

# Grand designs

**Sarah Francis** delves into the fascinating history of French castles, comparing a 'château fort' and a Renaissance château, both for sale in Gascony

The development of the *château fort*, or fortified castle, evolved from the earliest Roman forts and the first defensive French fortresses were frequently based around either a keep set on a hill or a motte surrounded by an outer area (the bailey) and defended by a wooden fence.

The earliest *châteaux forts* appeared in Europe in the 4th century after the Carolingian empire, built by nobles as their dwellings to demonstrate their wealth and social standing, and from where they could control the surrounding area, dispense justice and defend their territory.

In the 12th to 13th centuries impressive stone medieval castles appeared, frequently in a rectangular walled form with a central keep and towers at the corners, adorned with battlements, drawbridges and moats, and many of these have survived to this day. *Châteaux forts* continued to be built until about the 16th century, but the demise of archery and rise of cannon fire, and the techniques developed to deal with the force of gunpowder, which was sufficiently strong to breach their walls, made them obsolete.

## Fortified hamlet

Perched on a rocky outcrop on the western extremity of a pretty medieval hamlet, in the sunny department of Gers, this impressive fortified 12th-century château is a stunning example of medieval architecture which has been meticulously renovated and lovingly maintained. In addition, there is an attractive ruin, ripe for restoration with some lovely frescoes and turrets. The land falls away steeply and from its commanding position, the château enjoys uninterrupted and extended views of the pretty rural landscape surrounding it.

The hamlet boasts a church and a pretty archway leads through to a mini square with its *mairie*. In the 50s, the shops began to decline and disappear and are now all gone, leaving the village incredibly peaceful. A few residents inhabit the pretty half-timbered houses with their beamed facades and softly painted shutters, lining grassy paths and narrow alleys.

This impressive example of Gascon heritage falls under the governance of Vic-Fezensac, the capital of the *canton*, some 10km away, while Lupiac, the birthplace of D'Artagnan, the famous musketeer, is just beyond.

The last of the line of barons to own the castle died at the end of the 11th century, having sold the château to a family of farmers who allowed the building to fall into disrepair until the present owners bought and restored



it. The entire château, its surrounding walls, the well and the ruin were all ISMH (Inventaire Supplémentaire des Monuments Historiques) listed in January 2008. This classification is considered, especially by French buyers, as a mark of architectural merit and historical value with a certain cachet.

To undertake restoration of a listed building, the guidance and approval of the Architecte des Bâtiments de France (ABF) must be sought, which guarantees to protect these historic edifices from inappropriate or ill-considered works. In addition, their mere existence also helps to protect the immediate surroundings from modern blights. Owners can apply for grants for renovation, restoration or necessary maintenance of a listed building. French tax residents can benefit from significant fiscal advantages which, if they open their property to the public for the requisite number of days, are even greater.

I love to imagine the legendary characters of old who would have inhabited it – but how wonderful also to be able to enjoy the fact that it has been so beautifully restored, were one to become the new owner. ►



€1,500,000





€1,950,000

A wrought-iron gateway opens onto an attractive tree-lined avenue leading to the property



### Palladian power

In complete contrast to the rough and rugged architectural style of those ancient fortresses, following the Renaissance period some châteaux in France were built with more than a passing reference to the style of the famous Italian architect Palladio. Although Palladio lived in the 16th century, his influence was far reaching and long lived.

There was a revival of interest in the Palladian style in later generations and it became fashionable throughout Europe; examples can be found in parts of the Loire Valley and Christopher Wren and Inigo Jones were among his followers, as was Thomas Jefferson whose Capitol building is a famous example of Neoclassicism.

Also in the popular Gers department and situated within 35 minutes of Toulouse airport, this superb chateau has a definite link to the style of Palladio and is classed as a *monument historique*. Built at the end of the 18th century, on the foundations of a medieval fortress, this property is rich in original architectural features and has a magnificent entrance hall with pillars, alcoves and two impressive staircases, one on either side of the hall.

Recently refurbished in the style of the

period, the chateau offers about 1,000m<sup>2</sup> of habitable space, including a beautiful reception room with a superb parquet floor which has 177 panels of rare hexagonal marquetry, all in the style of Louis XV.

The construction of the chateau was begun in 1770 by Louis Antoine de Vic, but it was sold again for financial reasons in 1788 and it is believed that the new owner called upon the famous Toulousain architect Jean-Arnaud Raymond. This architect, whose career was largely based in Paris, is associated with the Neoclassical style.

Having won an important architectural prize in 1766, he spent eight years in Italy perfecting his craft and studying Vignole, Scamozzi and the Italian Renaissance architect, Palladio. Raymond became a fervent admirer of the latter, commenting that "my guide is always Palladio".

The chateau has two elegant grand staircases, each an exact copy of the other. This is a typical feature of the symmetry of Palladian design where, when a line is drawn down the centre, either side is a mirror image.

Ideally located within easy reach of a charming market town with two squares, the chateau offers considerable scope either as an



imposing primary residence or some form of commercial venture. A wrought-iron gateway opens onto an attractive tree-lined avenue leading to the property, with a secondary gateway into the village behind. Next to the drive is a large outbuilding offering further potential for conversion. A lovely property of considerable and unique architectural merit. ■

Sarah Francis is director of Sifex, specialists in the sale of French châteaux prestigious properties, vineyards and estates  
Tel: 0207 384 1200  
sifex.co.uk