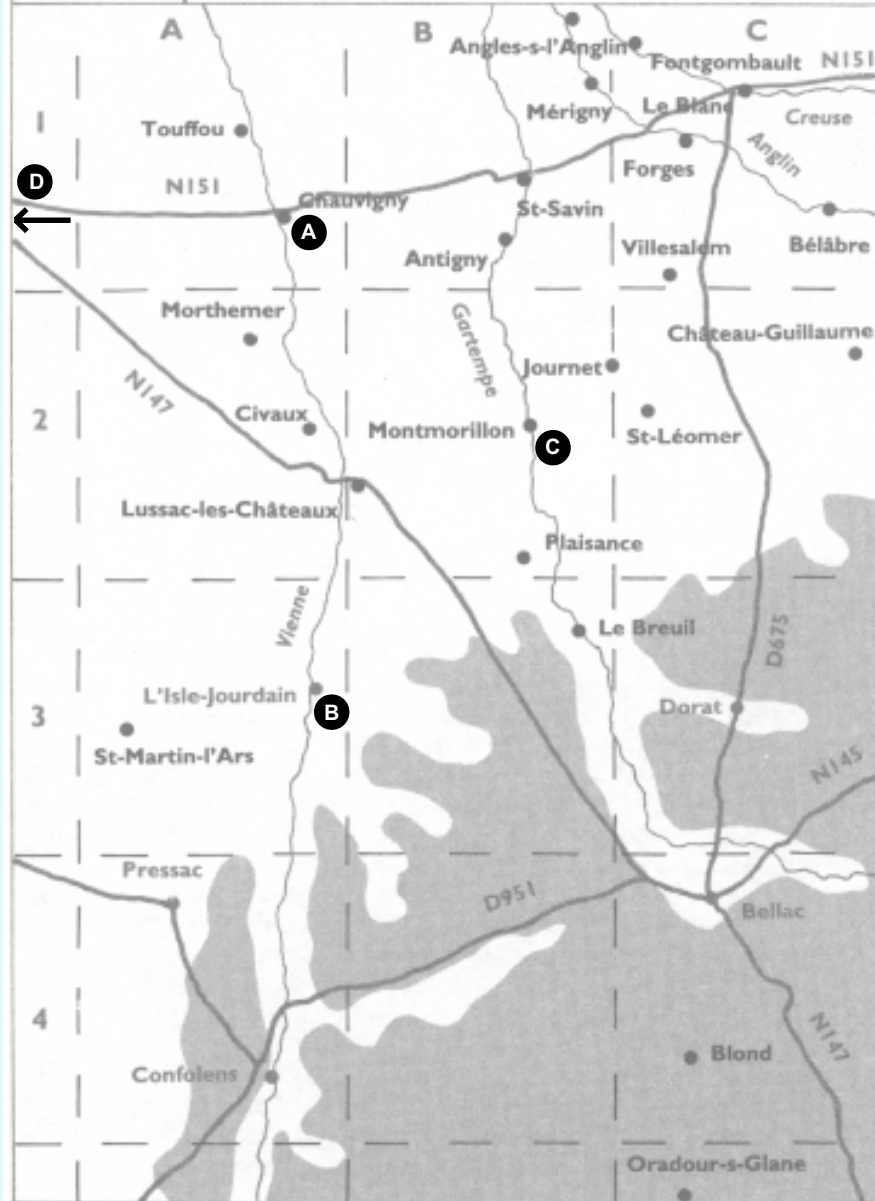
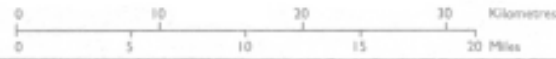


20

Poitou: rivers, Romanesque glories and a silent witness.
Cité médiévale. Gregorian chants. *Lanternes des morts*. Sacred
 Oradour. (Refer also to *L'Isle-Jourdain* on website.)



At first sight there seems little to entice tourists to seek out the terrain on map sheet 20. Not for the first time I shall restate the obvious: there are scores of interesting sites – if you know where to look. I emphasise the word sites because here man is the winner in his duel with Nature to attract your attention. Her contributions are of a more self-effacing nature – but both subtle and effective.

Nevertheless, to help me describe this corner of Poitou, I shall rely on Nature's more restful gifts – the river valleys which flow from south to north towards the Loire. In the top right-hand corner is the **Creuse** (C1); a few miles to the south-west is the humble **Anglin** (C1); further west is the **Gartepe** (B1/B3); and, on the left edge of the map sheet, flowing north in an almost straight line, is the **Vienne**. I'll start with the baby of the quartet, the Anglin.

Château-Guillaume (C2) overlooks the Allemette, one of the Anglin's many tiny tributaries. Approach from the D53, to the east. The compact fortress, with high ramparts, round towers and a formidable keep, snoozes peacefully in a wooded setting. Parts of the château date back to the 11th century. Dismantled by Richelieu, the castle was restored in 1878. (Apl to Nov: p.m. every day; July/Aug a.m. also.)

Downstream, **Bêlâbre** (C1) is especially eye-pleasing alongside the Anglin. Continue north-west, to **Forges**: what visual perfection awaits you as you approach from the east. The château is built of light stone and has six cone-hatted towers. The property is private; but stop and admire the structure and walk the path beside the château.

Nearby Ingrandes, with salami-sliced towers, has an attractive setting beside the Anglin. So has **Méridigny** (B1): see the river and weir from the bridge, glimpse distant views of the château at Roche-Bellusson and, if you have the time, enjoy the riverside walks. Downstream the Anglin is a charmer with rock faces adding cosmetic interest. **Angles-sur-l'Anglin** (B1) is a picture postcard *village fleuri*: from the bridge savour the castle ruins, medieval houses and weir.

Now east to the Creuse which, on map 20, is no more than 20 km long. **Le Blanc** (C1) is a busy place. To the north-east is the Brenne Regional Nature Park – an enclave of *étangs* and protected wildlife. High above Le Blanc's left bank are two museums: one, in the sombre Château Naillac, is the Musée des Oiseaux – which explains the varied bird life in the Nature Park; the other, the Maison des Amis du Blanc, evokes the life of the town and environs in times past. The drive downstream, starting under the massive viaduct, is a pretty run.

The Romanesque abbey church at **Fontgombault** (C1) must not be missed. Restored in the last century, the huge high-vaulted nave and stained glass are splendid; even more stirring are the Gregorian chants of the monks. Try to coincide your visit with one of the daily services: 10.00 and 18.00 (the latter is 15.30 on Thurs; and 17.00 on Sun and fête days). The monks are also dab hands as potters; see their work in an adjacent shop. You can also buy produce from the abbey farm.

Between the Anglin and Gartempe is a trio of differing man-made sites. First, the isolated Romanesque priory of **Villesalem** (C1) – constructed in the 12th century and with some delicate sculptures. The building is being restored and is open every day, except Tues. Second, the *lanterne des morts* on the green at **Journet** (C2) – one of many in the area (a few are marked on the map). *La lanterne* is a small, narrow, stone column with a hollow interior and arched windows – rising up from a base and tiny altar and topped with a minute cross. In days past an ever-lasting flame, to the memory of the dead, was placed inside the column, at the base, thus ensuring the light's glow could easily be seen.

Third, the remains of the rural Gallo-Romain Sanctuary of Masamas. Little is left now but nevertheless you will be fascinated by the site and the structure built in the first century. All the finds on the site are in the archaeological museum in the Maison Dieu at **Montmorillon** (B2). To find the sanctuary locate **St-Léomer** (C2): follow the road south past Séchaud and the site is to the left. (Also signposted from the D117, five miles from Montmorillon.)

As you criss-cross this laid-back terrain (there's nothing pretentious or chic about the scenery) you'll soon realise that maize and sunflowers seem to flood the landscape; uninteresting but colourful.

Start your Gartempe Valley exploration with a visual thump – at **St-Savin** (B1). Cross the river from the east bank. From the medieval bridge the 12th-century *église* with its tall, slim steeple and surrounding abbey buildings is a scenic feast. The interior is majestic: a high nave, classically balanced and with restful spaciousness, dominates the eye. You will have to bend your head right back to appreciate the almost child-like Romanesque paintings high above you. For some visitors the decayed frescoes are disappointing. (I found the musak, blaring out of the loudspeakers in the vast *place*, utterly out of keeping with the Romanesque treasure beside the square. Why does the mayor countenance such nonsense?)

Now upstream, stopping first at **Antigny** (B1). There's a *lanterne des morts* on the green; some naive frescoes in the Romanesque church; and a *musée* which contains numerous finds from the once important Roman town which occupied the present village site two thousand years ago. Further south, **Montmorillon** (B2) is the home of the Romanesque Eglise Notre-Dame (St-Catherine's crypt has some medieval frescoes); the 12th-century Chapelle St-Laurent; and the nearby Maison Dieu with its mysterious 12th-century Octogone chapel.

Continue south. Look out for a small moated house just east of **Plaisance** (B2), alongside the D12. The stretch of river from the bridge at Chez Ragon, south to **Le Breuil** (B3), is delicious: there's lots of white water – ideal for canoes and kayaks. If you want to see the Gartempe away from the road then park just east of the Chez Ragon bridge and walk north to the rock above the river, tagged the Portes d'Enfer. Another, shorter walk, past goats, chickens, and descending steeply through an oak wood, takes you to the Saut de la Brame, south of Le Breuil, where a river tumbles past car-sized boulders.

West to the Vienne. I'll start in the north and assume you drive upstream along its banks. First **Touffou** (A1), a most noble, inspiring and harmonious château, with towers and keep and a site beside the river (July/Aug: a.m. and p.m. but not Mon). Next **Chauvigny** where market day is Thursday. Head first for the *cité médiévale* high above the more modern town: enjoy ramparts, five ruined keeps (the restored Donjon de Gouzon has a folk and archaeological museum) and the Romanesque Eglise St-Pierre with startling grotesque capitals. Detour to another Eglise de St-Pierre, a tiny version, alongside the river south of the town; head south-west to the medieval and restored château at **Morthemer** (A2); and seek out the *cimetière mérovingien* at **Civaux** (A2: stone coffins in the north-east corner of the cemetery north of the village centre; also visit the museum across the road).

Next, the monument to the memory of Constable John Chandos, mortally wounded at Lussac bridge on 31 December 1369. The memorial is on the D25 just south of the N147 and west of **Lussac-les-Châteaux** (B2). One of England's most outstanding generals, he masterminded the victory at Poitiers on 19 September 1356. The further upstream you travel, the prettier the Vienne becomes, but tear yourself away to two magnificent man-made sites. First to the Romanesque church at Civray (20m west of Pressac in A4) – perhaps the best in Poitou with a fabulous façade and hallucinogenic patterns painted on the interior's walls and columns. Next, to the 12th-century Abbaye de la Réau, south of **St-Martin-l'Ars** (A3); the stone and carvings are so pleasing in their simplicity.

I'll finish on a sobering note. Drive through the *village fleuri* of **Blond** (C4) with its fortified church; cross the wooded Monts de Blond; relish the pastoral scene at the *étang* near Cieux; and then descend to **Oradour-sur-Glane**. First, be sure to pass through the centre of the 'new' village. At the southern exit park in one of several car parks for the Centre de la Mémoire which, at its simplest, ensures you *comprendre Oradour*. How can any human being, other than the depraved, 'understand' the massacre which took place here in 1944? The newly-built submerged halls do a vastly honourable and essential job – in explaining, in five separate areas, the rise of Nazism, the systematic massacres of Jewish and Eastern European peoples and, finally, an account of the horrors which befell Oradour.

Then cross, via a tunnel, to the martyr village. Here lie the untouched fire-blackened ruins of 'old' Oradour, which was sadistically destroyed by the 22nd SS Panzer Division on 10 June 1944, as the Germans headed north to Normandy after the Allied landings. On that horrific June day 642 human beings were massacred, including 207 school children. One word suffices: REMEMBER. Oradour is a silent witness to the irreducible baseness in human nature and the terrifying potential for the human race to destroy its own.