



The Jesuit Chapel of Saint-Jacques of Aire-sur-la-Lys

THE EXTERIOR

The chapel is a tall rectangle, fronted by a facade which is a little higher than the roof. It has a rounded apse. The walls are pierced with large windows. The buttresses protrude slightly. It is built of sand stone at the base with brickwork above, and white stone at the corners.

The white stone facade divides into three levels : a huge window at the second level illuminates the length of the nave. The escutcheons display the arms of the Caverel family and the dates 1688 and 1837 (the army had used the chapel from 1795 to the latter date). The upper level consists of a pediment, framed by reversed corbels. The pediment is surmounted with a cross, recently replaced.

THE INTERIOR

- A single nave concluding in a rounded apse is accompanied at the entrance to the choir by two chapels, one on either side. Together they offer the impression of a transept.
- seven bays, each eight metres long of which four constitute the nave.
- a semi-circular arch.
- a crypt intended for the fathers who died in Aire. Nothing remains of the old furnishings. The present fittings date from 1853 (put in hand by the priests of Saint-Bertin). They include :
- the altar, the stalls, the chandeliers, and the throne were installed in 1853.
- the Glory, which replaced the altar piece at the end of the apse, is the work of Magnard (1858).
- the windows, the work of Mauret, are modern.
- a pieta (late nineteenth century) once decorated the tomb of the abbot Debras in the cemetery of Aire. It is now, happily, housed in the chapel.
- fourteen carved panels in gilded wood and dating from the eighteenth century are among the only truly old fittings. They came from the collegial church. Four baroque statues in stone of Saint Jacques, Saint Ignace, Saint Pierre, and Saint Jean are also of the late eighteenth century.

This building is the chapel of a former college of Jesuits, active in Aire between 1615 and 1762. After their departure, the chapel experienced mixed fortunes. The faith and determination shown by the town enabled it to escape destruction. The achievements of the Committee of Protection, established in 1975, has brought a new youthfulness to the chapel.

Its construction was delayed by warfare until 1682, but the foundation stone was laid and blessed by the Bishop of Ypres on 28. June. Brother Jean Beegrand, Architect and sculptor for the Society of Jesus, supervised the construction. He was to be responsible for numerous Jesuit churches, including the collage chapel of Cambrai. The necessary funds had been assured thanks to a legacy from Marie and Therese de Caverel and gifts from the people of Aire. The project was also helped by the patronage of Francois de Montmorency, Viscount of Aire, who had entered the Society of Jesus. The chapel was finished in 1688 and dedicated to Saint Jacques the Great and Saint Ignatius Loyola.

The architects of the Society had had more than a century of experience in designing and building chapels and so one finds at Aire a strict adherence to the principles of the Jesuits. They may be summarised as follows :

- art must demonstrate the faith and guard against all frivolity
- the building must be welcoming and accessible to all
- the altar must be the focus of attention and the faithful must be able to see the priest from all parts of the building.

The chapel of Saint-Jacques is a monument most characteristic of the Netherlandish baroque. It was classified as a historic monument in 1942.

Its exterior dimensions are :

- length overall : 58 m
- width : 15 m
- height of the facade : 33 m
- height of the arch of the nave : 21 m.

