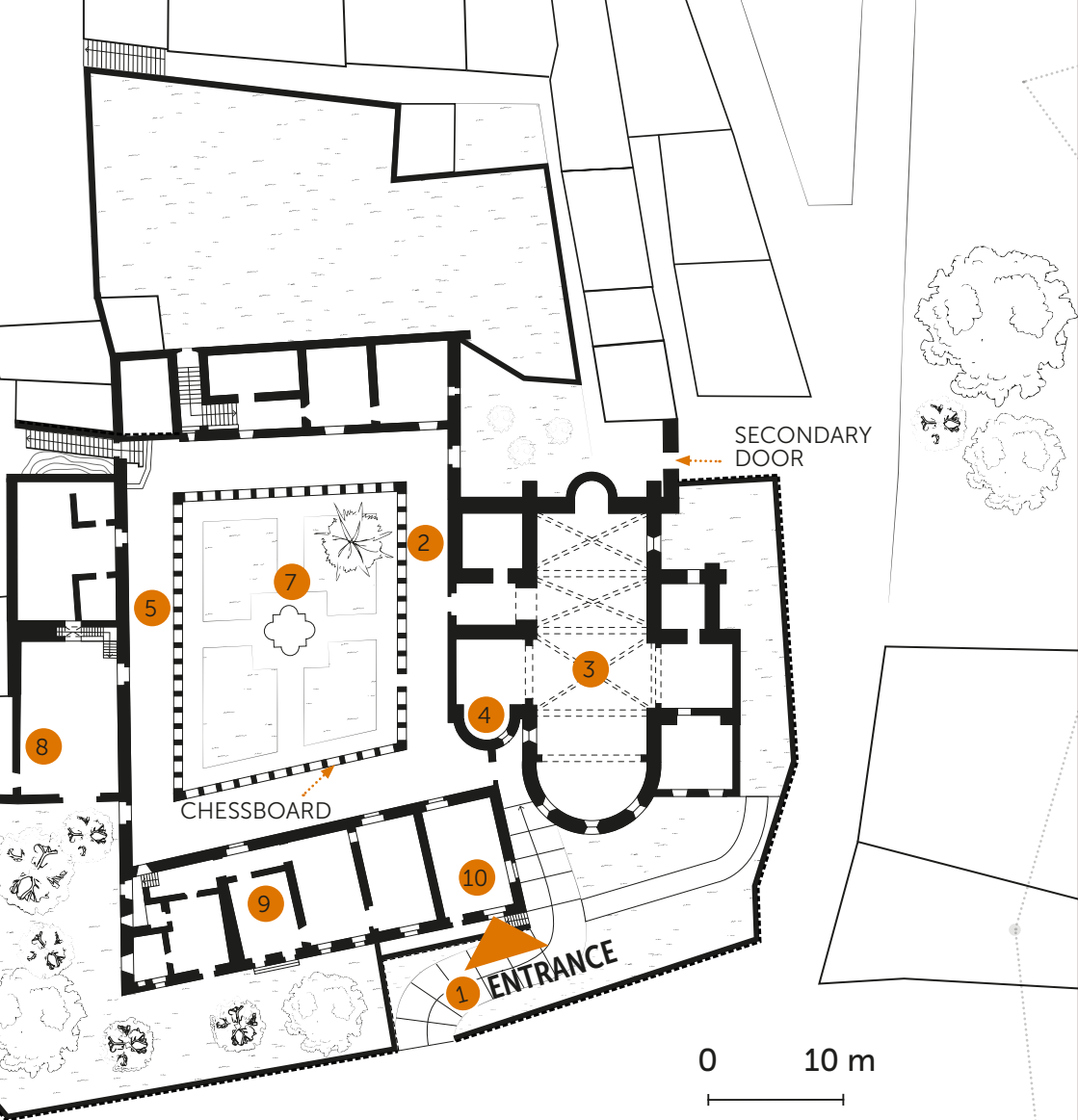


Legend

-  Stone wall
-  Small wall
-  Perimeter known to the Fort
-  Stonework ceilings (arches, rib vaulting, etc.)

Plan: ©H.Nodet/CAML - Graphic adaptation: Le Passe muraille





AN HISTORIC MOMENT

It was a solemn moment. The relics of Saint Hilaire were about to be excavated to be displayed in a reliquary to the veneration of the faithful. This relocation of the saint's relics represented a real re-founding of the monastery. It was instigated by Roger I, Count of Carcassonne, who was celebrating his victories over the Counts of Cerdagne and Toulouse. He was present, with his wife Adelaide, standing beside Abbot Benoît and Garin, the powerful abbot of Saint-Michel de Cuxa. Roger, who presided over the ceremony, henceforth forbade any further countly intervention in the affairs of the abbey and renounced his right to ground rents or services. Saint-Hilaire became the sanctuary for his lineage, which was thus placed under the saint's protection, and the count was revered.

NOT WHAT IT SEEMS ¹



The abbey that we see from the outside, which seems shut away from the outside world, almost afraid of its own austerity, hides a very different reality, which becomes evident as soon as you enter. Let's go inside. The cloister reveals unexpected dimensions – full of space, light, elegance. In the silence, the overriding atmosphere is one of contemplation; the only noise, the splash of the fountain in the centre. But these well-ordered cloisters tell not only of the abbey's prayer life but also of its political interests, of its controlling and consolidating in order to establish its power...

+ Further information

The Saint-Hilaire abbey was one of several abbeys founded in the eighth and ninth centuries that were protected by the powerful Carolingian kings. In around 814–828, the abbey received a letter of privilege from Louis the Pious, the successor of Charlemagne. This is the first evidence we have of its existence. At that time it was called the Saint-Sernin abbey.

+ Further information

The remains of a Romanesque door can be seen in the wall not far from the tombstone. This was the entrance to the 12th-century church. Looking at the font alcove on the right, you can imagine the monks lining up to cross themselves before entering the church to pray...



👁 Further information



In the top right corner of the entrance, the trace of an opening remains on the wall. It is that of the monks' dormitory, giving them direct access at night to the church's chancel, where they would go to sing matins.

Displaying one's power

Probably built on the site of a Romanesque cloister, the 14th-century cloister you see today is in a Gothic style typical of the Languedoc region. Its arches – which are supported by double sandstone columns with occasional monolithic stone pillars – have capitals decorated, for the most part, with foliage. Some of them have stories to tell...

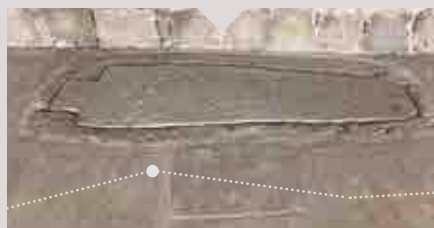
+ Further information

For Roger I of Carcassonne and Razès, the translation of the relics of Saint Hilaire was a chance to assert his power. He had just won some important victories. Granting his protection to this sanctuary was a way of showing himself to be an influential count and marrying his prestige with that of the saints. The abbey was at its peak.

Asserting one's status ²

On the ground just before the entrance to the church, a simple stone slab catches your eye. It's a tomb. Under this slab were found a mixture of bones.

They most probably belonged to lords, nobles and abbots that were gathered in an ossuary. Being buried within the abbey was a privilege.



THE BATTLE OF LE LAUQUET

Roger I, Count of Carcassonne, was in a state of disarray. On the banks of the Lauquet, the battle against Oliba Cabreta, Count of Cerdagne, was not going well. His soldiers were falling one after another. So he invoked Saint Hilaire, the first Bishop of Carcassonne, who he knew was buried nearby in the Saint-Sernin abbey. Legend has it that the saint appeared and allowed Roger to win the victory. That was enough to firmly establish his power...



PRESTIGE DESPITE EVERYTHING 3

The simple and spacious abbey reveals itself at the crossroads of times. The chancel is Romanesque, while the nave is Early Southern Gothic. One man, the abbot Guillaume Pierre, managed to attract pious acts, a lucrative source of indulgences and donations, and to bring his abbey, which was in great difficulty, up to date.

+ Further information

Financial difficulties had accumulated over the centuries. The crusade against the Albigensians had further weakened it and it was no longer protected. It was even stripped of its possessions by the Bishop of Narbonne, who arbitrarily assigned Saint-Martin de Limoux to the Dominicans of Prouilhe. This was a heavy loss and, moreover, it opened up a financial chasm: 70 years of unsuccessful lawsuits...



👁 More to see

The 'cul-de-four' vault of the chancel is typically Romanesque but its doors and windows are 19th century. They were made by the studio of a famous Toulouse master glass-maker, Louis-Victor Gesta. In the 12th century, this place would have been in semi-darkness, lit only by a few candles...

👁 More to see

The wall at the back of the nave shows an arch on columns that are oddly attached to the capitals of the haunches of the vaults: it's the beginning of a new space continuing the nave; the abbey was never completed...



A MASTERPIECE TO THE GLORY OF SAINT SERNIN 4

In the 12th century, one workshop stamped its mark on the golden age of Romanesque art in certain regions in the South of France. It was that of the Master of Cabestany. As at Saint-Papoul, he created a masterpiece here.

THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT SERNIN (OR SAINT SATURNIN)

In the third century, Pope Fabien sent Saint Sernin to evangelise Gaul. He arrived in Toulouse, where he became the first bishop. He was unpopular with Roman religious authorities: when he passed by the temple, the oracles were silent. One day, in around 250, he was summoned to sacrifice a bull to the pagan god. He refused and was arrested and sentenced to death. He was tied to a bull, which dragged him through the streets, but, in fact, he was already dead: his head had smashed against the temple's hard steps. Young girls collected his body to give him a Christian burial. Known as the Saintes Puelles, they were flogged and expelled from Toulouse. They took refuge in a village near Castelnaudary, which has since been named Mas-Saintes-Puelles.



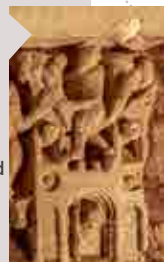
More to see



The Master of Cabestany introduced life into his art, breaking new ground. Note how the bull charges forward as though to tear away from the marble of which it is made; observe the tightrope walker on the right, who dances on the rope...

More to see

The 'sarcophagus' is read from right to left. The first panel on the side is devoted to Saint Sernin's mission of evangelisation: we see him surrounded by his disciples. Then, on the front, there follow the Toulouse scenes: the displeased oracles, the arrest of Saint Sernin and his martyrdom. Finally, the left-hand register depicts the Saintes Puelles.



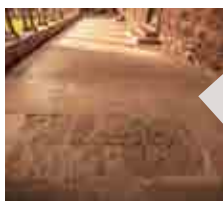
MODELS AND TRANSGRESSIONS 5



This 14th-century cloister follows an ideal model: that of the Abbaye de Saint-Gall in Switzerland. The abbey church is in the North Gallery; the West Gallery houses workshops; to the South, there is the monks' and guests' refectory; to the East, the chapter house...

Further information

Unlike the Cistercians, who relied on lay brothers to perform routine tasks, the Benedictines cultivated, manufactured and tended. They worked, and ran to Mass seven times a day through a cloister designed for free movement.



More to see

A cross, mounted on a shaft and ending in a sword: the slab in the West Gallery is identical to another in the church.

Yet underneath it were found not human bones but animal remains and pieces of pottery. Is this due

to the fact that we are in the workshop gallery? The question remains unanswered...



THE EFFERVESCENT ABBEY 6

In the 14th century, the Hundred Years' War made it necessary to fortify the abbey. The main entrance has a vaulted passage that leads to a gate protected by a double portcullis. A small two-storey tower watches over this access to the pilgrim's buildings on one side and the prison on the other. The abbot was a lord, who had the right to administer justice. Next to the prison are the wine cellars, where the monks made a discovery that promised them a bright future...

Further information



The cellars are dug out of the rock. In the Middle Ages, there were silos here, which served as a place to store grain. Later, separated from their lower part, they were remodelled to serve as wine cellars. The Benedictines attached great importance to wine – for health, symbolic and economic reasons...

CHANCE CREATES A FIZZ

Spring 1531. 'What's going on in these bottles?', the monks wondered. The wine was starting to bubble; something must have gone wrong. 'But taste it: it's good! ... It's delicious!' And thus, according to the legend, was born the Blanquette. The sparkling wine was much appreciated by the lords of Arques and the dukes of Joyeuse, who ordered it in great quantities.

An ostentatious ceiling 9

Between the end of the Hundred Years' War and the Wars of Religion, the abbey enjoyed a time of peace. The fashion was for painted ceilings. Pictures entered the private homes of the elite. A magnificent ceiling 'à la française' was created in the house of the abbot, a lord soon to become a layman, that expressed his rank, occupation and personality.



The spirit directs 7

Back in the cloisters, the bubbling of the fountain can be heard again. Despite 1970s' additions, the 16th-century fountain still recalls what the garden would once have been like. A structured, well-conceived ensemble, it would have been of symbolic as well as practical value.

👁 More to see



Four is the number that represents earthly perfection. But the cloister is not a perfect square but rather trapezoidal: it has 16 arches on the South side, 14 on the North, and 12 on the East and West, in order to fit on the rock on which the abbey is built.

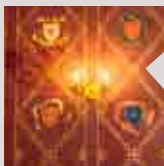
👁 More to see

The end of the joists are sculpted into monstrous heads, which seem to be spitting them out. The more scary they were, the



more the authorities were able to assert themselves. The panels between two joists are decorated with courtly or grotesque scenes, monsters and kings, falconers and jesters...

+ Further information



The ceiling of the abbey house was discovered in 1860 by Canon Boudet, who added his own touches: the floral motifs, a few panels and some paintings on the walls.

The Word resounds 8

In the refectory, the monks ate in silence. Heads down, they listened to the Gospels. The pilgrims and guests of the abbey did the same in the refectory next door, now gone. A miracle of the sacred Word penetrating the walls? No, simply is a well-designed and unusual pulpit...



👁 More to see

Take the narrow staircase at the end of the refectory that leads to the pulpit. Sit on the stone bench with your back against the wall and speak in your normal voice. Ask those who remained in the room what you just said or sung...



👁 More to see

The marks of a chessboard in the stone between two columns in the East gallery. In the North gallery, one of the columns is known as the 'butcher's pillar' because he used it for sharpening his knives: it is scored with blade marks – the traces of a not-so-distant past...



👁 More to see

A beautiful mullioned window, decorated with a grille. This is all that remains of the chapter house of the abbey after it housed institutions. In this same gallery, there is a Carolingian period stone that bears the same interlacing motif as on the church: a symbol of eternity...



THE VILLAGE OF SAINT-HILAIRE

AROUND THE ABBEY



A PRECIOUS SPRING

The fountain at the foot of the abbey was condemned when the road was cut, which caused a 2–2.5m backfill. But water still flows from the spring not far from the Place du Fort to a drinking trough on the edge of the Lauquet, not far from the bridge. In the 19th century, it supplied with water the gardens of a substantial property that stood here.



REPUBLICAN TURMOIL

In 1843, the mayor announced that collective interest was more important than individual interest. The house of the Niort family was thus demolished in favour of the construction of the road that still runs between Limoux and Carcassonne. It was suggested to the mayor that the Cabestany sarcophagus be sold to fund the work, but he refused, and stuck to his position.

In 1894, the city council ruled that the bell tower was endangering the parishioners and should be moved. A new one was built at the entrance to the fortified village, behind the church.



HOLY PROTECTION

Behind the abbey church, right up against its walls, stands the fort. In the 14th century, the abbey and part of the village were fortified. Instead of extending the nave of the abbey, a rampart was built. Bands of mercenaries roamed the region and the Black Prince was intimidating the village. The fort protected the abbey, and could serve as a refuge for villagers in case of attack. Today, it still feels safe, cut off from the outside world by the houses that butt up against the ramparts. The Place du Fort overlooks an abandoned garden that is home to the spring that feeds the fountain at the foot of the abbey. The Rue des Fossés leads to the old entrance to the abbey. Look up to see the arrowslits, a cross-window and some fine stonework...



CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

As the name suggests, Rue des Fossés ('Ditch street') was not originally a street, but a ditch, which reinforced the protection offered by the ramparts. Beyond this road, a little wider, another enclosure appears. Slightly oval in shape, it is believed to be that of an ecclesial enclosure, a space possibly created in the 10th–11th centuries by the church to offer a place to escape from the oppressive laws of the feudal lords. The parish church of the early Middle Ages occupied the site of the present cemetery. No trace remains of it.



AROUND THE RIVER

A REBUILT VILLAGE?

In 1574, the War of Religion was raging. The village was burnt by the Protestants. Perhaps as a result of these events, it was rebuilt on the slopes descending towards the River Lauquet. It is this 17th-century village that you cross to reach the riverside. Take the Rue du Cap de la Ville to reach the Rue de l'Hospitalet, where you will find a typical house of this period. Further down, you will join the Rue de la Molle. The stream here regularly turns into a torrent. The street is equipped with a 'béal' (an irrigation channel) to redirect the flow. Narrow paths cross it at regular intervals, preventing the inhabitants from getting their feet wet when they go outside on days when there's flooding. Further on, in the Rue de la Pétanque, a charming little Tuscan-style house is just waiting to be depicted by artists...

FROM THE CHAUSSÉE TO THE GARDENS

When leaving the village, turn right to get to the Chaussée, the dam. Here, the Lauquet is wide. A small tributary, the Baris, flows down from the forest of Rabassie and arrives here, passing discreetly under the weeds, to join the river. The béal begins close to this confluence and was used to power a water mill further downstream. It leaves the Chaussée and runs towards the village, disappears from sight as it skirts road, then reappears beneath the shade of the plane trees that surround the gardens. This water channel dominates the place: anyone who didn't fall in it as a child is not from around here, or so the locals say!...



THE RIVER BANKS

A small path runs alongside the gardens and down to the river. Here you can cross over a kind of footbridge to go and say hello to a beautiful spindle tree that is over 30 years old. You could also decide to stop and sit down, with your feet dangling over the water, to surprise the swifts that come to drink on the surface and the grey wagtails flitting about near the riverbank. In the water, barbs, nases, trout and gudgeon swim past each other, while frogs hide in the reeds. The yellow flowers of St. John's wort can be seen all summer, until the red berries of autumn appear...



A LITTLE CORNER OF PARADISE

Do you want a pepper? I have some salad; do you want some for this evening...? The atmosphere in the gardens that border the béal is that of a small village. Everyone draws from the béal to water their flowers and vegetables. The first gardens need a pumping system; the others have just to open the sluice gates for the force of gravity to cause the water to flow into their gardens.



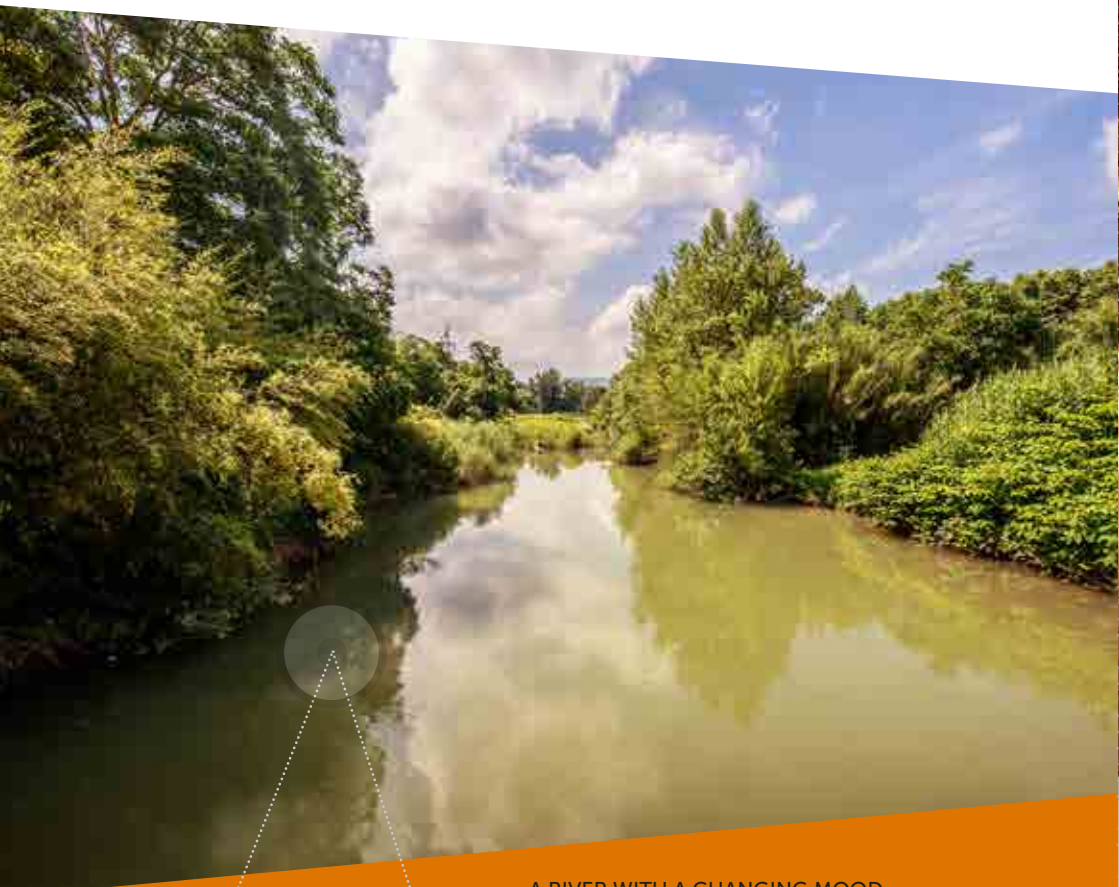
A LITTLE FURTHER ON



A footpath runs from Saint-Hilaire to Carcassonne. At first, it follows the Lauquet, then heads up into the hills...



Not far from Saint-Hilaire, Greffeil is a riverside village that makes for a charming excursion. A few kilometres away, the Rieunette abbey welcomes pilgrims and visitors...



A RIVER WITH A CHANGING MOOD

Not far from the Milobre de Bouisse, at 649m above sea level, the Lauquet flows through and shapes sandstone, limestone, marl and puddingstone, before reaching the Aude river, 37km further on, at Couffoulens. A river with a typically Mediterranean temperament, it is prone to unpredictable fits of rage...

PRACTICAL INFORMATION



GOOD PRACTICES



accepted animals

SERVICES



TOILETS

There are public toilets at the abbey.



PARKING

Free parking behind the abbey and along the Lauquet.



SHOP

Within the abbey grounds.



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