

Louveciennes: The Three Lives of the Château de Voisins

ATM Stories – Always Telling More by BNP Paribas – the podcast that goes behind the scenes to bring you some little-known stories about the bank. Those moments that have shaped the character and culture of a 200-year-old group, to be enjoyed anywhere and at any time!

Behind the discreet gates of the Château de Voisins, in the small town of Louveciennes, lies a vast park, somewhat frozen in time, sheltered from the hustle and bustle of the capital. Today, *ATM Stories* invites you to step inside and retrace the successive lives of this estate and its singular destiny.

Let's begin by skirting around the Château de Voisins. This leads us to a vast lawn, beyond which lies a 23-hectare park. The tranquility that reigns here serves as a reminder that we are at a comfortable distance from Paris—about twenty kilometers, to be more precise. As people used to say: the city in the countryside, and the countryside in the city.

But the location of Louveciennes offered another advantage, at least in 1650 when the first Château de Voisins was built: its immediate proximity to the estates of Versailles and Marly. In the middle of the 17th century, Louis XIV made the former the center of absolute power and the latter a retreat when he sought to escape from the oppressive weight of court life. In other words, Louveciennes became a privileged place, close to both the court and the capital, and within the orbit of the Sun King.

Let us continue our stroll. At the far end of the park, near the small Château de Bellevue, a terrace opens up onto a sweeping view of the Seine Valley. If one could look back in time, one would glimpse, toward Bougival, a spectacular structure extending over the river: the Machine de Marly. Commissioned by Louis XIV in 1680, this structure made it possible, for over a century, to pump water from the Seine in order to supply the basins, cascades, fountains, and other aquatic fantasies of the parks of Versailles and Marly. This technical feat profoundly shaped the landscape and brought fresh impetus to the entire region.

In 1696, about thirty years after its construction, the Château de Voisins gained real renown when it became the property of the Marquis de Cavoye, a childhood companion of Louis XIV. It then passed from hand to hand by way of aristocratic alliances until the French Revolution, gradually shifting from the nobility to the bourgeoisie. The estate expanded and was transformed. At the end of the 19th century, the Château de Voisins was rebuilt, larger and more modern. Its privileged location attracted writers and poets, and salons opened. The estate thus became a place for both leisure and culture.

Now that we have set the historical context explaining the vast park, the sumptuous buildings, the outbuildings, and all the charms of what might be called 'château living,' let us turn our attention to the sports facilities scattered throughout the park.

From the 20th century onward, the estate abandoned its role as a private residence and embarks in a second life. In 1946, after its occupation by German forces during the Second World War, the Château de Voisins was purchased by the Compagnie Immobilière Française,

a subsidiary of the Banque Nationale pour le Commerce et l'Industrie (BNCI), which would later become BNP.

The world was still echoing with the shock of the war, and France was relieved to set out on the path of what would later be called the *'Thirty Glorious Years'* (*les Trente Glorieuses*). This spectacular development of the country was accompanied by a profound social transformation, particularly in the field of work. The ordinance of February 22, 1945, by mandating the creation of works councils (*comités d'entreprise*) in companies with more than 50 employees, marked a major turning point as, from then on, these councils were responsible for managing social and cultural activities."

At the BNCI, this new social policy will notably be structured around sport, seen as a vector of both individual and collective well-being. Louveciennes, with its vast park and privileged location, was chosen as the epicenter of this policy: *"a retreat for leisure, but also a haven for work and reflection,"* as was stated in the October 31, 1974 issue of *Dialogue*, preserved in the BNP Paribas archives.

Within a few years, the park was transformed. Tennis courts sprang up like mushrooms. A football field appeared, soon followed by stands, locker rooms, and showers for the athletes. Football was played, of course, but athletics also flourished, thanks to the track surrounding the field, the jumping pits, and the throwing areas. Not to mention volleyball, basketball, table tennis, and even pétanque—played on a separate ground, away from the excitement of enthusiastic sportspeople.

Indeed, leisure and culture formed the second pillar of the social programs established by the BNCI. Thus, guests could also enjoy mini-golf, practiced with a customary sense of amateurism. Film screenings were organized, as well as dance evenings and even control-line flying demonstrations set up by the aviation section.

Activities multiplied, the park came to life, and Louveciennes became a true community hub for the bank's employees.

In 1962, the BNCI was named the most athletic company in France, and received the Coupe Jean Potin at the offices of the sports newspaper *L'Equipe*. The bank regularly organized "Inter-regional Challenges" to foster competition between its various sports sections across the country.

An issue of *Dialogue* dated 1974 listed the impressive number of football competitions held within the year: *"In a single season, from October to June, more than 80 matches were played on our fields."*

However, with all due respect to football fans, tennis held center stage at Louveciennes. With a little digging, one can still find no fewer than 13 tennis courts scattered around the estate today. In 1973 alone, more than 100 tournament or championship matches took place here. Henri Cochet, one of the famous *Four Musketeers* of French tennis, even came to the estate to train future competitors! And on Saturday afternoons, it was the children's turn to receive free group lessons.

Indeed, for the management of the BNCI, it would have been a shame for the Louveciennes estate to be restricted solely to bank employees. That is why, from the very beginning, the park welcomed families on weekends and during summer vacations.

As the October 1974 issue of the BNP magazine *Dialogue* described it: *"If you come here on a sunny weekend, you will suddenly find yourself immersed in the children's corner. You will*

then have to watch out for young cyclists, roller-skating specialists, and, if you approach the paddling pool, you will have to beware of the splashes caused by the playful antics of young swimmers”.

And let us not forget the importance of Thursdays. In the France of the 1950s, more and more women were entering the workforce, and childcare could often be a challenge. To ease the burden on parents, the BNCI set up a day-care center open every Thursday—before Thursdays eventually became Wednesdays.

At the same time, the Louveciennes estate opened its doors to another activity essential to the balance of a company like the BNCI: professional training. The Châteaux of Bellevue and Voisins were repurposed to host seminars and meetings. Forty guest-rooms were added to facilitate the venue of employees from outside the Paris region.

Meetings were organized to balance availability among the various departments, yet demand never ceased to grow. In the September 1992 issue of the BNP magazine, Guy Lapomme, then Secretary General of BNP, summed up the situation as follows: *“BNP’s own training programs—that is, continuing professional development—have expanded considerably due to the upheavals that have transformed our profession and our work organization.”* Not to mention the massive arrival of information technology at the end of the 1980s.

This evolution naturally led Louveciennes toward its third life. In 1989, the management of the BNP decided to expand the estate's capacity by building a new training center. The architectural firm received a specific mission: transform the site while altering the estate as little as possible, as the Château de Voisins is classified as a historical monument (*monument historique*).

Thus, a new infrastructure was born, built underground and partially hidden by the slope of the terrain. A hotel with 173 rooms, a 450-seat restaurant, facilities capable of hosting nearly 500 people, and a 200-space underground car park were created, remaining almost invisible around the Château de Voisins. In 2010, the Louveciennes estate was officially renamed Campus. It now welcomes not only bank employees but also partners and any organization wishing to take advantage of this unique setting for a seminar.

Today, Louveciennes has changed its function, but not its spirit: it remains a place conducive to reflection and daydreaming, away from the hustle and bustle of the capital. Although training has become its primary activity, families continue to come on weekends. Children play in the park, people enjoy the sports facilities or simply stroll for the pleasure of being there, in this 23-hectare park where oaks stand alongside beeches, fir trees, and walnut trees.