

THE CHÂTEAU DE TOCQUEVILLE

The ancestral home of Alexis de Tocqueville, on Normandy's Cotentin Peninsula, opens a guest pavilion

by Judy Fayard



ytiewpí at Château du Breuil

“Dear Tocqueville!”, the young author of *Democracy in America* wrote in an 1837 letter to his wife, speaking of his family chateau. “I can never imagine it as anything other than a refuge of peace and happiness. It is the port for all storms. I have never been as happy, for as long, anywhere else.”

Alexis de Tocqueville’s much-beloved home, in the village of the same name, is some 18 miles east of Cherbourg on the tip of Normandy’s Cotentin Peninsula. Hidden from sight in the lush green countryside just inland from the seacoast, the chateau started out as a 16th-century seigneurial manor—a big Norman stone house flanked by two towers with conical roofs, with a third tower across the courtyard that served as an immense dovecote. A stone band circling the dovecote tower indicates that the lord of



Portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville
by Théodore Chassériau

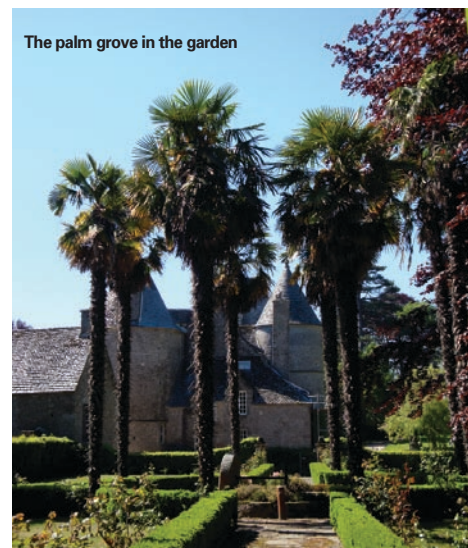
the manor was the local authority for “*basse justice*”—more or less a justice of the peace.

In 1661 the Clérel family took over the manor and, as was the custom, adopted the name of their fief: Clérel de Tocqueville. During the 18th century, as the family fortunes increased, the elegant central pavilion was added and the manor grew into a small chateau. The French Revolution in 1789 barely damaged it: the monumental dovecote lost its roof, and the word “king” was blacked out in the library’s books. More than a century later, in 1896, the square south tower was built, completing the graceful architectural composite that today is a classified historic monument.

The chateau is now the country home of the great-great-great-grandnephew of the famed writer and philosopher, Jean-Guillaume de Tocqueville, and his wife Stéphanie, who have



The library



The palm grove in the garden



The Ming bedroom in the guest pavilion

just completed the renovation of the square tower, transforming it into a three-floor, five-bedroom guest pavilion for weekly rental. The extremely spacious bedrooms are beautifully appointed, mostly with the family's own period furnishings, but the pavilion has also been discreetly and completely modernized, with a fully equipped kitchen and a central elevator camouflaged by charming wallpaper. (The original, narrow circular stone staircase between floors is romantic and still in use, but impossible for suitcases.) Adjoining bathrooms are a clever mix of antique fittings and contemporary comfort, and the heating system uses state-of-the-art geothermal energy.

Twists of fate

The square tower had not yet been built when Alexis de Tocqueville inherited the château in 1836. At the time, the young lawyer, author and political philosopher was a rising star. The first

volume of his *Democracy in America*, published in January 1835, was an unqualified success—after an initial printing of only 500 copies, seven new editions followed over the next few years. And he had recently, despite his family's doubts, married Mary Mottley, an Englishwoman five years his senior, with neither aristocratic pedigree nor notable wealth. Alexis had both. But if the Revolution had done little harm to the paternal Château de Tocqueville, it had coldly and cruelly decimated his mother's side of the family.

Tocqueville's maternal great-grandfather, Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes—himself descended from the illustrious military architect Vauban—was the minister and lawyer who defended Louis XVI at the Revolutionary Tribunal. Malesherbes was guillotined in 1794, during the Terror that followed the Revolution, along with his wife, his sister, his two daughters and their

husbands. His granddaughter, Louise-Madeleine Le Pelletier de Rosambo, and her newly wed husband Hervé de Tocqueville—both aged 22—were imprisoned with the rest of the family and slated for the same fate, but spared by the fall of Robespierre.

Over the next decade, as the Terror ended and France's First Republic careened through the Directory and the Consulate to Napoleon's 1804 self-coronation as emperor, the young Tocqueville couple had three sons. Third in line after his brothers Hippolyte and Edouard, Alexis de Tocqueville was born in Paris on July 29, 1805. The infant's face, his father later wrote in his *Mémoires*, was "so singular and so expressive that I told his mother he would be a distinguished man..."

The children grew up in the Château de Verneuil, inherited from Malesherbes's sister, in Verneuil-sur-Seine, where Hervé de Tocqueville was mayor. After studies in Metz, where his father had been named Prefect of Moselle, Alexis, armed with a law degree, was appointed a magistrate in Versailles. In 1831, along with fellow lawyer and lifelong friend Gustave de Beaumont (who later married Lafayette's granddaughter), he wangled a leave to survey the prison system in the United States. Traveling through New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Detroit, parts of Canada, down the Mississippi to New Orleans and up through the southern states to Washington, Tocqueville surveyed not only prisons but also the state of American democracy after half a century of existence. "I searched for an image of democracy itself," he wrote in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, "of its penchants, its character, its prejudices and passions; I wanted to understand it, if only to know at least what we could hope and fear from it."

Whistling winds

Despite his family's objections and Mary's slightly fractious character, the marriage was, judging from Tocqueville's letters, mostly very happy. They spent much of their time together at the château, and although he liked to point out that "from the top of the tower I can see the port where William the Conqueror embarked for his conquest of England," in fact the place had not really been occupied for nearly 50 years. The roof was still thatched, the straw turned russet with age, and the rooms, he wrote, "had huge fireplaces giving out more cold than heat, damp walls and corridors down which the wind whistles as gaily as on any autumn evening". They replaced the muddy paths leading to the house with a wide carriageway, and moved a double-arched portico, stone by stone, from the courtyard to where it still stands at the carriageway entrance. The shabby courtyard was replaced by a big green lawn bordering a large pond, and old hedgerows were razed to create an English-style garden park. He left the supervision of the work entirely to Mary, he wrote, merrily tongue-in-cheek, because "the proximity of workmen in no way suits a philosopher like me".

Tocqueville reported spending most of his days at the château outdoors, and the evenings with Mary in the library, "surrounded by the best books that have been published in the principal languages of Europe". Through the eventful years that followed, Tocqueville's political career as a deputy in the National Assembly kept him frequently in Paris, but when he retired from public life after the Second Republic was replaced by the Second Empire, with another Napoleon in power, he took full advantage of the château. "All I ask of God is good health for me and my dear wife, so that we can pleasantly spend the rest of our lives here," he wrote to a friend in 1856. But he was already ill with lung disease; advised to seek a better climate, he moved to Cannes, where he died on April 16, 1859, just short of his 54th birthday. He is buried at the foot of the belltower of the Tocqueville village church. ■

For more information on Alexis de Tocqueville and the château (in French and English): www.tocqueville.culture.fr

The château can be visited only on request. The introductory price for the newly opened guest pavilion is €5,000 per week. Contact: s.detocqueville@noos.fr



THE TIP OF THE COTENTIN PENINSULA



EAST COAST

An excursion from Tocqueville might start heading south past Valcanville and La Pernelle, with its panoramic view of the coast, to the busy port of Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue (pronounced San Va), known for its mild climate and its oysters. An amphibious craft makes the 10-minute hop to the tiny tidal island of Tatihou, where there's a maritime museum and a restaurant in an old Vauban fort. Then follow the coast road up to the small port of Barfleur—a good lunch stop with several restaurants along the quay.

Continue on the scenic D116, the Route du Val de Saire, almost to Cherbourg before turning south to the Château de Tourlaville, a Renaissance castle that was part of the royal domain of François I. In the 19th century it was owned and renovated by Edouard de Tocqueville and his sons; it now belongs to the city of Cherbourg, and the grounds have become a beautiful public garden.

WEST COAST

Take the small D45 coast road west of Cherbourg, near Le Hameau-de-la-Mer, with a first stop at the Château de Nacqueville, a magnificent 16th-century castle that was



The island of Tatihou, off Saint Vaast-la-Hougue, with the old Vauban fort



The gardens of the Château de Nacqueville



inherited by Hippolyte de Tocqueville's wife, Emilie Erard de Belisle de Saint-Rémy. Starting in 1830, they transformed the grounds into a splendid garden park filled with arum lilies, hydrangeas, azaleas and rhododendrons. The château is private, but the gardens are open to the public, and so is the drawbridge tower, a remnant of fortified walls that once encircled the château. www.nacqueville.com

The scenic drive along the coast leads to windswept Cap de la Hague, the lighthouse at Goury, Ecalgrain Bay and the rocky, wild and barren Nez de Jobourg. After the pretty town of Vauville (where, on a recent visit, the well-known Botanical Garden seemed slightly withered), head straight south to the popular beach resorts of Barneville-Carteret and Portbail.

D-DAY BEACHES

Some 20 miles south of Saint-Vaast, Utah Beach begins the series of D-Day landing beaches that line the coast as far as Ouistreham. Utah, in the *département* of La Manche, and Omaha, in Calvados, are separated by a large bay; both were taken by American troops, and the main American Military Cemetery is in Colleville-sur-Mer. Farther along, Sword and Gold beaches were British, and Juno Canadian. The American sector alone is an easy day trip; a full visit to the beaches should also include Caen, with its Peace Memorial (an unforgettable WWII museum worth several hours), and Bayeux, for the famed 230-foot long embroidered tapestry commemorating William, Duke of Normandy's conquest of England in 1066.

Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue

