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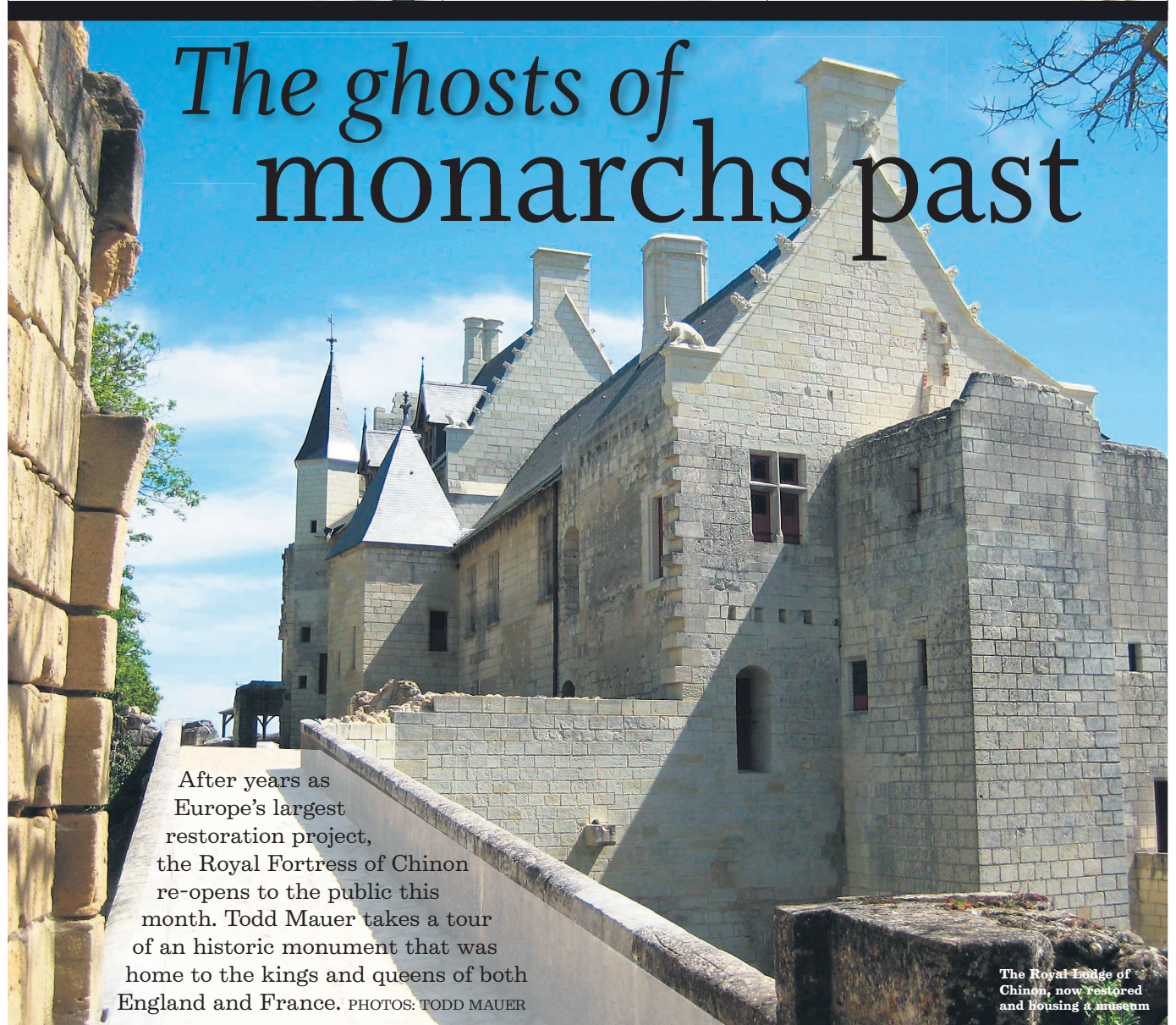
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The ghosts of monarchs past

After years as Europe's largest restoration project, the Royal Fortress of Chinon re-opens to the public this month. Todd Mauer takes a tour of an historic monument that was home to the kings and queens of both England and France. PHOTOS: TODD MAUER

The Royal Lodge of Chinon, now restored and housing a museum

When the ancient bell rings on the hour at the Royal Fortress of Chinon, what resonates is more than 1,000 years of shared English and French history. In fact, the bell - forged in 1399 and named the Marie Javelle - is the very same one that called Joan of Arc to prayer during her extraordinary visit to meet the Dauphin (the future Charles VII) in 1429.

However, following Joan's historic stopover at Chinon, the imposing fortress fell into disrepair and was for centuries maintained in a partially

ruined state. But in 2005 a bold restoration project began which was designed not simply to forestall the ravages of time, but also to rebuild and restore parts of the fortress to its medieval heyday - to a time when it was home to English and French kings and queens including Henry II Plantagenet, and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, their son Richard the Lionheart and King Philip Augustus. This month, after several years in which it was the largest restoration project in Europe, the newly restored fortress officially re-opens to the public.

In a Loire Valley most commonly

associated with elegant Renaissance châteaux, the fortress of Chinon is arguably the region's most compelling reminder that it is also replete with a surprisingly rich medieval heritage. Situated at the crossroads of the Anjou, Poitou and Touraine regions and surrounded by the rolling vineyards made famous in the satirical tales of Rabelais, the fortress - with its vestigial air of a time-battered cliff-top Camelot - dominates an escarpment overlooking the River Vienne and the well-served medieval town of Chinon.

The enormous scale of the fortification is best appreciated from the

opposite side of the Vienne where you can see the full effect of the architectural ensemble comprising ramparts of more than 500 metres, two forts (on the left, Fort du Coudray, on the right, Fort St Georges) and a castle (the Château de Milieu) with the thin and jutting clock tower housing the Marie Javelle.

Crossing the bridge into old Chinon with its beguiling half-timbered houses and tuffeau limestone mansions draped in garlands of wisteria, a cobblestone path leads visitors from the medieval intersection of *le Grand Carroi* up to the fortress entrance. Called *rue Jeanne*

D'Arc, the steep and snaking trail is the same taken by the Maid as she was summoned to meet the Dauphin. For those lacking Joan's youthful vigour - and not averse to mixing a bit of modern convenience with their medieval meanderings - a new glass elevator spirits visitors up to the fortress free of charge from a car park not far from the tourist office.

In spite of its historic significance, the fortress of Chinon has been threatened with demolition many times over the past 500 years - Napoleon III was one

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who campaigned to save it – but the recent €15 million restoration, with funds from the EU, the Région Centre, the Conseil Général d'Indre et Loire and the Direction régionale des Affaires Culturelles, has finally put to rest any fears over its future.

'The Royal Fortress of Chinon is the lone masterpiece of medieval military architecture among the many Renaissance residences of the Loire Valley, and the ambition for the restoration has been to preserve and promote this exceptional heritage while respecting the spirit of the place,' says Marie-Eve Scheffer, archaeologist and director of the fortress.

The ramparts of Fort St Georges have been largely re-built after extensive archaeological digs and studies which unearthed the foundations of the former palace of Henry II of England. French king Philip Augustus's Coudray Keep has been restored above and below ground; and a significant part of Charles VII's Royal Lodge has been sensitively restored and turned into a multi-media museum recounting the fortress's fascinating story through some of the characters who helped shape it.

The fortress reached the height of its importance as an English possession during the reign of Henry II in the latter half of the 12th century, and much of the structure visible today was built under his auspices. Henry frequently held court at Chinon with his formidable queen Eleanor of Aquitaine and their rebellious offspring – both future kings of England – Richard the Lionheart and John Lackland.

But alas, a happy family they were not. Between their incessant intra-familial rebellions and Henry's Lear-esque efforts to choose an heir from among his squabbling progeny, these larger-than-life figures were the medieval dysfunctional family par excellence. Their tortuous family relations and deadly power-struggles were wonderfully evoked in the Oscar-winning 1968 film *'The Lion In Winter'*, set during a Christmas court in Chinon and starring Peter O'Toole as Henry II, Katharine Hepburn as Eleanor and Anthony Hopkins as Richard.

Henry and his offspring made Chinon the epicentre of their vast Angevin Empire, which at its height would stretch from the Pyrénées all the way to the Scottish border. In addition to holding court and housing the royal treasure there, the Plantagenets also made Chinon a royal mint and used it as the administrative centre for their continental holdings. This meant that in addition to its military purpose it also had to support a civilian infrastructure and offer the comforts befitting a royal family whose territories were vastly larger than those of the nascent kingdom of France.

Considering its name, it comes as little surprise that Fort St Georges is the part of the fortress most strongly associated with the English and the Plantagenets. Aside from its newly restored ramparts, little remains of the fort, however. In fact, a combination of siege, subsidence and neglect gradually reduced most of the fort to rubble; the land fell into private ownership and for



View of Richard the Lionheart's Windmill Tower from Coudray Keep



View of the fortress across the vineyards that covered the remains of Fort St Georges

more than two centuries was covered in vines producing grapes for Chinon's highly regarded wines. It was only during 2003 to 2004 that archaeologists removed the vineyards and were able to study the fort in detail.

The foundations they unearthed revealed a surprising number of edifices densely packed together. In addition to the sizeable and comfortable Plantagenet lodgings built around a courtyard, archaeologists were able to discern two towers, staircases providing access to the ramparts, massive defensive walls believed to have been 18 metres high (some of which have been re-built as part of the restoration), a small first-floor chapel, a keep, a crypt and two kitchens.

Henry II's tumultuous 36-year reign came to an end through the alliance of the young and wily king of France, Philip Augustus – and Henry's own son, Richard, who was worried that he would be disinherited in favour of his younger brother John. Richard and Philip chased Henry through the Loire Valley in the summer of 1189. Henry was finally forced to surrender, and when later shown a list of the nobles who'd joined the rebellion against him, it is said by some chroniclers to have died of a broken heart upon learning that

his favourite son John was among those who'd betrayed him. Other contemporary chroniclers – perhaps eager to discredit the newly crowned Richard for political reasons – suggested that Henry died directly at Richard's hand.

In the shade of a respectfully bowing acacia tree, a modest plaque in the grassy courtyard of the Château du Milieu marks the spot where the indefatigable Henry II died. He is buried, along with Eleanor and Richard, just a few miles away in the majestic and fascinating Fontevraud Abbey. About 15 years after Henry's death, and five years after his son Richard the Lionheart's 10-year reign came to a violent end – thus leaving the ineffectual John on the throne – Philip Augustus returned to Chinon and captured it irrevocably for France. The illustrious English chapter in the history of Chinon was over.

Once in his possession, the French king Philip made major modifications to the fortress, strengthening the defences of Fort Coudray and building the cylindrical Coudray Keep. Inside the now restored keep, a series of dimly lit stairways lead visitors deeper and deeper into what served both as an ice room and a dungeon. Important prisoners such as Jacques de Molay

doomed Templars made cryptic carvings in the dungeon walls. Still clearly visible today, the carvings represent in Templar code the Holy Grail, the Temple Mount and Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified.

Above ground, the three-storey keep is a spartan but slightly cheerier affair, mainly because it affords the best elevated views of the fortress, including the Royal Lodge and the round Windmill Tower thought to have been built by Richard the Lionheart. Although Coudray Keep was constructed primarily as a military structure, it is perhaps more famous for having served as the temporary lodgings of an extremely important visitor to Chinon towards the end of the Hundred Years' War.

It was March 1429, and after the debacle of Agincourt and decades of humiliating reversals fighting the English and their Burgundian allies in the Hundred Years' War, the French were in a desperate position. The Dauphin was holed up with the itinerant French court in Chinon when news arrived of a young maiden from the Lorraine region who claimed to hear the voice of God asking her to drive the English out of France. After being interrogated in the town of Chinon for two days by the Dauphin's



This picture and bottom right: the restoration in progress. Bottom left: Templar engravings in Coudray Keep

PHOTO: © FRANCK BADAIRE



PHOTO: © FRANCK BADAIRE

– the last Grand Master of the Knights Templar, who during the suppression of his order in 1308 was interrogated at Chinon by papal envoys before later being burned alive in Paris – must have contemplated their precarious futures in quasi-darkness and penetrating cold and damp. To pass their time, the

sceptical advisers, she was finally granted the right to a royal audience and made her way up to the fortress on the winding cobblestone path that now bears her name.

As a prophecy had long spoken of France being redeemed by a maiden from Lorraine, Charles wanted to test if the 17-year-old Joan of Arc was really graced with divine powers. Although some historians suggest the story may be apocryphal, many contemporary accounts relate that before Joan was brought to Chinon's audience hall – today wisely left unrestored due to a lack of archaeological data about its original form – the Dauphin had one of his attendants don his royal robes while he disguised himself among his more than 300 courtiers. But Joan, it is said, was not fooled and identified Charles immediately, kneeling before him and saying: 'Gentle prince, I am Jehanne la Pucelle (Joan the Maid), and I am sent by the King of Heaven to bring aid to yourself and the kingdom.' After meeting her privately, Charles became convinced that Joan was indeed the

BEFORE: Chinon before restoration



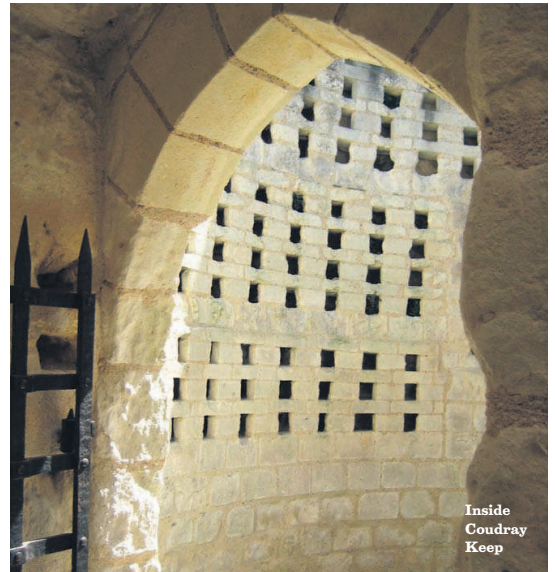
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AFTER: the fortress dominates the town





The Clock Tower housing the Marie Javelle



Inside Coudray Keep

messenger from God she claimed to be, and had her lodged in the Coudray Keep as a sign of royal approval. It was a pivotal moment for Joan, and a major step towards the eventual disentanglement of the intricately entwined medieval history of England and France.

Although the Dauphin's celebrated meeting with Joan certainly marked the fortress's high point as a French possession, the roots of Chinon's subsequent



Decorative turret from the Royal Lodge

decline may also be found in Charles's architectural contribution to the fortress: the Royal Lodge. Now a sophisticated multi-media museum devoted to Henry II, Philip Augustus and Joan of Arc, the lodge was built by the Dauphin as a residential complex designed purely for the comfort of his court. With a splendid view overlooking Chinon, the bucolic Vienne and the verdant pastures of the Vienne Valley, the then exiled prince had been free to contemplate his loyal Chinonais subjects and his complex destiny in considerable luxury.

In fact, the purely decorative turrets of the Dauphin's Royal Lodge were a harbinger of what the Loire Valley was soon to become: an aristocratic playground dotted with residential palaces of eye-popping grandeur but zero military value. All over Europe, medieval fortresses such as Chinon began to fall into disfavour as advances in military technology – particularly the use of cannon and artillery – were rapidly rendering medieval fortifications obsolete, and the aristocracy abandoned them for more comfortable and stately quarters.

Once Chinon's awe-inspiring medieval defences had been deemed outmoded,

The Dauphin's view of Chinon from the Royal Lodge



the decline of the fortress was inevitable. By 1575 there was already talk of demolition, and by the mid-1800s stones from the Royal Lodge were toppling on to the houses of the residents below.

Projects to demolish the historic fortress were conceived by various municipal authorities in the 16th, 17th and 19th centuries, but thankfully abandoned under protest from the citizens of Chinon. In 1855, the influence of writer Prosper Mérimée (his novella *Carmen* was the basis of the opera composed by Bizet), and the intervention of Napoleon III, also helped save the fortress.

As the restoration has progressed, the partially restored fortress has already begun attracting a steadily increasing stream of visitors – from 93,000 in 2007 to 112,000 in 2009, with a projected 250,000 in the years to come – and has also proven to be popular with the residents of the historic town. Denis Neyhleuc, a long-time resident of Chinon, says: 'The fortress is much

more beautiful now that it's not a ruin any more – and that will certainly attract more tourists. The restoration is very important for old Chinon.'

Today, the people of Chinon need no longer fear that their homes may be struck by falling stones from the once-crumbling ruin. The future of the fortress finally seems assured – and the ancient bell of the Royal Fortress of Chinon will continue to toll well into the foreseeable future. **TFP**

Details:

The Royal Fortress re-opens on 18 July.
Opening times from then on:
 Open every day except 25 December and 1 January. High season (1 April to 30 September): 9am to 7pm
 Low season (1 October to 31 March): 9:30am to 5pm
Admission charges:
 €7 full price; €4.50 reduced price; free to children up to 12 years
 For more information:
www.forteresse-chinon.fr;
 tel 02 47 93 13 45

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