

Tales from *the crypt*

Gillian Thornton finds English monarchs,



contemporary culture and a cutting-edge 'iBar' at the Royal Abbey of **Fontevraud**

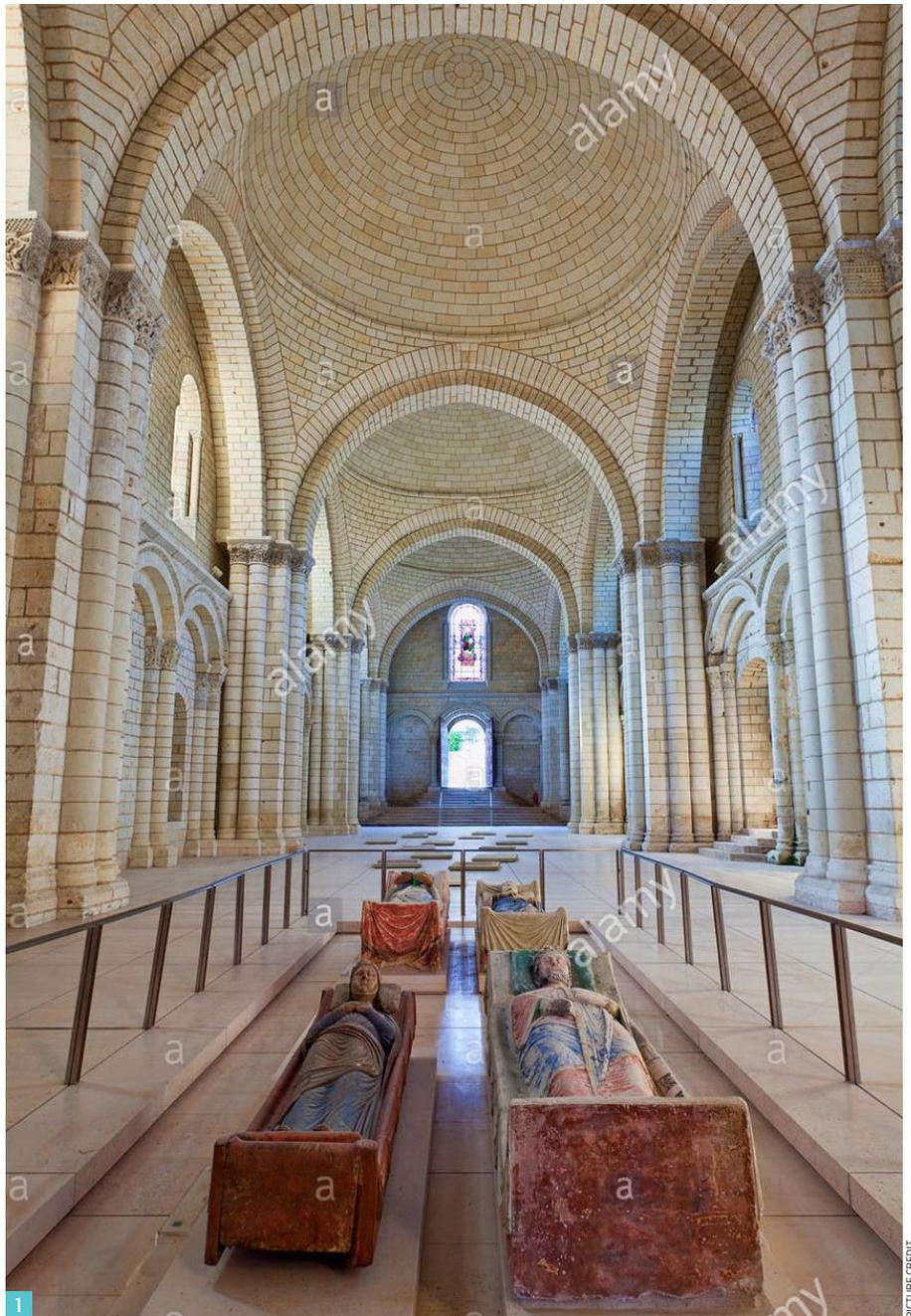
If soap operas had been around in the Middle Ages, the Plantagenets would surely have topped the list of dysfunctional families with a plot line that reads like a royal version of *Eastenders*. Just try this for a family saga...

Young English king Henry II – Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou – marries Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1152. She's 11 years his senior and was previously married to the King of France. When the passion turns sour, Eleanor sides with sons Richard and John against her husband, who puts her under long-term house arrest and takes another lover.

Fast forward to 1189 when Henry dies at Chinon, and Eleanor is released after 16 years. Richard takes the royal top spot, but 'the Lionheart' spends most of his time away on crusade. When he dies without children,

Why Plantagenets?

It's all down to Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, who married Matilda, daughter of English King Henry I. Clearly a man who liked to stand out in a crowd, it's thought that Geoffrey was nicknamed Plantagenet because he placed a spring of broom – *planta genista* in Latin – in his hat. Their son became Henry II, first of the Plantagenet kings.



1 & 2 Fontevraud Abbey, the final resting place of the Plantagenets



THIS UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE IS ONE OF THE LARGEST REMAINING MONASTIC COMPLEXES FROM THE MIDDLE AGES

Britain comes to Fontevraud

Many events take place at Fontevraud, but Festivini on 10th September 2016 promises a gastronomic feast and tasting of local wines with a distinct Anglo-French atmosphere. Details and booking on the website at fontevraud.fr

brother John promptly loses most of his mother's lands back to the French!

The Plantagenets are such an integral and compelling part of British history, that it seems slightly surreal to be standing beside effigies of three of them on French soil. But the dynasty originated in France and it was here at Fontevraud Abbey that Eleanor, one of the most powerful women in medieval Europe, spent her final years and established the family burial place.

Just 10 miles south-east of Saumur, Fontevraud Royal Abbey is around three hours' drive from Brittany Ferries' ports at Caen and St Malo – a fascinating stopover

on any Loire Valley holiday or journey south. Located on the edge of the historic Anjou region, this UNESCO world heritage site is one of the largest remaining monastic complexes from the Middle Ages – a historic visitor attraction, but also the Cultural Centre of Western France.

Founded in 1101 near a spring called the 'Fontaine d'Evraud', Fontevraud Abbey was a thriving monastery with a line of celebrated abbesses. A number of royal children were also educated within its walls until the dissolution of religious orders during the French Revolution. In 1804, Napoleon had the buildings transformed into a prison – a status that remained until 1963 when the Royal Abbey entered a new phase.

After major restoration work, Fontevraud opened to a very different kind of visitor in 1975, this time as a cultural centre for heritage, music and singing, visual arts and spirituality. So every year brings something new.

This year, for instance, sees the first stage of an innovative illumination scheme by Yann Kersalé that brings the fine lines and architectural details evocatively to life. Eighteen 'digital tapestries' will also showcase the Abbey's key historical events, its architectural details and personalities. Meanwhile, animated films by artist Eve de Roeck will be shown in the crypt, open to the public for the first time, and a new iCompanion uses geolocation to enable visitors to follow in the footsteps of a character and experience Fontevraud through another's eyes.

As you wander the impressive cloisters and experience the timeless simplicity of the former abbey church, it's not hard to imagine monks across the centuries who have found peace and contemplation within the white stone walls.

My Plantagenet friends – or at least their painted effigies – lie two-by-two in a neat oblong beneath the towering roof timbers of the nave. Although originally buried at Fontevraud, the Abbey was ransacked by the Huguenots in 1562 and the royal remains reputedly scattered. →

Picture caption



3 Staying at the Abbey's hotel offers the opportunity to tour the grounds when the public have gone home
4 Henry and Eleanor's effigies side-by-side
5 The Abbey contains impressive architectural details to experience



iPad tour for children



Armed with an iPad, visitors aged 8 to 14 can hunt for 'boZZons' – little creatures that hide around the Abbey. Choose to follow a day in the life of a nun or a prisoner, playing interactive games and learning history along the way.

Henry's effigy lies beside his wife, who holds an open book – a symbol of Eleanor's great education and wisdom. At his feet lies an effigy of their eldest son Richard – the ever-absent Lionheart – and beside him, the tomb of John's second wife, Isabella of Angoulême, who became a nun there. And John? He's far away in the nave of Worcester Cathedral.

There's lots to see and enjoy around the main abbey, but don't miss the Fontevraud l'Hôtel, created within the grounds in the former priory of St Lazare. Non-residents are welcome to enjoy the gastronomic fare at Le Restaurant, imaginatively created around a small cloister, but do book to avoid disappointment.

Alternatively you can just relax over a drink and a puzzle in the wonderful iBar, beneath the soaring roof of the priory chapel. Touch the screen of the interactive tablet tables to learn about the history and architecture, complete

a jigsaw of the Abbey, or try one of the children's games.

But I'd recommend staying for a night. The rooms are simply furnished and ultra-high-tech – the facilities all controlled from an iPad, which also serves as a telephone to reception and the outside world. Best of all, hotel guests enjoy a unique privilege – the chance to tour the Abbey grounds when the public have gone home.

So, before sinking into bed, I walked through the open abbey door and stood in the shadowy nave beside the key players of our medieval soap opera, with Eleanor's stone book atmospherically spot-lit like a 21st-century e-reader, as if to emphasise who really wore the trousers. 🇬🇧

Getting there

Fontevraud is around three hours' drive from Brittany Ferries' port of Caen. Visit brittanyferries.com or call 0330 159 7000.