



## **The Fortifications of Vauban at Briançon**

## Briançon: a constellation of mountain forts



The Vauban old town on a glacial cross-cliff

### Background History

#### | The strategic position of Briançon |

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The old town of Briançon stands out as a unique site of fortifications in the mountains. It is in an exceptional situation, perched on a rocky mountain outcrop at a height of 1326 metres.

The ramparts, planned by Vauban, form a tight circle around the town and it is further protected by a crown of high forts thus rendering it impregnable.

Majestic Briançon allows us to understand the great skill of this renowned military engineer at adapting fortifications to different terrains.

Therefore it is only natural that Briançon is included in the network of major Vauban works.

The position of Briançon at the meeting-point of the Guisane and Durance valleys, near the Montgenevre Mountain Pass, made it a busy trading route between Piedmont and Provence. This led to a small settlement being established beneath the Croix de Toulouse slopes and on the rocky mountain outcrop.

The advantageous position for defence of the glacier cross-cliff overlooking the valley was recognized very early on. In fact, the first written records which mention a "castellum" date from the 14th century (according to the historian Ammien Marcellin).

In the 17th century during the Ligue d'Augsbourg war, the borders to the east were menaced by the accession of the Duke of Savoy. In 1692, Briançon was in a state of defence, afraid of a Savoyard attack. The offensive was given in July 1692 over the Larche and Vars Mountain Passes located further to the south than Briançon. Damage was extensive in the region but Briançon was spared.

As a result of this attack, Vauban was dispatched forthwith to the Dauphiné and to Provence.

*"Briançon is a small town in the Haut-Dauphiné region where three main valleys meet. It is protected by two surrounding walls, one old and one new, but we can hardly rely on the old one which is in ruins"* Vauban

On the 21st and 22nd November 1692, he drew up his "projet des ouvrages à faire à la ville et au château de Briançon" (project of work to be carried out on the town and castle of Briançon)" completing the work originally undertaken by Hue de Langrune.

"The new surrounding wall was built to spare them from the Barbet's abuse and not to withstand a well-planned siege"

Vauban returned again in 1700 to build a veritable barrier of fortifications because Briançon had lost its outposts in 1696, notably at Pignerol, and the border had thus crept closer.

### | Vauban's skill at Briançon: adapting to the terrain |

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*"with regard to the terrain, it is difficult to imagine anything less even, with mountains which touch the sky and valleys which plunge to the depths. The ground between them is made up of these extremes with all the high and low imaginable and consequently extremely awkward for those attacking and those defending"* Vauban.



The Embrun Front with its colourful facades

As Briançon was commanded by high mountains on all sides, it was difficult to develop a defensive system. However, the northern front was easier to plan, with bastions, a curtain, demi-lunes, a dry ditch, covered way and glacis being put in place without too much trouble.

The Embrun Front proved more complicated to develop due to the steep terrain. Vauban therefore devised a false bray, layered half-way up the existing urban wall, which enabled more efficient grazing shots. As on the demi-lune on the northern Front, he placed perpendicular traverses intended to cover the defenders from flanking- fire from above.

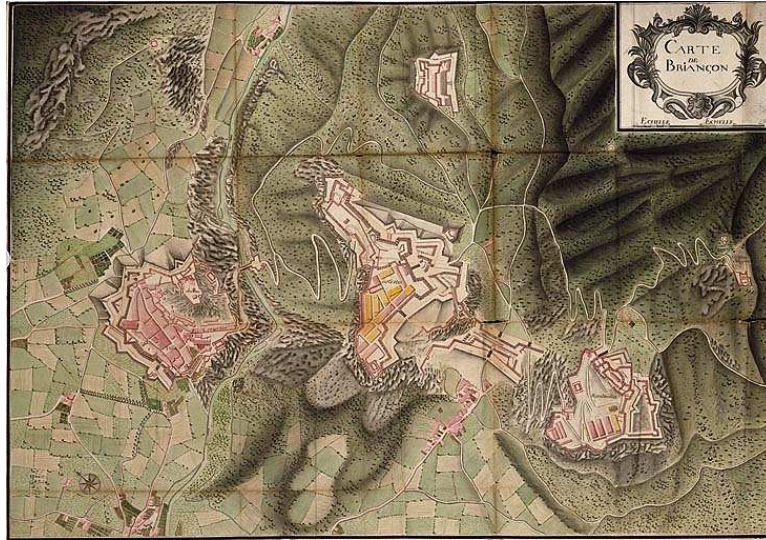
He also had big plans for the castle, which had to be abandoned. On one hand, he did not think the necessary funding would be available, and on the other hand, Briançon although far from the border, was protected by other strongholds.

To protect the defence system of the town, he deemed it necessary to fortify the neighbouring heights. He therefore planned a machicolated redoubt which would block the road from Montgenevre. This was called the Fort des Salettes. He put forward a rough project for a fort, called the Fort des Têtes, in another commanding position on the other side of the Durance river. However, this visionary work was not carried out until after his death for economic reasons and because, with the signing of the Utrecht Treaty in 1713, the border crept even closer to the Montgenevre Pass.

## | A crown of fortifications |

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The town of Briançon is still surrounded by twenty high fortifications today. Those of the old town and part of the Fort des Salettes were built by Vauban but the rest came later.



Map of Briançon, 18th century

Nevertheless, the mark of this great fortification engineer can still be seen in the works carried out in the first half of the 18th century.

In 1713, the town became a border zone which therefore required further protection. The construction of a veritable barrier of forts began under Louis XV's Regency in July 1721 and continued for 13 summers under his reign.

Claude François Bidal, the Marshal Marquis of Asfeld, Vauban's follower and successor, was in charge of the works as general director of fortifications in France.

To reinforce the fortifications of the town and the Salettes redoubt, a barrier comprising seven pieces of work "in the manner of Vauban" was built around the town: the Trois-Têtes, Randouillet, Dauphin, and Anjou forts, the Point du Jour redoubt and Communication Y and the Asfeld Bridge.

## Vauban's Work at Briançon



The Notre-Dame Saint-Nicolas Collegial Church

The ramparts of Briançon planned by Vauban, represent an excellent example of a bastioned wall adapted to steep terrain. The military architect managed to make the most of the natural defences on the Durance side, and also turned the difficulties of the neighbouring heights to his advantage.

But his work is not only of a military nature. Vauban also designed the Collegial, the Briançon parish church. Even here, military considerations were still taken into account: an enemy, exposed to fire on a bastion, would never have dared attack a building consecrated to God....

## The Restoration and Enhancement of Vauban Heritage in Briançon

Since 1987, Briançon has developed an active policy of restoring and enhancing its heritage. The town was awarded the label "Villes et Pays d'art et d'histoire" in 1990 and has set up a conservation area.

### | Refurbishment of the Square of Arms |

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Following a study, a project to restore the historic square of "Arms" in the Vauban Old Town has been agreed by the local council.

While waiting for work to begin in 2009, two archaeologists appointed by the National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP) and at the request of the Regional Service of Archaeology, probed beneath the Square of "Arms" to analyse eventual layers still preserved. They are particularly interested in the Vauban period.

A study of five different layers, with a depth of two and a half metres, has made it possible to discover the way the square was used over the centuries.

These archaeologists discovered important details about surface coverings (both clay and cobble stones) and the position of the well and the guardroom, which existed there from the 18th century. These analyses are essential to understand the layout and have therefore served as a reference for the restoration project. The groundwork will take into account the old cobbled and current areas. This will equally highlight the importance of water, a necessity in times of siege, through the reconstruction of the edge of the well.

## **| Restoration of the ramparts |**

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Since last May, new restoration work has started on the ramparts of the Vauban old town.

The first phase of work, costing 220 000€, aims to stabilise the ramparts, for safety reasons, and to secure the area. A watchtower, missing from the urban walls, will also be reconstructed.

It is essential to preserve the only testimony to Vauban's great skill in adapting the principals of military architecture to a mountain area. This restoration work is part of a wide programme of restoration which will continue in 2009 and the following years.

## **| The Actions of the "Club du Vieux Manoir" |**

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Since 1978, the Club du Vieux Manoir (CVM), a National Society for the Conservation, Restoration and Enhancement of Ancient Monuments, has been active in the safeguard and conservation of Briançon's heritage.

This year again, the CVM is returning to continue work on the Chapelle des Récollets, Fort du Château, the Saint-Blaise vicarage, and the Fort des Salettes.

This year Vauban's Fort des Salettes will benefit from general maintenance work concentrating on clearing plant growth from the top stonework, uncovering firing slots in the Haxo Gallery (even although it dates from later on) and restoring all the door and shutter frames of the fort.

In the long run, the collaboration between the town and the CVM should ensure further restoration work on the urban walls and other fortifications.

This Association equally helps the town with running events and open days. The voluntary workers are not only involved in building work but also ensure that the sites they are working on are open to the public. They offer guided visits, which complement the guided tours given by the National Heritage guides.

## **| Some future actions |**

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As a "Ville d'art et d'histoire" and with Unesco World Heritage listing, Briançon plans to open a "Centre for the Interpretation of Architecture and Heritage" (CIAP).

This cultural facility, with a relief model of the town, will be an exceptional source of information on the architectural history, urbanism and landscaping.

The CIAP will present the town's heritage and urban evolution, and is intended to be an educational resource open to all.

Directly linked to the restoration of the ramparts presented above, a project is under consideration to reconstruct the original level of the terrace in Eberlé Square.

Apart from the educational aspect linked to a better understanding of the fortification, this work will resolve a large number of problems on the ramparts.

## Vauban Heritage Summer Activities 2008

The events offered jointly by the Heritage Service and the Tourist Office, again this year give pride of place to the heritage left by Vauban. With something for everybody, come and discover -or rediscover the heritage which this great man of the 17th century has left us.

### | Zany Visits:" Forget Vauban, Darling call me Sebastien" |

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From the 8th July to the 21st August, come and enjoy these crazy visits written and performed by the 3 actors of the Conte Company. Discover the historic and dreamy side of Vauban in a totally off - the -wall way!

Wander through the town for an hour and a half following in Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban's footsteps from his first rattle to his heart in the Invalides, via his passion for pigs! But watch out, after this visit you are liable to smile in delight whenever you see a citadel!

### | The "Regiments du Passé": a stronghold in the 18th century |

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From the 1st to 15th August 2008 on Tuesdays to Fridays don't miss the " Regiments of the Past" this summer. They will add their talents to those of the conference guides of the Heritage Service to offer you lively visits and workshops.

Discover how soldiers lived at the time of Louis XV, military exercises, the hospital, the tavern, a French " meal" and a workshop for making civilian clothes.

### | « Forts en Danse » |

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From the 4th to 9th August 2008 come and enjoy the third encounter between the fortified heritage of Briançon and contemporary dance.

Once again this year, "Forts en Danse" has accepted the challenge of combining the light and ephemeral movements of contemporary dancers with the fortifications. Through dancing forms, the past joins the present in a vibrant performance.

### | Exhibitions |

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With Briançon's nomination for Unesco World Heritage Listing, two exhibitions on the theme of fortifications have been planned.

From the 5th to 23rd July 2008, the photographer Jeff Céas invites you to discover the other less -known fortifications of Briançon, through the exhibition "Quelques fortifications d'altitude...."

From the 11th to 31st August 2008, Michel Torrent offers you the chance to see the hidden side of Vauban's work, allowing your imagination access to the underground system of the town and the forts through the photographic exhibition entitled "L'architecture souterraine ou l'art de l'intégration au terrain" . This exhibition is about all that is underground: cisterns, wells, staircases, back fire casemates, the water network and cellars.

Finally from the 26th July to the 9th August, an exhibition in memory of François Veyrunes, artist and scenographer, will be presented as part of the 3rd "Forts en danse" performance.

## | Music and Fireworks in Vauban's Honour |

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Celebrations for the 14th July, and for the inscription of "The fortifications of Vauban" on the Worldwide Heritage list, will include music and fireworks on the Champs de Mars from 10.30 pm onwards in honour of the French military engineer.

This will be followed by an evening of celebration and dancing - whatever the outcome of our Unesco World Heritage nomination.

## | Press Contacts |

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## | Further information and reservations |

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Activites, events, exhibitions, guided visits and all the summer programme:

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