

ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA DE VILABERTRAN

A small pre-Romanesque church is documented here in the 10th century. A century later, Santa Maria de Vilabertran became an Augustinian abbey and parish church, which reached the height of its splendour in the 12th century.

Its decline began in the 13th century, and continued until the abbey church became a collegiate church in 1592 with the secularization of all the regular canons by order of Felipe II. The Vilabertran community became a deanery, and community life came to an end. From then onwards the canons began to construct dwellings within the abbey and its courtyard. In 1835, when church property was seized under Mendizábal's government, the state took possession of all the abbey's property except the church, which continued to serve as the parish church. In 1930 the Santa Maria de Vilabertran complex was declared a monument of national historical and artistic interest and restoration work began. In the 1980s, the Generalitat finally acquired the private properties which still existed within the abbot's palace.



1

Exterior of the church



Exterior of the church

The west end of the church of Santa Maria de Vilabertran dates from the 12th century. A change in the masonry can clearly be seen. The round-arched windows, played both internally and externally, are decorated with a dog-tooth frieze. The original doorway was demolished to make way for one in the Gothic style. The smooth tympanum survived from the Romanesque doorway, but the Gothic doorway was never finished, and all that remains are the arched mouldings and the lintel.

On the right you can see the doorway leading into the chapel of Sant Ferriol. Built in the 16th century, it is eclectic in style, with a depressed arch and slender Renaissance columns. On the lintel there is a figure of the saint and a lion with the arms of canon Bruguera, who had it built.

The square bell-tower, in Lombardic style, dates from the 12th century. Each of its three stories has double-arched windows surmounted by four blind arches, once again decorated above with a dog-tooth frieze. There was to have been another tower at the other side of the doorway, but it was never built.

2

Fortifications



Fortifications

According to a document dated 1377, king Pere III granted abbot Ramon d'Escales a licence to fortify the abbey. This first fortification was to a large extent absorbed into the second, which is what is now visible.

The traces of the first fortification that can be identified are the square and circular towers that can still be seen within the walls of the second fortification. The second fortification dates from the 15th century and is attributed to abbot Girgós. It was built taking advantage of the abbot's palace, the first fortification and the church, doubling the old walls. A taller, continuous defensive wall was built, with a crenellated parapet and embrasures, projecting on the inside and roofed with a half-barrel vault.



Fortifications

3

Abbot's palace

From the 14th century the abbots acted in commendam: they lived outside the abbey and held other posts and titles. For this reason they built sumptuous palaces in imitation of the nobility and prosperous bourgeoisie, who went to live in the cities. But these abbots were not the habitual residents of their palaces; the spent only the time there necessary to discharge their duties. From this time, Gothic architecture became an urban phenomenon, and spread throughout Catalonia. This palace is a good example of Catalan civil Gothic.

Some existing structures were respected, such as the Romanesque hostelry on the ground floor. On the facade, you can see the large arched entrance surmounted by a Gothic niche containing a representation of Our Lady. Over the keystone of the arch there is a sun-dial and what may be the family arms of abbot Girgós (to whom the construction of the palace in the 15th century is attributed). Also note the triple Gothic windows, except on the western side, where they are double. The heads of all the windows have trilobate tracery, while the window columns and capitals are of Girona limestone and are decorated with floral and vegetable motifs that are typical of Catalan Gothic.



Abbot's palace

4

The prior's kitchen garden



The prior's kitchen garden

The area to the east of the abbey was used for kitchen gardens. One of the most characteristic features of monasteries was their organizational and economic self-sufficiency. These kitchen gardens were used to grow food essential to the diet, such as cabbages, cucumbers, beets, pumpkins, peas and carrots, as well as herbs such as sage and rosemary.

5

Apse and Rocabertí chapel

Leaving the prior's garden behind you, you come to the apse of the church, in which the division between the two periods of construction can clearly be seen. The earlier masonry in the lower part of the wall consists of roughly-hewn stones. The upper part, belonging to the second phase of construction, is built of elongated ashlar blocks of Llers limestone. The roofline of the three apses terminates with a narrow band of saw-tooth decoration and a large cornice.



Apse

Round the corner, on the north side of the church, you can see the exterior of the Gothic chapel built on the north arm of the transept by the viscounts of Rocabertí, lords of Peralada, in the 14th century. It now houses an exhibition on the Cross of Vilabertran, a piece of silverware which is unique in Catalonia. Here the windows are larger and more slender, with two lights under a pointed arch crowned by a rosette. In the central section there is a rose window, filled with stained glass, as are all the chapel's windows.

Cross of Vilabertran

6

Architectural features that were formerly part of the abbey



Carrer de Santa Maria

Strolling through the village you can find several architectural features that once formed part of the abbey, but have now been incorporated into private houses. The Vilabertran local authority has now catalogued all these features as Cultural Assets of Local Interest under its 2006 Plan for the Protection and Promotion of the Cultural Heritage, providing them with at least partial protection.



Carrer Empordà

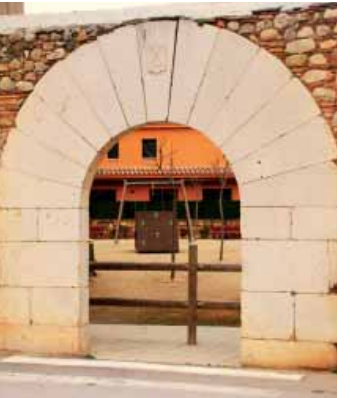
If you make your way up Carrer de Sant Ferriol you will come to Carrer de Santa Maria, and on the left you will see the first of the houses containing this type of feature, in this case a window and doorway built in ashlar masonry. If you continue along the street

away from the church, you will reach Carrer Empordà where, no sooner than you turn to the right, you can see a doorway framed by a vousoired arch, and then another one just a few metres lower down, almost in the Plaça Catalunya.



Plaça Catalunya

From the square, take Carrer del Príncep de Bergara, then turn right for a few metres along Carrer de l'Abat Rigau to reach Carrer de Vilatenim. Here there is another vousoired arch which forms the entrance to a leisure area. On the keystone can be seen a shield bearing a saltire and the date 1588. Now retrace your steps up Carrer de l'Abat Rigau, then turn left along Carrer Pep Ventura to reach a small square,



Carrer de Vilatenim



Plaça del Doctor Heras

Plaça del Doctor Heras. Here there is another vousoired doorway and a double window with trefoil tracery and floral decoration, like the windows on the southern facade of the abbot's palace. Finally, if you go up Carrer Empordà to the right then turn left into Carrer dels Comoners de Castella you will find a house with a doorway of ashlar masonry and a window similar to the one just mentioned.



Carrer dels Comoners de Castella

7

Torre d'en Reig

If you continue along Carrer dels Comoners de Castella you will come to the building known as the Torre d'en Reig, built in the Modernista style about the turn of the 20th century for Josep Reig i Palau, who was born in Vilabertran and became a forestry engineer who was entrusted with stabilizing the dunes of Empúries. You can enter the gardens via the main door and leave them by the side entrance, in order to obtain a more comprehensive view of the building.



Torre d'en Reig

The Torre d'en Reig, with elements that emulate nature and features reminiscent of a mediaeval fortification, resembles the forest house at Sant Martí d'Empúries in several ways. There are three stories plus an attic and the tower. The furniture was specially designed for the



Abbot Rigau's spring and wash-house

building in the Modernista style. There was also a comprehensive library. When the Civil War broke out in 1936, it was sacked and turned into a military command post for the area. Ramon Reig, an internationally-known watercolourist, inherited the building from his uncle Josep Reig. In 1959 Ramon Reig sold it to the Vilabertran local council, who used it to house a school, the office of the mayor, the office of the justice of the peace and a medical centre. Restoration and repair work was carried out in 1997–1999, and procedures were initiated to catalogue the building as an Asset of Local Cultural Interest.

8

Abbot Rigau's spring and wash-house

To the west of the abbey, behind the car-park, is abbot Rigau's spring. Abbot Rigau was granted the church by the three families who owned it at the time of Pope Gregory's reform, and it was he who initiated the life of the monastic community.

The landscape before you is one of market gardens, irrigated from the river Muga by means of elevated channels. Just here there is a spring of water which is used to fill the cistern. The overflow runs into the wash-house and what remains emerges from the fountain, which drains into the pond at the other side. This water is not suitable for drinking.

9

Market gardens

From the wash-house, if you follow the little track to the west that runs alongside the irrigated fields and the irrigation channels, you will see how the village of Vilabertran is set in a landscape typical of the Empordà plain, with rows of cypress trees running from east to west to prevent the north wind robbing the fields of their soil. It is a place of abundant water and is very fertile due to the draining of the marshes, a process which began in the 14th century, and the area has traditionally been used for the production of fruit and vegetables. Still today, if you stroll around the outskirts of the village, depending on the time of year, you will see the crops in the fields, so typical of the area. There are no major distributors in Vilabertran: it is more a question of family farming, typified by the variety of the crops produced. This is due to the fact that they are sold directly to the



Market gardens

consumer at the vegetable markets in the district, particularly the one held in Figueres three times a week. Since 2002, the village has devoted each weekend in September to the Fair of the Orchard and the *Poma de Relleno*, a dish typical of the Empordà which in Vilabertran is prepared using apples of the Verda Donzella variety, stuffed with beef and pork, lemon, egg, sugar and flour.



WALKS AROUND THE ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA DE VILABERTRAN

ENGLISH



WALK AROUND THE ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA DE VILABERTRAN

The abbey of Santa Maria de Vilabertran is one of the best-preserved mediaeval abbeys in Catalonia. Perfectly integrated into the urban fabric of Vilabertran, it stands on the Empordanese plain surrounded by market gardens.

Length of walk: 1 hour
Difficulty: easy

- 1 AROUND THE CHURCH**
• Length: 1 minute from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 2 FORTIFICATIONS**
• Length: 2 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 3 ABBOTS PALACE**
• Length: 3 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 4 PRIOR'S VEGETABLE GARDEN**
• Length: 3 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 5 THE APSE AND THE ROCABERTÍ CHAPEL**
• Length: 5 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 6 ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES THAT WERE FORMERLY PART OF THE ABBEY**
• Length: 30 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 7 TORRE D'EN REIG**
• Length: 5 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
• Visit: you can visit the gardens from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m.
- 8 ABBOT RIGAU'S SPRING AND WASH-HOUSE**
• Length: 3 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
- 9 VEGETABLE CULTIVATION**
• Length: 5 minutes from the abbey
• Difficulty: easy
• Visit: crop cultivation varies according to the time of year.

European hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*)
This mammal, measuring up to some 30 cms, with a round body, pointed nose, small ears and covered with spines to protect it from predators, is commonly found here. It is active at dusk and during the night and hibernates during the cold months of the year. It is a frequent denizen of vegetable gardens, crop-growing fields and urban gardens where it fulfils a magnificent role controlling the population of harmful pests such as snails, slugs, worms, and insects. Unfortunately, its numbers are threatened by the high number of deaths caused by motor vehicles.



European toad (*Bufo bufo*)
Although amphibious it spends a good deal of its time on land. Only during the spring does it search out pools and lakes to mate and lay eggs. It is nocturnal and feed off insects, earthworms and snails. Its numbers are declining in cultivated areas due to the use of insecticides.



Barn owl (*Tyto alba*)
A very common, nocturnal bird of prey with a wingspan measuring between 34 to 90 cms. The underparts are generally white and the upperparts buff, speckled with black and white. It has a round, white, heart-shaped face and large eyes. It feeds on small mammals and birds such as sparrows and swallows and is highly beneficial to cultivation. It has adapted to human constructions and, at night time, a pair of barn owls can be seen at the abbey, where they have made their nest.



White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)
A small, slender bird with ash-grey upperparts and white underparts, striped black and white wings and long tail with white outer feathers. It has a black throat and head. Its slim bill enables it to catch all kinds of insects. It frequently inhabits places near water such as the town wash-house. It can often be seen searching for food near and around cultivated areas and gardens as it wags its tail up and down.



White Poplar (*Populus alba*)
A fast-growing, waterside deciduous tree, with white bark and underside leaves, that can attain considerable height. During the spring it scatters its seeds by means of catkins carried by the wind. Often found on the banks of rivers, irrigation channels and other places where there is abundant water, frequently near its relative, the Poplar. They are grown for their wood which is mainly used in the paper industry.



ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA DE VILABERTRAN
The abbey of Santa Maria forms part of the urban landscape of Vilabertran. It is surrounded by fertile land, alluvial in origin which, like all the plain of the Empurdan, was originally marshland. From the 12th century onwards it was drained and cultivation commenced. The land's fertility and the abundance of water have made it ideal for irrigation and it is particularly suited for the cultivation of garden produce. Long rows of cypress trees line the fields, protecting them from the strong, dry gusts of the north wind. The flora and fauna consists of common species to be found in both the urban centres and on the agricultural plain. The proximity of the river Muga, and the irrigation channels and ponds, make it particularly suited for species found in wetlands and riverbanks. This natural heritage, together with the Natural Parks of Cap de Creus, Albera and Aiguamolls, account for the Empurdan's unique ecological importance within the country.



Garden produce
The municipality's main agricultural activity is the cultivation of garden produce through irrigation. Maize and sunflowers are grown, the latter, requiring less irrigation, being a good choice during drier periods. Potatoes, wheat and barley are also grown, but to a lesser extent. But vegetables are the main produce. The rich soil and the supply of water make it possible to grow a wide variety of vegetables. Amongst the tomatoes, beans, onions, lettuces, pumpkins and peppers there are often aromatic and medicinal plants such as lavender and thyme, and near the wells it is not at all unusual to find a walnut or fig tree. This wide range of high-quality agricultural produce mostly supplies the local markets held throughout the towns in the district.



Italian Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*)
Lines of cypresses planted around fields of vegetables are a common feature of the landscape in the Empurdan. Cypress trees originated in the Near East and were brought here by the Romans who considered them to symbolise hospitality and welcome. They live to a great age, which can exceed a thousand years.



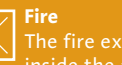
Dogs
If you have brought a dog with you, it is your responsibility to ensure that it is always under your control, kept on a lead, and does not cause a nuisance to other people. Dogs are not allowed inside the abbey. Dogs' owners are responsible for any damage they may cause.



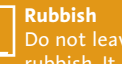
Cultivated fields
Keep to the indicated roads and tracks. Do not uproot, trample upon or otherwise damage the crops. They are their owners livelihood. Neither must you break branches, uproot plants or pick flowers. Photography is the best way of keeping a souvenir of your visit.



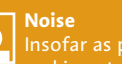
OTHER INFORMATION OF INTEREST
Car park
Parking space for cars and coaches is provided on the esplanade in front of the abbey gate.



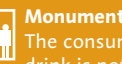
Picnic area
Near abbot Rigau's spring, behind the car park, there is a green area surrounded by cultivated fields. In one corner, down a couple of steps, there is a drinking fountain.



Leisure areas
There are two leisure areas with fountains: the first in the Plaça dels Hortolans, to the west of the abbey, the second is in the Plaça Lluís Companys, to the west of the town.



Noise
Insofar as possible avoid making strident noises such as those produced by shouting and radios or other similar equipment. Please show respect towards the people who live and work in the town.



Monuments
The consumption of food and drink is not permitted. Climbing on the walls of the monument and on the dry stone walls is prohibited. Any resulting damage to them could be dangerous. You must not inscribe anything on the walls or write any kind of graffiti anywhere. Some of the places visited during the visit are private houses and due respect and courtesy should be shown to their inhabitants.

THE ABBEY OF SANTA MARIA DE VILABERTRAN

GUIDED TOURS
From Tuesday to Sunday. Reservation required. Commentary in Catalan, Spanish, French and English.
A wide variety of activities for school students. Information and reservations: 972 387 559
Fax: 972 194 231

OPENING TIMES
From 1 October to 31 May:
10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.
From 1 June to 30 September:
10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

SERVICES FOR VISITORS TO THE ABBEY
WC
Audiovisuals
Guided tours
Shop

CLOSED
Mondays (except public holidays and the eve of public holidays)
1 and 6 January, 25 and 26 December

FREE ADMITTANCE
Tuesdays
23 April (Saint George's Day)
3 May (local festival)
18 May (International Museum Day)
11 September (Catalonia's National Day)
European Heritage Days

INFORMATION
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