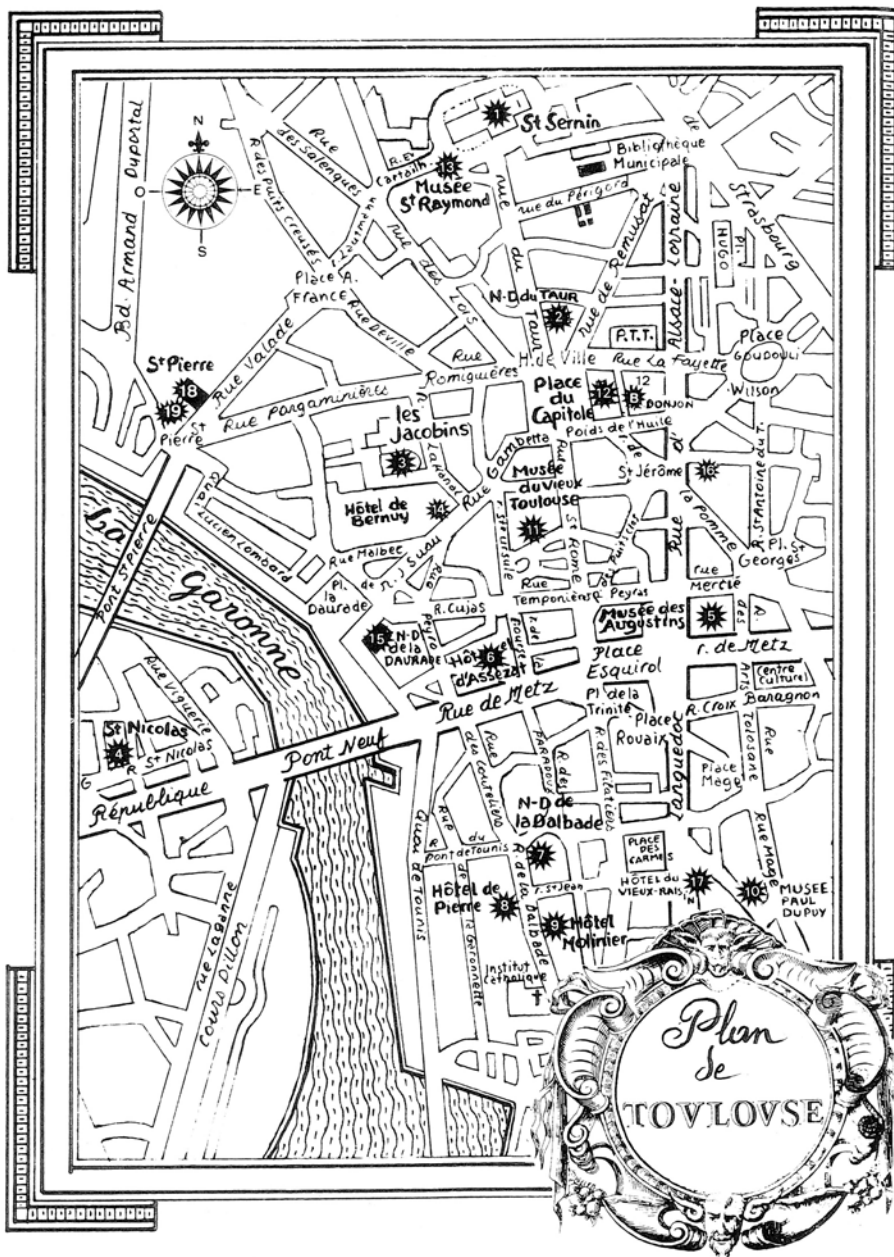


# Out and About in Medieval Toulouse

David Pearse takes us to the historic heart of France's fourth-largest city



1 - St Sernin; 2 - Notre-Dame Du Taur; 3 - Les Jacobins; 4 - St Nicolas; 5 - Augustins; 6 - Hôtel D'Assezat; 7 - N-D De La Dalbade; 8 - Hôtel De Pierre Ou De Clary; 9 - Hôtel Molinier Ou Felzins; 10 - Musée Paul Dupuy; 11 - Musée Du Vieux Toulouse; 12 - Hôtel De Ville Ou Capitole; 13 - Musée Saint-Raymond; 14 - Hôtel De Bernuy; 15 - N-D De La Daurade; 16 - St Jérôme; 17 - Hôtel Du Vieux Raisin Ou Beringuier-Maynier; 18 - Église St Pierre Des Chartreux; 19 - Église St Pierre Des Cuisines.

## Looking at the street plan

Bordering the River Garonne, medieval Toulouse extends as far as the Basilica of St Sernin but is concentrated in an area bounded approximately by the Jacobins' Church to the north, St Etienne Cathedral to the north-east and the rue de la Dalbade to the south-west. This is also the site of Roman Toulouse, which was made into a fort in the first century BC. With the decline of the Roman Empire, Toulouse was for a time the capital of the Visigoths; and by the beginning of the sixth century it was part of the Frankish kingdom.

## A brief visit to the sixteenth century

Today the best way to find medieval Toulouse is to abandon the busy thoroughfares, like the rue d'Alsace Lorraine (originally a Roman street) and the cafés on Place Wilson (named after an American president). Instead, waiting quietly for the occasional car or pedestrian, there are narrow streets like the rue Pharaon and the rue Perchepinte, with their high, old walls, occasionally interrupted by large, heavy doors. For anyone seeking medieval Toulouse these doors are a distraction, but an irresistible one. They belong to town houses (*hôtels*), some dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century. Typical town houses of this period – like most buildings in Toulouse – were built of red bricks. They had elaborate sculpture, framing the entrance, impressive façades around the courtyard inside, a large staircase leading to the first floor and somewhere a tower, normally for ornament rather than use. The whole construction was designed not only to impress the visitor but also to advertise the achievements (often in business) of the owner.

One of the earliest of these town houses is situated at the junction of the rues Gambetta and Jean Suau, where work began in 1504 on the Hôtel de Burnuy. The house belonged to Jean de Burnuy. His family in Spain had already established trading contacts with Toulouse; and Jean was successful enough as a Toulousain merchant both to have a house with two towers and to entertain King Francis I. Belonging to



(right) The entrance of the hôtel d'Assézat from the courtyard.

the same sort of period, two other town houses are worthy of mention.

Close to the Place des Carmes, down the rue St Jean Prêtres, the Hôtel de Pierre sits squarely at the junction with the rue de la Dalbade. Here construction was started in 1538 by Jean de Bagis. Beyond the main doors, flanked by two stone figures, the courtyard walls were provided with stone casement windows, decorated with columns. Baroque embellishments were added by a subsequent owner.

Most important of all – not least because it is open to the public – is the huge Hôtel d'Assezat, situated on the rue de l'Echarpe, off the rue de Metz. The Assezat family established itself in Toulouse in the 1520s. Their enterprise quickly secured commercial contacts throughout Europe and enough money to finance the ambitious construction, between two courtyards, of two principal buildings and an elaborate tower, completed 1555-58.

### Hard times in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

Distraction or not, at the very least these town houses serve as a reminder that in the sixteenth century, encouraged by the trade in a blue dye – *pastel* in French, *woad* in English – Toulouse was



enjoying a degree of prosperity unknown across the previous approximately 100 years.

Against a background of the Hundred Years War (1338-1453), fourteenth-century Toulouse suffered from disease, dearth and discontent. The Black Death broke out in 1348 and again in 1360. There were serious famines in 1374-76 and 1377-78. Riots erupted in the 1330s and 1350s. Between 1335 and 1398 it is estimated that the population of Toulouse shrank from 35,000 to 24,000.

Plague, bad harvests and food shortages persisted into the early part of the fifteenth century; and 1463 was the year of disaster, when many wooden buildings in Toulouse were destroyed by two weeks of conflagration (believed to have been started in a bakery).

What escaped the worst of the flames was anything built of brick, including most of the churches and monasteries, bequeathed to Toulouse from its medieval past.

### Origins of medieval Toulouse

Of those walking through the narrow, airless streets of medieval Toulouse, some would have been pilgrims; and of these, many would have been making for the Basilica of St Sernin – or possibly Notre Dame de la Daurade, which had been adapted from a Roman temple, originally dedicated to Apollo.

These two churches, along with the Cathedral of St Etienne, suffered badly when the pagan Visigoths took possession of Toulouse in the fifth century. St Sernin (founded at the end





## Romanesque: basilica and cathedral

At the beginning of the eleventh century, no doubt helped by donations from pilgrims, an ambitious programme of reconstruction began on the Basilica of St Sernin, starting at the apse, progressing episodically by way of the large transepts and finishing with the west front of the nave in the thirteenth century. Five chapels radiated from the apse and an ambulatory allowed pilgrims to circulate more easily. Above the transept crossing soared the octagonal bell tower, started in the twelfth century and completed approximately 100 years later. Attesting to the expertise of the builders, the barrel-vaulted nave is a restrained Gothic. The overwhelming aspect of the basilica is, however, Romanesque; and in fact St Sernin is today one of the biggest and best examples of Romanesque churches in Europe.

of the fourth century) was set alight; while the Daurade and the cathedral were abandoned. Having passed into the hands of the Christian Franks, however, Toulouse saw work re-commence on the Daurade, which by the ninth century had become a monastery. In the mid-ninth century St Etienne was officially mentioned for the first time on the site it occupies today (near where the Hôtel d'Assezat was subsequently constructed). Meanwhile, by the beginning of the ninth century, the restored St Sernin not only boasted the remains of the Roman martyr and first Bishop of Toulouse – *Sant Sarnin* in the Occitan language – but had also been given holy relics by the Emperor Charlemagne. Not surprisingly, by the late tenth century St Sernin was regularly attracting pilgrims.

Less spectacular, but in its way very interesting, the Cathedral of St Etienne also began reconstruction in the early eleventh century; and initial work was in the same style, though rather more austere. Even so, the cathedral's nave is impressive – broad and high, with the roof resting on unsupported arches. By the beginning of the thirteenth-century transepts had been built and the foundations laid for the bell tower. Then, after a pause of just over 40 years, it was decided to build a new cathedral. The result was a grand choir with five bays and radiating chapels, all in the new Gothic style. The intention was to continue with the new building and in time pull down the old one. Unfortunately, work on the choir ceased; and equally unfortunately, the Gothic choir had been constructed on a slightly different alignment from the Romanesque nave. The solution in the fifteenth century was to fashion a link between the two; but the net effect is awkward and/or endearing.



Toulouse Cathedral  
(Cathédrale Saint-Étienne de Toulouse)

## A time of plenty: the thirteenth century

During this period Toulouse moved into an era of confidence, expansion and prosperity. Indeed, the responsibilities of the *capitouls* (magistrates) had begun to expand from the early twelfth century, as successive Counts of Toulouse bestowed on them greater privileges. One grant in 1226 was in recognition for the support given to the count during the Albigensian Crusade, when Toulouse endured three sieges in nine years. Later the title of Count passed into the royal family; but connections with the crown only served to increase Toulouse's importance – cemented in the fifteenth century by the establishment of a *Parlement* for registering the king's edicts.

Many of the duties of the *capitouls* related to production and trading. Both began to grow at this time, as people moved into Toulouse from the countryside seeking work and in the process boosted demand and supply. Within Toulouse wooden houses increased to accommodate the new arrivals. Outside Toulouse by the early thirteenth century agricultural and increasingly industrial products reached out to northern France, the French Atlantic coast and even Spain.

With the growth of commerce came a better quality of life, encouraging the citizens of Toulouse to turn their attention notably to education – with the founding of a university in 1229 – and to religion, helped by the presence of the four orders of mendicant friars.

Cloisters of the Church of the Jacobins



Church of the Jacobins



### Friars' Gothic

In 1215 Dominique de Guzman founded the Dominicans and shortly afterwards acquired some land in Toulouse (near where the Hôtel de Burnuy would be built 300 years later). Work finished in 1263 on the church, which became known as the Jacobins, because the headquarters of the order was at St Jacques in Paris. A century on from the reconstruction of St Sernin, the Jacobins' church was given the same shape of bell tower; but the style of architecture was now completely Gothic. Austere on the outside, the church's most impressive features on the inside are the double naves – rebuilt in the fourteenth century – and the so-called 'palm tree' of 22 ribs linking the roof of the naves with the ceiling of the apse.

By the early fourteenth century the Jacobins had secured the usual set of monastic buildings: cloisters, chapter house, sacristy, refectory, etc. From what remains, two features are worth mentioning. First, the fourteenth-century mortuary chapel has its original frescoes, depicting the martyrdom of St Antonin, patron saint of the church. Second, the cloisters, with their double-columned arches, were recently restored, but look as though they have survived intact from the fourteenth century.

Shortly after the Dominicans, the Franciscans came to Toulouse. Known as the Cordeliers, because of the cord worn

around their grey habit, they aimed to rival the Jacobins' church. On the rue Deville work on their church – dedicated to the Virgin Mary – started around 1260 and continued into the following century. Like the Jacobins, the exterior of the church was a plain form of Gothic; but the interior was painted to resemble stone. In fact the Cordeliers' impressively large nave was five bays longer than the Jacobins'; and the former seem to have had the additional advantages of a library, an infirmary, a kitchen garden and a private cemetery. In 1871 the Cordeliers' Church was burned down, leaving only the bell tower and a portion of the main entrance.

The Augustinians and Carmelites also had a significant presence. The Carmelites had been located in what is now the Place des Carmes, with their church suffering serious damage in the major town fire in the fifteenth century, and the rest being demolished in 1810. The Augustinian buildings were partly demolished in the mid-nineteenth century to make way for an art gallery.

Another important site is Notre Dame de la Dalbade, the walls of which were originally covered by a whitewash called '*albade*'. The foundations date back to an early period; but most of the work on the church, as it is today, was done in the sixteenth century. It was at this time that the Jesuits – founded in 1534 – moved into the Hôtel de Burnuy,

vacated by its family after 50 years of occupation.

### Fast Forward

By the eighteenth century in the rue Mage, close to the Place des Carmes, Toulouse had a new town house. This was started in 1750 by the Count d'Espie and passed through the Chalvet and MacCarthy families until it became connected with the banker, Courtois de Vicose, the latter name now given to this house. With the usual courtyard and also a garden, the house was well provided with domestic accommodation, along with elaborately decorated rooms for the resident family.

While the nineteenth century seems to have been characterised by a degree of destruction, by contrast, the twentieth century witnessed efforts in restoration. In addition to the reconstituted cloisters of the Jacobins, the sixteenth-century Hôtel du May – near the Hôtel de Burnuy – found fresh life in 1907 as the Museum of Old Toulouse; and major renovations were undertaken on St Sernin, today a World Heritage Site.

### Further reading

Philippe Wolff, *Histoire de Toulouse* (1974)

David Pearse studied at Liverpool University. His PhD was in British and French relations with Russia 1815-25. Most of his career has been devoted to teaching history.