Richard Eales led a group of 25 CSG members (of several nationalities), and Pamela Marshall organised the logistics, to visit castles, bastides, and churches fortified and not, in a most enjoyable and instructive tour that began in Bayonne (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), in medieval times at the southern end of English-ruled Gascony, then took in the lands of the vicomtes of Béarn before terminating at Lourdes, perhaps better known for pilgrimages but also possessed of a fine castle. This represented the final stage of Richard’s three trips to south west France, the previous two having worked westwards from Cathar castles south of Carcassonne and Toulouse to reach the county of Foix, a county which became joined dynastically to Béarn in the 1250s. Part of a patchwork of lordships running along the Pyrenees, the rulers of Béarn had pursued a successful course of marriages and occasionally warfare to extend and take over neighbouring lordships and the best known of the many named Gaston called himself after the sun god and ruled from 1331-91, successfully negotiating a path between England and France during the Hundred Years War. Gaston III saw himself as independent and his geographical location (and wealth derived from sitting across routes to and from Spain and the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela) and this state of affairs actually lasted until the middle of the seventeenth century.

Gaston Fébus was responsible for a substantial castle-building programme but the group also visited other sites both earlier and later in date. Richard Eales provided notes and introductions reflecting current knowledge but was quick to acknowledge that little serious work had been done on many of them and that very few boasted serious guide books. There was much scope for on-site discussion and at some castles our own conclusions differed from the “received knowledge”.

The Castles of Gaston Fébus

The Castle Studies Group tour of Béarn,
13-21 September 2015

Fig. 1. Bayonne, Château Vieux.
Bayonne was visited first. The city was a prosperous port majoring in the wine trade and dated from Roman times, and part of the Roman walls were reused for the medieval city. The old town was joined by a new town and there were both old and new castles although both are now inaccessible. The Château Vieux (Fig. 1) was rectangular and originally contained an immense hexagonal donjon, demolished when the castle was rebuilt in the 17th century. The Château Neuf, in the new town, is now part of the university and is also quadrangular. It dates from the late 15th century. It was possible to view the older site externally and note the high walls and towers but there was no access to what remains of the new. The old town, which falls away sharply to the river Nive below, before it flows into the larger river Adour, also boasts a fine additional rampart built by Vauban for Louis XIV and offered a splendid subject for students of 17th century fortifications - nor was it the last to do so on this tour.

One of the tributaries of the Adour, the Bidouze, flows past the castle of Bourgade in the medieval lordship of Guiche. First mentioned in 1080, the lordship recognised English allegiance until the castle was burnt by the Bayonnais in 1257 in a local feud, resulting in its switching allegiance to Navarre. It was back under English rule by the 1370s. It fell into French hands with its neighbouring lordships during the final French conquest of Gascony, in 1449. The castle (Fig. 2) stands on a promontory approached through a village boasting its own defences and consists of a rectangle 30 by 20 metres, two towers, a gate and a donjon. The gate stands three storeys high, originally constructed in the 14th century it was rebuilt in the 15th. The donjon (if that is what it was – there was some disagreement on this) has dimensions of 13 by 10 metres. A set of decorative windows faces out over the river.

A little further on along the river is the village of Gramont. Here a grandiose baroque palace

Fig. 2. Bourgade: gate tower (centre), village (right), possible donjon, left, behind curtain.
(the château Bidache) dating from c. 1640 still belongs to the dukes (originally counts) of Gramont. The first reference to the medieval castle here is from 1250, and it had been destroyed by Simon de Montfort acting as seneschal of Gascony. There had been serious fire damage in 1796. Sections of medieval work remain (Fig. 3): late 15\textsuperscript{th} century gate towers and a donjon possibly of 1400, with walls two metres thick, the interior converted into a chapel. Gun loops for handguns had been inserted. From here, it was a short run to the bastide of Hastingues (Landes) standing on another tributary of the Adour. It was founded by Edward I in 1289 by arrangement with the local abbey of Artehous (which we were not able to reach) and named after John Hastings who was royal seneschal. Quadrangular in shape, it retains a substantial gate 12 metres high (Fig. 4) with two loops remaining of its defences, and hosted a port on the river at the opposite end of the town, a good example of a planned town built to promote the ruler’s interests and generate wealth, but also defensible.

Close by stands the town of Labastide-Villefranche on the western borders of Béarn, which may have been founded in response to Edward’s initiative. It was begun in 1292 and contains a large, tall rectangular tower typical of the castles of Gaston Fébus, six storeys high (Fig. 5). Tradition has it that the top half was added in 1350 to the standing part built when the town was founded. Although there is clear change half way up, it was forcefully argued by CSG members that actually it must have been of one build, the apparent change being merely a pause, otherwise the design, with first floor entry and no staircase, made no sense. Sadly, it was not possible to gain entry to verify this suggestion by inspecting the internal layout.
The next day began with a major site associated with Gaston Fébus, the town and castle of Sauveterre-de-Béarn. The church of St Andrew dating from c.1200 possesses a chemin de ronde below the roof. The town itself is first mentioned in 1253 but was much older. It actually comprised a succession of three towns separated by gates, the final being added in the 14th century. There were 226 households in 1385. The massive Tour Montreal stands 60 metres away from the castle rebuilt by Fébus, though linked by the curtain wall of the town, and presents problems of interpretation. It is assigned to the 13th century. It is 5 storeys high and again has no internal staircase. The castle itself is inaccessible and much ruined, its origins dated to 1290. No great tower remains, so what was its relationship with the very impressive Tour Montreal? Various theories were of course on offer. Below the town, which stands on a cliff above the river, stands one remaining side of a fortified bridge where road and river routes intersected. Also originally 13th century, its defences were added by Gaston Fébus (Fig. 6). Of the town walls there remained one gate and stretches of curtain. In all, Sauveterre offered a fascinating glimpse of the process of development of urban settlements and lordly power through the 13th and 14th centuries while leaving modern students to question why what has every appearance of a great tower located quite separately from the compact remains of the castle.

The next visit was a great contrast. St Jean Pied de Port was a Navarrese town close to the Pyrenees which had once been visited by Richard Lionheart. Apart from a small Gothic church, there stood only a gate and length of town wall of medieval date. The castle has disappeared. Over the whole stands a massive Vauban citadel now used as a college.
The castle of Mauléon-Licharre (Fig. 7) stands above a valley. Mentioned in the 12th century, it belonged to the viscounts of Sarles and was captured by Simon de Montfort in 1249. Following a history of repeated captures and recaptures it finally became French in 1449. In the 17th century the medieval towers were lowered and rebuilt. Long before, it had been a motte with two baileys. It too was an interesting mix of different periods.

Bellocq was a bastide founded in 1280 with a castle created under Gaston VII (the line of Gastons started again at I following the Foix merger) between 1250 and 1280. In form a large irregular stone enclosure standing alongside the river Gave de Pau, it was, according to our (compulsory) guide a purely military site and had been influenced by Gaston’s experience of Catalan architecture. The castle boasts seven towers. The rectangular gate tower has a portcullis, a chimney and decorations and a floor inserted later. All of the towers were circular and extended far from the curtain wall. One that could be accessed had a fine sexpartite vault and two construction phases, the first attributed to the 1250s and the second to Fébus (Fig. 8). The castle had been partly demolished by Louis XIII after it had been used in a Huguenot revolt in 1620. Richard Eales pointed out both that the castle had previously been even more defensible when the ditch was deeper and the river higher, but also that Gaston VII had entertained Edward I there so there must have been domestic and residential functions as well. The bastide, however, had no market and served a military and administrative function.

Orthez formed the centre of the lordship of Béarn for centuries. It is made up of four separate (but connected) defensible bourgs built from the 1240s on. In form a large irregular stone enclosure standing alongside the river Gave de Pau, it was, according to our (compulsory) guide a purely military site and had been influenced by Gaston’s experience of Catalan architecture. The castle boasts seven towers. The rectangular gate tower has a portcullis, a chimney and decorations and a floor inserted later. All of the towers were circular and extended far from the curtain wall. One that could be accessed had a fine sexpartite vault and two construction phases, the first attributed to the 1250s and the second to Fébus (Fig. 8). The castle had been partly demolished by Louis XIII after it had been used in a Huguenot revolt in 1620. Richard Eales pointed out both that the castle had previously been even more defensible when the ditch was deeper and the river higher, but also that Gaston VII had entertained Edward I there so there must have been domestic and residential functions as well. The bastide, however, had no market and served a military and administrative function.

Orthez formed the centre of the lordship of Béarn for centuries. It is made up of four separate (but connected) defensible bourgs built from the 1240s on. At the highest point stands the great château Moncade protected by a nine-sided ditch and two concentric walls with a gatehouse (now disappeared), the whole originating in a large motte. As at Sauveterre it is proposed that Fébus added the top to an existing two storey tower (the very top floor was
removed and replaced in the 19th century). The entrance to the tower had a rather unusual form, consisting of a door at first floor level reached through the attached residential block which preserves the footings of a grand entrance stairway along its side. The tower itself has a prominent projecting beak (Fig. 9).

The town is also known for the magnificent fortified bridge possibly sited at an earlier ford, first built in timber, replaced in stone by Gaston VII then rebuilt by Fébus (Fig. 10).

Morlanne was another site combining castle with fortified village church. It stands on what was for a time the northern frontier of Béarn. It has been a base for castellans since the 1230s and in 1373 Fébus gave it to an illegitimate half-brother. The castle has the form of a brick-built irregular heptagon on top of a large motte containing ranges of buildings set against the curtain on five sides, a gate-tower described as the donjon (Fig. 11) and another, smaller gate. Much of the castle was restored by its owner in more recent times. Excavation of the site exposed that there had been a circular donjon of the 12th century in what is now the courtyard and the main doors are said to be 14th century.

In the village the church of St Laurent had a 13th century clock tower but the fortification had been carried out by Fébus. A defensive walkway ran around the inside of the chevet and three gun loops were visible.

Lescar had been a Roman bishopric and had an early 12th century cathedral (Notre Dame) rebuilt in the 17th. Numerous fine capitals and a mosaic could be inspected. Of the town defences there remained a 14th century gate, one wall tower and a stretch of curtain. The towns of Oloron-Ste-Croix and Oloron-Ste-Marie stand on opposite sides of the river and are both medieval. The first has a Romanesque church and remains of a defensive enclosure, and a small urban tower (de Grède) which was unfortunately closed. The second has a fine, fortified Romanesque cathedral (Ste Marie, Fig. 12). The square 12th century pilgrimage church of St Blaise was also visited, in which the vault seemed to have had the same Spanish influences as that of Ste Croix.

En route to this attractive church the group visited the town of Navarrenx. Founded origi-
nally in the 11th century with a count’s castle, it had become a bastide in 1316, and in the 1530s was provided with a magnificent and still extant example of 16th century artillery fortification by a Veronese engineer (Fig. 13). The sad fragments of the once substantial medieval castle are outside the circuit on a small promontory site and it was best understood via the model reconstruction in the interesting town museum.

The magnificent and palatial castle of Pau reflected its importance as a home for the later kings of Navarre and future French king Henri IV was born here. The castle stands on high ground between the Gave de Pau and a stream and has seven towers (Fig. 14). Much of the masonry is medieval but it has been heavily rebuilt. Three towers including the donjon were built by Fébus to join the two of older date and two were added in the 19th century. Fébus’ donjon was of brick and stands 33m high. The original entrance was replaced by the current one in the reconstruction and there are no fewer than five gates now. The donjon is the largest of the towers.

The town of Morlaas was in the vicomté of Montaner and was an early capital of Béarn and boasted a church of 1100 with fine carvings on its façade. It had been restored. The castle at Montaner itself stands on a height above river and village and comprises an oval curtain wall reinforced with a rectangular buttress at each change of direction, and an immense donjon (Fig. 15). This tower is the tallest in the region at 36 metres. The courtyard was once occupied by a range of domestic buildings with a cistern in the middle. The donjon, reached by a drawbridge across the ditch, also had a portcullis. The tower was added by Fébus because the castle stood on his frontier with the rival Armagnac dynasty. Begun in 1375, it was completed in five years. Entry was through a narrow door from the wall walk at second floor level. The whole castle was built of brick, reflecting an absence of good building stone. The castle was badly damaged during the wars of religion and some questionable restoration was undertaken in the mid-20th century. The nearby church of St Michel contained splendid wall paintings dating from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries.

Fig. 10. Orthez - The fortified bridge.

Fig. 11. Morlanne and gate tower.
Beaucens (Hautes Pyrénées) was in the lordship of Bigorre. The remains of a castle that dated back to the eleventh century were modernised and a donjon of modest size was built possibly in 1400, to add to the tower built at the opposite end of the inner of two baileys during the previous century. Access was via a succession of four gates leading through the much weaker outer ward. The free-standing donjon was entered at first floor level (Fig. 16). The site had suffered both 17th century damage and modern attempts at restoration.

In the town of Luz-St.Sauveur (Hautes Pyrénées) stands a remarkable fortified church (Fig. 17) perhaps inevitably called Templar but with defences actually dating from long after their suppression – it was a gift to the Hospitaliers in 1362. The church inside the defences, which march around it very closely, was 12th century. There was debate about its function as its small size made it unsuitable as a refuge. One suggestion is that it might have been used as safe storage for the goods of local citizens. Reached by a steep path above the town stand the ruins of the small castle of Ste Marie (Fig. 18), the centre of a lordship and first documented in 1278. It had been built by the counts of Bigorre but between 1360 and 1404 was held by the English.

The tour then stopped to visit the Cistercian abbey L’Escaladieu dating from 1135-42 with substantial baroque and later additions but preserving the medieval church and chapter house.

Mauvezin (Gers) (Fig. 19) stands on a tall hill and was the main centre in Bigorre first mentioned in 1083. Held by a cousin of Fébus from 1341, it was captured by the French from English occupiers in 1373 but passed to Gaston six years later. It was built on a motte with two baileys but had a stone enclosure by the 1100s and an early donjon inside, the foundations of which were unearthed in 2014. The present great tower was erected by Fébus but it was still unfinished a dozen years after work began in 1379. At 37 metres it is as impressive as any of its contemporaries. The castle has been turned into a faux-medieval theme park complete with one-third scale siege engines for children to play with and plenty had turned up to do so.

The final destination was Lourdes (Hautes Pyrénées). The castle stands high above the
The Castles of Gaston Fébus

Fig. 14. The magnificent and palatial castle of Pau. Birthplace of French king Henri IV. The 14th century donjon is the brick tower on the right.

town and for long served as a base for pillaging during the 100 years’ war. First mentioned as early as the 11th century, it faced many sieges but was never captured. It underwent massive rebuilding in the 19th century but it is possible to distinguish Fébus’ great tower (Fig. 20, 21) and gates. Fébus had secured the castle (after the French had failed in a siege) by doing a deal with the then occupants, English brigands, who had been there for 46 years. It contains an excellent local history museum. Below in the town there remains one of the towers of the town wall, the tour de Garnavie, 16 metres high with first floor entry, dating from the 13th century.

By the end of the tour, participants had learned much about the history and architecture of a distinctive region, at the time largely independent of its large neighbours France, Navarre and English Gascony, and particularly about the distinctive castle-building style of the vicomtes of Béarn. The most successful of the medieval line (the family tree also leads to one of France’s significant monarchs, Henri IV) was Gaston Fébus and his castle building owed much to the skills of one of his subjects, Sicard who was lord of Lordat, a castle in Foix visited on the previous tour. Sicard was one of that select group of aristocrats who was also an engineer and architect and is known to have played a major part in the work at Montaner, Morlanne and Pau.

If the immense great towers that characterised the vicomte’s castles, all with very deep basements and entry at a great height from the ground, were evidently suited for a number of functions including sending out highly visible statements of power, Gaston’s castles also served a range of political purposes facing rival lordships and occasionally being called upon for military roles: the defences arranged around the great towers were real and some included provision for gunpowder weapons, still in their infancy when his rule began. Gaston’s success as a ruler was matched by an interesting private
Fig. 15. The castle at Montaner.

Fig. 16. Beaucens donjon.

Fig. 17. The fortified church in the town of Luz-St.Sauveur. Entrance through the gate tower(left).
The Castles of Gaston Fébus

Fig. 18. ABOVE: The ruins of the small castle of Ste Marie above Luz-St.Sauveur.

Fig. 19. BELOW: Mauvezin (Gers). Note the gate on left of great tower, (modern) houuds above, and reconstructed medieval crane in front of door.
life, including expelling his wife and suspicion of the murder of his son. Like other medieval rulers he was fascinated by hunting and wrote his own treatise which survives in many manuscripts. The chronicler Froissart’s account of meeting him is well known: how he spent the day hunting, and would expect his court to join him for dinner each day at midnight.

The later history of the region was disturbed by major wars. First, with south-west France being a stronghold of Protestantism, the wars of religion of the 16th century were violent, with the castles often among the (non-human) casualties. Then the wars between France and Spain saw the creation of massive modern fortresses by Vauban. The ending of these conflicts left the castles to decay until modern restorers turned their sometimes unhelpful attention to these medieval sites. Happily, enough survived to richly repay visiting and study.

(Note: unless otherwise specified, all the castles named are located in the département of Pyrénées Atlantiques.)

Dr Peter Purton, January 2016.