

History

Three centuries of history

In December 2005, Lorient was awarded the prestigious title of Town of art and history. Uniquely for Lorient: all the periods of its history and the whole 1 700 hectares of its territory are covered by the award. This is the first modern town to have obtained the award in these conditions.

It is recognition of Lorient's heritage but also of the town's efforts to raise its population's awareness of architecture and town planning.

Creation

In 1664, Louis XIV authorised the creation of the French East India Company to develop trade with Asia and in particular the profitable spice trade. In 1666, the head office of the India Company set up in Port-Louis, at the confluence of the river Scorff and the river Blavet. The history of Lorient really starts with the creation of the Le Faouëdic shipyards. Two frigates and a 1 000-tonne ship, the Soleil d'Orient, left these new yards that attracted farmers and workers. The Soleil d'Orient, more commonly known as L'Orient, An Oriant in Breton, gave its name to the burgeoning town. Spices, teas, fabrics, silk, lacquers and porcelain from the "Indias" made the fortune of the India Company and the shipbuilders. In 1719, the

financier John Law founded a new India company, which, due to its monopoly on trade between mainland France and Africa, colonies in Louisiana and the Antilles, the Indian Ocean and the China Sea, ensured an era of great prosperity in Lorient until 1769. The town became the exclusive market for colonial products and the nerve centre of ship building. The loss of certain colonies however, led to the bankruptcy of the India Company (1769). The shipyards were converted into an arsenal in 1770. Lorient became a military port in 1791. The “Port of the Indias” chapter had come to a close. In the XIXth century, the French Navy were facing the technological challenges of steam engines, propellers, iron and armour plating. Thanks to its arsenal, the Navy realised a great many “firsts”: 1st steam-powered ship, 1st propeller-driven frigate, 1st ironclad battleship by Dupuy de Lôme... From 1880 to 1930, bustling trade and then fishing led to the creation of considerable port infrastructures. The Keroman fishing port was inaugurated in 1927. Lorient was soon to become France’s 2nd fishing port.

The Renaissance

At the eve of the Second World War, Lorient was a military port with an arsenal at the forefront of naval techniques, an active trading port and a burgeoning fishing port. In one century, the population had doubled : 46 000 inhabitants were counted in 1939. The Second World War brought considerable upset to this promising young town. Lorient was on the front line, mainly due to its gigantic and robust submarine base. The Germans occupied the town and implemented their strategy to win the battle of the Atlantic. The largest military edifice in Europe was built at Keroman as an operational base for German U-boats. In 1943, deadly attacks by German submarines forced Winston Churchill to order massive bombing of the sites sheltering the submarines, including Lorient, “with the greatest possible force”.

Following the 1945 Armistice, 85% of the town of Lorient lay in ruins. Georges Tourry was charged with rebuilding the town with the help of around fifty architects. Speed was of the essence to rehouse the population. However, the end of one era for Lorient marked the start of a new period. Over the years, its historical sites have been renovated and rebuilt. 60 years following the destruction of the town, Lorient has risen from its ashes and resumed its purposeful march towards the future. It has even received the award Town of art and history.
