

The building of the Palais de la Berbie

The name of the Palace comes from the Occitan word “**bisbia**”, which became “**verbie**” then “**berbie**” meaning **bishop**.

The Palace was built in several stages: the construction itself took place between 1228 and 1306. Following that, and up to the beginning of the 20th century, the Palace was to undergo many improvements.

Origins: work by Durand de Beaucaire (1228-1254)

Until the beginning of the 13th century, the Bishops of Albi lived close to the Romanesque cathedral in a group of houses lent by the canons. The Bishops took advantage of the fall of the viscounts of Albi, the Trencavels, during the Albigensian crusade to reorganise tax collecting to their own benefit. This sudden enrichment allowed Bishop Durand de Beaucaire to display his power with a new residence. It was composed of a feudal hall (*aula*) with a tower; while to the West he built the **Tour Saint-Michel** with its two levels, to contain the ecclesiastical tribunal and prisons.

Work by Bernard de Combret (1254-1271)

This bishop finished the work of his predecessor by giving the Palace its aspect of a citadel: he joined up the former buildings. The Bishop feared for his safety because of the royal power which supported the claims of the Commune of Albi and because of the popular uprisings, so that the walls are much more sophisticated on the side of the City, the Bishop’s principal adversary, than on the side of the Tarn, which formed a natural, “rampart”.

In addition, in order to avoid any risk of fire, he had all the fortress’s halls covered with ogive vaults.

Work by Bernard de Castanet (1277-1306)

This work was carried out in parallel with the building of the new Cathedral of Sainte-Cécile. The Bishop’s ambitious and authoritarian character unleashed the royal wrath and the hatred of the Albigensians. Fearing for his safety, he reinforced the building once again. He created a double keep, the Tour Mage, made up of:

- the earlier **Tour Saint-Michel**, raised one floor which housed the Bishop’s private chapel and official room.
- a new tower, the Tour Sainte Catherine, in which the Bishop set up his residence.

The former residence, the Vieille Berbie, became the ecclesiastical court. Bernard de Castanet’s small curtain was reinforced by semicircular buttresses on the gardens side. Lastly he threw two curtains to the East and West, descending the escarpments towards the river, thus creating new spaces belonging to the palace and allowing a possible escape route towards the Tarn.

1309-1474: work in the intermediate period

During this period, we see a succession of bishops who brought no notable changes to the Palace. The Great Black Death and the Hundred Years War sapped the Bishops’ power and revenues.

The defensive system on the bank of the Tarn was closed with a curtain between the towers built by Bernard de Castanet. On the town side, a new porter’s lodge was installed with a bastioned landfill.

Work by Louis d’Amboise (1474-1503)

He introduced Renaissance fashion to the Palace. He built his own residence to the East of the Palace, on the Castanet wall. It comprises a series of apartments, the refurbished Tour d’Amboise, as well as a gallery built on the curtain. He also facilitated access to the Tour Mage with a spiral staircase rising from the court level.

17th century work

The Palace gradually lost its rôle as a fortress. In 1598, the military Governor of Albi ordered the demolition and leveling of the fortifications and defenses before returning the Palace to the Bishop. The ruined aspect of the upper parts of the keep on the North face date from this time.

Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.1635-1676: Gaspard Daillon du Lude lined the court side of the Amboise wing with two floors of galleries surmounted with a terrace with large classical openings. He lowered the south curtain by two levels to create a covered passage to reach the cathedral. The Renaissance decorations of the Amboise wing were replaced with a classic decor.

1678-1687: Hyacinthe Serroni redecorated the Vieille Berbie Chapel with false marble stuccos completed in 1685.

1687-1703: Legoux de la Berchère refurbished the apartments in the Suffragants wing. He erected tiers of galleries against the wall of the great keep symmetrical to those in the East. A terrace was created at the foot of the Castanet buttresses, and of the gardens in the area contained by the North enclosure. This was lowered to form a walkway.

18th century work

The fortress was opened up to the city: a very large portal pierced under the Amboise wing now gave onto the new Quai Choiseul.

In 1764, Choiseul Stainville built a gallery and library perpendicular to the Amboise wing.

Cardinal de Bernis hollowed out a small living room in the North-West Tower which opens onto a distant view of the Tarn.

He laid out the garden: Antique style statues symbolising the season were placed on the lower curtain.

19th century work

The Revolution and the Empire planned to make the Palace, by now a “national building”, into a “Museum of Natural History, Art and Antiquities”.

A new entrance to the medieval court was opened through the Amboise wing.

Only Cardinal de Stainville’s library would keep its original function.

In 1823, the archiepiscopal seat of Albi was relieved and restoration work was undertaken; in 1862, the Chapel Notre-Dame and the Du Lude and De Bernis living rooms were listed.

In 1905, the separation of Church and State finally put an end to the Palace’s original function.

20th century work

1909-1929: restitution of earlier states: 15th century façade of the Amboise wing and destruction of the

Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.1922: Inauguration of the galleries dedicated to the painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

1945-1985: restorations to the timbers, roofing and external woodwork.

2001-2012: enlargement and restructuring of the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum.

The Great Staircase

The volume which contains the staircase is the vestige of the feudal tower which stood against the official hall (the *aula*) of the first Palace. It was lowered to its present level after the Wars of Religion.

When Gaspard Daillon du Lude abandoned the old Tour Mage and installed his apartments in the Amboise Wing, he needed a dignified entrance and used the stump of the now useless tower. There he built the present staircase keeping one of the intermediate ogive vaults, dating from Bernard de Combret’s improvements, and had the four quarters of the vaults adorned with the four Cardinal Virtues in imitation of the Cardinal Virtues painted in 1636 by Domenichino on the pendentives of San Carlo Ai Catinari in Rome.

The balustraded handrail and the banister knob date from the 17th century.

The portal

The external portal (the Museum entrance) was opened and decorated by Bishop Hyacinthe Serroni after 1678.

The reception hall (ticket office and shop)

It forms the lower room of the very first episcopal palace, raising the question of whether it originally served as a lower chapel or a sort of tribunal, the officiality, or a reserve commanding the access to the circular stairway of which only the upper part survives.

The Gardens

The gardens were organised by Hyacinthe Serroni between 1678 and 1687. He laid out the terraces and flower-beds in French style, and stone steps with long noble balustrades bearing coats of arms. Then he converted the North and West curtains into walkways, and the former barbican tower with its pyramidal spire into a resting room in to which in 1630 he affixed his own cartouche “of azure with a lion or sawing a rock or with a saw or, surmounted by a five-pointed star also or”.

The East curtains were extended with corbels and porticos.

The Antique style statues representing the seasons were added in the 18th century by Cardinal de Bernis.