# Bessèges in the industrial era : the Lalle district

Piémont cévenol nord




Parcours patrimonial de Lalle (Office de tourisme Céze Cévennes)




## Explore the mining history of Bessèges, a true "boom town" born of the growth of the mines. This first section explores the Lalle district.

This heritage trail takes you into a remarkable industrial saga : the lives of the miners, their tools, the main stages of the mining operations... up to the 1861 disaster, which claimed 106 lives. Ten panels created by pupils of the Collège Le Castellas (lower secondary school) in 2024/2025 punctuate the walk and offer a vivid reading of the landscape and its past.

### Useful information

Practice : Discovery trails

Duration : 1 h

Length : 0.9 km

Trek ascent : 19 m

Difficulty : Very easy

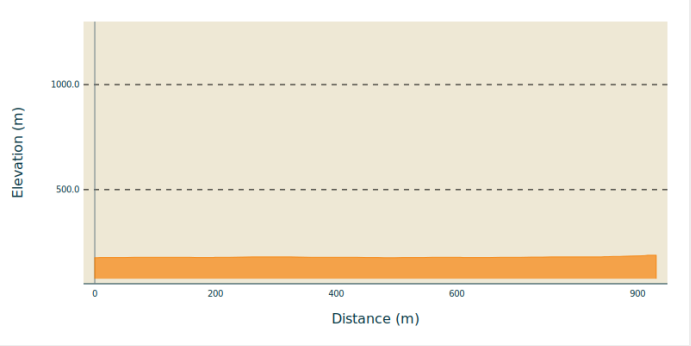
Type : There-and-back

Themes : History and culture, Water and geology

# Trek

**Departure** : Place Jean Jaurès (in front of the Hector Malot elementary school)
**Arrival** : rue Jouguet (Stade de Lalle)
**Markings** : découverte PNC
**Cities** : 1. Bessèges

## Altimetric profile




Min elevation 176 m  Max elevation 189 m

# On your path...




The Lalle district (A)
The baths (B)
The mine flooding (C)
The Cèze, a transformed valley (D)
The workers' entrance (E)
The lamp room (F)
The ceremony of 13 April 1862 (G)
Rue Ferrer (H)
Around the Sainte Hortense shaft (I)
The Terret shaft (J)

# All useful information

## How to come ?

Access

From Ales by RD904 and RD51 or from Génolhac by RD17 and RD156.

Advised parking

place Jean Jaurès et devant la Poste

## Information desks

**Tourism office CezeCévennes, Bessèges**
14 rue de la République, 30160 Bessèges
ot.besseges@gmail.com
Tel : 04 66 25 08 60
https://www.tourisme-ceze-cevennes.com/

## Source

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http://www.ceze-cevennes.fr/

# On your path...



## The Lalle district (A)

The Lalle mining concession was created on 30 April 1828 and, until the mines closed in 1946, had many owners and operators. Covering 406 hectares, it was the origin of the development of Bessèges on the left bank of the Cèze. In 1858, an imperial decree created the commune, which by 1861 had 7055 inhabitants. The population kept growing until 1881, when it peaked at 11404 inhabitants. The hamlet of Lalle was attached to the commune in 1864. By the 1930s, working the concession was no longer profitable. It was nationalised in 1946 and the activity was finally abandoned.

Attribution : MIAOU



## The baths (B)

The Lalle district had a small bathhouse. The building still stands and can be recognised in the few surviving photographs of the period. Even today, a street is called "chemin des anciens bains". The baths were small, and the upper floor was reached by an external staircase. The water was heated with coal, and a large chimney carried away the smoke from combustion. In the context of the mining town, the development of "hygienism" was linked to growing awareness of industrial pollution. Advances in medicine at that time convinced the authorities to ensure healthy conditions in urban areas. It was in this context that municipalities opened public baths and that bathtubs became more common.

Attribution : PNC



## The mine flooding (C)

On 11 October 1861, at around 3.30 pm, a flood struck the Lalle mine during a violent Cévenol episode (an intense Mediterranean rainstorm). The floodwater suddenly seeped into the galleries. Of the 142 miners present, only 26 managed to get out, notably via the Terret shaft. Witnesses described the water rising as fast as a tide. Five miners were rescued the same day. Five others were saved later: two had stayed underground for two days. The last three survived fifteen days in the flooded mine. All spoke of their faith, of quenching their thirst with water from the pit, and of total darkness. While underground the survivors lay alongside the dead, on the surface families gathered and rescue efforts were organised.

Attribution : PNC



## The Cèze, a transformed valley (D)

The landscape of the Cèze valley was completely transformed by industrialisation over almost two hundred years. On the left bank of the Cèze, upstream of Bessèges and the Lalle district, a large slag heap (crassier) changed the landscape. From 1867 it received waste from the metallurgical and steelmaking industries on the right bank. A wagon cableway carried the slag to the top of the heap. The waste was then used as infill to create the level areas needed for industrial installations, such as the coke ovens located not far from the footbridge. Building tunnels was also essential to cross torrential ravines. These "covered streams", civil engineering structures designed to carry away rainwater and runoff, are still numerous in Bessèges.

Attribution : PNC



## The workers' entrance (E)

The "workers' gallery", also called the "descenderie" (inclined tunnel), was the main access to the Lalle mines. The gallery was 1.20 m wide and 1.80 m high. Dug into sandstone, it was lined with masonry. Down this sloping gallery, the miners descended and reached level 50. The cross-cuts (travers-bancs) allowed workers to move from one site to another. The galleries were dug with picks by miners known as "rock miners" and cut horizontally into the rock. Those opened in the coal seam were the work of the "hewers" (piqueurs), who brought down the coal. They were generally propped with pine timber, chosen because it creaked, giving warning of an imminent collapse. Support was provided by the "timbermen" (boiseurs), who installed and replaced the timbers holding up the roofs and walls.

Attribution : Gascuel



## The lamp room (F)

Lamp attendants must hand out to the miners going down clean safety lamps that are filled, lit, locked and with all their parts in perfect condition. Lamps must be returned systematically to the lamp attendant on the way back up. Lamps thus served as the miner's "identity card": with them, it was possible to check who was below ground or on their return. If, depending on the shift, lamps have not been returned, the lamp attendant must immediately inform the master miners, who decide what measures to take.



## The ceremony of 13 April 1862 (G)

A small circular building, known as the "collapse shaft", now stands on the spot where the floodwaters of the Long and the Castellas poured through a breach, flooding the mine in October 1861. The ground suddenly gave way under the weight of the water, opening a passage to old galleries that had not been backfilled, only 17 metres below the surface. The disaster claimed 106 victims. A metal cross commemorates the tragedy. The ceremony, civil and religious, was only held on 13 April 1862. It was particularly solemn: nearly 8000 people attended, when Bessèges had about 7055 inhabitants.



## Rue Ferrer (H)

The commune of Bessèges was created on 1 January 1858 by imperial decree from the communes of Robiac, Bordezac and Castillon de Gagnières. The town had 5 750 inhabitants and reached its peak in 1881 with 11 404 inhabitants. It is an example of a "boom town" of the Cévennes coalfield. Housing had to be found for the new residents working in the mines, the iron and steel industry and the metalworking industry. Streets typical of mining towns appeared, such as rue Ferrer, which in the 19th century was called "la route de Lalle". The mining companies owned much of the housing and land in the Lalle district, in order to keep the workforce in place. Thus in 1914, the Compagnie des Mines de Lalle owned 48 houses on rue Ferrer.



## Around the Sainte Hortense shaft (I)

The Sainte-Hortense shaft was "sunk" (dug) in 1853 and put into service in 1857 at a depth of 80 metres. It was used to extract coal by day and to drain water by pumping at night. It was powered by a 50 CV steam winding engine. Around 1875, it was deepened to 313 m. The original wooden headframe was replaced by a metal headframe. The Sainte-Hortense shaft ceased operating in 1924. Its headframe was dismantled and sold to the Compagnie des Mines d'Aniche, then re-erected over a shaft at the Notre-Dame pit at Waziers (Nord), where it remained in service until 1977. From the 1930s, the industrial wasteland was reclaimed and a stadium was built. But it was not until 2001 that the site was finally made safe.



## The Terret shaft (J)

The Terret shaft was "sunk" (dug) from 1853 and put into service in 1857, at the same time as the Sainte Hortense shaft. It takes its name from Mr Terret, who in 1853 was director of the Société des Fonderies et Forges de la Loire et de l'Ardèche. It was then 180 m deep and equipped with a 50 CV steam winding engine and a wooden headframe. Around 1875, the shaft was deepened to 230 m and completely re-equipped. The wooden headframe was replaced by a fine metal headframe made of lattice girders, visible in photographs from the late 19th century. In October 1861, during the disaster, the Terret shaft allowed miners to be evacuated and rescuers to reach the flooded galleries.

Attribution : PNC