

The Legion of Honour

Recognition of personal merit

During the Revolution, the orders and decorations of the *Ancien Régime* were abolished. In the course of the revolutionary wars, the need to create new awards to distinguish soldiers quickly became apparent. On becoming Emperor, Napoleon I decided to reward bravery as a civil merit. To this end he created a new order, the Legion of Honour, and a mark of distinction, the Star of the Legion of Honour. The order provided almshouses for the sick and the elderly, and schools for orphans and daughters of recipients of awards.

Ceremonial distribution

The first distribution took place during the summer of 1804, firstly at Les Invalides on 15 July, then at the camp of Boulogne* on 16 August, where 2,000 soldiers and 13 civilians were decorated. The event was spectacular: 100,000 men, including 80,000 soldiers, gathered on the steps of this natural amphitheatre overlooking the sea. Long before Napoleon I, Julius Caesar had chosen this site to prepare his fleet for an invasion of Britain.

Honour of the French State

This award contributed to the cohesion of the Empire. The star became a cross, but is still the highest level of merit. It is awarded by the French President according to criteria of personal merit.

* Explanations overleaf.

Glossary

Battle of Austerlitz: Napoleon I's victory over the Austro-Russian army on 2 December 1805 in Moravia (the present day Czech Republic).

Bourbon Restoration: period following the abdication of Napoleon I when the monarchy was reinstated, from 1815 to 1830.

Camp of Boulogne: military and naval base set up by Napoleon on the coast of Boulogne-sur-Mer, between Le Portel and Cap Gris-Nez.

Elder branch of the Bourbons: descendants of King Henri IV; Louis XVIII, the younger brother of Louis XVI and Charles X reigned during the Bourbon Restoration.

Groggnard: nickname, which translates as “grumbler” or “grouch”, given by Napoleon to soldiers of the old guard who, although bad-tempered, followed him faithfully.

Victor Hugo: famous French poet and writer.

Information

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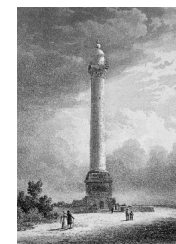
Column of the Grande Armée

A tribute to Napoleon I

In memory of a ceremony

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) set up the camp of Boulogne* in 1798 in this natural port within sight of England, which he sought to invade. Here, on 16 August 1804, the Emperor awarded the Legion of Honour in great pomp to his soldiers, before they left for Austerlitz*. These soldiers would soon form the legendary Grande Armée. Marshall Soult suggested that a column be built in memory of the ceremony. The Emperor gave his consent; the town of Boulogne provided the site; and the soldiers donated a portion of their wages to fund the column's construction.

The vagaries of its construction



View of the column,
F. Nash,
19th-century
etching.

The first stone was laid by Soult on 9 November 1804, but building work did not begin until 1809. Construction was halted in 1811 for financial reasons. During the Bourbon Restoration*, the monument was completed, but this time to glorify the legitimacy of the elder branch of the Bourbons*. During the reign of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848), a statue of Napoleon I was added to the top of the column. After sustaining bomb damage during World War II, the statue was taken down and replaced, and the column restored.

* Explanations overleaf.



The column

Set at the end of a long avenue, the column dominates the valley of Terlincthun, where the ceremony took place on 16 August 1804. The architect, Étienne Éloi Labarre, took inspiration from Trajan's Column in Rome, but unlike the Roman model, he gave the column a smooth shaft. It is built on a pedestal and topped with a composite Doric capital, upon which stands a structure consisting of a platform, a pedestal and the statue of Napoleon I.

1 The base can be accessed by a set of steps flanked by bronze lions. Designed by the sculptor Moitte and cast by Getty, they were completed by Houdon and put in place in 1831. The bronze used was made by melting cannons seized from the enemy during the Napoleonic campaigns.

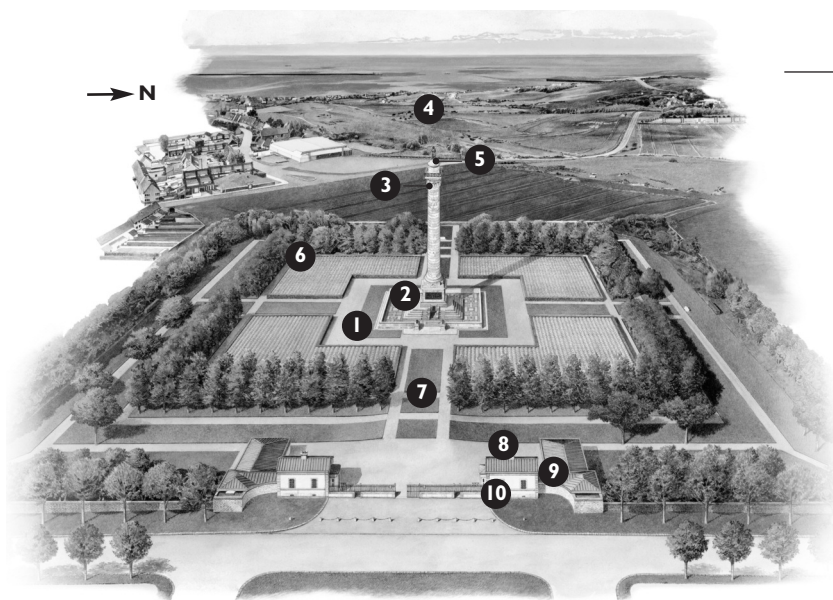
2 The pedestal bears bronze bas-reliefs on each of its sides which were installed in 1843. The bas-relief facing the entrance depicts Marshal Soult submitting plans for the column to the Emperor. On the east side is a depiction of the Legion of Honour award ceremony as it occurred on this site.

The column, which stands over 50 metres tall, was built from local stone, a hard limestone with veins and colour reminiscent of marble. A spiral staircase leads up to the narrow platform.

3 The platform affords a beautiful panoramic view of the surroundings. Towards the sea, or the south, is a small fort, built at the time of the camp of Boulogne*, and the port jetty.

4 The stela, or Napoleonic stone, is located in the centre of the column, on a small protruding bump. It symbolically marks the spot where the Emperor himself distributed the Legion of Honour.

5 The statue of Napoleon as a "little corporal" was made by the sculptor Pierre Stenne and



erected in 1962. The French President at that time, General de Gaulle (1959-1969), wanted the Emperor to be depicted in field dress.

6 The gardens

Completed in 1845 and recently restored, the square garden is structured by two perpendicular axes which meet at the column.

7 The monumental axis extends beyond the entrance to a long avenue planted with trees. Four flowerbeds in the form of a square alternate with box and ball-shaped tamarix shrubs as a symbol of the country's many worthy soldiers or grognards* present at the ceremony of 16 August 1804. Lines of trees surround the square of flowerbeds.

The pavilions

The pavilions were built in 1840 at the entrance to the site.

8 The right pavilion houses a small museum recounting the distribution of the Legion of Honour on 16 August 1804.

9 The second room evokes the vicissitudes of the monument's existence: changes in its signification in the 19th century, damage sustained during World War II, and so on. A panoramic video presents the key parts of the camp of Boulogne*.

10 The third room was dug to house the statue of Napoleon I made by Bosio, erected in 1841. It depicts the Emperor in his coronation robes with a Legion of Honour cross in his hand. It is made of bronze and weighs two and a half tonnes. The impact of bomb damage during World War II is visible on the robes. When the statue was taken down in 1959, a poem was discovered inside of the sceptre held by Napoleon I. It was a poem written by Victor Hugo* (1802-1885) commissioned by the national guard. Due to the fact that one or two of its lines are somewhat disrespectful of England, it was not read out when the column was inaugurated in 1841. But unbeknownst to all, the text was hidden inside the column. As for the first statue, sculpted by Houdon when construction of the column was commencing, but never actually put in place, it was melted down during the Bourbon Restoration* to create the statue of King Henri IV which stands on the Pont-Neuf in Paris.

* Explanations overleaf.