

Brr..Brr..Bruges and Ghent - March 2006

Wed 15th - Outbound

I have two duties this trip. Not only write this article but also the onerous task of counting who is on the coach. But as I pass they keep talking to me! Either I remember the count but forget if I'm in it, or I know I am in it but forget the number. Well we all boarded plus or minus a memory lapse or two.

During the journey Adrian Parry gave us an introduction to his research on the William Leathes collection. A rumour quickly spread that we could be tested during the trip. This was followed by a quick trade in forged parental sick notes.

I've never been through the Euro tunnel on a coach wrapped in a carriage. It rolls a tad, it's like a virtual ferry trip. Nevertheless, the journey was smooth all the way to our centrally sited hotel in Bruges. The day ended with an enjoyable meal. The wine waiter, displaying admirable honesty, pointed out we had many bottles of our entitlement left untouched. Showing considerable constraint we kept these for our last evening.

Thu 16th Bruges

Today started with a guided walking tour. It was so cold. I had to thaw out our guides' words later.

Bruges has such a mixture of architectural styles. In the Burg Square are the gothic town hall, the renaissance style civil registry, the neo-classic Court of Justice and the baroque Deanery. The Market square contains the Belfry and the Neo-gothic Provincial Court. Even many of the 'Medieval' buildings are reconstructions. Bruges could be defined as Classic Neo-gothic medieval-renaissance.



The main attraction of Our Lady's church is the statue of Madonna by Michelangelo. Originally made for the cathedral of Sienna it was bought back by two merchants on a business trip in 1506 - some memento.

Although it is now a museum, nearby is one of the oldest remaining hospitals in Europe. It was built for pilgrims, passers-by and traveling salesmen, although I could see no sign of a Mondeo today.

It's even colder now and the boat trip on the canals is next but we huddled together on the converted Russian icebreaker for a picturesque tour.

The apocryphal story is that a brass monkey was the brass stand upon which cannon balls were stacked aboard ship. In cold weather the differentials in metallic contraction parted balls from monkey. Well today metaphorical cannon balls are rolling all around the deck.



We warmed up on a coach tour of the locality. Andrew, our guide, was full of enthusiasm and humour but his English was very nearly hors de combat. I became accustomed and snippets

filtered through. As we passed some wind turbines Andrew described how to walk sideways in a high wind whilst leading with ones elbow. I have tried this form of locomotion but have been ridiculed into submission. Now I believe he was describing the feathering of the turbine blades. The local wool trade arose only because sheep would eat the salty grass on the reclaimed land. Andrew then mentioned the value of 'Alan'. Thinking he was referring to Alan Swerdlow. However, others thought he was talking about 'a limb'. Eventually we found he was referring to alum, which was used for fixing fugitive dyes in wool.

I particularly liked Andrew's description of the door in the massive Lissewege church that was only opened once for each monk - it led to the cemetery.

Near the Ter Doest abbey at Lissewege is an enormous barn. It is considered one of the most important Gothic buildings in the Low Countries. As all local wood is bent by the prevailing wind it was constructed using straight English wood.

Fri 17th Bruges

Each to his own today, so we ran up the Belfry tower for the view and to keep warm. I was fascinated by the Flemish primitives in the Groenigene museum. They depicted everything in such detail from dirty fingernails to skin flaying but to their eternal shame they failed to depict perspective accurately and thus were forever known as primitives. I liked the artist Jan Anton Garemijn's motto of 'Never a day without a line'. Far better for an artist to have that mantra than a cocaine addict.

In the evening I had some of the plumpest most delicious mussels ever.

Sat 18th Ghent

The Castle of the Counts contains beautiful engraved and etched weapons and instruments of torture. The apparent loving care taken to make these implements is a touch disturbing. Upstairs was a suggestion box from the prison. However, in this box warders could deposit complaints about certain prisoners. Someone was thinking outside the box with this idea. What did they write and then do with the results? Sound like a good idea for a competition.

Wilfred our guide for the afternoon was delayed briefly as Mary's gang had been to the wrong tourist bureau. We think Alan handed her the map of Ghent upside-down a few days earlier and she never fully recovered.

The Ghent Belfry's 54 bells ruled city life. There were bells for special announcements, danger, when to finish work (with different bells for different trades), and of course the time.

The tower once had a copper dragon on top, which was strafed during the war. Did the pilot report it spiraling down with smoke and flames pouring from its nose? Did he receive the Order of St George?

Sun 19th - Homeward

Calais was far too cold to explore so most of us ended up ducking into the nearest restaurant. Another smooth journey bought us to Ipswich by 5:30.

These are the words I thawed out. Others may have defrosted differently. But I do know I had a thoroughly enjoyable and interesting time. I encountered plenty of banter and laughter in good company with the odd dragon and Flemish primitive thrown in.

Many thanks to Alan Swerdlow without whom I would have been sitting back home maybe warmer but certainly not wiser.