

## A little history

## In the beginning, the Durolle barred the way.

The known history of Thiers begins in the lower town, on the left bank of the rushing river, where the valley widens towards the plain.

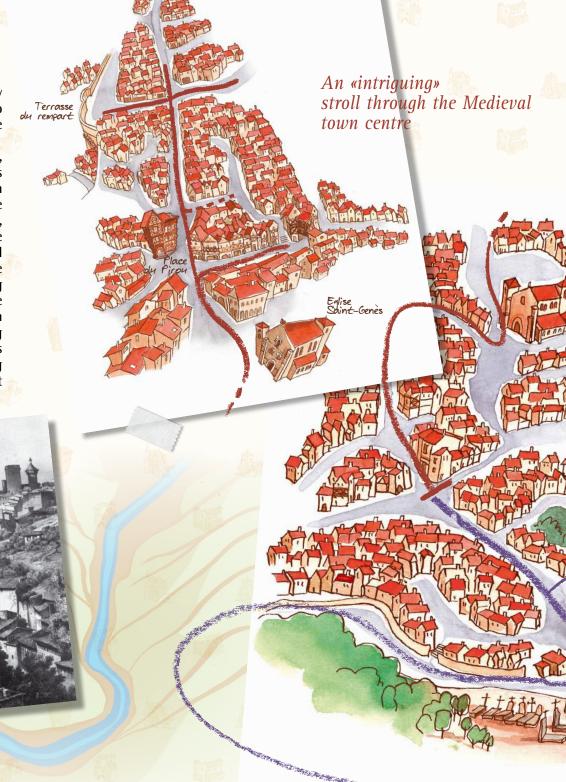
A Merovingian town, probably already famous for its fairs, grew up around a church that housed the relics of Saint Symphorien. Destroyed in the first half of the 6th century, Thiers was rebuilt, expanding outwards onto the rocky spur on the right bank. This defensive choice drove the growth of the Medieval town.

While the original site close to the water's edge was governed by Cluny,

the upper town organised itself around the Saint-Genès church and the feudal castle of the lords of Thiers. At the meeting place between the Auvergne and the Forez, an obligatory route between Lyon and Clermont, the lords of Thiers were able to forge alliances, thus ensuring their independence.

This spirit of resistance is probably what gave the people of Thiers (also known as the Bitords) their unique rebellious character.

From the early 14th century onwards, the development of new techniques helped tame the Durolle river. From rugged, agricultural beginnings, the town turned its face to the future, ushering in the industrial age. The ancient «cloth treading hammer» and tanneries gradually gave way to the development of the metal working and paper manufacture industries. The town built a solid industrial reputation based on its outstanding manufacturing skills and expertise. Over time, Thiers developed into a flourishing trading post, exporting its goods throughout Western Europe and the Americas.



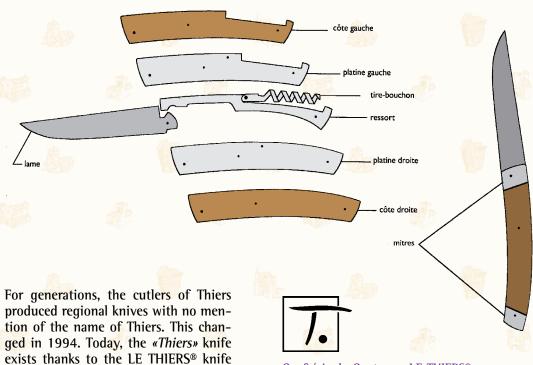
#### «Romantic» walks through the Vallée des Usines



## Knife-making industry

Thiers is still the French capital of the knife-making industry, the life-blood of the town which currently manufactures nearly 70% of the cutting tools produced in France. During the 20th century, however, these skills (in working metal and horn) also allowed the town to diversify into other crafts and industry sectors, mainly in the fields of forging (car parts, surgical prostheses, surface treatments, etc.) and plastics processing.

A particular feature of the Thiers cutlery industry was, and still is, the design and manufacture of a multitude of regional knives, the most famous of which is perhaps the «Laquiole» (named after a village in the Aveyron). By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most farmer's knives in France came from the workshops in Thiers. At that time, the cutlery town was in the midst of an industrialization phase. Increasing demand for folding knives by the working classes generated large orders that the small local manufacturers could not satisfy. This spurred them to turn to the Thiernois factories which produced nearly 50 different models of regional knives. Regional knife generally bear the name of a territory (the Corsican, the Montpellier, the Rouennais, the Laguiole, etc.), or that of their inventor, such as the «Pradel».



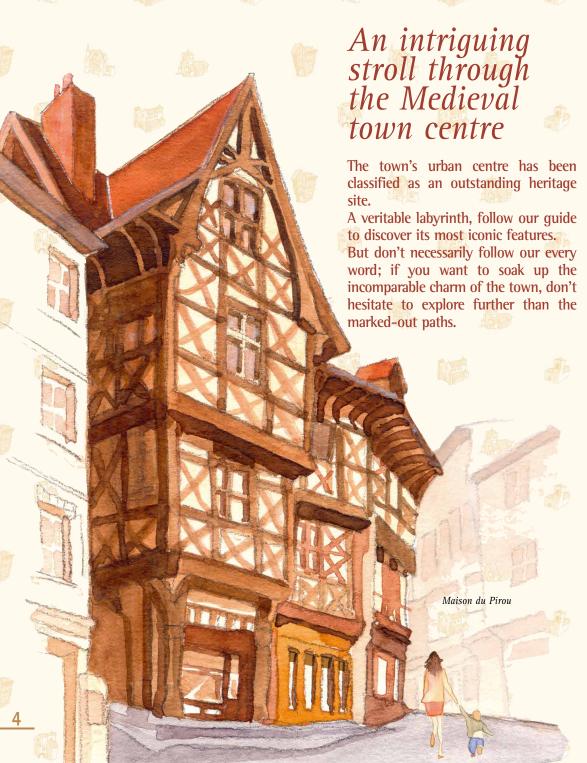
guild and is distinguished by its profile,

its name inscribed on the blade and its

hallmark (a «T» inscribed in a square).

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#### A Place du Pirou

Overlooking a steep slope, this small square is bordered by the picturesque Maison du Pirou (15th century), in front of which justice was administered.

This building houses the tourist information office. Built in the 15th century by the Duke of Bourbon, the elegance and sophistication of this house, with its high, flat-tiled roofs, bears witness to an impressive history.

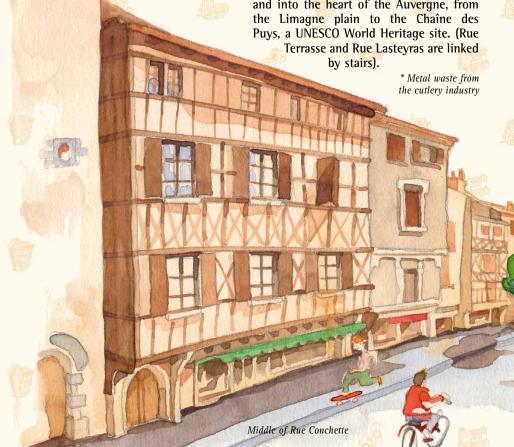
### B Rue du Bourg

South of the Rue Terrasse, the Rue du Bourg, which is older, was originally part of the large perimeter wall built in the 12th and 13th centuries.

At No. 10, a flamboyant Gothic door made of Volvic stone, framed by pinnacles and surmounted by a tympanum decorated with curly leaves and coats of arms, marks the threshold of a rich noble's house. The llot Mercière is one of the recent sites in the conservation area. The colourful Medieval half-timbered houses preserve the district's historical heritage. The floor of the square is inlaid with decorative châtilles\* that resemble cutlery.

### Terrasse du rempart

This belvedere, one of many, offers spectacular views over the town and its surrounding landscape. The panorama here extends over the lower reaches of Thiers and into the heart of the Auvergne, from the Limagne plain to the Chaîne des Puys, a UNESCO World Heritage site. (Rue Terrasse and Rue Lasteyras are linked by stairs).

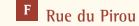


## D Rue Conchette

Taking its name from the fountain (the conche) that used to flow here, this street forms part of the great wall built around the town in 1410 by Louis II of Bourbon. In the 16th century, it was the preferred place of residence of the grand merchants of Thiers, evidenced by the private Renaissance stone-faced manor houses at Nos. 10, 12, 14, 18, 19 and 29, the architecture of which resembles certain buildings in the historic town centres of Clermont-Ferrand, Riom and Lyon. At Nos. 18, 19 and 29, just push open the doors to enter the inner courtyards of these opulent homes, occasionally adorned with galleries and tower staircases.

### E Rue Alexandre Dumas

Rue Alexandre-Dumas is one of the city's ancient streets which ran along the outside of the second wall of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the houses of which on the western side were built right up against the wall. It was situated 8-9 m lower than the inner-town Rue du Transvaal (natural landscape); the relics of two of the wall's towers can still be seen in the street.



Narrow and lined with high facades, Rue du Pirou offers a lovely view of the pedde du Coin des Hasards (15<sup>th</sup> century), an architectural feature in Thiers which gives it a rather Florentine atmosphere. The pedde is a main building (here with carved woodwork) that spans the street, allowing people to move discreetly between two facing buildings.

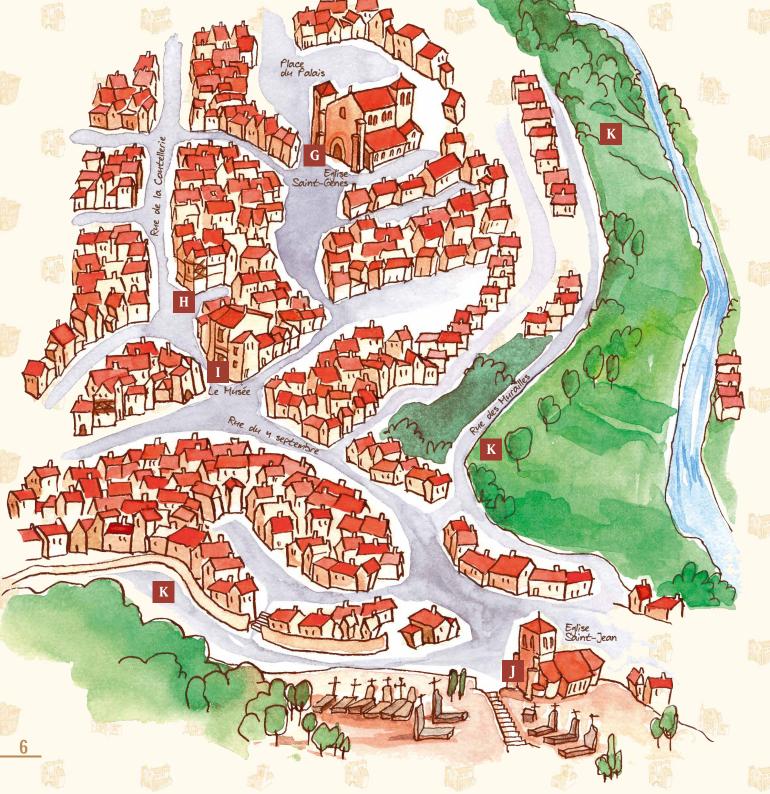
The Coin des Hasards is built on the site of an ancient fortified gate dating from the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century. Some people say that its unusual, rather poetic name refers to an ancient meeting house.... Was it in response to this unusual place that the Maison des *Sept Péchés Capitaux* (House of the Seven Deadly Sins) was named a century later? This house, with its listed façad, is another fine example of the town's timber-framed architecture.

The corbelled upper floors are supported by beams whose sculpted ends are said to represent, from left to right, sloth, anger, envy, gluttony, lust, avarice and pride.









#### **G** Eglise Saint-Genès

Dating back to the earliest days of the upper town, this imposing basilica was built in the 6th century under the episcopate of Avitus (571 - 594), as a homage to the martyr Genès who was beheaded on a rock overhanging the Durolle. An important place of pilgrimage, it was rebuilt in the 11th century, before being extended with chapels. It houses a mural «Christ in majesty» in the vault of the apse. Built directly on the rock with no foundations, it has the widest nave and the largest Romanesque dome in the Auvergne. During work on the church, fragments of a 12th century mosaic were discovered. The sole example in Auvergne of a pre-Romanesque mosaic of Byzantine inspiration, it comes from the church's porch and depicts Christ with lions in black and white tesserae.

#### H Rue de la Coutellerie

All along this route, you will see colombages\*, and also some unusual decorations of secular inspiration. Taken together, these historic details all combine to create the intriguing atmosphere that makes the historic centre of Thiers so interesting to stroll around.

At No. 12, the façade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century house is punctuated by a series of ogival arches topped with geometric motifs. The small columns crowned by flowery niches once housed statuettes that have now disappeared.

At No. 14, the first-floor façade is formed of a horizontal strip of cut-out wooden crosspieces decorated with scallop shells and human heads. Below this, a set of 5 canopies cross the façade vertically. Atop the small columns sit 6 small figures (5 men and 1 woman) whose humorous, even slightly naughty, postures put a smile on the face of passers-by...

At No. 21, the façade of the Maison de l'Homme des Bois (15<sup>th</sup> century) has a curious decor. Above a horizontal strip decorated with monstrous figures, a figure in bas-relief covered with an animal skin and leaning on a stick whose sculpted pommel represents a head raises questions. Is it Saint Christopher? Saint John the Baptist? An alchemist? A representation of wild man? Or maybe a symbol of the tanners' guild? As yet, no one has managed to unravel its mystery.

<sup>\*</sup> col<mark>ombag</mark>es: half-timbered hous<mark>es w</mark>ith a wooden crossbeam structure, filled with cob



#### I The Museum

The Musée de la Coutellerie (Cutlery Museum) is located at No. 23, the ground floor of which still looks like an ancient cutler's shop (as does the adjoining one). You can continue to explore the history of Thiers' knife-making industry at No. 58 in the same street, in the *maison des échevins\** built of andesite and arkose stone.

It takes some sixty-odd different operations to make a knife, sixty rows, as they say here.

The proposed tour, of two sites, and then the Vallée des Rouets, introduces you to a meticulous skill, explaining its language, its prodigious creativity, as well as the history of a people, experts in the field of fine metallurgy.

Ancient and modern collections, film projections, scenographies and entertainment give a glimpse of the passion shared by the people of the mountainous Thiers region for this exquisite craft whose development and outreach still surprise historians and economists to this day.

\* échevins: aldermen, municipal councillors under the Ancient Regime

# The Saint-Jean district (church and cemetery)

Located on a flat area at the end of a rocky spur on which is built the Eglise Saint-Genès and the Medieval quarter, the Eglise Saint-Jean was rebuilt in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the late Gothic style to serve the **windustrial**» part of the town.

The Passet, an ancient name, refers to the path that walkers still take today to go down from the Saint-Jean district towards the Durolle valley. In Rue Daguerre, at the level of the church's chevet, the cannon openings and the beginnings of a pointed arch are clearly visible. These defensive elements confirm the presence of a gate at this place in the fortifications built in the 15th century. The massive bell tower with its buttresses would appear to be part of the town's defence system. The Saint-Jean cemetery, which stands against the walls of the old church, was created in the 1830s following the abolition of the Saint-Genès cemetery. What could be more romantic than this setting, that has inspired so many landscape artists.

You can wander through the alleys and explore the graves of the cutler families of Thiers.

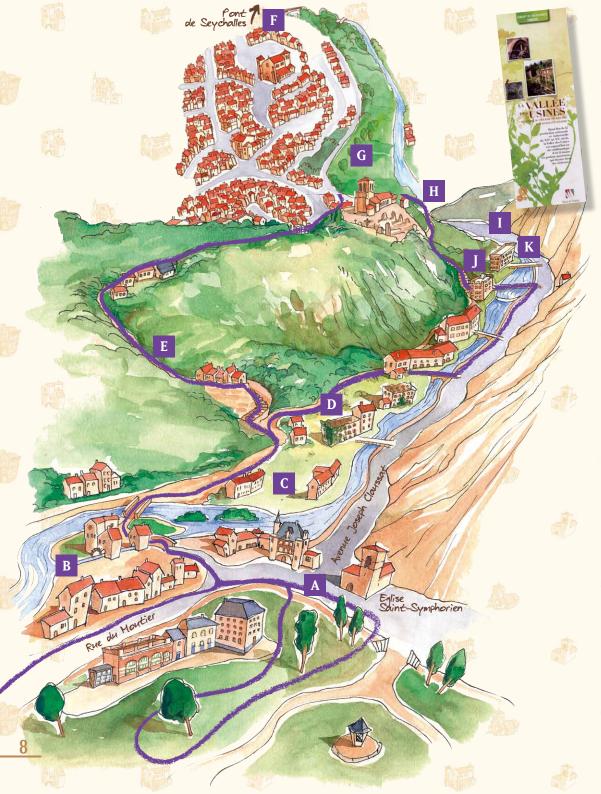
Musée de la Coutellerie 58, rue de la Coutellerie – 63 300 Thiers Tel.: +33 (0)4 73 80 58 86 musee-coutellerie@thiers.fr www.ville-thiers.fr/musee-de-la-coutellerie

# K Rue Anna Chabrol and Rue des Murailles

Rue Anna Chabrol, together with Rue des Murailles, are former *patières\** lying under the town walls, laid out as a path so that, for reasons of hygiene, the rags destined for the paper mills did not pass through the town centre.

You will see numerous knife-making workshops (large glass windows) built behind the Medieval houses. Most of these workshops date from the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the arrival of electricity enabled workshops to be built further away from the river (motive force) and integrated into the homes of the craftsmen.





## «Romantic» walks in the Vallée des Usines

These walks, which offer breathtaking views of the rugged peaks and sheer cliffs of Thiers, go up the Durolle river, from the Moutier district, following the route of the town's industrial history. Nowadays almost silent, the Valley des Usines, the former beating heart of the Thiers region, offers an atmosphere imbued with a certain romanticism.

#### The Durolle river

For almost a thousand years, the Durolle river was Thiers' main highway. It was also a  $Styx^1$ , if you consider that its rushing torrents run right through what people in Thiers refer to as the Creux de L'Enfer, at the bottom of which the devil, among other torments, took delight in using the dreaded wheel.

The taming of the river and its banks by means of weirs and biefs<sup>2</sup>, locks and dams, sluices and access roads, constituted a formidable challenge in itself. This alone amply justifies Thiers' motto *«le travail vient à bout de tout»*<sup>3</sup>.

- (¹) The Styx: in Greek mythology, it is the largest of the rivers of the underworld; its waters made people invulnerable
- (2) Bief: a channel used to divert water
- (\*) « le travail vient à bout de tout»: Work conquers all in Latin, Labor omnia vincit / motto taken from two lines in Virail's Georgics.

#### Industrial development

After the grain and oil mills, after the tannery fulling machines, came the time of the hammer mills¹ and the first grinding mills². The first signs of a knife-making industry date back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. But how?

The question is open to discussion; while the town had access to hydraulic power and charcoal from the surrounding forests, it had neither metal ore nor the sandstone quarries necessary for the manufacture of millstones. No matter though!

Despite the rugged terrain and difficult supply routes, raw materials nevertheless got through; iron ore from the Dauphiné and millstones from the Haute-Loire. The skill of the Bitords provided the rest and Vulcan, grand master of the forges, beat the iron directly by the Durolle for nearly six centuries!

The fame of Thiers, a knife-making town, soon spread beyond the borders of the realm, with the Bitord merchants exploiting every historical opportunity to export their goods to far-off countries, from Latin America to the Mediterranean Levant, from Southern Europe to Africa.

By 1855, up to 20,000 people were employed in knife-making, together with *taillanderie* (the manufacture of forged tools for carpentry, cabinet making, farming, etc.), the production of chisels, razors, tableware and a host of other, related, activities. In the same year, there were 80 factories along the river, while in every surrounding farm, horn, ivory and precious wood were worked in the workshops, before being assembled and polished.

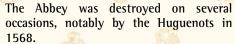
- (1) Martinet: iron drawing mill
- (2) Rouet: grinding mill

#### The Moutier district (Church, Orangerie, Abbot's residence)

The Moutier district (around the monastery) is intimately linked to the history of human activity on the banks of the Durolle. The gatehouse of the abbot's residence, framed by two towers connected by a wooden gallery, dates back to the 15th century.

Grégoire de Tours tells us that «in this castrum there was a church dedicated to Saint Symphorien, martyred in Autun in the year 200 AD». Very quickly, the religious community was placed under the rule of Saint Benedict. In the 11th century, Guy II, Viscount of Thiers, restored the Moutier Abbey and handed it back to the monks. After this, it was further extended and placed under Cluniac control, while retaining the title of Abbey because of its age and importance.

Logis abbatial



In 1707 a terrible flood ruined the monastic buildings, leaving only the Abbey house itself standing.

In 1882, the Moutier church was partially restored, and the chancel and two bays removed. The Orangerie, in the Moutier district, opposite the church and the Abbey house, was built in the 19th century by the Sabatiers - a family of cutlery manufacturers. The complex included a bourgeois house, a park of just over one hectare and an «orangery» built in 1877, used to store the palm trees, citrus trees and other Mediterranean plants that lined the property's wide driveways.

The Parc de l'Orangerie became famous and, in 1994, was converted into vast public park. In its luxuriant green setting, you can see many large trees dating back over a hundred years, as well as several remarkable species.

#### B llot Navarron

Although most have been converted to serve the cutlery industry, you can still see a paper mill similar to those depicted in old lithographs on the banks of the Durolle, in the Moutier district.

The mill housed the entire paper manufacturing process on its two stone levels topped by a timbered floor used as a drying rack: rags were kneaded with mallets driven by a hydraulic wheel and a camshaft; sheets were formed from the resulting pulp, drained and de-watered under a press, then dried under a roof where the circulation of air was controlled by a system of sliding shutters.

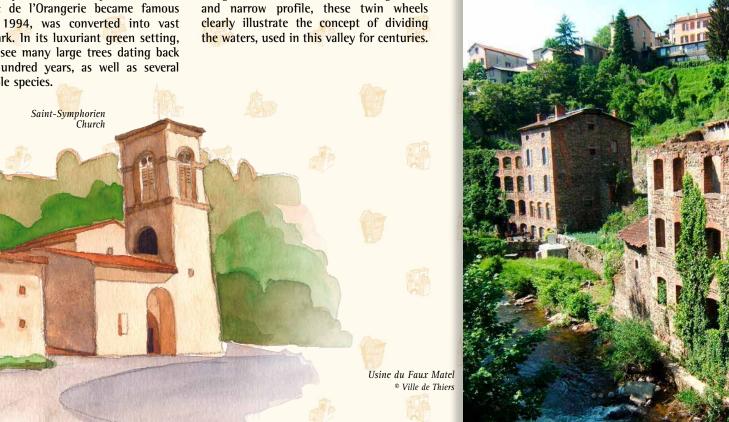
The mill wheels harnessed the energy needed to operate the machines. Perfectly designed to fit the river's flow, gradient

## The Crospailhat property

used to be an important industrial site. Before 1860, this former paper mill was taken over by the cutler Sabatier, who exported knives for professionals that became globally renowned for their outstanding quality.

#### The Usines du Faux Martel.

with their granite walls and brick-framed windows are characteristic of the industrial buildings of the late 19th century. These buildings were erected on the site of former grinding mills (rouets), of which they have retained the hydraulic fittings.

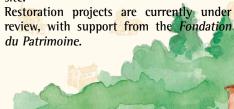


#### E The Chemin des Rochers

marks the route along which raw materials were transported, as well as the roads used by hundreds of workers before the present-day road was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Carved into the rock face, this path illustrates an uncommon focus on adapting to the site's steep formation and offers a plunging vista over the Vallée des Usines.

# F The Usine du Pont de Seychal,

known as the «liner» because of its shape, was one of the largest paper mills in Thiers. Around 1870, even bank notes were printed there. Around 1902, it was purchased by the prestigious *Société Générale de Coutellerie et Orfèvrerie*, later specialising in stainless steel cutlery. Built into the riverbed, the main building comprises vast workshops illuminated by openwork façades. The elegant slate-roofed street-side building housed the administrative services and marked the entrance to the site.



#### G The hospital gardens

The hospital and its chapel were established by royal decree in 1668. The ancient chapel was rebuilt between 1830 and 1837, adding a Volvic stone façade. This former hospital still has the gardens below it, although there are plans to convert them into a playground.

#### H The Usine de la Croix de Fer

was one of the two production units of the Wichard company, world leader in marine fittings. This former paper mill, which was in operation until around 1885, was then converted to a cutlery factory. It was at this time that the old timber racks were destroyed and replaced by stone walls. The building owes its name to the elegant old wrought iron fleur-de-lys cross (visible from the bottom of Rue Daguerre).



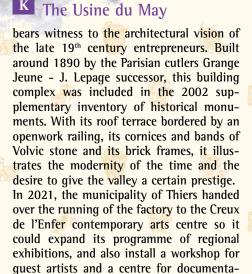


L'usine du May

Established in 1901, the Mondière Forges specialised in the manufacture of table knife blades. Despite its modest size, this company supplied both cutlers in Thiers and nationally renowned silversmiths such as Christofle, Colliot and Caput. When the factory closed its doors in the 1980s, everything was left in place: machines, tools, parts in process, blue work overalls, helmets, gloves. All of which bear witness both to the technical skills and the memory of the workers.

#### To the «Bout du monde»

You can continue this walk by taking the dead-end street at the place known as "Les quatre chemins", which leads to the "Bout du monde" and the Vallée des Rouets. You can also join the Vallée des Rouets walk, which is less strenuous, by taking the N89 to the places known as Le Grand Tournant, La Roche Noire and Château-Gaillard.



#### J The Usine du Creux de l'enfer

tion and archives.

This site, converted into a contemporary art centre in 1988, was originally a grinding mill, already documented as far back as 1476. It shows evidence of several phases of reconstruction, testimony to an industrial, social and architectural history that has evolved over several centuries. You can still see certain relics of these past eras in the art centre today.

#### The Creux de l'Enfer, national contemporary arts centre

The Creux de l'Enfer was created in 1988 in an exceptional industrial building overlooking the Durolle river. Labelled a building «of national interest» in 2019, the arts centre supports visual artists in their research as well as in the production and distribution of their works.

It is a place of experimentation that promotes the development of often unpublished works by renowned or emerging artists, thus creating the conditions for fruitful exchange with people from all backgrounds. Drawing on a wide variety of influences, navigating the Creux de l'Enfer defines a project that is at generous, intense and convivial.

In 2021, the Creux de l'Enfer expanded into a showcases new projects in close collaboration with local actors.

Practical information:

Open from Wednesday to Sunday from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. during the exhibition period. Free admission. Find out more: +33 (0)4.73.80.26.56 info@creuxdelenfer.fr

https://www.creuxdelenfer.fr/fr/



seeks to introduce people to contemporary knife manufacture and all its 21st century innovations. Established through a collective effort by the municipality of Thiers, the Fédération Française de la Coutellerie, Esprit de Thiers, the Confrérie du couteau LE THIERS®, several company directors and cutlery craftsmen, it provides a space for information and communication that aims to promote the modernity and high-tech nature of cutlery production in modern-day Thiers.



#### Symposium of monumental sculptures in metal

Thiers has hosted several monumental works of art since 1985, celebrating a thousandyear-old metalworking culture, an alliance between industrial manufacture and contemporary artistic design. The symposium of monumental sculptures in metal, which brought together six internationally renowned sculptors (Michel Gérard, Dennis Oppenheimer, Patrick Raynaud, Vladimir Skoda, George Trakas, Yves Guérin), as well as two groups of designers (Totem and Sowden-Du Pasquier), combined the past and present, offering them both to the future).





To name just a few...

Prosper Marilhat (1811 - 1847), the orientalist painter was entranced both by Egypt and by the region of Thiers where he was born.

**Eugène Isabey** (1804 - 1886) took his first steps in lithography with his Voyage en Auvergne du Baron Taylor, which shows a view of Thiers: the Saint-Jean district.

Achille - Etna Michallon (1793 - 1822) rediscovered his enchantment with Italy at the foot of the Margeride, seeing Thiers rising up like a «Castello romano», of which he left a dozen or so studies.

Edmond Tudot (1805 – 1861) prepared 60 of the 144 figures making up the Átlas de l'Ancienne Auvergne et le Velay, with one view of Saint-Jean and another of Pirou.

Michel Goutay (1804 – 1858) painted Thiers all his life, exhibiting at the Salons in Paris between 1827 and 1848.

Louis-Jacques Daquerre (1787 - 1851) ), precursor of the photographic era, celebrated Thiers in his diorama from 1827.

Théodore Rousseau (1812 – 1867) left paintings of Thiers on display in the Louvre and the Lisbon Museum.

L'écrivain George Sand (1804 – 1876) dedicated her novel «The Black City» published in 1861 to the town of Thiers.

Chronicler and novelist Alexandre Vialatte (1901 -1971) lived in Thiers and wrote about it.

François Truffaut (1932 - 1984) was inspired by the town's steep streets in his film «L'argent de poche» released in 1976.

Jean Anglade, the famous author born in the Auvergne, whose many books are often set in his home region.

Thiers also appears in Yann Queffélec's novel «Le maître des chimères» published in 1990.





## CHARMING TOWNS AND VILLAGES IN THE LIVRADOIS-FOREZ

he Livradois-Forez Regional Nature Park boasts a rich historical heritage. Its towns and villages form a hierarchical network of communities with complementary activities that include tourism, farming, forestry, crafts and industry.

This spatial organisation of functions and activities dates back to the Middle Ages and, since the 14th century, has produced an attractive and even remarkable urban architecture. The Livradois-Forez Regional Nature Park supports communes in their efforts to promote the discovery of these lovely town centres.



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Tourist Office - Parc naturel régional Livradois Forez www.vacances-livradois-forez.com info@parc-livradois-forez.org

## USEFUL ADDRESSES

Maison du tourisme du Livradois-Forez

Bureau d'information de Thiers Hôtel du Pirou 63300 Thiers Tel: + 33 (0)4 73 80 65 65 contact.thiers@vacanceslivradois-forez.fr







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- COUTELLIA

  Art and traditional knife trade show:
  mid-May
- 13 Km thiernois
  Footrace that goes straight through our
  picturesque old town, between narrow
  streets and avenues, slopes and steep
  climbs an unmissable regional sporting
  event: beginning of June
- PAMPARINA
   Street music festival showcasing a wide range of musical trends with around 40 free concerts over 3 days, bringing together over 30,000 festival-goers at each edition: early July
- Foire au Pré Large autumn fair: early September
- Marche Thiers/Roanne
  The popular 70 km night walk: early
  December

#### Vallée des Rouets

Not far from Thiers, in the Durolle gorges, you will find the Vallée des Rouets. A wild place haunted by the spirit of the ancient cutlers. Here, the Durolle has carved out its bed in the granite mountain. For over three centuries, the cutlers settled on its banks to harness the formidable energy of the rushing waters. They laid out paths, developed the banks and built grinding mills called rouets. Today, you can follow marked paths to explore the lives and work of these proud and independent people: the knife grinders.

Guided tour of the last working mill; combined ticket in July and August including a visit to the Cutlery Museum.

Information: +33 (0)4 73 80 58 86.