

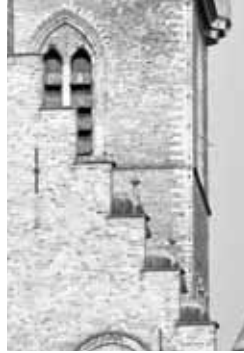
Proud Guardians of Civic Liberty

Belfries in the Low Countries

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[L U C D E V O L D E R E]





All photos by Michiel Hendryckx.

In the Middle Ages trade and the cloth industry were thriving mightily in North-West Europe. As a result, the middle classes in the towns of the Southern Netherlands became rich and increasingly influential. Belfries or hall towers were a symbol of this urban and middle class freedom and power. For before this only the rulers and the church had had the money to finance such large buildings.

As the safest place in town, the belfry often housed the town's archives, its strong-rooms and sometimes the prison as well. Bells were hung in these towers. Because of their height they were also used as watchtowers to warn of approaching enemies in time and to spot fires in the town quickly. The town bell was then rung. From the 16th century on carillons came into vogue as well.

A group of 56 belfries in Belgium and France has been included in the UNESCO World Heritage list.

Nearly all the belfries still in existence are in Belgium (26 in Flanders and 7 in Wallonia) and in Northern France (23). The only Dutch belfry, the one in Sluis, is in Zeeland Flanders, on the Belgian border.

Here we shall show you eight belfries from the Southern Netherlands. Those of Aalst, Arras (Atrecht), Douai, Ghent, Ypres, Kortrijk, Sluis and Tournai.

All eight of them have a tale to tell.



Nec spe nec metu

Nothing is what it seems. Inscribed on the belfry in Aalst is the Roman-Stoic motto NEC SPE NEC METU - without hope or fear - and beneath it the year 1200.

The motto and the year were added in 1555, on the occasion of the joyous entry of the Spanish King Philip II of Spain, who was also Count of Aalst. Philip had succeeded his father, Charles V, following the latter's abdication in Brussels that same year.

It was the monarch's personal motto. And 1200 was a round-figure date for the construction of the original Aldermen's House, which dates from 1225, making it the oldest in the Netherlands. In 1380 the Aldermen's House burned down when the men of Ghent laid waste to the town. Part of the house burned down again in 1879, after fireworks set fire to it during the fair. The bell-tower itself and the carillon only date from 1460.

In the spring of 1576 Spanish troops, who had not been paid for a very long time, started plundering the Southern Netherlands. Without hope and without fear. Because of its central location, the mutinous troops chose Aalst as the base for their merciless raids. In November 1576 this Spanish fury reached Antwerp. Thousands were put to the sword. These events sent an enormous shock-wave through the Low Countries and led to the Pacification of Ghent on 8 November.

The treaty stipulated that the Spanish armies should leave the Low Countries and that there should be freedom of religion. Nothing could be less true. But when there is no hope any more, one may very well learn to fear nothing too.

The one-time financial centre of the Low Countries

Atrecht, or Arras, is now part of France, but in the twelfth century it was the most important producer of cloth in the Low Countries and the most dynamic town commercially. In the thirteenth century it was also the Low Countries biggest financial centre. Back then Atrecht had 25,000 inhabitants. But in 1212 the French King Philip II Augustus managed to filch the town and the Artois region from the County of Flanders.

Atrecht's role as a financial centre was taken over by Bruges in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, by Antwerp in the sixteenth century and by Amsterdam in the seventeenth.

Nonetheless, Atrecht maintained its major role in the revived textile industry, especially in tapestry weaving.

In 1579 the Union of Atrecht was concluded, reconciling a number of Walloon regions with the Spanish Governor-General, Alexander Farnese. As a reaction to this, in the same year the Northern regions came together in the Union of Utrecht. A difference of just one letter, but the Low Countries were now split in two.

From that time on Atrecht was part of the Spanish Netherlands, until the city fell permanently into French hands in 1659 and became Arras.

And the belfry? The belfry of Atrecht/Arras is the clock-tower of the town hall. The town hall and the 75 metre high belfry date from the 16th century. '*Prodigieux beffroi mince, dentelé de mille caprices, qui dresse jusqu' aux nuages () sa masse énorme et légère*', as Paul Verlaine said of it in 1889: incredible slim belfry, indented with a thousand caprices, that raises its huge, light structure to the clouds.

The belfry suffered badly in the First World War, but was meticulously rebuilt after hostilities ended. It still dominates one of the two *grandes places* and is surrounded by 155 houses in Flemish baroque style.

The belfry is adorned with the imperial crown of Charles V, ruler of the Low Countries,

It was inspired by that of Oudenaarde and reminds us that the County of Artois once formed part of the German nation's Holy Roman Empire. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*.





France's carillon capital

Along with Lille and Orchies, Douai was a part of the County of Flanders which has been French-speaking since the twelfth century. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the town was a plaything in the struggle between the French kings and Flanders.

King Philip II of Spain founded a university there in 1562, the second in the Low Countries after Leuven. The university became a bulwark of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, but at the end of the nineteenth century it was lost to Lille.

In 1837, long after Douai had fallen into decline, Victor Hugo passed through Douai and wrote to his daughter Adèle:

'There is there the most beautiful belfry I have ever seen. Imagine a Gothic tower, topped with a slate roof, consisting of a multitude of little cone-shaped windows one on top of the other; on tip of each window a weather vane, on each of the four corners a turret; and on the top of the belfry, a lion turning with a flag between its paws; and out of this highly amusing, crazy, lively ensemble comes a carillon. In every little opening you can see a bell working away madly like a tongue in a mouth. I drew the tower, and when I look at my drawing, I seem to hear again that joyful carillon escaping like natural vapour from this mass of pinnacles.'

The carillon was installed as early as 1391 and Jehan Lourdel was appointed by the aldermen to set the rhythm of the town's life with his playing of the bells. He was the first of a series of, to date, 35 carilloneurs.

The bells were melted down by the Germans in 1917. By 1954, though, the tower once again housed 47 of them, in addition to the two heavy bells dating from 1471 that, though damaged, had survived the war and been restored: 'Joyeuse', a 5500 kg (108 cwt) A pitch and 'La disnée', a C of 2400 kg (47 cwt).

Today there are 62 bells in the tower, spanning five octaves. Douai is the only town in France that still has a paid carillonneur and can therefore rightly be called France's carillon capital.

Go and have a listen.

The Ghent dragon

For the last six centuries there has been a dragon on the Ghent belfry. It is 3.55 m (11.65 feet) long, 1.50 m (4.9 feet) wide, 1.80 m (5.9 feet) high and weighs 398 kg (7.83 cwt). It has an iron body and is covered with sheets of gilded copper.

This is its story.

During his crusade against the Seljuks between 1107 and 1111, the Norse King Sigurd Magnussen was given a dazzling reception in Constantinople by the Emperor Alexius Comnenus. On his departure for the North the monarch is supposed to have given the gilded dragon from the prow of his ship to his imperial host by way of thanks. The Emperor in his turn is said to have had the showpiece installed on Hagia Sophia or on the Boukoleon Palace. Less than a hundred years later the Flemish Count Baldwin IX took part in the Fourth Crusade and in 1204, after the recapture of Constantinople from the Turks, he was crowned Emperor of the Byzantine Empire in Hagia Sophia. Supposedly he had the Norse dragon brought from Constantinople to our part of the world and gave it to the town of Biervliet in Zeeland Flanders, whose warriors had fought so courageously against the Turks. The impressive trophy – so the story continues – did not stay in the possession of Biervliet very long, because shortly afterwards it fell into the hands of the people of Bruges. Following the battle of Beverhoutsveld in 1382, the people of Ghent in their turn took the dragon from Saint Donat's Tower and carried it off triumphantly along the River Lieve to Ghent as plunder of war. There it was placed on top of the belfry. *Se non è vero, è ben trovato*: if it's not true, it's a good story. The dragon has always been very popular with the people of Ghent. It was even made to breathe fire during festivities. This was first done on 17 March 1500 on the occasion of the baptism of the future Emperor Charles V. The last time that the dragon breathed fire was in 1819 when the Prince of Orange was visiting Ghent.





Risen from its ashes

The belfry in Ypres stands high above the Cloth Halls, one of Europe's greatest medieval civic buildings. In October 1914 the advancing Germans briefly occupied the city, only to leave it again, probably on 12 October.

On 13 October 1914 British troops marched into Ypres. They would hold the town for the whole of the war. Surrounded by the enemy on three sides, Ypres would be blown to smithereens over four long years. On Sunday 22 November 1914 the Cloth Halls and the belfry caught fire for the first time.

Eye witnesses wrote: 'On Sunday 22 November the Cloth Hall was bombarded, a grandiose monument highly praised in art history, the renown of Ypres. (...) First a breach on either side of the tower, then the clock came down and the Carillon collapsed; around 11.30 the tower caught fire and soon the monument was nothing but one huge inferno.' 'Around 9 o'clock on Sunday 22 November many bombs fell; they hit our building with uncommon accuracy (...). The clock, and the two carillons as well, fell right through the tower and finally, around 11 o'clock, the incendiaries hit their target and started the fire that cries out for vengeance. (...) And contemplating your skeleton, O suffering treasure of art, we hum silently: "Ypres, Ypres, Your greatness built up once again and industry and trade and work brought forth! Then shall the carillon play from all your tower battlements."'

In 1915 the last civilians left the town. By 1918 there was not a wall left standing in Ypres and a man on horseback could see clear across the town. Not until 1967 was the total restoration of the Cloth Hall and the belfry completed.

The perfect marriage

In Kortrijk, or Courtrai, the belfry now stands abandoned, stripped of the old cloth halls that had surrounded it and which were only demolished at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time they were even thinking of pulling down the whole building.

Enthroned on the top of the tower is a gilded statue of the Roman god Mercury, the god of trade who rightly rules this industrious town. It is not him we are interested in, though, but the town's oldest citizens: Manten and Kalle, who ring the bells in the belfry.

In the fourteenth century a bell on the Hall Tower was linked to a clock, operated by a metal automaton called Manten who struck the hour. When the Burgundian Duke Philip the Bold plundered Kortrijk after the battle of Westrozebeke in 1382, his engineers very carefully took the famous mechanism away with them. They put it on the Church of Our Lady in Dijon, where it can still be seen. In 1651 the inhabitants of Dijon gave their mannikin, or jacquemart, a wife called Jacqueline and two children because: 'It's not good for a person to be alone'.

Kortrijk quickly acquired a new Manten to strike the hour, and in 1424 this was granted the company of 'a Mantine to strike the bells'.

She would soon go down in history as 'Kalle'.

Manten and Kalle became an inseparable couple and today they still take it in turns to strike the bell every half-hour. 'They get on like Manten and Kalle' is an expression used to denote couples who living together in harmony. And Flanders would not be Flanders if no local beers had been devised to bear the names of the inseparable pair that marks the hours on Kortrijk's main square.





Arranged marriages

Philip III, the Good, Duke of Burgundy (1396-1467), married three times, had thirty known mistresses and eighteen acknowledged bastards.

In October 1428 Philip of Burgundy sent a delegation to Lisbon to negotiate a third marriage. The delegation included the artist Jan van Eyck. Two copies of the portrait he painted of Princess Isabella were sent by courier to the Duke. On 25 July 1429, a day after the signing of the marriage contract, 'la infanta Isabel' married the Burgundian Duke in Portugal by proxy or, as the Dutch expression goes, 'with the glove'. The religious marriage was solemnised on 7 January 1430 in the belfry in Sluis and followed by a week of celebrations with jousting tournaments and banquets in Bruges.

Three sons were born of this marriage, two of whom died young.

In 1468 the only surviving son, Charles the Bold, was betrothed to Margaret of York, the sister of the English King, in the same belfry. The truth is that Margaret arrived in Sluis by ship on 25 June and Charles, who was also on his third marriage, came to check out the looks of his future bride. Whom he first set eyes on in the belfry.

The marriage was solemnised in the church in Damme and then they proceeded in a stately procession to Bruges, where the Papal Nuncio, six bishops and innumerable nobles indulged themselves in a whole week of extravagant banquets and tournaments.

And incidentally, you can hire the belfry in Sluis, the only one in the Netherlands, for your own wedding.

A dragon, an eagle and a Phrygian cap

The oldest belfry in Belgium is in Tournai, now Wallonia, the French-speaking part of the country. In 1188 the French King Philip II Augustus conferred the bell right on the town, which automatically implied the right to build a belfry.

Clovis, the founder of the Frankish kingdom that would eventually become France, was born in Tournai in 465. The town would remain French from the time of Philip Augustus, who strengthened his power in the north at the expense of the Count of Flanders, till 1513.

Tournai then became English for five years under Henry VII (the only Belgian town ever to suffer this fate!), French for three years under Francis I, and eventually came under Hapsburg rule from 1521 with Charles V.

Louis XIV deeply regretted the fact that “this old French town” became Austrian after the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. But he could not have everything.

The Austrian Emperor Joseph II had the dragon on the belfry replaced by a globe with the eagle on top. The French troops who took the town in 1792 then replaced the eagle with the Phrygian cap, a symbol of freedom, but in 1794 this was again removed by the Austrians and replaced by a triangular banner.

The belfry has survived it all – fire, restorations and structural alterations. In 1294 the town decided to increase the height of the bell-tower. The tower lookout needed to be able to see farther over the growing town and the construction of the cathedral choir impeded the view to the north. The secular power had to be brought into balance with the spiritual power. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

