

### A brief outline of Olten's history

The name Olten is first mentioned in 1201 in connection with the canon regular Oulricus de Oltun, a member of the knighted clan of Olten-Hagberg. The first document mentioning Olten as a town dates from the year 1265. A later document from the year 1295 makes clear what made Olten interesting at that time: the bridge over the Aare River. Through many centuries, this bridge was the "umbilical cord", as it were, that kept the town alive. This dependence from transit traffic shaped the life of the town; the people of Olten have always been forced to be open to new ideas and economic developments.



Another aspect of this open-mindedness was a self-assured rebellious attitude of the Olten townspeople towards the Solothurn authorities. After two disastrous fires in 1411 and 1422, Olten had come under the pledge lordship of the Solothurn authorities who took advantage of Olten's political opposition. The government's patronizing behaviour stirred up the spirit of resistance in Olten and may have been one of the reasons why the "Huttwiler Brief" stating the demands of the rebellious peasants in the peasant war of 1653 was also officially sealed by the town of Olten. After the suppression of the rebellion, Olten lost its town privileges for this obviously hostile act! Until the French invasion of 1798, Olten remained almost completely dependent from Solothurn in political and legal terms.



It is hardly surprising then that all attempts to overthrow the old patrician regime in the late 18th and early 19th century were actually instigated by citizens of Olten.

It is probably due to the political aptness of those enlightened "patriots" that Olten, as the first municipality of the canton, received an organisational charter in 1817 opening the path to extensive corporate independence once again. The far-reaching political and denominational changes of the 19th century, the overthrow of the patrician rule and the ensuing democratization, the rise of the railroad offering new economic opportunities, the struggle between the catholic church and the state after the first Vatican Council of 1870 (known as "Kulturkampf") and the increasing industrialisation



combined with an almost explosive growth of the town – due in part to the influx of "new blood" by new immigrant citizens – made Olten a self-assured town of pioneers of about 7,000 souls. Despite of huge infrastructure problems owing to the population explosion, the town remained open to issues of culture and education. The town library and museums were turned into public facilities during this difficult time.

In economic terms, there were a lot of changes as well. In addition to the shops of the central railroad and of numerous renowned local companies like Roll, Giroud, Strub und Glutz, and Sunlight, many new companies settled in Olten.

During World War I, Olten became a garrison town; the new Bifang school building was turned into a rear echelon military hospital.

The time between the two World Wars brought an economic breakdown and emergency measures for fighting the rampant unemployment but it was also a time of reflection and reorientation. Olten got established as a place for conferences and festivities, and for sports events: as early as 1924, the town's bicycle association Sali organised the first bicycle races. From 1931 on, regular motorcycle races with international participation were held in the industrial section.

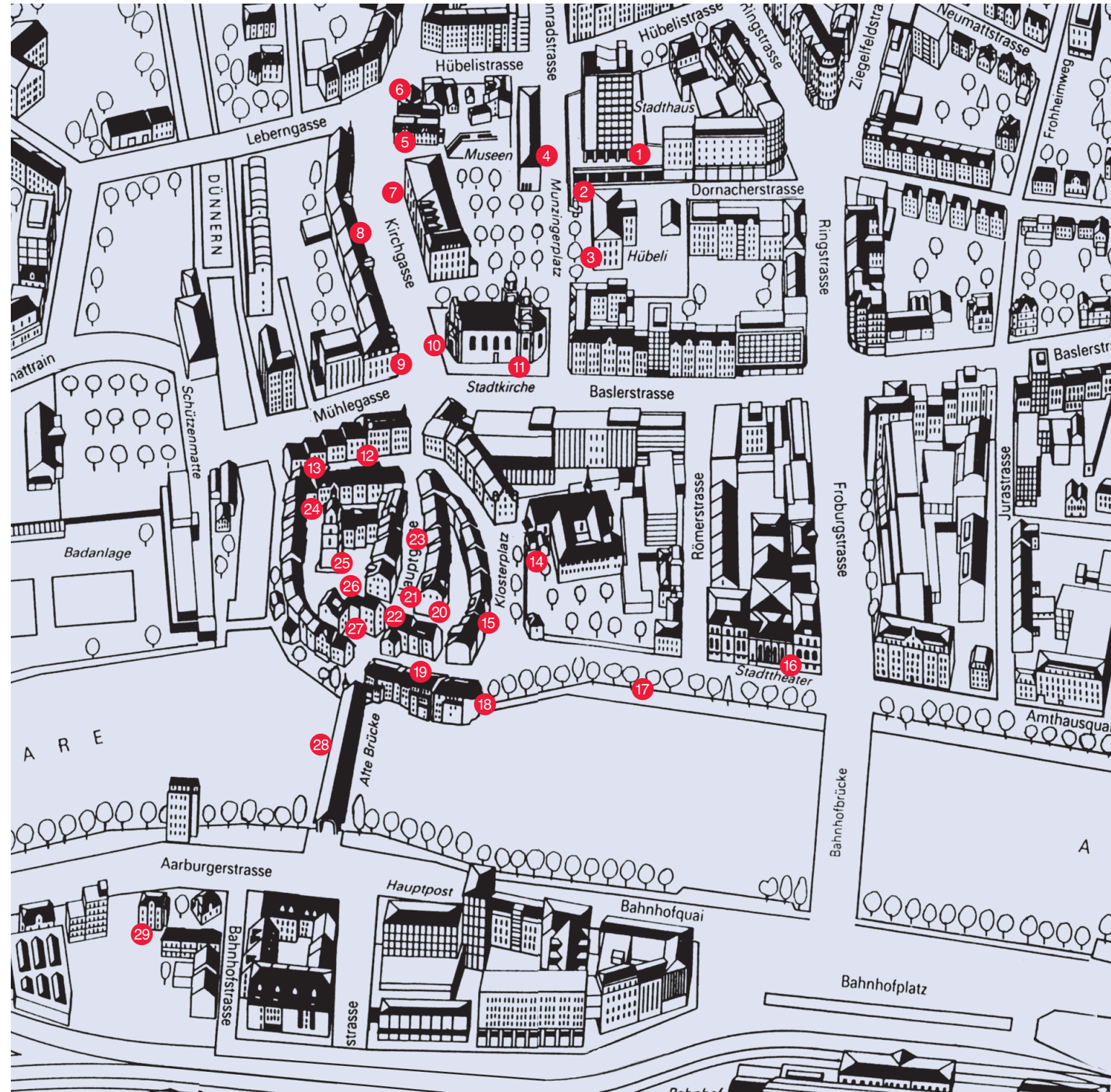
World War II brought a new setback. Towards the end of the war, new faces appeared in Olten: internees from all parts of the world.

Then came the time of the "economic miracle" after World War II, a time of economic prosperity. Olten built a new train station bridge and developed visions in urban planning. The town was supposed to become a centre of the region. Visible sign for this ambition: the new town hall. Topics of agitated discussion in the press included a new town development project on top of the Born, the golden economic triangle, the supra-region Aarolling (Aarau-Olten-Zofingen), a centre for industry and commerce in Gheid and Olten as a Swiss centre for the sports.

The recession of 1974 resulted in a huge sobriety. Numerous companies went out of business or moved away but rampant unemployment could narrowly be avoided. For the first time, Olten's population massively declined: from 21,478 inhabitants in 1968 to 18,022 in 1990!

At the same time, we're seeing a clear shift in the main economic activities. More and more, Olten is becoming a service centre. The main station is changed to meet the requirements of the railway modernization project "Bahn 2000". Olten, since 1986 the "economic pole" of the canton Solothurn, is becoming once again, like at the beginning of the 19th century, a city of schools.

Martin Ed. Fischer, former town archivist



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- 3 **Hübeli-Schulhaus** (school building)
- 4 **Magazin**, former fire brigade building
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## A walking tour through Olten's History

**1 Town hall**

Designed by architects Frey, Egger & Peterhans and built 1963 to 1965. Seat of the town administration. Moved into in November 1965, inaugurated on April 30, 1966. Process of renovation in stages since 1992.

**2 Former Oberer Brunnen (upper fountain)**

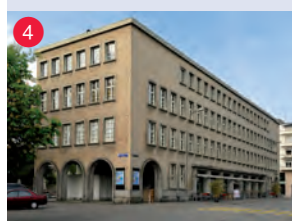
Purchased in 1860 in connection with the preparations to the Swiss song festival in Olten and set up in the old town next to the former house with the oriel (corner *Hauptgasse / Hintere Gasse*). Moved to this location in 1930 to make space for the construction of the former business building of Felbert. (No picture)

**3 Hübli-Schulhaus (school building)**

Designed by J. Kälin, Solothurn and built from 1868 to 1871 as the first actual municipal school building. During the German-French War, it was used as general headquarters under general Herzog.

**4 Magazin, former fire brigade building**

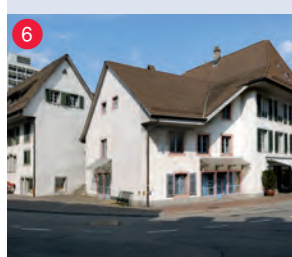
Designed by Olten architect Fritz von Niederhäusern and built in 1930 in connexion with job creation measures. It was intended as part of a new multi-winged town hall which was planned in 1929 to include a fire brigade building, school house and museum. Today, it is the town's historical museum.

**5 Fischbrunnen (fish fountain) in the Wangner Vorstadt**

Purchased in 1843 as replacement for the old village fountain in the *Hammer* section (on the old *Solothurner Landstrass*' by the present textile mill *Filztuchfabrik Munzinger*). It was moved several times. Until 1903, it stood on the corner of *Kirchgasse* and *Leberngasse*.

**6 Wangner Vorstadt**

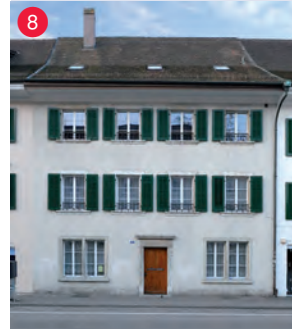
Former small craftsmen neighbourhood. Oldest structural parts are from the late 15th century. The houses were supposed to be replaced by a new large-scale town hall project in 1929. In 1975 transferred to private ownership and renovated according to historic preservation guidelines.

**7 Museum of natural science**

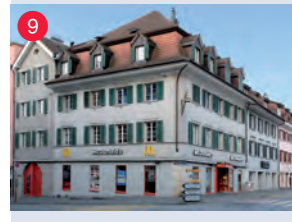
Designed by Oberst Konrad Munzinger and built in 1840 as a school house and seat of the municipal administration. From 1872 on, it also contained the *Naturalienkabinett* (collection of natural science) and from 1901 on the Disteli Art Collection. After the move to the new town hall at *Frohburgstrasse* in 1910, it became the first site of the town library until 1925. Since 1926, it has been Olten's municipal museum of natural science.

**8 Chorherrenhäuser (houses of the canon regulars)**

Built from 1701 to 1705, in connection with the move of the convent of canon regulars *Schönenwerd* which was planned but never realised. For the consistent stone floor, they were used as a tithe barn by the authorities. The house on the Western corner was used as the mayor's seat 1701–1798.

**9 Gasthaus zur Krone (inn)**

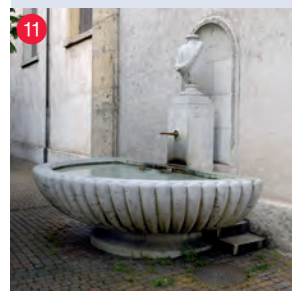
Built in 1701 as "canonry" in the row of the canon regulars' houses. In 1746, it became the site of the *Gasthaus zur Krone*. From 1781 to 1794, it was the meeting place of the "Helvetic Society". Later, it became an inn with its own brewery and also housed the "Krone" pharmacy. In 1922, it became the department store 'zur Krone'. Since 1970, it has been centre specialty store of CVO.

**10 Stadtkirche (town church)**

Designed by Blasius Baltenschwiler and Niklaus Purtschert and built 1806 to 1813. Stucco work by Franz Georg Rust, Solothurn; ceiling fresco by J. Georg Vollmar, Bern; side altars by Xaver Hecht, Willisau; high altar painting by Sebastian Gutzwiller after a design by Martin Disteli. In possession of the Old Catholic parish since 1874.

**11 Former Kronenbrunnen (fountain)**

Created by Solothurn stone masons Rust & Baumann in 1834. Original site was next to the *Gasthaus zur Krone* on *Kirchgasse* corner *Mühlegasse*. Was moved to this location in 1939 for reasons related to traffic engineering.

**12 Fountain at Oberer Graben**

Erected in 1966 to replace the modest former *Marktbrunnen*. Created by sculptor E. Spörri, Wettingen. (No picture)

**13 Ring wall at the Hexenturm (witch's tower)**

The last remaining part of the former ring wall; at one time, it surrounded the entire town except for the section along the Aare river. Under the pinnacles still clearly visible: the loopholes. Behind is a 40 m stretch of the former battlement parapet. From the merlon of the *Hexenturm* which can only be seen from inside the town, a witch is supposed to have caused a terrible storm during Olten's occupation by Solothurn and Bern troops in 1383.

**14 Capuchin monastery**

Typical capuchin construction. Founded by Jakob Graf von Solothurn in 1648. An additional story was added to the convent building in 1931. The church was restored in 1975. The high altar painted in 1640 by Johannes Wil, a student of Rembrandt, is a synoptic presentation of the Passion of Christ.

**15 Rathskeller (town hall cellar)**

Former guest stable of the inn *zum Löwen*. Converted to a residential house in the late 19th century utilizing some set pieces of the *Löwen's* former facade. The restaurant has been there since 1896. Rebuilt and furnished in a historicizing style in 1906. Frescoes by Emil Kniep, Luzern. On the side facing the wall *Der letzte Frohburger* (The last Frohburg citizen), on the side facing the town *Auszug der Oltner in den Bauernkrieg 1653* (Olten's forces setting out to the Peasant War of 1653).

**16 Concert hall and administrative building**

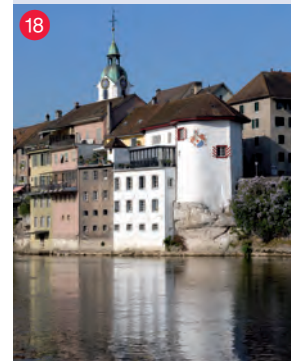
Representational buildings in the renaissance revival style, by the former *Zielempquai* dock of 1868, today the *Amthausquai*. The construction of an administrative building with an added on concert hall in 1884 was suggested by the supervisory authorities of what was then the municipal savings bank Olten. In 1885, it was expanded to include the *Amthaus*, an administrative building of the municipal authorities (today a court building). Designed by Julius Kunkler.

**17 Obelisk**

Erected in 1905 by *Verkehrs- und Verschönerungsverein Olten*, an association for improvement of the town's traffic and appearance, to commemorate four famous Olten citizens: *Bundesrat* Josef Munzinger (1791–1855) (member of the federal council of Switzerland), Johann Jakob Trog, SCB Director (1807–1867), Martin Disteli, painter (1802–1844), and Pater Ildefons von Arx, author of the first chronological work on the town's history (1755–1833).

**18 Zielempl**

Remains of the old town castle, partially dismantled in 1868 and reduced by 1½ stories. Former seat of the Frohburg town reeves. Originally, a walled in building complex extending from the Aare river up to the so-called *Frohburger-Hofstatt* and to the *Kapuzinertörrchen* (Capuchin gate): castle, *Rittersaal* (knights' hall) and barns. Refuge emergency water supply (cistern).

**19 Stadtbad (town baths)**

Oldest recorded pub in Olten. First mentioned in 1413. "Town baths" until the 19th century with the privilege to use the excess water of the former "lower fountain" by the town hall for its bathing facility.

**20 Former Unterer Brunnen (lower fountain)**

In 1975, this fountain replaced the former "lower fountain" by the town hall to serve for its memorial. Together with the "upper fountain", the "lower fountain" provided the water supply for the old town for centuries. When the old town hall was converted to town library, the former "lower fountain", a big stone trough, was removed. (No picture)

**21 Former town hall, now town library**

Erected in 1705 on the site of the former town house of the Bumann family, an old clan of noblemen in the king's service. It housed the big town store on the first floor, the great council room on the second and above that the town dance hall. The usher's apartment was on the attic floor. Completely renovated in 1925 and converted into town library.

**22 Inn zum Löwen**

Olten's oldest inn. The current appearance dates from the mid 19th century. Parts of the old facade – like the former arms cut in stone above the entrance – were reused in the *Restaurant zum Rathskeller*. The inn included the former adjacent hall (with the incam), a big barn outside the town's gates and another building at the site of the current restaurant *Rathskeller* which was used as guest stables.

**23 Mayor's houses zum Bögli and zum Kreuz**

Since Conrad Umbendorn's instalment as mayor by Solothurn in 1514, it was the mayor's seat until 1655. In 1532, it was expanded to become the *Haus zum Bögli* through the addition of a wooden bower above the former alley. In 1655 the government exchanged it for what was going to be the *Haus zum Kreuz*. The *Haus zum Kreuz* was the mayor's house from 1655 until 1701, when it became privately owned through another exchange and turned into an inn.

**24 Hospital, hospital barn and Hexenturm (witch's tower)**

It was bequeathed to the town by Werner and Elsa Scherrer in 1482 to be used as community poor house and orphanage. As such it was used until the early 20th century. The *Hexenturm* in the court yard between the old hospital and the hospital barn was used as a prison. From its pinnacle, Metzina Wächter is said to have conjured such a heavy storm that the Solothurn and Bern troops had to break off their occupation of the town in 1383.

**25 Stadtturm (bell tower)**

Erected by Konrad Gibelin of Solothurn in 1521 as a bell tower for the former town church that had burned down in 1422 and was newly consecrated in 1461. From 1676 to 1682, it was remodelled in the baroque style with an additional storey added. When the dilapidated church was torn down in 1844, it was left standing as a time and bell tower. Renovated in 1928, 1975 and 2006.

**26 Former chaplain's house "Unser Lieben Frau"**

Founded in 1450 by Werner and Elsa Sterr. Residence of the chaplain. The chaplaincy "Unser Lieben Frau" was closed in 1876. Preserved on the Western wall: axial choir window of the town church (rebuilt after the big fire of 1422 and newly consecrated in 1461). The windows and frescoes were re-discovered in 1971. Left: Mother of God with child, right: St. Elisabeth of Thuringia.

**27 Kaplaneiplatz (Kaplanei square) and oldest school house in town**

What is Kaplanei square today was originally the walled in private garden of the chaplaincy *Unser Lieben Frau*. After the chaplaincy was closed, it was turned into a public square. Second house in the narrow passage to *Hintere Gasse*: Chaplaincy Sancti Elogi 1520 (founded by miller Rudolf Winter). From 1545 on, it was the seat of the town clerk and from 1606 to 1815, it was used as Olten's first school house.

**28 Alte Brücke (old bridge)**

It was a fortress protecting the river crossing during Roman times. The bridge is first mentioned in 1295. It burnt down several times in the course of the centuries and was damaged or swept away by floods or ice runs. It was destroyed for the last time during the French invasion. The current bridge was built in 1803 to replace the temporary bridge from 1797, both designed by Blasius Baltenschwiler.

**29 Ennet Aaren**

Municipal custom house and so-called *Disteli-Haus* on the Eastern side of the old bridge, both built in 1786. These, together with the group of three buildings behind are the last remaining parts of the former boat- and raftsmen quarters *Ennet Aaren*. As bridgehead before the gate on the right side of the Aare that burnt down during the French invasion, it had a certain importance.



This walking tour was donated by StadtAnzeiger Olten on the occasion of the paper's 75th anniversary.