



History in microcosm

Château du Lude, Sarthe

The seat of the comte and comtesse Louis-Jean de Nicolay

An idyllic French castle on the banks of the River Loir proves to have an unexpected depth and complexity of history, as John Goodall discovers

Photographs by Will Pryce



TO walk around Château du Lude (*Fig 1*) is seemingly to enjoy a history of French architecture in a single building. Where the castle overshadows the road that crosses the River Loir, the visitor can enjoy the drama of vertiginous medieval fortress. On the opposite, southern, side is the splendour of a Renaissance frontage flanked by towers and with a broad balcony overlooking the park. To the west is a polite 18th-century façade that rises above a small formal garden. Finally, the entrance court to the west with its fine enclosing arcade evoke on a grand scale the 17th-century splendours of the Marais in Paris. This delightful variety is, to some extent, a creation of the late 19th century, but it does accurately reflect the deep and complex history of the building.

A castle has probably existed in the village of Le Lude since the 10th century, but the earliest identified parts of the present building date to the 13th century. There survive the bases of walls and towers that imply the existence of a substantial stone fortress on the site. In all likelihood, this building established the essential medieval plan of the castle as a rectangular enclosure surrounded by deep ditches. The evolution of this building from the 15th century to the present has only relatively recently been unpicked in an unpublished thesis for the University of Tours by Pascale Thibault in 1993.

Possibly from the first—but certainly by about 1425—the rectangular castle enclosure was divided by an internal wall into two unequal parts. To the west lay the main courtyard, which effectively corresponded to the footprint of the house today. It was laid out on a square plan, with an angle

tower at each corner and a lodging range along its southern side. The fabric of this medieval inner court forms the base over which the castle has been developed and adapted over the centuries. As a result, the castle today comprises an astonishing six floors, the lower two of which are substantially medieval.

To the east of this was a smaller outer bailey with towers at its outer corners. A dog-leg approach gave access through it to the inner court. The main gate with a drawbridge across the moat stood to the south side of the outer bailey. Having crossed this, the visitor then turned left into the inner court through a gate in the dividing wall. A third

fortified enclosure also existed to the east of the outer bailey and commanding the bridge across the Loir. Its date is uncertain, but the present form of the earthwork suggests that it was organised for mounting artillery in the late 15th century.

The figure who began the transformation of this

imperfectly understood castle into the building we see today was a certain Jean de Daillon (1412–82). Born into a family distinguished in royal service, Jean pursued a successful Court career and purchased Le Lude in 1457. Soon afterwards, he fell spectacularly from power, but then restored his fortunes in 1468. It was probably from this date onwards that he began altering the castle. In an undated letter, he enthused about the fine pace of new alterations to the building and, in February 1479, no less a figure than the royal master mason Jean Gendrot is recorded as having charge of the works of the Lord of Lude.

From the evidence of the castle fabric, it seems likely that Jean's changes included the construction of a new L-shaped lodging block along the north and west sides of the inner-castle bailey. Together with the existing south range, this created a U-shaped ➤

‘To walk around Le Lude is to enjoy a history of French architecture’

Fig 1: The 18th-century front of Le Lude viewed across the Loir. To the left is the Renaissance frontage flanked by towers



Fig 2 : The old kitchen was restored in 1993 and is now accessible to visitors. The late-19th-century kitchen ranges are used each year for the preparation of jam from the estate

courtyard of residential buildings open to the east. A great stair set in a tower—one of the distinguishing marks of a major French residence—stood at the inner junction of the two suites of apartments. Jean may have died in the course of the building works and it has been suggested that his son, Jacques, completed work to the surviving tower at the outer angle of his father's two residential ranges.

Whether or not he was involved in completing his father's tower, Jacques certainly was later responsible for rebuilding the original lodging block to the south of the castle. Here, he created a spectacular Renaissance frontage framed to either side by a massive tower. His work cannibalised earlier structures and—it has been argued on stylistic evidence—was undertaken in two phases: the first in 1505–10 and the second between 1515 and 1520. Externally, the completed frontage is rich in Italianate detailing, including Classical roundels and antique motifs. They are a reflection of the cultural exchange between France and Italy that resulted from Francis I's wars.

Although the interior of this early-16th-century range has been much altered subsequently, something of its form and decoration can still be reconstructed. The main room partitions still survive and two 18th-century plans of the castle suggest that the new range formed a discrete residential complex with smaller and more private rooms arranged towards the east of the range and the south-east angle tower.

Among these is an exquisite chamber generally described as a study. The walls of this are painted with scenes drawn from two specific sources: a manuscript of the *Triumphs of Petrarch* owned by Jacques and a historiated Bible of Claude Paradin, published in Lyon in 1553 (**Fig 3**). This latter source suggests that the paintings were executed after Jacques' death in 1534.

The successful Court careers of subsequent members of the Daillon family appear to have focused their attentions elsewhere and the castle created by Jacques seems to have remained essentially unchanged until the first quarter of the 17th century.

To regularise and modernise the internal courtyard in conformity with modern fashions, the U-shaped residential buildings were, at that time, completely refaced and the sophisticated neo-Classical detailing was picked out with panels of coloured marble. It has been suggested that the best parallels for this decoration are to be found in a group of early-17th-century western French altarpieces, such as the high altarpiece of Laval Cathedral.

Le Lude passed out of Daillon ownership in 1685 following the death of the last direct male descendant in the line, Henri de Daillon, duc du Lude. Thereafter, the estate and castle appear to have been little used by their owners. In 1751, however, Le Lude was sold to Joseph Julien Duvelaër for 395,000 livres. Duvelaër, who became comte du Lude, made his fortune in Canton and returned to Europe with a Chinese wife. It was probably at his direction that the first surviving plans of the castle were drawn up.

In 1779, he commissioned the architect Boulard to repair the building, which was



Fig 3 above left: A view of the study with its late-16th-century paintings. Visible here is one of Petrarch's triumphs to the left and Noah's Ark to the right. Fig 4 above right: The main stair. On the newel is a copy of a 15th-century bronze angel from Paris

evidently in a poor state. Boulard's work included the repair of the south terrace, but he also advocated the demolition of the outer bailey, observing that it obstructed the main house, was costly to maintain and its materials could be used to repair the castle. The outer bailey, in fact, survived, but not for long.

On the count's death, Le Lude passed to his niece, the marquise de la Vieuville, who, with her older and wealthy husband, embarked on the modernisation of the building. The architect they chose, Jean Benoît Vincent Barré, had considerable experience of working on older buildings. He also had a reputation for duping and ruining his clients.

His plans for the new building were presented to the marquise in August 1787 and the first stones were being laid within a month. Barré not only demolished the outer bailey, but also reversed the entire building by infilling the open side of the inner court and removing its opposite counterpart to the west. In place of the demolished

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range, a screen of arches was created. A new *enfilade* of grand entertaining rooms was created on the ground floor of the new range and the two angle towers on the new western front were respectively planned to incorporate a chapel and a theatre.

Unfortunately, the cost of the project rapidly spiralled out of control: one account claimed the bill had risen to an astonishing 100,000 écu. Nevertheless, most of Barré's changes were completed before the French Revolution intervened in 1789. Only work to one tower and an entrance terrace seem to have been left unfinished. With the help of the inhabitants of the ton, the marquise survived. The castle was briefly seques-

trated by the state, but then passed through marriage into the possession of Louis Céleste Frédéric de Talhoët, from whom the present owners are descended. Over the next decade, it enjoyed mixed fortunes and, in 1815, it was even occupied by Prussian soldiers.

A dramatic revival was in store for the castle, however, under the direction of Talhoët's grandson, the vastly wealthy Auguste, marquis de Talhoët-Roy, and his wife, Leonie Honorez, a Belgian heiress. From 1852, they engaged Pierre-Félix Delarue, a proponent of the Gothic style, who had worked widely across the Sarthe region, to oversee the restoration of the north side of the castle. This included the complete reconstruction of the north-west tower in 1854–7 to incorporate a grand staircase (**Fig 4**) and library. Delarue was also charged with the restoration of the painted Renaissance study, which had been rediscovered in 1853.

Further changes overseen by another local architect, Denis Darcy, followed between 1876 and 1880, including the ➤



Fig 5: The dining room, within the south range, was restored to its present form in 1889 by the Parisian architect Louis Parent

refashioning of the roofs and internal changes for the domestic convenience of the family.

Soon afterwards, in November 1881, the celebrated garden designer Edouard André submitted designs for the elaborate development of the park and garden. Yet these changes were just a foretaste of further projects to come.

In 1884, the marquis died and was succeeded by his son, René, a passionate hunter who clearly had grand plans for the castle. Having toyed with proposals from at least one architect in 1887, he eventually settled for the services of Louis Parent (**Fig 5**), one in a celebrated dynasty of Paris-based architects.

During a period of nearly 20 years between 1888 and 1906, Parent almost completely reworked virtually all the principal interiors and exteriors of the castle, overlaying or adapting the work of his predecessors as was necessary. To him, we owe the present form of the dining room and

great gallery, as well as the splendid south stair of 1900. As a pendant to this work, documents in the castle further identify further external adaptations of the castle by the architect Paul Lafargue from 1911 to 1914.

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The marquis remained in ownership of the castle through the two World Wars and when he finally died in 1948, the estate passed to his grandson, René, comte de Nicolay. The comte died in 1954, leaving his widow, born princess d’Orléans Brâgance, to run the castle. She first developed it as a tourist attraction and devised a *son et lumière* show on the history of Le

Lude that enjoyed enormous popularity. Over the past 40 years, it is estimated to have attracted more than five million visitors to the castle.

Today, Le Lude is managed by her son, comte Louis Jean de Nicolay, and his wife, Barbara, who have focused a great deal of energy on the gardens. These are now registered by the state for their importance (*COUNTRY LIFE*, February 15, 2012) and host the award of the Pierre-Joseph Redouté horticultural literary prize each year.

The castle buildings, however, have, by no means, been neglected. Among other projects, the spectacular granary building, with its open timber roof, has been transformed into an exhibition area and the old kitchen restored (**Fig 2**).

The whole remains beautifully maintained and, under the care of the comte and his wife, Le Lude has entered the 21st century as a loved and living family home. ↘

For more information about the château, visit www.lerule.com