

The setting for an architectural jewel

External transformation

Until the 18th century, the chateau still had a medieval building and remains of a keep around the two Renaissance buildings. A fortified gateway closed off this courtyard. With its walled garden, the chateau covered the entire island in the middle of the Indre.

On the village side, a farmyard used to lie at the centre of a group of farm buildings. To replace these, two symmetrical outbuildings were built in the late seventeenth century, beyond a crescent-shaped courtyard and a long tree-lined avenue.

The English gardens*

From 1825 onwards, the Marquises of Biencourt had the fields drained to create an English garden*; the concentric paths allowed the facades of the chateau to be admired. The many branches of the Indre, amid overhanging trees, enhanced the natural beauty of the site. Species from distant lands were planted: Atlas cedar, American bald cypress and Asian ginkgo biloba.

Creation of the mirror

The fifteenth-century cannon walk* which formed a terrace in front of the chateau was removed during restoration work in the 1950s to allow the river, slowed down by ledges, to create a mirror for the architecture.

Glossaire

Cannon walk: a terrace in front of the chateau for storing artillery pieces.

Candelabrum: a rising vertical pattern composed of objects and leaves.

Early Renaissance: the early Renaissance period in France from the late 15th century until the 1520s.

English gardens: landscaped gardens imitating the picturesque natural landscape.

Pilaster: a flat vertical ornament which both looks like and acts as a column.

Putto, plural *putti*: a small character which is a combination of a child, an angel and Cupid.

Bay: a surface bordered by two vertical lines.

Practical information

Average length of visit: 1 hour 30 minutes

Guided tours in French

Audio guides available in French, English, German, Italian and Spanish.

Tours accessible to disabled visitors.



The Centre des monuments nationaux publishes a collection of guidebooks about French monuments translated into several languages. Éditions du Patrimoine publications are on sale in the bookshop-giftshop.

Centre des monuments nationaux
Château d'Azay-le-Rideau
37190 Azay-le-Rideau
tél. 02 47 45 42 04
fax 02 47 45 26 61

www.monuments-nationaux.fr

Azay-le-Rideau Chateau

A jewel of Renaissance architecture

Evidence of rising social status

In 1510, the Azay estate and fortified castle were bought by Gilles Berthelot: he began rebuilding a sumptuous residence in the Italian style. The splendour was to signify his noble rank, which came with his position as King's secretary and notary. Following his marriage to Philippe Lesbahy, this skilled financier pursued a prosperous career under the reign of François I, aided by his relative, Semblançay, who was the kingdom's Superintendent of Finances. When Semblançay was accused of corruption and executed, Berthelot fled. François I seized the chateau and gave it to Antoine Raffin, his comrade in arms, in 1537.

A new era of splendour



*The chateau
c. 1820,
lithograph
by Langlumé.*

Antoine Raffin's descendants occupied the chateau until the 18th century. In 1791, the Marquis Charles de Biencourt purchased the estate. This aristocrat and his descendants restored the chateau to its former glory. One of their more notable achievements was the vast romantic park. The last marquis, in financial ruin, was forced to sell the estate at the end of the 19th century. The State bought the chateau and part of the gardens in 1905.

* Explanations overleaf.



The courtyard facades

These are typical of the early Renaissance*, with the regular rows of bays* formed by the windows one above the other. On each floor, pilasters* frame the windows, crossing the horizontal bands of mouldings to form a decorative grid pattern.

The high dormer windows add to the skyward effect, which is accentuated by the decor of the main staircase.

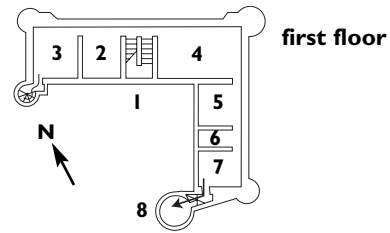
At the water's edge, the buildings are topped by overhanging corner turrets.

I The main staircase

The main staircase, which incorporates the grand entrance into the chateau, originally formed the centre of the facade. It comprises three floors of loggias topped with a pediment which adds to the vertical effect. The facade is abundantly decorated with a mixture of traditional Gothic motifs - small architectural features, niches with platforms - and Renaissance ornaments: rinceau friezes, *putti**, candelabra* and diamond-shaped pilasters*.

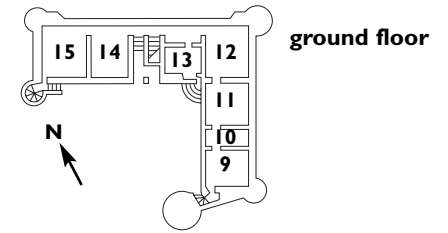
This staircase is one of the first in France to have straight flights included in the middle of the main building, and no longer in an adjoining tower, as was the case in Medieval times.

Inside, each flight is covered with a coffered ceiling decorated with portrait medallions.



The stately apartments

- 2 The antechamber** to the apartment opens to the left.
- 3 The great bedchamber** destined for the king lies beyond it. It was occupied by Louis XIII in 1619 on his visit to the Lord of Azay.
- 4 The great hall**, on the other side of the landing, was formerly the venue for balls and banquets. The huge volume is emphasised by an elegant cornice. The columns and pilasters* on the imposing fireplace bear witness to the art of the Renaissance sculptors. Like the leaf frieze beneath the cornice, the salamander and motto decorating the mantelpiece were painted in trompe-l'œil in the mid-20th century to show what the finished decor would have looked like.
- 5 The next room**, of smaller proportions, is the first room in the apartment located between the courtyard and garden.
- 6 The narrow cabinet** was perhaps intended for use as a chapel in the 16th century.
- 7 The master's bedchamber:** its layout suggests that Gilles Berthelot may have chosen it for his apartment. The windows overlooking the courtyard, garden and river, like those in the great hall, have been restored to look the same as the scarce remaining Renaissance woodwork. The lower parts feature ornamental openwork bays.
- 8 The spiral staircase** provided private access to Gilles Berthelot's apartment.



Ground floor

The Marquises of Biencourt had this level fitted out as reception areas.

- 9 In the library** stands a fireplace and wall decorations made from wooden panels and painted canvas.
- 10 The old passageway** between the courtyard and garden was raised and enclosed by the Biencourts to form a pleasant vaulted cabinet.
- 11 The dining room** still has the dinner service bearing the Biencourt coat-of-arms.
- 12 The kitchen**, where the floor has been raised, still has its Renaissance fireplace and sink. It features cross-ribbed vaulting and shares a well with the next room.
- 13 In the 16th century, the pantry** was used for storing and distributing food.
- 14 The billiard room** is decorated with 18th-century Beauvais tapestries depicting hunting scenes.
- 15 The Biencourt room** has regained the warm atmosphere it had in the 19th century, thanks to a large collection of paintings, historical portraits and photos of the Marquises and their wives.