

Palace of Versailles golden gate restored

The golden gate to the Palace of Versailles has finally been replaced, more than 200 years after being torn down during the French Revolution.

By Henry Samuel in Paris

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Palace of Versailles is one of France's most visited tourist sites | Credit : Photo : GETTY

After two years of work, a replica of the original 80m wrought iron and gold leaf gate now graces the entrance to Louis XVI's former power base.

A total of 100,000 gold leaves have been crafted into the shapes of *fleur de lys*, crowns, masks of Apollo, cornucopias and the crossed capital Ls representing the Sun King.

The royal gate, which stands at the entrance to the cour d'honneur, "provides an essential element of Versailles' historical identity", said Jean-Jacques Aillagon, president of the palace monument. "It returns to this area in front of the château all its symbolic force."

Private donors contributed £4 million to rebuild the 15-ton work, and a plethora of historians and top craftsmen – sculptors, gilders, wrought iron craftsmen and ornament makers – were drafted in to ensure an exact replica of the original built by Jules Hardouin-Mansart in the 1680s.

The only surviving sculpted elements of the original palace enclosure are Peace by Tuby and Abundance by Coysevox.

"But it was very well documented, which allows us to create a faithful replica," said Frédéric Didier, architect in chief of France' historical monuments.

Experts studied 17th and 18th century archives and information from archaeological digs before deciding on the final model.

The gate is the centrepiece of a secure double enclosure separating the cour d'honneur from the royal courtyard – at the very heart of the palace.

"Versailles is the king's residence and the whole layout aimed to demonstrate that one was approaching his sacred person," said Mr Aillagon.

One of France's most visited tourist sites, the chateau de Versailles west of Paris has been undergoing renovation work since 2003 when the government launched a 17-year old "Grand Versailles" project to restore it to full former glory.

A new visitors' centre is also being built at Versailles to improve tourist access to the ornate palace and royal gardens with their renowned fountains.

The gate will be inaugurated on 8 July.