

Rennes le Château

This small French hilltop village is known internationally, and receives tens of thousands of visitors per year, for being at the centre of various conspiracy theories, and for being the location of an alleged buried treasure discovered by its 19th-century priest Bérenger Saunière



The modern reputation of Rennes-le-Château rises mainly from claims and stories dating from the mid-1950s. These stories influenced the authors of the worldwide bestseller *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* in 1982, and that work in turn influenced Dan Brown when he wrote *The Da Vinci Code*.



The village church dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene has an extremely complex history, having been rebuilt several times. The earliest church of which there is any evidence on the site may date to the 8th century. However, this original church was almost certainly in ruins during the 10th or 11th century, when another church was built upon the site - remnants of which can be seen in Romanesque pillared arcades on the apse.

This survived in poor repair until the 19th century, when it was renovated by the local priest.

Saunière died in 1917, leaving the secret of where he got his fabulous wealth to his housekeeper, who promised to reveal it on her deathbed - but sadly she had a stroke which left her paralyzed and unable to speak before her death in 1953. Speculation was rife on the source of the parish priest's money. Was it the lost treasure of the Knights Templar or the Cathars in the area? Was it buried Visigothic gold? Was Saunière blackmailing the Church with some terrible secret? The evidence that points to the last possibility is that Saunière's confession before his death was so shocking that the priest who heard it denied him absolution and last rites.

The mystery is rendered greater by a series of parchments found by the local cleric in 1891. The parchments were, on the face of it, Latin transcriptions of passages from the Gospels, but they contained deeper mysteries. Saunière also appears to have left other "clues" in the highly unusual redesign of his church and other structures in the area. Hidden within those Latin parchments were two messages in French:

This treasure belongs to Dagobert II King and to Sion and he is there dead.

Shepardess no temptation that Poussin Teniers hold the key peace 681 by the cross and the horse of God I complete this Daemon guardian at midday blue apples.

Rennes le Chateau

Distance: 18km

Travel time: 30 minutes

