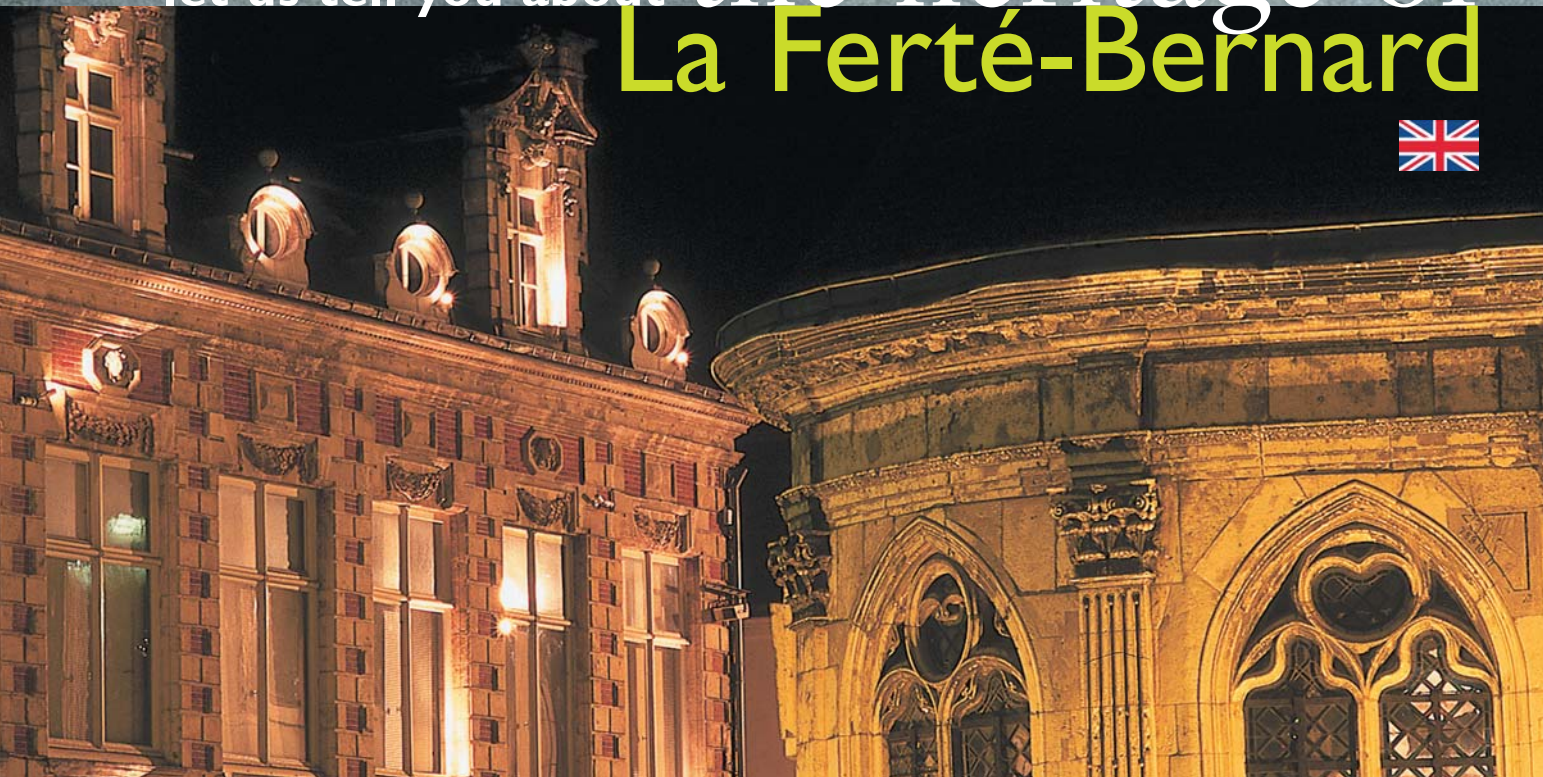


The Perche Sarthois,  
a listed Pays d'art et d'histoire

let us tell you about the heritage of  
**La Ferté-Bernard**





# The shape of the town

La Ferté-Bernard is closely tied to the river Huisne. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the river was a route between the Paris basin and the west of France, hence the original settlement here.

## La Ferté-Bernard: 11<sup>th</sup> century roots

The town of La Ferté-Bernard dates back to 1027 when Avesgaud, bishop of Le Mans and feudal lord built a fortress here. He chose the marshlands of the valley of the **river Huisne** as they were easy to defend and close to ancient transport links. The fortress was composed of the **upper bailey or courtyard**, around which stood the seigniorial buildings and the **lower bailey** which housed the outbuildings. There were two entrances, **Saint-Julien gate**, which faces towards the town

of Bonnétable, and **Saint-Barthélémy gate**, which opens onto the Le Mans-Paris route. The fortress remained in the hands of the Bernard family from the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> to the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Their name, combined with the word “ferté”, an old word meaning fortress, gave the town its name.

## Growth during the Middle-Ages

The lower bailey grew into a more urban development during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and spread towards the **faubourg Saint-Barthélémy**, (on the site of today’s place Ledru Rollin).

The Bourgneuf neighbourhood appeared in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. After the Hundred Years War, La Ferté-Bernard was rebuilt and improved. It was at this time, in 1450, that the work began to build the **church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais**. The walls of the town were rebuilt in 14<sup>th</sup> century stone, capable of resisting artillery and Saint-Julien gate was rebuilt around 1480.

Gradually, outlying districts sprang up around the town’s walls, such as Les Guillotières, on the road to Le Mans,

which dates back to 1555. The population then was around 1,000.

## 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century: lacking in elbow room

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the town was lacking in space. It continued to spread outwards and several convents such as les Filles de Notre-Dame, which still remains today, were built. The town walls, deprived of their military functions, were dismantled little by little and four of the five gates were destroyed between 1777 and 1836. New streets were designed and promenades (or malls\*) built.

## 1800-1850: a time of change

The main square, **place de la République**, was created in 1850 and marked the beginning of the urbanisation of the north of the town. With the arrival of the railway in 1854 in the neighbouring town of **Saint-Antoine-de-Rochefort**, there was a marked increase in commerce and industry in La Ferté-Bernard.

The town grew to such an extent that Saint-Antoine and a part of Cherreau and Cherré were annexed by La Ferté-Bernard in 1889, taking the population to over 5,000.

In the 1920s, the mayor, Georges Desnos, modernised the town and improved living conditions by razing buildings unfit for habitation and replacing them by new accommodation. The housing on rue Robert Surmont is an example of the constructions of this period.

## 1950-1980: unprecedented expansion

Thanks to its location half way between Paris and the west of France, to the availability of labour and space to spread out, the town became industrialised, which in turn generated more housing and infrastructure.



Map of La Ferté-Bernard, 1826. The river cuts off the château from the town to the north and the countryside to the west.



Boulevard d'artillerie in front of the château, from place de la Lice. Anonymous drawing, 1760.



Rue Carnot.



The Petit Mail in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



# The old town centre

Circuit 1.5 km  
approximately 45 mins



View of La Ferté-Bernard from the north-west in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lithography by Saint-Elme de Champ, 1826



Chapel of Saint-Lyphard, purchased by the town and restored in the 1980s. Listed as a historic building since 1981.



Old houses between the branch of the river rue du Pavillon and rue Delaborde, gradually demolished after World War I.



Portrait of the Duke of Orleans, founder of the oratory. Stained-glass window of the Saint-Lyphard chapel, 1990. Designed by Denis Béalet and made by Didier Alliou of Vitrail France.



Saint-Julien gate, before the replacement of the wooden lintel by a stone arch towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by J. Jacottet, lithography Lemercier.



Paumier-Mauger family house, built in 1906, now the Youth Club.

## The site of the castle and chapel of Saint-Lyphard

The general structure of Avesgaud's *castellum* still remains. The fortress originally comprised an artificial mound on which the master tower, known as the Tour du Trésor (treasure tower), was built. It was placed in the middle of the fortress, which was entirely surrounded by water and served as a support for several buildings. The **porch tower** served as a link between the château and the town, located

in the former lower bailey. The square still bears that name today (place de la Lice). In 1392, following an attempted assassination of Olivier de Clisson by Pierre de Craon, constable of France, lord of La Ferté, Charles VI ordered the castle to be destroyed. The remains were handed over to the king's brother, Louis I of Orléans. He is to be thanked for the partial reconstruction of the **dwelling** and the **chapel of Saint-Lyphard**. The fortifications were reinforced in the 1470s with the

creation of boulevards\* designed to transport artillery along the canals and behind the castle, where they still remain today. The tour-porche (porch tower) and the tour du Trésor (treasure tower) were destroyed around 1830-1850 when rue Alfred Marchand was built. The originally L-shaped seigniorial dwelling at the back of the courtyard, which no longer sports its wing, dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was extended in the 17<sup>th</sup>

century, as can be seen by the outer gallery, and reworked in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 1980s, the town acquired and restored the **chapel of Saint-Lyphard**. A Romanesque style aperture was discovered, which dates its construction in the late 12<sup>th</sup> or early 13<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps after the lower bailey was urbanised. In the late 14<sup>th</sup> century a small, Gothic style oratory was added to the original building.

Make your way towards **Saint-Julien gate** via rue Florant.

Next to the landing stage you can see the remains of the **town walls** as they were rebuilt after the Hundred Years war, around 1450-1480. The sparse remains illustrate a fairly low curtain wall\*, with a crenellated parapet and probably strengthened with earth from behind. The now blocked canon-port\*, visible at the end of the wall, shows how the defence system was adapted to suit the artillery of the times. The walls were protected by a steep mound of earth where the rue Florant is today.

The **large house** next door, **neo-regionalist in style**, was built in 1906 on the site of the original mound. Its steeply sloping, overhanging roof, its colours and Art Nouveau style decorations, typical of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, are in stark contrast to the neighbouring houses.

## Saint-Julien gate

Records mention the gate for the first time in 1476, but it no doubt dates from the original fortifications. The gate as we see it today was rebuilt around

1480 at the same time as the rest of the town walls. The walled town forms a square of buildings crossed by two passageways for carts and pedestrians and closed by drawbridges, a portcullis\* and gates whose cramping is still visible. The defence is assured by two large towers with a rampart walk\*, battlements\* and machicolations\*. Several openings show that the fortress was adapted for artillery.

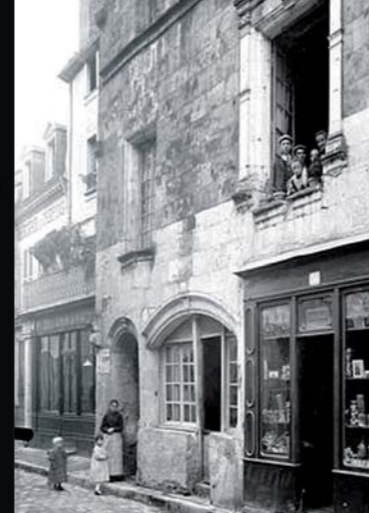




Saint-Julien gate from rue d'Huisne, first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



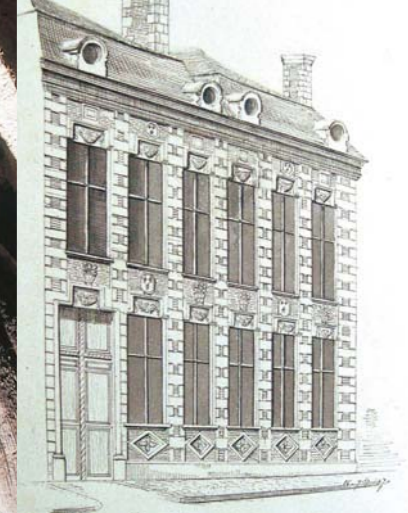
Saint-Julien gate, traces of machicolations, and the bell tower of Notre-Dame-des-Marais.



Rue d'Huisne, house frontage, second quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (now demolished). Photograph by Félix Martin-Sabon, before 1897.



Rue d'Huisne, grotesque at the entrance to the cour de La Chaussumerie



Street frontage of Courtin de Torsay mansion before the dormer windows were added in the 1870s. Drawing.

Although military in construction, Saint-Julien gate also had a legal role as it was the place where the octroi\* or city toll was paid. Its monumental appearance was also an ostentatious demonstration of the town's importance. This role was reinforced by the abandonment of its military vocation after the siege of the town in 1590. It was the **town hall** from 1703 to 1907. It was altered inside and several new apertures were

created. In the 1870s, a stairway was added by the architect Darcy. At the same time, work was conducted on the outside to transform the entrance to the town. A bridge was built, the ground was levelled and the wooden ceiling was replaced by a stone vault. **Saint-Julien gate** is the most significant remains of the original ramparts and a listed building since 1875. It symbolises the town of La Ferté-Bernard for the people of

Sarthe. The gate also marks the boundary between the historical centre and the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century extensions.

### The main streets: Rue d'Huisne and Rue Carnot

When you pass through Saint-Julien gate, you are using the oldest route into the town. Built in the Middle Ages, this road crossed the town from Mamers and Bonnétable via the chaussée de Saint-Antoine and towards Le Mans via rue Bourgneuf and **Saint-**

**Barthélémy gate**. On either side of rue d'Huisne and further on, in rue Carnot, a few narrow houses demonstrate their medieval influences. The oldest, late 15<sup>th</sup> century and early 16<sup>th</sup> century, often comprise living accommodation overlooking the street with a stairway at the back and with a passageway leading to a courtyard with a second house at the back of the plot, linked to the first by a gallery. These half-timber constructions were altered over

time. However, the alterations mainly concerned the buildings overlooking the street. Some well-preserved back buildings can be seen from the **Petit Mail**. The **house at n°31** is a typical example. Despite the density of construction, the buildings do not take up all the space behind the street. A few passages remain, such as the **Cour de la Chaussumerie**, marked by a sculpted character bearing a bag of lime on his shoulder.

These areas were gradually linked to the outside of the town via footbridges at the same time as the tree-lined walks were planted, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

### Hôtel Courtin de Torsay, 50 Rue d'Huisne

This huge dwelling is one of La Ferté's rare examples of a late 17<sup>th</sup> century mansion house\*. Probably built for the Courtin family, magistrates at the parliament of Paris, it is particularly wide, in contrast to

many houses, which are built on narrow plots. At the same time, it is much more symmetrical than older houses. The front elevation has a line of large windows, emphasised by a mixture of brick and stone. The gambrel roof makes the loft space easier to convert than a high roof. Nevertheless, the modernity of this house resides in its side passage with coach door. Invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to enable coaches and

horses to access the stables at the back of the house, the coach door is a proof of the nobility of the owner of the residence. Two wings were erected at the back of the building but only one remains today. Renovation work was conducted between 1870 and 1877 and the interior was altered. However, the front elevation was left untouched aside from the replacement of old coats of arms by figurative





Courtin de Torsay mansion, back right, detail of the allegorical painting on the ceiling, 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Street frontage of Courtin de Torsay hotel and sacristy of Notre-Dame-des-Marais, former funeral chapel of Marie de Vabre, built between 1616 and 1624.



Church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais, southern elevation, by P. Manguin, 1847.



Church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais, Ecce Homo window given by the Heullant family, detail of donors, to the south of the chancel, around 1540 and 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais, chancel vault, completed around 1596.

panels and the creation of two large dormer windows.

Now owned by the town, this house was home to the public library until 2013 and the passage leads to a pretty **public garden** behind.

### The church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais

The promotion of the **chapel of Notre-Dame** to parish church in 1366 entailed rebuilding work. However, work was delayed by issues surrounding

the Hundred Years war and did not commence in earnest until after the period of troubles, around 1450. Economic prosperity and rising populations encouraged royal and lordly donations added to those of the up and coming bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, it took a century and a half to build a church the proportions of which far exceed the needs of a population of no more than a thousand.

The work began on the nave and the tower in the second

half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

It continued in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with a new chancel with three chapels with flat vaults built between 1520 and 1545. The building was finished in 1596. The structure is Gothic in style but the décor changes as the construction evolves. The nave and the west door have purely Gothic ornaments of a sobriety that contrasts to the chancel, which copies the style of major

churches and has three levels supported by flying buttresses. The décor on the south elevation that faces towards the town is lavishly ornate, in a Renaissance style that mixes religious evocations such as *Regina Coeli Laetare* and *Ave Regina Coelorum* on the parapet and the Italian ornamental repertoire combined with surprising secular images of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra. The outstanding character of the building stems in part from the emulation between its

benefactors who rival for attention. They are omnipresent in their coats of arms sculpted on the keystones or illustrated in prayer on one of the church's thirty-five stained glass windows.

Finished in 1623 with the construction of a funeral chapel that was rapidly turned into a sacristy, the **church of Notre-Dame des Marais** is an illustration of the intellectual explosion of the pivotal period

between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Indeed, although the layout and elevation remain characteristic of Gothic architecture, the décor inspired by antiquity is a remarkable illustration of the Renaissance period.

Thanks to its exceptional design, the building was included on the first ever list of historic buildings drawn up in 1840 by Prosper Mérimée. Since then, it has been regularly renovated. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Gothic style was

emphasised when the south door was transformed in conjunction with the building of place Carnot. Since the 1990s, the mayor has initiated several restoration campaigns in partnership with the state and local authorities.

### The fountain and rue Carnot

In 1477, the inhabitants drew up a petition in protest that the town did not have a public

watering place for drinking water; the only source was located close to rue de la Cougère, several hundred metres outside the town. The petition was successful and in 1483 a lead and wood pipeline was installed from the source to the centre of the town. This installation demonstrates the prosperity of the town of La Ferté-Bernard, a town capable of installing public amenities with encouragement from its inhabitants.





Fountain on place Carnot and church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais after the alterations to the southern door between 1843 and 1860. Watercolour, anonymous.



N°10, rue Carnot, detail of sculpted decor.



Denis Béalet market hall, ground floor glazing by Didier Alliou, Vitrail France, 2007.



Place de la Lice and the market hall, between 1914 and 1918. The current statue of Saint Louis is not in the niche above the central bay.



Oak rafters restored in 2006-2007 in the covered market.

The current watering place, an octagonal shape with an obelisk in diamond granite from Alençon, was installed in 1651 and is thought to have been paid for by Robert Hoyau. In rue Carnot, formerly rue des Porches and rue Notre-Dame, visitors can admire the town's best preserved **half-timber houses**. Fortunately, local alignment plans have mostly spared their corbelled construction. Today, as in

bygone times, the ground floors of these buildings are used as shops while the upper floors are private accommodation. The sculptures on the frontages indicate the trade formerly practised on the premises. At **n°7 and n°10**, the bunches of grapes and grotesque characters set around a traveller and a mermaid on the first floor evoke a tavern. The house at n°10 also bears the remains of a representation of the stoning of St-Stephen on its third floor.

### The Market Hall, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century architecture, a sign of prosperity

The market hall in La Ferté-Bernard was first mentioned in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. The site opposite the entrance to the castle was probably chosen by the lords and is a sign of the town's prosperity towards the end of the Middle Ages. The current building is the result of several stages of work, the two main parts being the roof structure, which according to records began in 1477 and

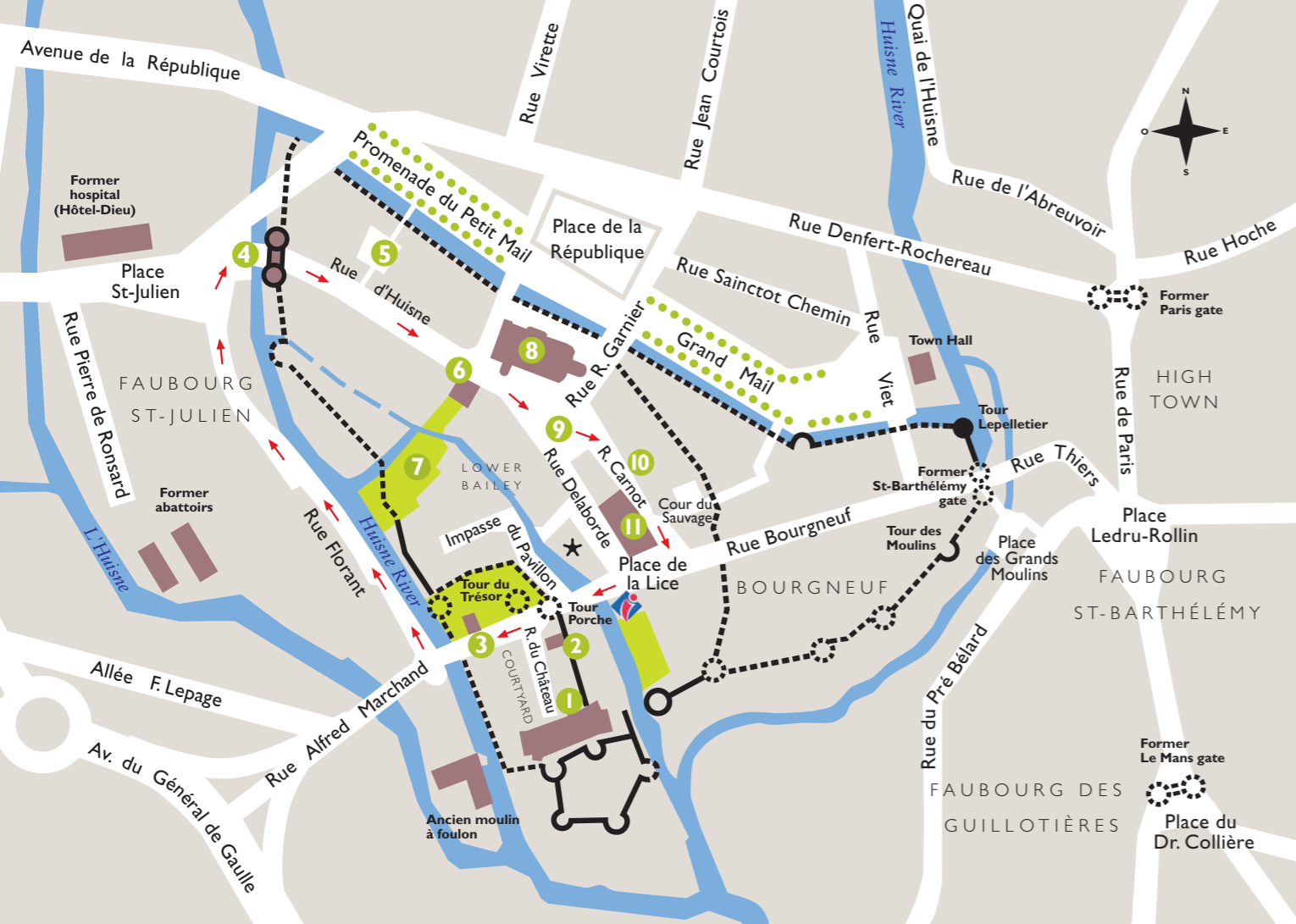
the underpinning of the stonework, which was altered in 1536 and instigated by Antoinette de Bourbon, widow of Charles de Lorraine, lord of La Ferté. As early as the Middle Ages, the market hall had a dual function, commercial and legal. The ground floor was used for the sale of fabrics, grains and meat while the first floor was used as a courtroom to conduct seigniorial justice and for council meetings.

The layout of the building is as simple as its frontage is monumental. Some 20 metres high, the main façade has two levels and is separated into three bays that coincide with the interior divisions: three areas marked out by oak pillars that rise from the base of the building and support the impressive roof structure that can be seen from the first floor. Being a very functional building, the market hall has few ornamental features aside

from the four sculptures on the gable. The main sculpture is of Saint-Louis, the patron saint of merchants and lawmen, which is placed in a niche with Renaissance décor above the large windows. The gable is framed with scions with two lions that used to bear the coat of arms of the de Lorraine family. The crest of the roof ends with a majestic eagle. Property of the Richelieu family during the Revolution, the

market hall was purchased by the town in 1810. The first floor was used as a local courtroom until 1976 but the ground floor has not been used as a market since 1899, when it became a multi-purpose hall. It is still used as such today. The building was listed as a historic monument in 1973 and reopened to the public in April 2008 following three years of restoration work.





## THE OLD TOWN CENTRE / CIRCUIT 1.5 KM, APPROXIMATELY 45 MINS

- |                               |                                   |                            |  |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| 1 Castle                      | 5 Cour de la Chaussumerie         | 9 Fountain                 | Trail                                      |
| 2 Chapel of St-Lyphard        | 6 Hôtel Courtin de Torsay         | 10 Half-timber houses      | Wall still visible                         |
| 3 Neo-régionalist style house | 7 Public garden                   | 11 Market Hall             | Wall no longer exists                      |
| 4 Saint-Julien gate           | 8 Church of Notre-Dame-des-Marais | Tourist office (departure) | ★ Site of the covered market in the 1930s. |

## Glossary

**Art Nouveau:** artistic movement active from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, especially in architecture. The style used sometimes complex shapes inspired by the botanical world and banishes straight lines and angles.

**Boulevard:** external fortification used as a passageway for artillery, a platform in front of the ramparts. By extension, the word has come to designate a wide road around a town, often planted with trees.

**Cannon-port:** an opening in the wall, often circular in shape, beneath the loophole, enabling to project a cannon muzzle. Cannon-ports appeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries

**Castellum:** latin term for fortification.

**Rampart walk:** path around the top of a fortified wall.

**Battlements:** parapet with indentations or embrasures for shooting.

**Curtain wall:** a connecting wall hung between two towers surrounding the courtyard.

**Portcullis:** a heavy timber or metal grill that protected the castle entrance and could be raised or lowered from within the castle.

**Hôtel-Dieu:** in the Middle Ages, this was the name given to hospitals managed by the church. The sick were cared for here and paupers or pilgrims were also given shelter.

**Mansion:** a large, comfortable town house.

**Palissade:** the fence surrounding the area between the castle and the base court or lower bailey, which was used for military exercise.

**Machicolations:** projecting gallery on brackets, on outside of castle or towers, with holes in floor for dropping rocks, shooting, etc. Stone gallery of the same shape and emplacement and having the same purpose as the wooden galleries.

**Mall:** the name derives from the mallet, a sort of hammer used in the game of Pall-Mall, which was very fashionable in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. By extension, mall refers to the tree-lined avenue used as a promenade and place to play the game.

**Octroi:** place where the city toll on goods was paid. This was a local tax collected on various articles brought into a district for consumption. The king granted permission to levy local taxes.

**Oratory:** place for prayer.

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## Explore La Ferté-Bernard, follow the tour...

This booklet is to help you make the most of your visit to La Ferté-Bernard and encloses some of the secrets of our town's architecture.

We have designed this document with tourists in mind. The introduction sets the scene and explains how the town came about and grew over time.

The tour is 1.5 km long and should take you about 45 minutes to complete. You will visit the historic town centre, take in the main features of the La Ferté-Bernard and delve into the origins of the town.

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The *Pays d'art et d'histoire* tourist guides and tourist offices would be happy to give you advice and information. Throughout the year, we organise events and guided tours for groups to tell you about our heritage. We can cater for individuals from spring to autumn.

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