



Aire sur la Lys





Aire-sur-la-Lys

A town on the river Lys

Aire-sur-la-Lys is strategically placed in the lowlands between the Mountains of Flanders and the Artois hills. The layout of the town has been influenced by its many rivers, of which the Lys and Lacquette wander between the houses.



A place of heritage and history

The tower of the collegiate church of Saint-Pierre and the watchtower (the Belfroi) are focal points to be picked out on the horizon. They draw attention to the town's role as a historical centre. The town's houses, also its religious, military and commercial buildings, contribute to the special identity and history of the town.



Its natural surroundings

The marshes, woodlands and ponds which mark the surrounding countryside are manmade. Without losing their agricultural identity, these varied landscapes are also open for the observation of fauna and flora in their natural habitat, and for fishing and rambling.



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The history of a town

A « new town »

Aire was born out of the political ambitions of the Count of Flanders, Badouin II, who wanted to consolidate his principality. Thus its origins were similar to other strategically placed Flemish towns. Among them are Lens, Béthune, Lillers and Douai. The ducal château was built around 900AD and together with the foundation of a collegiate church made for a secure and attractive place where a town could and did develop.

A mercantile centre

The town experienced a rapid growth in the Middle Ages, thanks to trade and crafts which were encouraged by the presence of the Lys, even then a navigable river. The market, a space dedicated to trade became the centre of the town. Its character was defined round a central area of Rue de Saint-Omer - the Grand'Place - Rue d'Arras.



A prosperous town

From 1237 to 1384, Aire was a fortified town belonging to the counts of Artois. Then Aire became a Burgundian possession on the death of Louis le Male («the Manly») in 1384, and it became a pawn in the game of marriage alliances and inheritances under the Hapsburgs. Commerce, largely aided by the transshipment of goods on the Lys, flourished. Was not therefore the joyful entry of the Emperor Charles V into Aire in 1549 to be seen as a rare and unparalleled occasion ?

The secular government of the town

The *burgenses*, the bourgeois or townsmen, established their own traditions which shaped their relationship with the Duke, and between the inhabitants (mutual support, etc.). These customs were gathered and set down in what is known in Aire as the Charter of Friendship (Lex Amicitiae). This charter received ducal approval in 1188. And when a urban secular government, detached from the Duke's authority, was set up, new buildings began to appear : a covered market, a town hall, a watchtower. The town made for itself symbols of a new, urban power.

A link in a chain of fortifications

The wars of Louis XIII and Louis XIV were about the return of Artois to the kingdom of France. They were concluded by the Treaty of Nimegue (Nijmegen) in 1678 and it confirmed the return of Saint-Omer and Aire to the bosom of France. The military position of Aire, a link in Vauban's second line of defence, was strengthened by a clever use of water from the river, controlled by a system of sluices and water-gates. These fine defensive works, however, could not prevent the capture and destruction of the town in 1710 by the coalition forces (English, German, and Dutch) during the War of Spanish Succession.

Aire, a French town

Reintroduced into France by the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), Aire began to be rebuilt in a classical style and following a precisely laid-down town plan. The appearance of the town has changed. The classical architecture of the rebuilt houses in the Grand'Place were made to harmonise with the new Town Hall. The more modest houses were from then on aligned with the streets and adopted a design for their façades which were noticeably classical in their regularity and uniformity.



Changes in the XIX^e et XX^e centuries

The dismantling of the fortifications at the end of the nineteenth century permitted the growth of boulevards along the line of the old town walls where industries new to the town grew up (breweries, a gasworks, a foundry, a sawmill). The opening out of the town to the country was seen as a key to the future and a sign of modernity. Yet the town

remains to one side of the great regional upheavals and, today, is at the centre of a group of communes, numbering around 15 000 inhabitants. Aire-sur-la-Lys is attached administratively, culturally, and from the point of view of tourism to the locality of the Audomarois.



The Grand'Place

A market place

A vast triangular space, the Grand'Place was always where merchandise and goods were exchanged. As the economic heart of the town, it drew to itself the magistrate's hall, the headquarters of administrative power, and the watchtower, symbol of communal freedoms.

The Bailliage



Inaugurated in 1600, the bailliage was built as the guard-house for the town militia. At the same time and not without difficulties between the powers, it served as the bailiff's* court which continues to give the building its name today. As a building, the bailliage is heir to the medieval Flemish tradition. Its exterior is characterised by a covered walkway or gallery, the canopy of which is set on eight monolithic pillars with heavy

pedestals. The first-floor façade rests above the ribbed and arched vaults of the gallery. The façade has wide barred windows with distinctive cross-pieces. But it is the sculptured decorations which catch the eye. From the horizontal frieze, where coats of arms and insignia of the Golden Fleece stand out, to the tritons over the windows ; from the Virtues and the Four Elements, semi-reclining in Attic poses, to the carved niches of the main façade ; the principal motifs and decorative themes of the bailliage are largely inspired by the Italian Renaissance. Classified as a historical monument in 1886, the bailliage has undergone many restorations. Its central position, «at the doorstep of the town», and nowadays, its role as the Tourist Office, makes it a required stop for all ceremonies, celebrations, and processions.

* The bailiff is an old name used to designate the Official of the royal law. It corresponds today to the magistrate.

The building of a new town hall and watchtower

After the return of Aire to France in 1713, the magistrates of the town set out the steps for the royal authorities which were required for building their new town hall. Completed in 1721, it was built according to the design of an architect from Arras, Heroguel. Its classical façade gains its rhythm from its colossal pilasters, wide vertical bands, jutting out from between the openings. The emphasis is stronger in the central part where the openings are bigger. The main window was given a symbolic balcony for issuing proclamations. The classical decor blossoms in the topmost part : a powerful pediment with the arms of the town, enhanced by cornucopia. It is surmounted by figures representing Justice and Power, rising from the balustrade, and coats of arms and braziers with

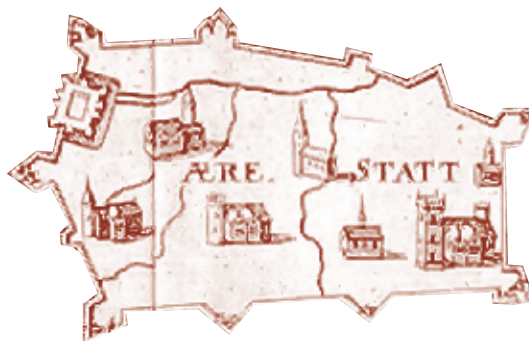
stone flames.

The watchtower, built of brick and stone and also designed by Heroguel, rises from behind the Town Hall. The two buildings are linked by the Salle de Loup which in olden days housed the valuable documents of the commune (acts of establishment, seals, etc.)

The creation of an architectural unity

In 1722, the magistrate imposed a restriction on the growth of the town which gave the Grand'Place a new look. The façades were to be adorned with pilasters, according to the example of the Town Hall in order to form an architectural whole, intended as an affirmation of magisterial and monarchical power.





Religious architecture



The collegiate church of Saint-Pierre

Established in 1059 by Baudouin V of Lille, the construction of the early collegiate church at Aire was begun from the end of the eleventh century. Rebuilt around 1492, it became a permanent building-site until the middle of the seventeenth century. Although the collegiate church of Saint-Pierre looks to have an architectural unity, it has had

an eventful history. Gravely damaged by the sieges of 1641 and 1676, it was ruined by that of 1710 when it lost its vaults, high windows, and the upper storeys of the tower.

In the nineteenth century, Monsignor Edward Scott, a rich dean, returned the church to «its ancient glory» by giving it luxurious wall painting, a coloured marble flooring, and a remarkable collection of church furniture (pulpit, rood screen, and decorative grilles for the side chapels). Deprived of the eastern end of the church in a bombing raid in 1944, the renovation of the collegiate church still has to be completed.

The wounds of war are slow to heal.

The collegiate church of Saint Pierre is the most important example of the Flamboyant style in our region, and in spite of reconstructions and restorations, it retains its original design and so its architectural unity is genuine.

Among the masterpieces found inside are a seventeenth century organ (1633) which came from the Abbey of Clairmarais and a Fresco (1594) telling the story of the disciple of Saint Jacques, his transfer to Aire by Philippe d'Alsace in 1166, and the miracles which followed.



The former Jesuit college and the chapel of Saint-Jacques

Recognised by Pope Paul III in 1540, the Company of Jesus was set up to propagate and defend the Catholic faith. Dedicated to education, the Jesuits set up foundations which rapidly became a great success in what is known as the Counter-Reformation. The towns of Douai, Cambrai, Saint-Omer in the sixteenth century and Aire in the following century were endowed with Jesuit colleges. The college buildings of Aire, established in 1639, were associated (from 1688) with a church under the protection of Saint-Jacques. The building, in baroque style, was financed by the gifts of numerous benefactors and built to the designs of Jean Begrand.

The suppression of the Jesuit order in 1761 led to the chapel becoming a possession of the



community. Initially it was put at the disposal of the army which stored explosives and animal fodder in it. Then it became a military riding school, and was only reopened as a church after negotiations between the municipal and military authorities. At the back of the apse, a monument sculpted in 1858 by the local artist Magnard symbolises the return of the chapel to its place among the cultural edifices of the town.



The church of Saint-Quentin-les-Aire

Reworked and enlarged in the sixteenth century, the church of the village of Saint-Quentin-les-Aire acquired characteristics of the Flamboyant movement. The nave has a star-shaped, vaulted roof. The design of the openings became more complex. Under the eaves are sculpted motifs of pagan origin mixed in with allusions to quaint and often farfetched fables and folktales.



The waterside

The Lys and its tributaries

A river which crosses frontiers, the Lys, 214 kilometers long, flows into the Escaut at Ghent.

A long arterial route, the river was from the tenth century a more important waterway for carrying goods than the Scarpe. In Aire other streams join the Lys. The Lacquette crosses the town, running from south to north, while the Oduelle and the Mardyck flow through the outlying districts.



The wetlands

Numerous marshes, tongues of land surrounded by water, extend to the edge of the town. These green landscapes, marked by willows, ashes, alders, and poplars, provide shelter for a typical fauna. Lapwings, little owls, mallards, grey herons, rabbits and hedgehogs cohabit in these unstable lands in an uneasy hierarchy. To the north of the town, ponds, the results of the extraction of stone for ballast, have created a natural reserve of 109 hectares. Huge lakes surrounded by a semi-aquatic vegetation offer a special site for bird-watchers and a paradise for fishermen.

From defence...

The presence of water around the town has influenced the story of its defence. The confluence of the Lys and the Lacquette provides a tongue of land which was a natural barrier against intrusion. The topography determined from the eleventh century the position of the Count's *castrum*. The construction of water-based defences reached its highest level of sophistication in the seventeenth century under Vauban : any siege was disrupted by the judicious release of water which, otherwise held back by a system of sluices and reservoirs, would flood the countryside around the town.

... to industrial settlement

The town quais, that is, the navigable section of the Lys between the Grand Moulins (mills) and the water-gate, represented since the Middle Ages, the place where commerce and industry settled. The nineteenth century, marked by a rapid and unprecedented development, saw the establishment of breweries, a tanning-works, basket-makers, a saw-mill, and a foundry, all along the banks of the Lys. These enterprises marked the character of the town forever through their characteristic industrial architecture.



Amusements

Water-based festivities and pastimes occur throughout the year. On the first Sunday of July, the Festival of the Lys encourages everyone to revisit the «Bassin de Quatre Faces» (with four sides) through musical and sporting events. Fishing competitions and organised walks offer a chance to discover a special environment. Finally, the moorings for pleasure-boats, a little-known facility, proudly reveals its charm and friendliness.





Cliché C. Thériez



Festivals and traditions

Lydéric and the foundation of the town in legend

According to a sixteenth century chronicle, Lydéric, the renowned woodsman of Flanders, after his great battle with Phinaert, became the founder of various city settlements, among them Lille, Aire and Bruges. The Bridge of the Castel over the Lacquette in Aire is the supposed surviving remnant of his castle, built by himself on a small island. Thus it is his memorial. Tradition recounts, moreover, that the mighty woodsman and his wife, Yonne, daughter of the King Clothaire, were buried in Aire in 692. Their tombs were thought to be visible in the collegiate church until the sixteenth century. Following loyally in the Flemish tradition, Aire possesses a legendary giant, along the lines of Lydéric. His working effigy is wheeled out for the festival of the andouille (a local sausage) on the first Sunday in September.

Appetisers

Each locality has its specialities ; Aire has its sugared mastelles (sweet biscuits) and its sausage (the andouille) which are praised by gourmets.

The andouille of Aire is the jewel of the local gastronomy. It can be enjoyed cooked, raw or smoked. It is made by the *charcutiers* (pork butchers) of the town as an aperitif, or as an hors d'œuvre, or cooked in a soup or a stew.

In the nineteenth century, Cyrille Faes unveiled the recipe for the mastelle, a biscuit made with almonds, sugar, and orange-flower water. The recipe is perpetuated by only one *patissier* in Aire at number 15, Grand'Place.



The pottery of Aire

The making of earthenware was a necessity for the town from the Middle Ages. At the dawn of the fourteenth century, of the six known potters, three were in the Rue de Brabant. This craft established on the banks of the Lys, survived until the middle of the nineteenth century. Encouraged by the town in 1714, the most important ceramics factory in Aire produced a highly-fired crockery in imitation of that of Rouen, Lille and Saint-Omer. Manufacture continued until 1789 when it suffered from outside competition and the loss of its main vendor, Jean-Jacques Dumetz.

The procession of Notre-Dame Panetiere (lit. Bread-basket)

In 1214, the town, under siege and starving, received a convoy of corn. Seeing this as a sign of divine intervention, the population of the town promised that the Virgin Panetiere should become the protector of the town, an unusual veneration. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the brotherhood of the same name commissioned a statue of a Virgin of the Assumption to grace her chapel in the collegiate church of Saint-Pierre. Pulverised in the bombing of 1944, it was painstakingly restored and placed in the transept. Today the veneration of Notre-Dame Panetiere is alive and her nine days of celebration represent a special moment of renewal.

The traditional markets

Throughout the year, the picturesque and welcoming markets enliven the streets and squares of Aire sur la Lys. The Friday morning general market, the live animal market, the Christmas Market at the end of December, the flower market, and the town open day, the latter two occurring on the first and second Sundays of May, are above all moments to experience the conviviality of the town.



