

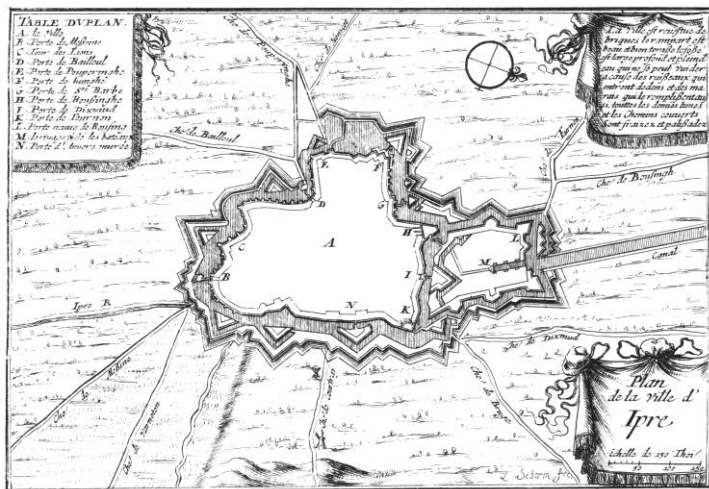
## YPRES

David Flintham

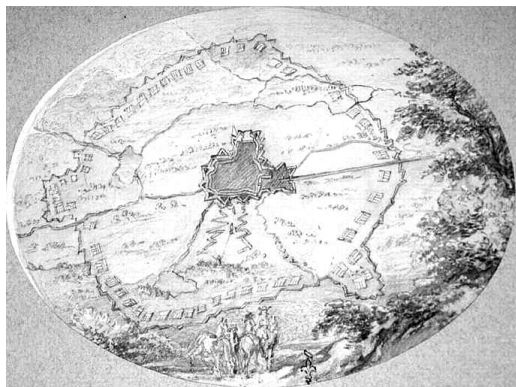
Ypres (or *Ieper* in Flemish) was a wealthy and prosperous town. Located on the *Ieperlee*, Medieval Ypres' prosperity came from the cloth trade (especially with England), and by the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century was beginning to display this wealth in the form of grand civic buildings. Subsequent Dukes of Burgundy fortified the town, (fortifications comprising of several large stone towers, connected by curtain walls with a flooded ditch in front. Four gates gave access to the town).

At the start of the Eighty Years War, Ypres was one of a number of disaffected towns in the Spanish Netherlands that received the attention of the Spanish Duke of Alva who, in 1567, built its citadel. In 1578, however, the Dutch captured the town by stratagem – they blocked the closure of the Messines Gate with a wagon containing an unusually hairy 'bride' and 'bridesmaids'! The Spanish did not take this reverse lightly, although it was not until 1583-84 that they were in a position to besiege Ypres. Despite having little or no artillery fortifications, the town held out for six months until starvation finally brought about its surrender. During the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish improved and strengthened Ypres's defences. They constructed earthwork demi-lunes/ravelins in front of the walls and a bastioned trace around the *Ville Basse*, a new suburb to the north of the town – 'M' on plan below.

(Charles Blackwood collection)



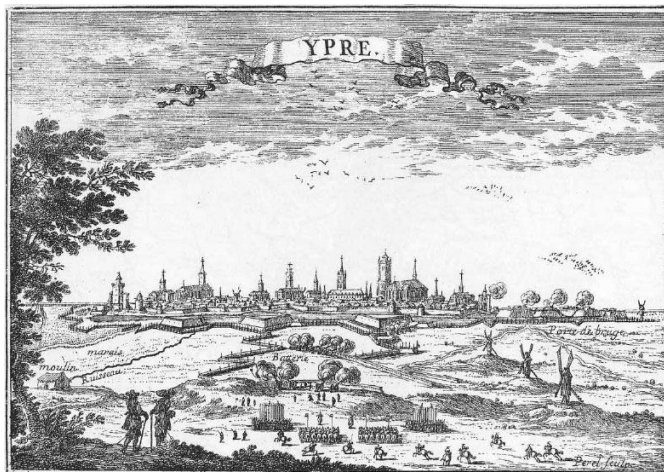
These improvements were timely as France besieged the town three times (in 1644, 1648 and 1658), exploiting the dry ground on the east side of the town to make their attacks. Below, the 1648 siege ([www.fortified-places.com](http://www.fortified-places.com))



Louis Enghien (later to become the Prince of Condé) had made a careful study of siegecraft and

fortification in his youth, skills he was able to put to good use when he commanded the French army that captured Ypres from Spain in May 1648, although the French occupation on this occasion was to last just five years - Spain regained the town in 1653<sup>ii</sup>.

With English assistance, France renewed its offensive against Spain in the autumn of 1657. Ignoring English advice to take the town by storm, Ypres fell to the Vicomte de Turenne in June 1658 (a siege directed by the young Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban<sup>iii</sup>), one of a number of French successes in the early summer of that year<sup>iv</sup>.



The print above purports to show the 1678 siege but if so the centre should be occupied by a large pentagonal earthwork citadel, built 1669, so it may represent the 1658 siege. It does give a good idea of the appearance of the defences and the zig-zag attack from the east.

North is to the right.

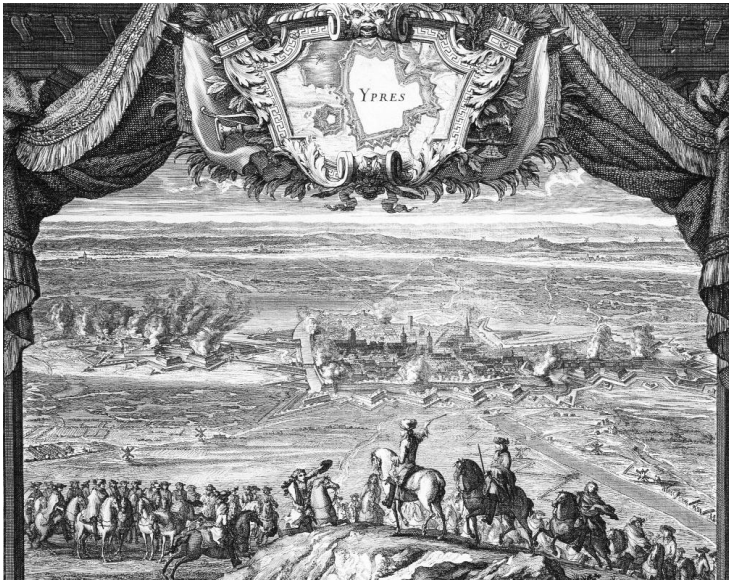
([www.fortified-places.com](http://www.fortified-places.com))

The 1659 Treaty of the Pyrenees returned Ypres to Spain once more, suggesting that Ypres was an important bargaining piece.

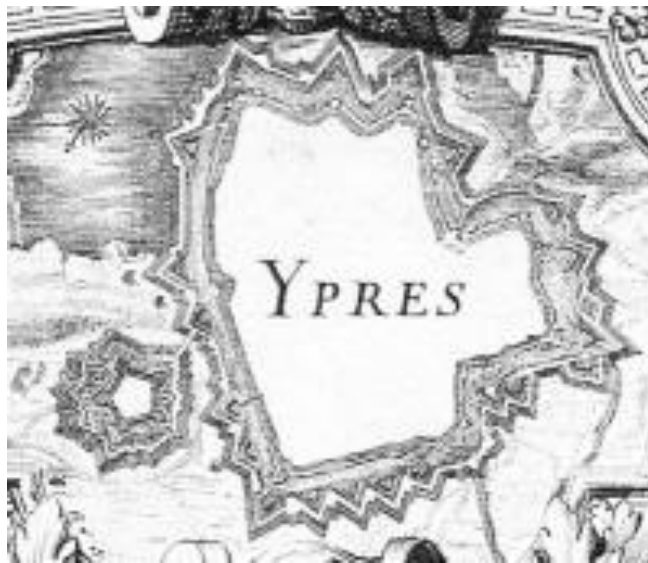
By the end of the following decade, France was making further advances into the Spanish Netherlands, and had gained control of the important fortresses of Douai, Tournai and Lille. Ypres was now dangerously exposed. As it would only be a matter of time before the French approached, in 1669 the Spanish ordered the Walloon engineer Jean Boulengier (1625-1706) to strengthen its fortifications, which at the time consisted of the medieval walls, protected by some demi-lunes to the east and west. To the north, Ypres was strongly protected by the bastioned trace around the *Ville Basse*, but to the south, where the ground was very wet, there were virtually no artillery fortifications. The defences were completed by a covered way stretching most of the way around the town.

Knowing where the French had attacked during previous sieges, Boulengier first set about building an earthwork citadel in the east. This took the form of a regular pentagon with five bastions and five demi-lunes. The flanks of the bastions facing away from the town were additionally strengthened by the incorporation of second ramparts (*fausse braies*). Boulengier planned to link the citadel to the eastern defences by the construction of a new bastion and stretch of rampart. Realising that this plan was in fact flawed (the left flank of the new bastion could have been used against the citadel), the citadel was built closer to the town, between two demi-lunes in front of the eastern wall. Because of its earthwork construction, which was both cheap and simple to carry out, the citadel was completed in less than two years.

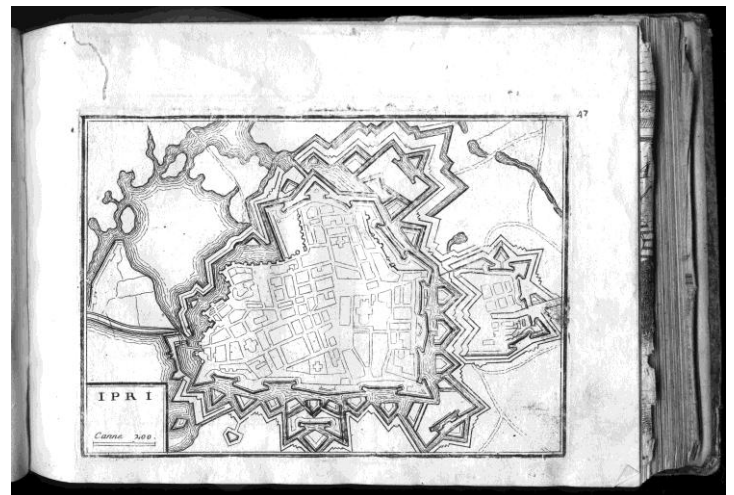
France re-captured Ypres on 25 March 1678 after an 11-day siege, attacking the town from the east, and along the canal from the north, and then capturing the citadel, despite the efforts of the garrison who employed a rarely used technique of digging 'counter-approaches' against the attackers' 'third parallel approach'<sup>v</sup>. Below



The plan at the top (detail below) shows the citadel to the left of the town, so this can only depict the 1678 siege; but the Ville Basse, fortified in the early 1600s, is missing. These old prints are to be treated with caution! The citadel is shown in flames on the left (detail bottom) and the trenches are shown approaching along the canal, bottom right. (www.fortified-places.com)

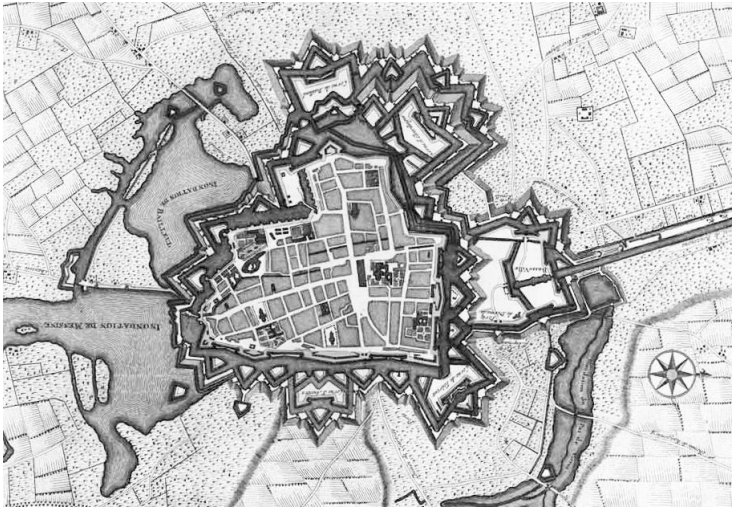


Vauban immediately set about improving the defences (work started the following month). First, he demolished the Spanish citadel and replaced it with a hornwork (despite the changes to Boulengier's initial design, the citadel was never fully integrated into the adjacent fortifications and the nearby ramparts could still have been used against it) – this protected the eastern approach much more satisfactorily. In the more important fortresses, such as Ypres and Lille, Vauban employed hornworks in profusion, and in 1746, it was noted that they were 'placed... often so near each other, as would incline one to believe that he rather intended more to terrify an enemy by their numbers, than to strengthen the place'<sup>vi</sup>. He remodelled the defences of the Ville Basse, adding additional works in the form of two demi-bastions. He introduced sluice gates to divert water from the Iperlee into the defensive ditches, in so doing creating the *Majoorgracht* (Major Canal)<sup>vii</sup>. Vauban normally disliked the use of water as he felt that it could soon become stagnant and unhealthy leading to epidemics in the garrison, but was prepared to use the water moat when necessary<sup>viii</sup>. The north-western part of the defences were strengthened by the addition of two hornworks (the more northerly of these had a second ditch), and were further strengthened with a covered way and three lunettes. With improvements to the outer defences complete, Vauban returned to Ypres in 1682 and began improvements to the inner defences, which were essentially unaltered since the middle-ages. In the south-west, the defences were almost unapproachable because of the marshy ground, so only required minor alterations. The existing medieval towers were reduced in height, their walls thickened and the existing curtain walls strengthened by heaping earth immediately behind them. The main wall was protected by the construction of small ravelins (Lunettes) in the ditch and a strong covered way.



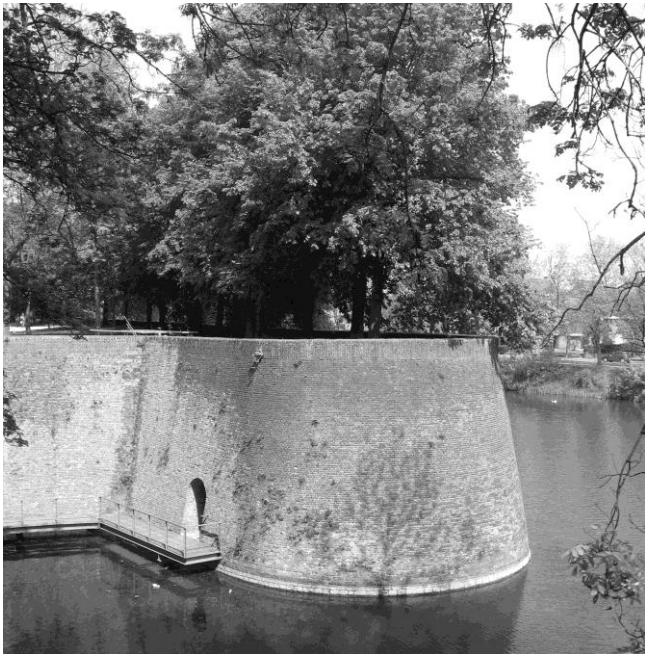
The print above is from a 1706 book and shows most of the changes made by Vauban in 1678 and 1682, though a comparison with the print below shows some features are missing (Charles Blackwood collection)

Without any natural protection, the remaining fortifications, however, required a more radical approach. He built a bastioned trace around the rest of the town (D-B clockwise on first plan). But construction was difficult due to the sandy ground, and deep foundations were required to stop the defences sinking. As a result, the bastions were not particularly deep (most noticeably on the eastern side, where the central bastion is particularly wide for its depth).



Print inverted so North point matches previous prints (www.fortifed-places.com)

Sally ports were built into the flanks of this bastion, with stairs running down from the ears of the arrow-headed bastions, with walkways and quays on the Kasteelgracht and the Majoorgracht to provide access to the outworks (below).



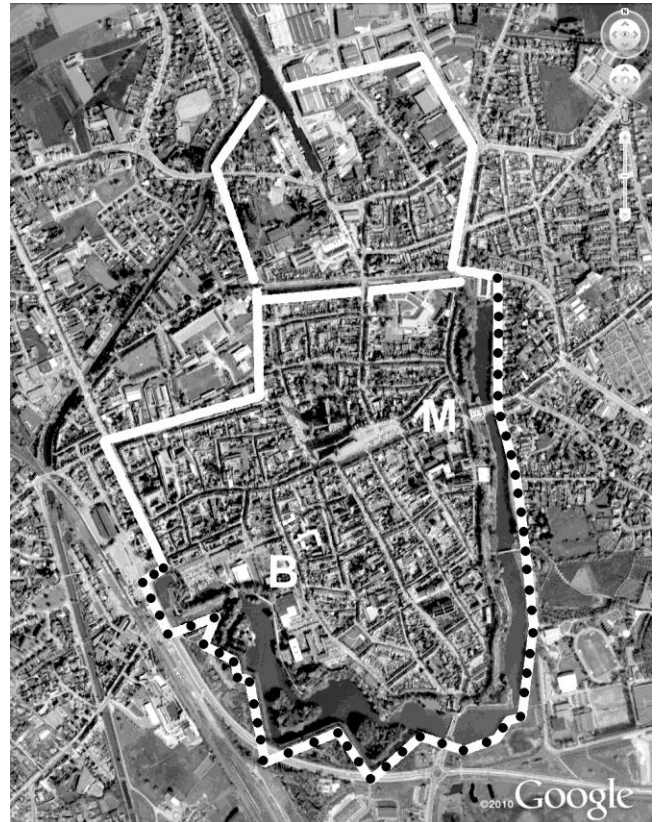
Vauban had transformed Ypres into a strong fortress and in so doing enabled neighbouring smaller fortresses (such as the near-by Fort de la Kénoque) to be decommissioned and dismantled<sup>ix</sup>. Ypres was a key element of the first-line of his *frontière de fer*, the double line of fortresses which guarded France's north-eastern frontier, which, even in the blackest days of the War of Spanish Succession (1701-14) were never completely broken through. This was the most heavily fortified region of the Pré Carré, Vauban's hexagon-shaped definition of France's frontiers<sup>x</sup>.

In 1689, Vauban revisited Ypres, finding the fortifications at Ypres *'dans un grand disorder'* which led to a complaint about false economies to Seignelay, Louis XIV's Minister of Marine<sup>xi</sup>. It was whilst he was at Ypres that Vauban fell seriously ill. Ypres, 'the marsh-fortress' was somewhat unhealthy, and it was here that Vauban, already troubled by bronchitis, caught pneumonia. The seriousness of his illness can be gauged from the fact that it was not until the

following spring that Vauban, normally a fit and very active individual, was up and about again, but would spend 1690 quietly at his home in Bazoches<sup>xii</sup>.

The allies broke through the French 'Line of Brabant' (an outer defensive line established in 1701, incorporating Antwerp<sup>xiii</sup>) following their victory at Ramillies (23 May 1706), which forced the French under Louis-Joseph de Bourbon duc de Vendôme to establish a new barrier, the 'Lines of 1706/1707', which incorporated Ypres<sup>xiv</sup>. However, Louis XIV was forced to yield up Ypres as part of his concessions at the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 which ended the War of the Spanish Succession<sup>xv</sup>. During the War of Austrian Succession (1740-8), the French took Ypres from the Dutch in nine days in the summer of 1744, an achievement that Louis XV was particularly proud of – it had taken his grandfather, Louis XIV eleven days to take Ypres in 1678<sup>xvi</sup>.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, concerned that the fortifications were preventing the town's growth, the decision was taken to demolish them. Whilst the ramparts on the western side of the town were demolished, the town did not grow as expected and so demolition was not completed. As a result, forty percent of the main ramparts were left intact, although the Bellepoort and Antwerpenpoort gates were removed.



Ypres today, north at top. White line marks line of ramparts, dotted line is opposite extant walls.

CHB (© Google)

It is a tribute to the design and construction of the fortifications that remained that they were able to survive the massed German heavy artillery which levelled most of the town of Ypres during the Great War. Indeed, the fortifications were reused in places to provide shelter from the bombardment (they were put to a variety of uses including hospital, signalling headquarters, cinema and 'offices' of the *Wipers Times*, whilst it was from the eastern

bastion of the Lille Gate that the signal was given to detonate the massive mines at the start of the Third Battle of Ypres<sup>xvii</sup>). When peace returned, it was decided to rebuild the Menenpoort (Menin Gate - previously the Antwerpenpoort, 'M' on aerial), as a memorial to the Commonwealth soldiers who died on the Ypres salient. Designed in 1921 by Reginald Blomfield (amongst his other achievements, he wrote a biography of Vauban), who had as much trouble with the sandy ground upon which the gate was built as Vauban had in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it contains the names of 54,896 Commonwealth soldiers who died with no known grave (including the author's great-grandfather). Its design is that of a triumphal arch with a barrel-vaulted passage for traffic through the mausoleum honouring the Missing and was opened by Lord Plummer of Messines in 1927 (below).



Since 1928 (except for during the German occupation) at 20:00 every evening members of the local fire brigade sound the Last Post. Since 1918, Ypres has been completely rebuilt and the fortifications that remain have been restored.

Ypres's remaining ramparts can be explored via an extensive network of accessible footpaths. There is a walk of nearly 3km in length (the suggested starting point is near to the railway station (close to the site of the Bailleul Gate, 'B' on aerial), and heads in an anti-clockwise direction. Along the route there are a number of information panels (colour page 30) whilst the Stedelijk Museum near the Lille Gate provides further information. The route is described in Martin Marix Evan's *Ypres – In War and Peace*<sup>xviii</sup>. A 1:600 scale model of Ypres forms part of the Musée des Plans-Reliefs collection. It was built in 1701 under the direction of the engineer Tessier de Derville, and restored in 1789 and again in 1949-50. It is currently housed in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lille<sup>xix</sup>.

(Photographs by the Author)

Dedicated to the Memory of **Professor Richard Holmes** (1946-2011), whom I twice accompanied on visits to Ypres.



Richard Holmes

[www.historyextra.com](http://www.historyextra.com), uncredited)

As an author, battlefield guide and military historian, there were few to equal him – his style was quite unique. He was extremely knowledgeable and very approachable and generous, and inspired my interest in the First World War. Whilst not primarily a fortress historian himself (although I do recall discussing 17<sup>th</sup> century fortifications over breakfast in Arras once, where he referred to Vauban fondly as 'the old fellow'), many of Professor Holmes' works deservedly find places on the bookshelves of those interested in fortifications – for example, his *Tommy* (2005) is compulsive reading for anyone interested in British fortifications on the Western Front. I've not read a better biography of Marlborough than his *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General* (2009), whilst *The English Civil War: A Military History of Three Civil Wars, 1642-51*, written with Peter Young, although 40 years old, is still one of the best military histories of the Civil Wars. *Fatal Avenue* (2008) remains my all-time favourite book on military history. **Professor Holmes** will be greatly missed.

<sup>i</sup> DUFFY, CHRISTOPHER, *Siege Warfare: The Fortress in the Early Modern World, 1494-1660*, (London, 1979), pp. 66-7.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>iii</sup> HEBBERT, F. J. and ROTHROCK, G. A., *Soldier of France: Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban, 1633-1707*, (New York, 1989), p. 26.

<sup>iv</sup> DUFFY, CHRISTOPHER, *Siege Warfare*, Op Cit., p. 134.

<sup>v</sup> DUFFY, CHRISTOPHER, *Fire and Stone*, (Edison, 2006), p. 135, and LYNN, JOHN A., *The Wars of Louis XIV: 1667-1714*, (Harlow, 1999), p. 153. See also VAUBAN, SEBASTIEN LE PRESTRE DE, *A Manual of Siegecraft and Fortification*, (Michigan, 1968), p. 125.

<sup>vi</sup> MULLER in DUFFY, CHRISTOPHER, *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 1660-1789*, (London, 1985), pp. 81-2.

<sup>vii</sup> MARIX-EVANS, MARTIN, *Ypres in War and Peace*, (Andover, 2007), p. 17.

<sup>viii</sup> BLOMFIELD, REGINALD, *Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban*, (London, 1938), p. 47.

<sup>ix</sup> LEPAGE, JEAN-DENIS, *Vauban and the French Military Under Louis XIV*, (Jefferson, 2010), p. 155.

<sup>x</sup> GRIFFITH, PADDY, *The Vauban Fortifications of France*, (Oxford, 2006), pp. 12-14.

<sup>xi</sup> BLOMFIELD, Op Cit., pp. 111-2.

<sup>xii</sup> HEBBERT, F. J. and ROTHROCK, G. A., *Soldier of France: Sebastien le Prestre de Vauban, 1633-1707*, (New York, 1989), p. 121.

<sup>xiii</sup> LYNN, JOHN A., Op Cit., p. 107.

<sup>xiv</sup> DUFFY, CHRISTOPHER, *The Fortress* Op Cit., p. 38.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, pp. 106-7.

<sup>xvii</sup> MARIX-EVANS, MARTIN, *Ypres in War and Peace*, (Andover, 2007), pp. 16-17.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> WARMOES, ISABELLE, *Musée des Plans-Reliefs*, (Paris, 1999), p. 32. ◆