



# The watchtower (beffroi) of Aire-sur-la-Lys

1724 : the end of the rebuilding at a cost of 97,000 livres.

1872 : a small fire in the beffroi caused by lightning. It was restored exactly as before.

1914 : another fire in the beffroi. Only the campanile and the wooden parts of the interior were burnt. The clockwork, the carillon and the two big bells collapsed onto the vault of the Salle du Loup, situated on the first floor (below). From this time the role of guetteur was discontinued.

1923 : the rebuilding of an identical beffroi, according to the plans of an architect of Bethune, Jacques Alleman. The repairs were paid for by the town because the beffroi had not yet been classified as a historic monument.

1947 : the beffroi is classified as a historic monument.

2005 : the beffroi is classified as a world-wide monument by UNESCO.

## CHARACTERISTICS

The watchtower of Aire-sur-la-Lys is in effect a tower of the Town Hall. Both were built in the baroque style. It was built at the same time as the Town Hall to which it adjoins and with which it connects. The beffroi was built, according to Heroguel's plans, to a height of 30 *toises* (roughly equal to a fathom), that is about 58 metres. It rests on four huge supports of brick and stone two metres thick.

It has seven levels :

The ground floor is the Salle du Loup ; access is from behind the Town Hall. Most of the town archives are on display or stored there.

At the second level a passage in the thickness of the west wall gives access to the attics of the Town Hall.

On the third is the revolving drum for the tunes of the carillon.

On the fourth are two huge bells which replaced the Ban cloque (1925) and the Vigneron (1926).

On the fifth is the rack of the fourteen bells of the carillon. The total weight is 2,500 kg and the most imposing of the bells weighs 260 kg and the smallest 26 kg.

On the sixth are the four iron axles which turn the gilded hands of the clock faces.

The seventh gives access to the interior of the bell-chamber, a vast octagonal room, lit by eight big windows. To get there you have to climb 236 steps !

The construction of the first watchtowers in the region coincided with the emergence of a communal movement which led to the rise of towns in the eleventh century. The commune run by its representatives became known by its municipal seal or the right to a bell. Rapidly, the communes wished to provide a proper tower with which to compete with the donjons of the castles and the steeples or bell-towers of the churches.

The beffroi fulfilled multiple tasks. It served as the watch tower. The sentry of the town, the *guetteur* with his horn, sounded the alarm in the case of fires and warned the inhabitants of the approach of an enemy army. The bell, the " *ban cloque* ", rang the hours. The burghers and the town councillors met in the beffroi. It served as a prison and the town charters, seals, and treasure were kept in a strong room there.

1179 : the construction of the first " *cloquier* " (ancestor of the beffroi).

1355 : construction of a hall and a second " *cloquier* " of wood to overlook the town. The governor of Artois gave permission for a *ban cloque* to be built in order to regulate the hours of workers.

The charters, seals, and other municipal treasures were housed inside.

1372 and 1405 : the beffroi was destroyed in town fires.

1447 : the reconstruction of the beffroi in stone and brick ; it was given a second bell, " *Le Vigneron* " which rang closing time for places of evening entertainment.

1625 and 1705 : works to repair the beffroi.

1708 : the beffroi collapses.

1710 : the town is besieged and much of it destroyed during the War of Spanish Succession.

1713 : Aire is returned to the Kingdom of France in the Treaty of Utrecht.

1715 : Louis XIV gives his approval for the rebuilding of a new beffroi.

1716 : the reconstruction of the beffroi as it is today was begun according to the plans of the King's architect, Jacques Heroguel.



[Visits : Saturdays at 3.00 pm from April to September. In July and August, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 3.00 pm. Further information and bookings at the Office of Tourism, tel. 03.21.39.65.66]