

# History of the Château de Rochechouart

is still visible today. It was used to oversee the protection and defence of the heart of the viscount's château against attacks from the defensive ditches, the town and the surrounding plain, which was where danger was most likely to come from. From the tower it is possible to access the residential logis and the Sainte-Marie chapel, where the viscounts worshipped. At the end of the Middle Ages, quantities of rubble were transported to the site and it was then possible to build the first château around a courtyard.



## The origins of the château

The château de Rochechouart is situated on a remarkable geological site, a crater that was created by the impact of a meteorite about 214 million years ago. Breccia stones (rocks formed of agglomerate fragments) have been used to build the château. The first château de Rochechouart was very different to the one we see today. The site on which it was constructed, "la Rocca de Cavardus", gave rise to the town's name and the name of the family of Viscounts de Rochechouart. The site itself was on a much steeper slope than it is today. We know very little about the early castle.

During the 11th and 12th centuries the hypothesis is that the Viscounts of Rochechouart, following the example of other great lords in the Limousin and Poitevin regions, had a mighty buttressed tower built, such as we can still see today in La Rochefoucauld, Mortemart, Lastours or even Montbrun, albeit on a smaller scale.

## The fortress

In the 13th and 14th centuries, we would refer to a fortress or fortified castle, rather than a château as we imagine them today. The fortress included the Viscount's private quarters as well as houses and accommodation for some of his knights. The almond-shaped tower (fortified tower) which adjoins the entrance to the current château dates from the 13th century. It is the remaining vestige from this period that



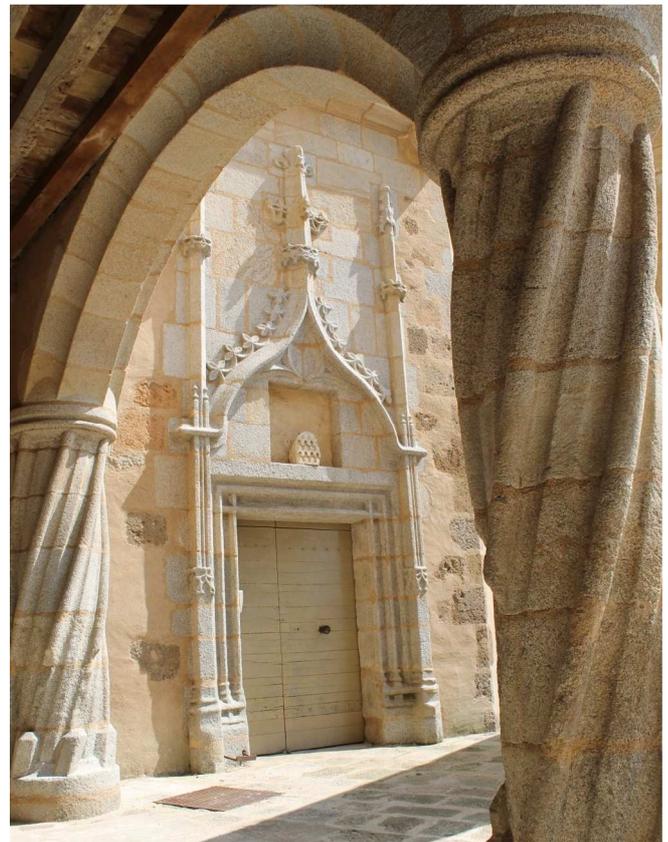
## A château characteristic of the end of the Middle Ages (c. 1470-1512) and of the Renaissance

The château was entirely rebuilt and restructured from the 1470s onwards and took on its current form at this time. A huge works programme was organised. The building can be classified as a "Renaissance château". In reality, it is a fairly uniform example of the style of the end of the Gothic era, and combines late Gothic design with Renaissance motifs. It comprises an ambitious construction dating from the end of the Middle Ages, with external spiral staircases set into the corners of the courtyard, mighty circular towers and decorative bays and chimneys in flamboyant Gothic style. The result is rare collection of frescoes and an outstanding architectural ensemble.

**The fortified entrance** adjoins the old almond-shaped tower (fortified tower), the only visible remains of the 13th century castle. It is designed to house the double drawbridge.

**A raised gallery** surrounds the château courtyard. The series of twisted columns is very regular. All the shafts twist in the same direction in the first section, and then alternately twist in opposite directions in the château's central wing. They are decorated in flamboyant Gothic style. The slanting columns in front of the two spiral staircase turrets were moved and placed here at a later date to create a covered walkway.

The **tour du Lion** is a very solid tower with a diameter of 12.50 m, typical of the late Middle Ages. It consists of a dungeon with a cupola vaulted ceiling, loopholes for firearms, living quarters and the Viscount's chamber. The niche appears to be original and the insertion of a potentially ancient lion is thought to date back to the works carried out in the late 15th century. It was fashionable to re-use ancient elements in the Middle Ages, and even more so with the rediscovery of Antiquity and admiration for its style that characterized the Renaissance and the 16th century. Note the presence of a second lion whose partially damaged head is still visible on the right of the niche. The room leading to the Viscount's tour du Lion chamber was the subject of extensive decoration works in the late 15th century. This is the **Salle des Chasses**, decorated from wall to ceiling with coloured frescoes depicting a banquet, a procession and a hunting scene with hounds. The inventories also mention a **chambre des Cibilles** on the ground floor, the walls of which are also thought to have been decorated with paintings. The **polygonal main staircase tower**, which leads to the Salle des Chasses, juts out clearly from the corner formed by the walls of the town-side wing and the wing containing the main living quarters which overlooks the valley. It has clearly been designed to attract attention and to be used. Its **door**, with its criss-cross toruses, is richly decorated. This main entrance is decorated with an ogee arch motif and veneered rosettes and pinnacles. In the top of the tower there is a room lit by a small window. It is supported by a beautiful palm-tree vault centred on the core of the staircase spiral. In the **tour du Redan** you can still see the two levels of casemates in which firearms were used. Set apart and detached from the living quarters, it seems to serve a defensive purpose. It was razed to the ground over the course of the passing centuries.



The work *Le Souffle végétal* by Giuseppe Penone has been displayed where the tower once stood since 1985. The **floor under the rafters of the large living quarters**, with its wooden timbers and flamboyant dormer windows, fits in with the programme of work carried out in the late 15th and early 16th centuries and which was subsequently continued. Above the gallery attached to the living quarters there may have been a roof terrace with a balustrade and double dormers, linking the two staircase turrets and therefore accessed via the doors. The floor under the rafters was raised by an extra floor in the 18th century. The **tour des Norrices**, also known as **la tour de la Chapelle**, originally had a residential function: the quadrangular room housed a bedroom with a bed, a fireplace and two cross-window openings. In addition to this programme of building works, in around 1530, the **Hercules frescoes** were produced using grisaille techniques in a style that is characteristic of Renaissance modernity and the rediscovery of ancient and mythological models. The west wing, the service quarters wing, was never completed, but accommodated the kitchens and was used for preparing meals and storing food.

Work on the château was continuous until it was brought to a brutal stop, doubtless as a consequence of the events of 1512-1513. In 1512, Viscount François was accused of the murder of Pierre Bermondet, his neighbour, who refused to sell him some land. For this crime, François, who had fled, stood trial in absentia and was sentenced to death by the Parliament of Paris in

The sentence also included the decrowning of the towers (destroying the tops of the towers).

These extensive works result in an outstanding architectural ensemble.

### **The modern era and rediscovery of the château**

The château, which was a family-owned property, was occupied less and less frequently by the Rochechouart family as court-based activities were centred around Paris and Versailles. The inventories, and the site inspection of 1743 in particular, reveal that the former viscounts' residence is in an advanced state of disrepair. However, the château was still used as a holiday residence and for leisure purposes and a major refurbishment programme reflecting the tastes of the day was launched during the 18th century, between 1760 and 1770 in particular. This programme extended to include the surroundings and gardens, where a huge exterior double flight staircase was built.

During the French Revolution, the three corner towers, which were symbols of the feudal system, were dismantled, the château was pillaged and the remaining furniture and archives dispersed. The Rochechouart family, to whom the château was restored after the Revolution, decided to sell it to the

Haute-Vienne *département* in 1836. The building then underwent a series of restoration and rebuilding work programmes, largely depending on what it was being used for at the time (town hall, court, local council buildings etc). The towers were rebuilt during the 19th century. In spite of its restoration only a century before, the tour de la Chapelle collapsed in 1953: it was partially rebuilt in 1954 using concrete.

In 1985, the Haute-Vienne *département* chose the château as the site for the Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart, making it possible for the general public to have permanent access to this outstanding heritage building. The frescoes in the Salle des Chasses and the Galerie d'Hercule, recently rediscovered, have been restored.

As a testimony to the museum's desire to express heritage and contemporary creation, the work *Rochechouart Line* was created for the Galerie d'Hercule by British artist Richard Long (1990). At the beginning of the 2000s, a programme of works to redevelop the internal spaces, led by architect Jean-François Bodin, provided the museum with its current appearance and ensured that the building was accessible to all members of the public. A programme of works to restore the façades was launched in 2015 following a new series of studies into the buildings.

