

Belgium by Ferry March 2003

Getting there

This entailed a drive to Hull, and then the P & O Ferry to Zeebrugge. Things have changed from a few years ago; a well-signposted series of new roads (and countless roundabouts) take one through Hull's less-than-inspiring industrial environs to the ferry. Boarding is by 17.00 s, which seems a bit premature as actual departure does not take place for another two hours. We stood on deck in the hazy afternoon sunlight and could just about make out the Humber Bridge a few miles upriver, but by the time the boat shuffled its way out through the dock and a lock, night had fallen, although everywhere was the glare of sodium lights, and the flaring stacks of the oil refinery at Paull.

We had inadvertently booked a separate 4-berth cabin each; the booking form on the website is in English, but, as with lots of well-intentioned Continental communications, things like abbreviations turn out not to mean what you think. So the trip was rather more expensive than we had planned; nevertheless, the cabins were comfortable and onboard life tolerable, although the evening entertainment in the two main lounges is best avoided. The promised keyboard player in one did not seem to be there in person, although the keyboard was playing muzak by itself, its keys rising and falling as if under a spectral hand. On the floor below, the resident band churned out 30-year old pop hits ; at least there were three real humans visible, although the bass and drums were provided by machine.

Tuesday morning dawned with clear pink-tinged skies, but a slight mist hid the Belgian coast until we were almost there; we passed into Zeebrugge harbour past a lighthouse sitting on the end of a curving defensive mole made up of piled concrete cubes (very like those that link some of the Orkney islands). Then the long and sinuous disembarkment procession through the terminal building and an untidy scramble to the queue of waiting coaches. The transit to Bruges only takes a few minutes, along fairly anonymous motorway, with a few glimpses of countryside of pancakian flatness with the odd steep-roofed old farmhouse and distant brick church tower. Delivery was to Bruges railway station, with a huge concourse clearly designed to handle incoming and outgoing tourists in immense numbers.

Bruges

This is a city that has for over a century consciously devoted itself to the entertainment and edification of visitors; it has had time to become really quite good at it. From the railway station, which is firmly based in the present world, only one busy dual carriageway remains between you and the past world represented by the city. This time transit is made via a pedestrian crossing that, in addition to the usual little illuminated red and green men, provides audio-stimulus in the form of whirring and clicking. Once across, there is a bridge across the curving moat-cum-canal, with in its inner side the green tree-shaded mound of the ancient ramparts that still virtually encircles the medieval city. The walls have gone, but four great gatehouses survive, along with the odd tower, and a few windmills that use the elevation of the ramparts to claw their way skyward in search of the necessary air flow amidst all this flatness

One thing that might take the uneducated visitor aback is the fact that virtually all the historic fabric of Bruges is in red, or rather brown and orange, brick; stone only occasionally appears in either the oldest or the very grandest buildings, such as the ashlar facade of the Town Hall.

Old Flemish brickwork is familiar on the East Coast of England, in Norfolk, Lincolnshire and even around Hull, but only as the palest reflection of this.

At the heart of the city rise three great medieval towers; there is nothing of the succeeding centuries to rival them. The Belfort or Town Belfry, symbol of civic pride, rivalling two ecclesiastical spires, those of Our Lady's Church, and St Salvator's Cathedral, each quite distinctive in silhouette. One can triangulate one's position within the city by simply raising one's eyes above the rooftops to their relative positions.

Of these three towers, the image that stays longest in most people's minds is probably that of the Belfort, overlooking the Market Square; it even appears in one shop window modelled in white chocolate. It is a wonderful structure with spiral stairs that rise up for an eternity, complex mechanisms for playing its carillons of bells, and 13th-century wrought iron grilles to protect the chamber in which the city's charters were kept. The public don't get to the very top; that would entail a final ladder through a circular shaft rising through the uppermost of a series of domical brick vaults.

Our Lady's Church has a 13th century west front (in stone, a rarity in Bruges) with Romanesque echoes in arcaded circular turrets; behind soars the massive tower, of ancient brick with many blocked openings, giving it the air of a massive industrial building, to the fresher brick of the rebuilt spire. Inside there is much of interest, a Virgin and Child by Michelangelo, and a series of medieval brick sarcophagi, now displayed lidless, with plastered and painted interiors including cheerful censuring angels.

St Salvator's Cathedral was, until the 1830s, simply another parish church; it was elevated in status after the old St Donatius' Cathedral in the Market Place was destroyed on an occasion when local ecclesiastical politics became a little heated. It was decided at this point that its west tower was neither lofty nor impressive enough to befit a cathedral, so the English architect Street was called in to remodel and heighten it; the oddly asymmetric upper section is his.

There are many other wonderful buildings; just over the road from Our Lady's Church is St John's Hospital (now the Hans Memling Museum) which like the church is old enough to be partly of stone; there are three parallel ranges with stone arcades between, and axial arcades as well which have stone piers carrying timber plates; the central range has a splendid roof (dendro-dated to 1254) of raised base-cruck form, or something like that. The Gruuthuse Museum is a palatial 15th century house, but its interiors seem largely restoration; it has to be admitted that quite a lot of the antique appearance of the city is due to concerted restoration/rebuilding that took place in the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries (the term neo-Bruges style has been coined). The discovery of the city by antiquarian tourists and its own 'English colony' were a significant influence here. Old photographs of some of the famous viewpoints are quite surprising, and are best avoided if you want to keep the romance.

Apart from the grander buildings, what one remembers most is the gable-fronted houses, I suppose mostly of the 16th and 17th century houses; most have stepped gables and the older ones blind traceried or cusped panels above the windows; many 17th century examples are dated, sometimes on terra cotta plaques. Most street corners have niches with religious figures, usually a Virgin and Child.

Bruges and Bicycles

When in Bruges, it has to be borne in mind that at any moment one may be struck by a bicycle. Admittedly the risk is lessened when one is tucked up asleep in an attic bedroom, or atop the Belfort, with three hundred feet of spiral stair below you jammed with French school children, but nevertheless it is there. And if you set foot in the street, within seconds a phalanx of young women in dark coats, speeding upon their velocipedes straight out of a Victorian novelette, will swoop from nowhere. There is no security; they obey no rules - roads, pavements, any level space is a potential scene of carnage. And, apparently, the law is such that no cyclists can ever bear responsibility. Troops of bicycling Amazons who Boadicea-like affix scythes to their wheels, then hunt down and in a very real sense carve up elderly pedestrians, regularly claim the costs of cleaning their machines and re-sharpening their blades from their victims' next-of-kin. You have been warned.

Ghent

In a poem (by Robert Browning) they used to teach English school children, they brought the good news there from Aix... that was all I knew about Ghent¹. It is in fact a major city, about 30 km from Bruges. Like Bruges it has a cluster of medieval towers at its centre, but there the similarity ends. For a start they share a skyline with factory chimneys and modern high-rise blocks, and the place is over-run not so much with tourists as students, as this is a major university centre. But again there are frontages of impressive gabled houses, sometimes reflected in rivers, all on a rather grander scale than Bruges. Getting to the old centre from the railway station is a euro's worth of tram ride, and there is interest in the 19th and 20th century streetscapes before you get down the valley bottom and the old centre.

The oldest building is Gravensteen, the 'Castle of the Counts', an impressive and thoroughly medieval-looking edifice. It has a big gatehouse projecting from an enceinte studded with buttresses that expand into semicircular turrets, ringing a taller elongate donjon (very much of the type that would once have been called a 'hall keep'), which has a forebuilding on one side and a bridge linking it to the 'Counts' House' on the other. The structural history of the donjon has familiar echoes with English fortresses such as castle Acre, in being an 11th century hall house later submerged within a motte and made the basis of a great tower, although not quite the one we see today. For Gravensteen is not a ruined castle, but an ex-ruin; a good display of 19th century photographs show it after its building declined into industrial use, but before restoration. Two walls of the donjon, and quite a lot of the curtain wall, were more or less down to ground level. So most of the present interiors, and almost all their architectural detail and timber work, are relatively new, a clever and effective pastiche. Better-preserved than the building are a whole series of ghoulish artefacts by which the local authorities used to inflict pain and mental terror in any who offended their susceptibilities. One gets the impression that the Counts and Aldermen whose courts and torture chambers the building housed would not have been nice people to get on the wrong side of. The three Gothic towers that rise at the centre of Ghent form a dramatic group, closer together than those at Bruges. They represent the Church of St Nicholas., the Belfort, and the Cathedral of St Bavo. The Cathedral is a cruciform church with the usual polygonal eastern radiating chapels at its east end, and chapels opening laterally off each bay of the nave aisles with a big tower at its west end - all on a big scale. There is nothing before 1300, and the nave with its brick vaults is as late as the mid-16th century. Its most famous possession, Van Eyck's 'Adoration of the Mystic Lamb' is now sequestered in the north-west tower where visitors must pay 2.5 euros to see it, but a photographic facsimile, courtesy of Messrs Agfa/Gevaert, is displayed for free in its original chapel, where it hung from its original installation until

¹It appears Browning's poem describes a totally imaginary incident.

1986. There are lots of other paintings, carvings and mausolea, all in all impressive and off-putting at the same time, just too much marble carved as flesh, good medicine for the production of Protestants..

St Nicholas Church feels very different. It is still being restored, and the nave remains 'under wraps'. The transepts, central tower and eastern arm are predominantly 13th century. There is much more light, less clutter, and the art and fittings a bit more transparent and less overbearing. The staff are welcoming and informative. It is a bit like the contrast between Liverpool's two cathedrals, the flawed but transparent realities of 'Paddy's Wigwam' and the choking Neo-Gothic gloom of Gilbert Scott's Anglican monstrosity.

We had a brief look at two other notable buildings. Just over the bridge from Gravenstein Castle is the wonderful Butcher's Hall, a long stone building with row of crowstepped dormers and a tremendous medieval roof structure exposed within. And beyond another bridge is another massive church with a western tower, beside which the surviving buildings of a Dominican friary are now part of the university. The main cloister has lost its west range; the east cloister walk is of brick, with inside it a 13th century chapter house entrance of the classic type. But to the south there is a second cloister, and this seems to have its own chapter house as well....