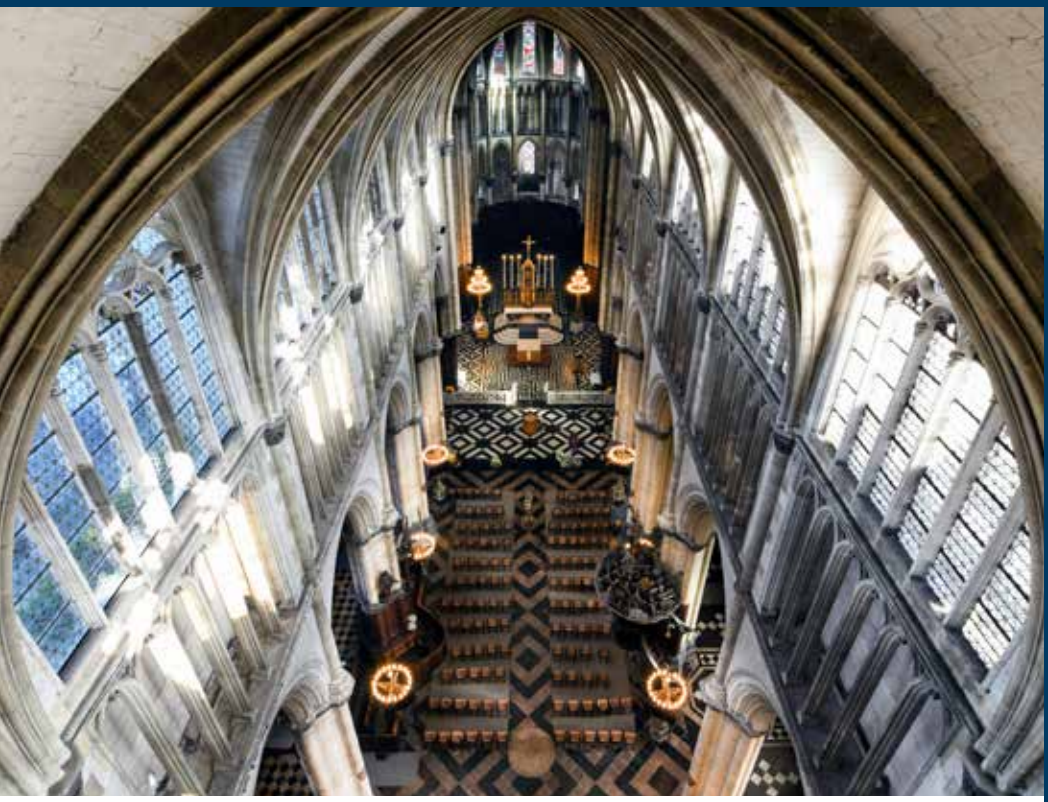
TRAIL

SAINT-OMER CATHEDRAL



EARLY ORIGINS OF THE TOWN

During the 630s, King Dagobert the First entrusted Omer (from the Latin name Audomarus) with a mission to spread the Christian religion among the people of the Therouanne diocese. The work of this monk from Luxeuil abbey was hugely successful. Historical accounts tell how Omer soon converted a lord named Adroald who gifted to him the land of Sithiu on which the future town of Saint-Omer was to be built.

1. Dagobert handing the bishop's crozier to Omer Saint-Omer. BAPSO, ms.098

2. Tomb of Omer in the cathedral. Collection Musée Sandelin, inv.75-5

3. The cathedral, cloisters and bishop's palace in 1758. Relief model of Saint-Omer

TWO SITES, ONE CITY

At the highest point, on the Sithiu mound, Bishop Omer built a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Together with three other monks, Bertin, Momelin and Ebertram, they founded a monastery dedicated to Saint Peter and Saint Paul in a secluded spot on the banks of the river Aa. Bertin, the first abbot of the monastery, was also put in charge of Notre Dame church by the now ageing Omer, who asked to be buried there. The twin sites of the Sithiu monastery were thus founded, and soon became an important destination for pilgrims, from which the town grew.

Around 820, a reform separated the two religious centres. The church of Notre Dame became a collegial church governed by around thirty canons and a provost. Together they formed a religious community. At the north side of the church, cloisters and buildings used by the canons were built, but these were demolished in the 19th century during work to create a separate building. From the 13th century onwards, the priests lived in houses owned by the chapter (for example no. 14 Rue des Tribunaux); these were contained within a close that was locked at nightfall. An arch in Rue de l'Echelle still stands in the location of one of the five entrances to the close.

The collegial church of Saint-Omer was promoted to the rank of cathedral in 1559, after the destruction of Therouanne. After many years of war between France and the Habsburg Empire, the bishopric of Therouanne was taken in 1553 and destroyed by Emperor Charles V. The Gothic cathedral, erected in the mid-12th century by bishop Milon the First, was completely destroyed. Its extensive diocese was divided into three new bishoprics, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Saint-Omer and Ypres.

At the time of the French Revolution, Saint-Omer Cathedral was looted and then used as a store for cattle fodder. It was nevertheless restored to the clerics in 1802 as a simple church. Pope Leo XIII recognized the historical importance of the building and granted it the honorary title of minor basilica in 1879. The following year, it was listed as a *Monument Historique*. It is still commonly referred to as "Notre-Dame cathedral".

A MODEL OF GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE

The initial wooden church was replaced in the 11th century by a Romanesque building. After it was damaged at the end of the 12th century, the canons began to build a new structure with an east to west layout. As the work spanned 400 years, the present building shows how the Gothic style evolved between the 12th and 16th centuries, with increasingly elaborate decorative features and use of technical prowess to build increasingly higher and lighter churches.

1 - The Choir (12th-13th century)

The semi-circular choir is lit by high windows with stained glass dating from the 19th century. Three chapels radiate from the ambulatory which goes around it. There used to be a passageway from the end chapel to the bishop's palace (now the courthouse). At the south end stands the octagonal tower which was formerly used both as a vestry and a treasure room.

2 - The Transept (13th-15th century)

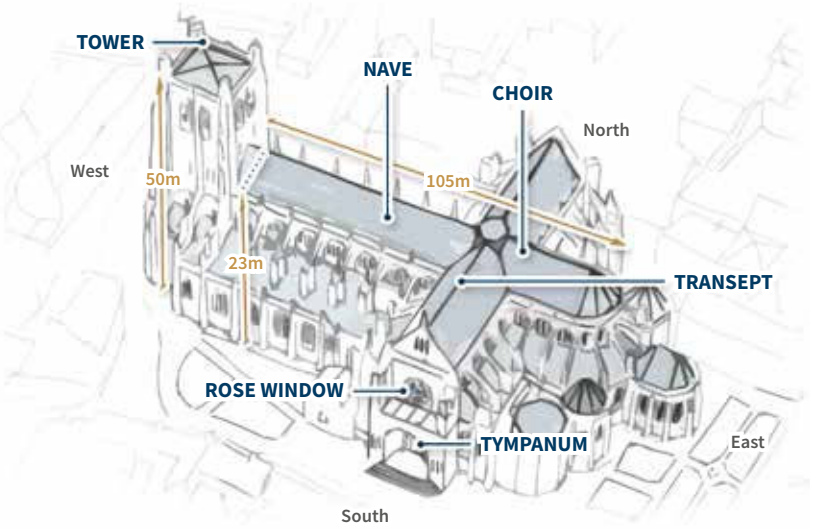
The work continued with the transept and the south portal which was built around 1250-1275. Above the south door is a tympanum depicting the last judgement, probably restyled in the 17th century. At the top, we have a standing figure of Jesus Christ, surrounded by the Virgin Mary, Saint John and four angels. The scenes at the bottom oppose Abraham welcoming the blessed to Paradise and the devil casting the damned into the mouth of Leviathan. The stained glass above the door is a 15th century rose window in the Rayonnant Gothic style. Also built mainly in the mid-15th century, the rose window above the north door, with its fleur-de-lys patterns is however in the Flamboyant Gothic style.

3 - The Nave (14th-16th century)

The greater part of the building work was completed in 1445. It began with the canon's chapels along each side. Some of these were however added afterwards. Flying buttresses made it possible to build the nave to its towering height. Located on the outside walls, these bowed structures compensate the thrusting forces of the roof vaults and ribs.

4 - The Tower (15th-17th century)

Like Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, Gothic buildings generally have a harmonious facade, with three portals and two symmetrical towers. The single square tower of Saint-Omer's collegial church is specific to the region and its local history. Its Romanesque design echoed that of the tower of the old abbey church of Saint-Bertin, now in ruins. The towers of the collegial church and of the abbey used to be a symbol of the clerical power of the town.



SOME OF THE WORKS OF ART TO BE FOUND IN THE CATHEDRAL

The former cathedral contains a wealth of remarkable items of great diversity. The canons, bishops and the families of patrons all contributed to the rich interior of this religious building. Some of the works are art treasures, others recall the history of the building. The site can be seen not only as a place of worship, but as an actual museum.

Follow the numbers to learn more about a selection of these works.

1 ***The Entombment of Christ*** is one of the cathedral's finest paintings. Gerhard Seghers skilfully used shadow and light in his composition to capture both the action of the scene and the deep sorrow of the people depicted. His training in Caravaggio's techniques during a time spent in Spain is reflected in the strong contrasts between the darkness of the cave and the torch lit scene to the left. The influence of Rubens in the work of Seghers, especially after his return to Antwerp, is apparent in the almost tactile rendering of the fabrics and the body of Christ, so characteristic of the style of the 1630s.

2 Commissioned by the canons in the 13th century and initially located behind the main altar, **the tomb of Saint Omer** used to contain a reliquary. It would be presented to the many pilgrims through the openings in its sides. The relics were moved several times and are no longer contained within this funerary monument. Omer is represented here *gisant*, with his bishop's attire and attributes. Along the nave, you can see some sculpted scenes of miracles performed by the saint.

3 **The Virgin and Child** by Jacques Dubroeucq is one of Saint-Omer's most famous works of art. It is however just a fragment of a great funerary monument that was dismantled and partly destroyed after the Revolution. The only other survivors are two angels (kept in the Sandelin museum). The monument which was originally housed in the Charterhouse of Val-Sainte-Aldegonde in Longuenesse, was erected in memory of Philippe de Sainte-Aldegonde, who died fighting against the armies of Charles V of Spain. It is the last work produced by Jacques Dubroeucq, a major Flemish sculptor of the Renaissance.

4 The side aisles are punctuated by the **canons' chapels** with their elaborate screens. Built in the 17th century, they are mainly made of coloured marble, or wood painted to give it a marbled effect. They vary from Renaissance to Baroque in style. The last screen before the north wing of the transept was designed for canon Georges Guilluy in 1631. His patron saint is shown on horseback in the central medallion. Above it is an alabaster statue of Saint Nicolas.

5 The sculpture group known as the ***Grand Dieu of Thérouanne*** is a remarkable piece. Whilst Charles V of Spain was in the process of destroying Therouanne in 1553, the canons of Saint-Omer strove to save a fragment of a Last Judgement dating from 1240-1250. This sculpture group of Christ seated on the holy city of Jerusalem, flanked by the Virgin Mary and Saint John, used to adorn the south portal of the cathedral of Therouanne. This explains its impressive size and proportions. In spite of their attempts to install it above the north door of Saint-Omer cathedral, the canons ended up keeping it inside the building.

6 **The astronomical clock** shows the hours, days, months, lunar cycles, seasons and the signs of the zodiac. There are very few such specimens in Europe. Commissioned by the canons in 1555 from a master clockmaker in Saint-Omer, this instrument presents an ancient vision of the world with the Earth at the centre of the Universe. Centuries later, their 17th century successors had a sundial engraved on the south portal, to help them set the time. The clock underwent some modifications in the 18th century. But the steadfast bell-ringer, in his officer's uniform, still stands ready to chime the hours.

7 The ambulatory around the choir is now an exhibition space. A variety of works are presented there.

A › **Erkembode's tomb** stands out for its almost primitive appearance. Sculpted from a single sandstone block, the tomb is set on impressive lion-shaped supports. Erkembode was an Irish monk who lived in the 13th century and became abbot of Saint-Bertin then bishop of Therouanne. The highly worn surface of the stone is due to the many pilgrims who would visit his tomb as early as the 9th century onwards. Known to have walked the length and breadth of his diocese, Erkembode was reputed for his power to heal people with foot problems or paralysis. Still today, people leave shoes on his tomb in hope that the "saint who makes people walk" can help them.

B › Look up to see a statue of **Christ bearing his cross**. This painted wooden sculpture used to have pride of place in the centre of the rood screen from 1678 to 1753. This screen between the choir and the nave used to separate the clerics from the worshippers. Changing practices led to the removal of this architectural feature.

C › On the wall of the choir, the painting known as the ***Life of Saint Omer*** is composed of four panels painted on both sides. Only the reverse side is shown here. The panels belonged to a retable. The patrons who commissioned the retable, Jean-Baptiste du Bois de Fiennes and his wife, are shown kneeling with their respective patron saints. The complex composition includes scenes of miracles performed by them.

8 **Saint Omer's chapel** contains the preserved relics of the first bishop of Therouanne. Originally contained in the tomb **(see 2)**, the remains of Omer were desecrated and partly lost during the Revolution. At the start of the 19th century, they were put in a safe place inside a bust made by Hermann Cattez. Behind it, the stained-glass windows relate the life of the man to whom the town owes its existence. The side windows depict other local saints such as Erkembode. The pavement of the chapel includes 123 medieval slabs. Reinstalled in the 19th century, they depict various subjects, such as work in the fields, the signs of the zodiac, exotic or fantastic animals.

9 A remarkable Virgin in Majesty sits at the top of the **Notre-Dame-des-Miracles** alter. The poses of the characters and detail of the drapery show the influence of antique sculpture in the early 13th century. This statue carved in oak used to be housed in a shrine on the main square of the town (place Foch). When it was demolished, the statue was removed to the collegial church. It was hidden during the Revolution in the church of Saint-Denis. The statue was embellished in the 19th century by adding gold leaf, ermine fur, a sceptre and a new crown.

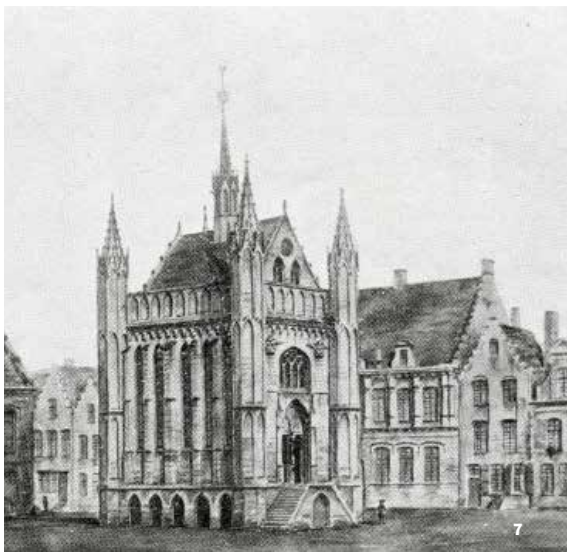
10 **In the choir**, Louis XV style wood-carvings by François Chifflart remind us of the former function of the building. In a U-shaped formation are installed the bishop's throne, called a cathedra (from which is derived the term "cathedral") and the 76 stalls of the canons. The splendid main altar in carved, gilt wood, made in 1753 (taken from Saint-Bertin's Abbey), and the new altar are at the crossing of the transept, thus placing the liturgical choir at the centre of the architecture. The black and white marble labyrinth on the floor is a 19th century copy of the prayer path that used to pave the choir of Saint-Bertin's abbey church.

11 The baroque **organ case** was completed in 1717 by the Saint-Omer workshop run by the Piette family. This instrument containing over 3000 pipes was made by the Douai organ builder Desfontaines, although its sound was adjusted in 1855 by the renowned Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. The case stands on twelve columns, most likely a reference to the apostles. They are arranged as in a baroque theatre. The figures of Saint Peter and Saint Paul stand out like the pillars of the church. Above them are allegories of Faith and Hope, instrument-playing *putti* and the heraldic arms of the chapter. At the top are King David, Saint Cecile and angels who accompany the Messiah in a celestial concert. Depicted as Christ the child, he stands on a globe, crushing a serpent, representing evil, under his foot.

12 A masterpiece of the sculptor Jacques Dubroeucq, **the funerary monument of Eustache de Croÿ** (†1539) was erected at the request of his mother. She later joined him in the tomb. The remarkable alabaster statues show two representations of the bishop of Arras: one kneeling, accepting his destiny, and the other lying dead after giving his last breath. Heavily damaged during the Revolution, many elements are missing from this composition. It originally showed Saint Eustache watching over the praying bishop, with Faith standing opposite him upon a pedestal.

13 The floor contains ***many ledger stones in memory of the canons***. Some of these have been moved to the walls to prevent further wear. This is particularly the case of those located at the end of the south side aisle. They display some fine marblework and intricate designs. These 15th century graves illustrate the wishes of the canons to be buried in the place where they devoted their lives to God.

14 ***The Descent from the Cross*** to be seen in Saint-Omer was painted in 1612 and is attributed to the school of Rubens. This is a recurrent theme in religious art, but the many descents from the cross signed by Rubens to be found in northern France and Belgium show the predilection of the Flemish artist for this subject. The dramatic work has a triangular composition which focuses the viewers attention on the characters and their emotions. The size of the painting only heightens the intensity of the scene.

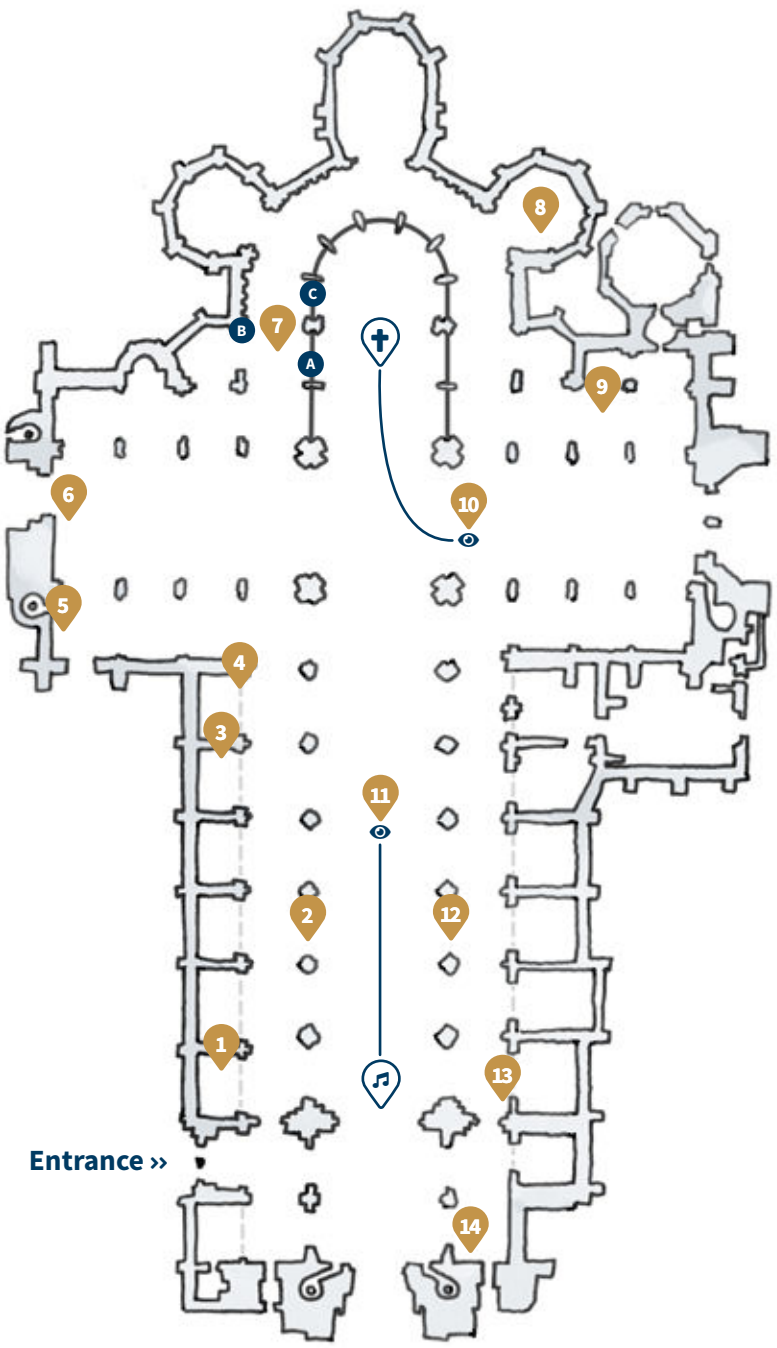


4. Entombment of Christ, 17th century, Gerhard Seghers. Photograph courtesy of the Sandelin Museum

5. Details of the wood carvings of the choir. Photograph by C. Peterolff

6. Photograph of the cathedral. Photograph by C. Peterolff

7. The chapel of Notre-Dame des Miracles, based on a watercolour by E. Durin, early 20th century. Collection of the Société Académique des Antiquaires de la Morinie



Trail n°3 - *SAINT-OMER CATHEDRAL*

Visit the most emblematic building in Saint-Omer and let it tell you about its history, its architecture and its works of art. In this tour which presents a selection of paintings, sculptures and furnishings, you will gain an understanding of the immense impact this building has had over the ages, both in terms of religion and art.

“ The cathedral never looked so beautiful as when viewed from this narrow lane, above the red and blue-slated rooftops ”
Germaine Acremant, Ces Dames aux chapeaux verts, 1922

In 2014, the Agence d’Urbanisme et de Développement Pays de Saint-Omer was designated a “Land of Art and History” a nationally recognized title bestowed on it by the state, represented by the prefect of the region. This title is given to regions, towns or wider communities which, aware of the importance of raising awareness of their architecture and heritage among the local population, work actively to inform, educate, promote and engage in a wide programme of cultural actions. All year long, the Agency carries out these actions with the help of professional tour guides, to ensure that the region’s architectural riches and heritage are brought to the attention of all those who live there, young and old alike, and of visitors to the region.

The nearby towns of Beauvais, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Calais, Cambrai, Chantilly, Laon, Lille, Noyon, Roubaix, Saint-Quentin, Soissons and Tourcoing hold the title of “Town of Art and History”; the larger communities of Amiens Métropole, Lens-Liévin, Pays de Senlis à Ermenonville and Santerre Haute-Somme have the title “Land of Art and History”.

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