

Middelburg

The Town in the Middle

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[D E R E K B L Y T H]

When I visited Middelburg for the first time, back in the early 1980s, the town was an old-fashioned, religious place. It was a Sunday and everything was closed, except for the churches, which were full. It felt twenty years behind Amsterdam.

When I returned to write this story in early 2017, it was clear that Middelburg had moved on, but not much, so it still feels a couple of decades out of date. Some shops are now open on a Sunday, but not too many. And the churches are still full.

The name means Middletown. And Middleburg does look like a middling Dutch place. It has all the usual details of a small Dutch town – dented bicycles parked outside the station, a shopping street with a Blokker and a Hema, a van on the main square selling *oliebollen*. You could be in any small Dutch town, I thought. But that’s not really true, I found out later. Middelburg is far from average.

The town is called Middelburg because it sits in the middle of the former island of Walcheren. But it is nowhere near the middle of the Netherlands. The train from Amsterdam seems to slow down as it heads through Zeeland province, passing through a vast empty landscape dotted with cows, stopping at small places along the way, taking its time to get to its provincial destination.

I was staying in the Hotel aan de Dam on the former harbour front. It was a charming old place out of the Dutch Golden Age with creaking stairs, ornate carved doors and solid oak beams. Originally a private house, it was built in 1652, possibly by Jacob van Campen, the architect of Amsterdam’s town hall. The bedrooms were furnished with old record players and a stack of vintage jazz records. The hotel did have wifi, so you could use a smartphone, but the owners seemed to assume guests would be happier listening to a slightly scratched Duke Ellington album.

Intriguing passages

The next morning, I went for a walk. The streets were strangely empty, apart from the occasional bicycle. I was struck by the scrubbed stoops, the potted



Middelburg Archives

plants on the street, the neatly parked bicycles. And something else I noticed. The bicycles were locked using a traditional rear-wheel clip lock, not the enormous reinforced steel locks you have to use in Amsterdam to prevent your bike vanishing in the night.

Most of the houses along the waterfront have attractive eighteenth-century white painted facades with straight classical cornices. But lurking behind the Empire-style facades, not quite hidden, were the older pointed gables from the seventeenth century.

The names painted on the houses in neat black letters offer some small clues about the identities of the previous owners. Some houses had biblical names. Others were named after foreign places like Antwerp or Edinburgh. And quite a few gave the names of the people who now lived in the houses. Here was where Tom lived with Ellen. And this is where the Van Rossum family lives.

I didn't notice at first, but the town has a network of secret lanes that run between the houses. I stumbled upon one lane called Kuiperspoort, where coopers once made barrels, hidden between the Dam and the Rouaanse Kaai. A low arch led into a seventeenth-century courtyard surrounded by mellow brick houses with step gables.

These intriguing passages are too small to be marked on the city maps. Some so narrow that only one person can squeeze through. Others so low that you have to duck your head. Yet they are fascinating to explore, leading you to overgrown gardens and hidden warehouses.

Facelift

There are other mysteries too, that don't get explained. The old town looks harmonious, well maintained, but then you sometimes notice an individual house or even an entire block that does not fit in with the rest. They look more like

modern post-war Dutch houses. And you want to ask why they were built in these beautiful waterfront locations.

Fortunately, I was shown around town by John Louws, a retired teacher with a deep understanding of Middelburg's past. He told me about a forgotten episode in the early years of the Second World War, a few days after the bombing of Rotterdam. The Dutch government had already surrendered, but Zeeland refused to give up without a fight. There were French troops in the region who tried to resist the Germans. The town was shelled on 17 May 1940, possibly by the French, or maybe the other side. The population had already been evacuated to safety, and only nineteen local people were killed, but hundreds of old buildings were reduced to rubble, one third of the housing stock in all.

After they captured the town, the Germans almost immediately launched a reconstruction plan. They recruited architects trained in the Delft School to design modern houses to fit the scale of the old buildings. The new houses can often be identified by a little plaque showing a phoenix rising from the ashes, along with the date 1940. But the new buildings don't exactly blend in with the old. 'They look authentic, but they're not,' Louws explained. 'It's as if the town had a facelift.'

The beautiful Gothic town hall was one of the casualties of 1940. Eight members of the famous Keldermans family from Mechelen had worked on this ornate Late Gothic building, from the laying of the first stone in 1452 to the completion in 1520. But the building was destroyed in a matter of a few hours, leaving nothing but the outer walls standing.

The town was hit by another catastrophe in the winter of 1944 when the suburbs were flooded. For more than a year, the water remained more than a metre deep in places, turning farmland into lakes. Even now, Louws explained, anyone buying a house in Middelburg will ask if the property was under water in 1940. If the answer is yes, then the deal might be called off.

Rescued heritage

It took several decades before the town had fully recovered. The turning point came in the early 1970s when Dutch cities were beginning to realise the importance of restoring historic monuments. Middelburg was one of the first cities to rescue its dilapidated heritage. Despite the loss of several hundred houses in 1940, the town still ranked fifth in the Netherlands for the number of





historic monuments, after Amsterdam, Maastricht, Leiden and Utrecht. With some 1,150 listed buildings on its books, many of them in a poor state, the city launched an ambitious plan to restore its architectural heritage.

[Kloveniersdoelen](#)

Louws took me down Spanjaardstraat to show me the results. Once a notorious slum, known mainly for its brothels, it has been transformed into an elegant cobbled street lined with renovated seventeenth-century houses.

We then walked out to the edge of town, where the Kloveniersdoelen, where the city guards once met, has been converted into an art cinema and restaurant. You can sit in the enormous banqueting hall, or, when the weather is good, find a table in the garden in the shade of a fruit tree.

The biggest surprise lies in the centre of town, where a modest gate leads into the Abdijplein, a huge open space enclosed by brick buildings. It once belonged to a Norbertine abbey founded in the twelfth century by monks from Flanders. Now it is surrounded by various buildings including a church, the Zeeland province offices and the Zeeland Museum.

One door leads into a hidden Gothic cloister enclosing a medieval herb garden. Some old stone steps lead down to a dark basement bar where you can drink Belgian and Dutch beers.

Eccentrics

The Zeeland Museum is located in one of the old buildings overlooking the abbey courtyard. It reopened in the summer of 2007 after an eight-year reconstruction led by the Brussels architect Christian Kieckens. The renovation



included a new entrance cut into the wall on the abbey courtyard and a bright, stylish café called ZMCAFE.

The original museum contained a dusty collection of oil paintings gathered in the nineteenth century. It didn't offer much of interest, apart from a portrait of Admiral De Ruyter in a splendid gilt frame and a paper model of a shipping disaster. But the museum has tried to bring some vitality to the collection by placing the focus on local crafts like chair making while adding playful touches based on Zeeland's traditional costumes.

The most inspired section comes at the end of the tour in the attic where three oversized crates are crammed with miscellaneous objects, like seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities. Here you can admire dozens of odd items that have somehow ended up in the museum, like a waistcoat and breeches worn by skipper Verlinde at his wedding in 1820, a set of playing cards with faded pictures of the Battle of Waterloo and a tea box disguised as a stack of books.

It seems that Middelburg, far from being average, has more than its fair share of eccentric intellectuals, butterfly collectors and amateur scientists. One of the most interesting, Johannes Goedaert, was the subject of a small temporary exhibition. He was an amateur scientist, naturalist and illustrator. Fascinated by insects, he spent his time searching in the Zeeland sand dunes for rare species.

Outside the museum, a curious sculpture shows two metalworkers standing next to a cannon resting on two sandbags. Created by the artist Sjuul Joosen, the work commemorates the Burgerhuys family, who once cast ships' bronze cannon and church bells in a dark attic at the top of one of the abbey buildings.

A guilty secret

It took me some searching to find evidence of the trade that turned Middelburg into the second most important city in the Netherlands. It is still something of a guilty secret, but Middelburg grew prosperous from the slave trade. In the eighteenth century, ships of the Middelburg Commerce Company, the MCC, carried more than 268,000 African slaves across the Atlantic, returning to the home port with holds filled with sugar, tobacco, cotton and cocoa beans. But you find little evidence of this trade in Middelburg, apart from Hedi Bogaers's simple granite Zeeland Slavery Monument unveiled in 2005 on a little square close to the former headquarters of the MCC.

Yet the story of Middelburg's slave trade can be tracked down if you are persistent. It is preserved in the exceptionally detailed records kept by the company. These old logbooks, which cover 113 Atlantic voyages, are so complete that they have been added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

An unknown island in the Pacific

The town also keeps strangely silent about its most famous explorer. At the advanced age of sixty-two, the local lawyer Jacob Roggeveen was sent to find the mythical continent Terra Australis. But on Easter Sunday 1722, his three ships stumbled by accident on an unknown island in the Pacific Ocean, which they named Easter Island.

You might have expected a statue of Roggeveen, but recently, when this idea was proposed, the council claimed it had no money. It could not even afford to put up a plaque on the house where Roggeveen was born, one local historian complained. It was left to the Zeeland archives to come up with an imaginative manner to remember Roggeveen. An extract from his diary is now carved onto a brick wall outside the Zeeland archive building on Hofplein. Other lines are inlaid on the polished floor of the cafeteria and there are even extracts from his account on the walls of the toilets. The expedition is also commemorated by a mysterious replica Easter Island *moai* head that stands outside a retirement home on Buitenruststraat.

Time is an empty bottle of wine

Middelburg's most notable contemporary artist, Marinus Boezems, has created some interesting works that are dotted around the town in unexpected locations. His most striking installation, the *Podio del Mondo per l'Arte*, is a replica of an old covered market where grain was once traded. Demolished in 1969, the market hall was rebuilt on the Damplein square as a platform for conceptual art. The art interventions are laid flat on the ground like gravestones, so they are easy to miss. 'This could be a place of post historical importance,' is carved on a stone set in the ground in 1976. Other works include Willem Breuker's 1998 iron manhole cover with the inscription 'Time is an Empty Bottle of Wine'.



St John café



Sint Jansplein

Next to an ancient stove

It's easy to miss the Sint-Jansstraat, a quiet lane off the main shopping street, which has a hint of Amsterdam's Jordaan. It leads to the Vismarkt, a hidden square where they used to sell fish from the North Sea. The market hall still stands on the square, along with a stone pump and several old chestnut trees, but the fish sellers have moved elsewhere.

I sat inside the St John café on Sint-Jansstraat at a little table in the back room next to an ancient iron stove. The café is a rambling place with a piano in the back room, old coffee tins and a wooden counter rescued from a Belgian bar. It's the kind of place where locals sit with the newspaper, tourists update their Facebook timelines and children are allowed a fluffy *Zeeuws bolus* covered with sticky brown sugar.

Years behind

Before leaving Middelburg, I rented a bike to explore the countryside. It doesn't take long to get out of the town. You cross a canal, then another, and – look! – there are cows. The cycle routes lead to pretty towns on the coast like Vlissingen to the south, Domburg to the west and Veere to the north.

With sea all around, the air is wonderfully clear. You can see the clocks on Middelburg's two towers from a long way off. Locals tell you that the clock on the town hall tower, known affectionately as Malle Betje, is always a bit slow, compared to the clock on the abbey tower, which they call Lange Jan. And the sundial is said to be slightly squint, giving rise to the notion of Middelburg time, thirty minutes behind Dutch time.

Someone recently sparked off an internet discussion on Middelburg time. 'The time is thirty minutes behind in Middelburg? More like thirty years,' he quipped. 'And that's the same for the whole of Zeeland.'

But maybe that's no bad thing. ■

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