

The town's history

Mise à jour le : 01.12.2011 | 12h16

- Antiquity
- Late Medieval times - between episcopal power and ducal power
- The excesses of the Revolution to a short prosperity under the Empire
- From one war to another : 1914 - 1944
- Legendary times, Gradlon, Saint Corentin and the foundation of Quimper
- The Renaissance and modern times – Quimper under the Counter-Reformation
- The urban and industrial adventure of the 19th century
- Demographic, urban and contemporary expansion

Antiquity

Archaeological studies have revealed that Quimper and its surroundings have been continuously inhabited. Neolithic potteries or the remains of a dolmen are evidence of an occupation between the 6th and 3rd millennium B.C. The remains of several cob buildings surrounded by fences, some oppidums (ancient Roman settlements) and traces of craft industry show country habitation during the Iron Age and Gallic era.

A small port town became established on the banks of the Odet river in the current quarter of Locmaria, in the first century of our era. The gallo-roman site took advantage of the tide coming up the ria from the rivermouth in order to develop commercial activities. Roads connected this little emporion (ancient river port) to Vannes, to Bigouden country or to Carhaix, the Osisme capital. Dominating the site of Locmaria, Mount Frugy held temples and a necropolis of several hundred tombs. On its outskirts, sumptuous villas rubbed shoulders with cob-built farms surrounded by fences.

This small flourishing merchant port was abandoned towards the end of the 3rd century, when the Roman empire underwent crisis .

Legendary times, Gradlon, Saint Corentin and the foundation of Quimper

Regarding Quimper's origins, the myths have merged with the few historical accounts of the period. Dated 1235, Saint Corentin's 'la Vie' (the Life) attributes the town's foundation to Gradlon during the 5th or 6th century. King of the town of Ys, **Gradlon gifted his castle situated at the confluence of the Odet to the hermit Corentin to build his cathedral**. This legendary king also appears in the second book of 'la Vie latine de Saint Guenolé' (The Latin Life of Saint Guenolé) written around 880.

Gradlon is the central character of the town of Ys legend, a sort of breton Atlantis, whose origins are lost in Celtic oral tradition. Down through the centuries, Breton storytellers and writers have taken over this myth to elaborate it and create various versions wherever their imagination took them.

Historically, it is probable that the bishopric was founded during the Carolingian period. Archaeological searches have revealed that at the end of the 10th century, a genuine town plan formed around a new Romanesque cathedral.

Late Medieval times - between episcopal power and ducal power

Simultaneously a religious and political centre, the town was torn between the Duke's and Bishop's forces.

The « Church's Land » included the whole of Quimper intra-muros and the land to the north of the town's ramparts. The Bishop disposed of the same powers as a layman Lord : he exercised justice, imposed sentencing and forced petty daily rules on Quimper's people.

The Duke exercised his power **on the Duke's Estate**, a district developing beyond the Steir river, to the west of the ramparts.

Quimper intra-muros occupied a surface area of around fifteen hectares surrounded by 1500 metres of high walls bordered by the Frou, Steir and Odet rivers. Towards 1450, around 4500 people lived there.

Partially urbanised, this space included fields, orchards and gardens in its higher part, while the lower part held the Bishops' Palace, the houses of the Canons and middle-class burghers. Half-timbered houses, similar to those currently present in Old Quimper, lined winding, partially-paved alleys.

The Renaissance and modern times – Quimper under the Counter-Reformation

With the attachment of Brittany to France in 1532, the rivalry between episcopal and ducal power continued but eased. **An oligarchy of minor nobility and middle-class asserted itself.** It provided a number of doctors, lawyers or sailors such as the Admiral of Kergelen. These large families had private mansions built in the city and acquired country estates.

Quimper numbered 9000 inhabitants at the end of the 17th century. The walls of the town, having lost their military use, were no longer maintained. Whilst the fortified entrances were demolished, the construction of new bridges improved traffic conditions. But the town had inherited an anarchic and insalubrious structure from the Middle Ages. In 1762, a **fire** ravaged the wooden houses of rue Kéréon. Responsible for establishing a new building plan, the civil engineer André straightened the layout of the street and constructed stone-walled buildings.

As a result of the Counter-Reformation, the proliferation of religious orders brought about the **construction of several religious buildings.**

The excesses of the Revolution to a short prosperity under the Empire

In January 1790 Quimper was designated **county town of the département.** Joseph le Guillou de Kerincuff became the first mayor.

The civil constitution of the clergy was not welcomed by the Quimper people. Numerous evader-priests went into exile. Religious congregations were suppressed in 1792. Several family buyers profited from the **sale of clergy property.** Convents and other religious buildings were converted into barracks and prisons or held new administrations.

Under the regime of the Terror, **revolutionary excesses multiplied** : witchhunts of evader-priests, waves of arrests and public executions, ransacking of churches and the cathedral, destruction of statues and reliquaries...

Following the turmoil of the revolutionary period there was a period of relative prosperity during the Consulate and the Empire. Quimper took advantage of the marine blockade of Brest by the British Navy. The small merchant port on the Odet became the depot of the wartime and Merchant Navy. But the peacetime of 1815 put an end to this intense activity.

The urban and industrial adventure of the 19th century

Quimper wanted to change the medieval layout which was the origin of the weak development of the town. The town centre was re-organised to facilitate access and open new roads. A new marketplace was built in rue Saint-François, on the site of the Cordeliers convent. The town hall moved to the former Guernisac mansion on place Saint-Corentin. More open and airy, **the town left behind its medieval corset** and spread out onto both sides of the Odet riverbanks.

Ransacked in revolutionary times, the religious buildings were restored or rebuilt. The spires for the cathedral towers, classified as historic monuments in 1847, were constructed in 1857 by Joseph Bigot. The architect continued his work by building the Fine Arts Museum in 1872. The Max Jacob theatre was built in 1904.

The arrival of the railway in 1864 brought new industrial activities. The pottery found new outlets. The food-processing industries (canneries, ice factories) and other businesses occupied the new industrial estates.

From one war to another : 1914 - 1944

In honour of the 556 Quimper men who fell at the front during the First World War, the town had a **memorial** built on the Town Hall's staircase of honour. Charles Godeby's paintings show battle scenes.

Between the wars, **new estates were built.** Workers housing estates adjoined the industrial areas which rubbed shoulders with more elegant estates on the quaysides or in the Court district. The architect Olier Mordrel designed distinctively-styled buildings with new materials. The « Ty Kodak » house and shop belonging to the photographer Villard located near to the Kerguelen estate is an example of his resolutely modern work.

Occupied by the Germans by 18 June 1940, Quimper - though spared the bombardments - suffered hardships, arrests and deportations. Once the Normandy landings were declared, the **Breton Resistance members** liberated the town on 8 August 1944 after violent fighting.

Demographic, urban and contemporary expansion

Following the Second World War, the baby-boom brought about a **serious housing crisis.** Quimper had to find new building land. The 1960 fusion of Ergué-Armel, Kerfeunteun, Penhars and Quimper municipalities all together made **Quimper much larger** and allowed the town to become a true metropolis.

Quimper, from now on numbering 50,000 inhabitants, had **large estates** built in the Kermoysan district. The residential suburbs and business parks grew on the outskirts of the town. These changes turned the landscape and the identity of the surrounding old rural communities upside-down.

From 1960 onwards transport developed via the building of new roads and the creation of bypasses and bridges.

The Hippodrome industrial estate was created in 1962. In the 90's the Creac'h Gwen district welcomed the **Quimper Cornouaille technopole** (high-tech industrial R&D centre). Higher education developed with the opening of the Per Jakez Helias centre of West Brittany University (UBO) and the Asia Pacific Management School (ISUGA).

The grouping together of the urban area's communities continued in 1993 with the creation of **Quimper Community**, made up of Ergué-Gaberic, Guengat, Plogonnec and Quimper. It was enlarged by the membership of Plonéis, Pluguffan and Plomelin in 1997, then Locronan in 2011.

