

The Ghent belfry

Significance of the Belfry

The 14th-century Belfry symbolizes Ghent's inhabitants' struggle for freedom, independency, democracy and social justice.

Klokke Roeland (the Roland Bell) was chimed when there were assemblies or fights against the enemy. The municipal privileges were kept in the secrecy room. These valuable documents were of vital importance for the city, since the rights and liberties of the Ghent people were set down in these privileges. The Belfry's clock and bells regulated the daily life in Ghent. The carillon sounded every half an hour, marking the working hours as well as dawn and sunset.

There was permanent surveillance over the city from the tower. In case of fire, calamity or approaching enemies, the tower keepers warned the population by chiming the bells. Entrances, celebrations and triumphs were brightened up with chiming bells.

The Belfry's solid bulk ends in the corner turrets, restored according to the original model and marked by the statues of the famous 'Men from Ghent', the stone watchmen. Gilded crockets and the famous dragon-shaped weather vane decorate the elegant spires. The belfry accommodates, amongst others, the 'secreet' (secret chamber) and the 54-bell carillon. Together with the towers of the St. Nicholas Church and St. Bavo's Cathedral, it determines the well-known skyline of the city of Ghent.

Cloth hall

In the beginning, this impressive building was standing here on its own, but during the first half of the 15th century the cloth hall

('Lakenhalle') was built adjacent to the tower. In the Middle Ages Ghent was one of the most important places for the trade of wool and cloth. At the cloth hall the textile was inspected and sold by the inspectors of the hall. The construction of the hall started in 1425. Already in 1441, with only 7 of 11 planned bays completed, the works were put to a stop. At that moment the cloth trade was already past its peak and the incomplete cloth hall served other purposes.

The crypt (in fact at the original street level) nowadays houses public services. The first floor gives access to the Belfry. The top floor has since 1613 been the home of the Ghent Saint Michael's Guild and the fencing-school. There's also a museum on this floor. The attic is used as a training-room for the fencing-school.

Mammelokker

The small building adjacent to the belfry and the cloth hall was erected in 1741 in rococo style. It served as the jailer's lodging and gave access to the town jail, which was accommodated at the crypt from 1742 to 1902. Today it is the office of the ombudswoman.

The name Mammelokker is Ghent dialect and refers to the bas-relief on the façade: a young woman is breastfeeding an old man. A Roman legend tells about the prisoner Cimon, who was sentenced to starvation. He could be saved by his daughter, who daily breastfed him.

Unesco

Together with 23 belfries in Flanders and 6 in Wallonia the belfry of Ghent has been inscribed upon the World Heritage List of the UNESCO Convention on December 4, 1999. The inscription on this List implies recognition of the outstanding universal value of a cultural or natural site, which de

serves protection in the interest of mankind. Since the Middle Ages, belfries symbolise the deep human urge for freedom and democracy and play an exceptional role in the fields of architecture, urban planning and musical history.

Secrecy Room (ground floor)

In spite of recent archaeological research, the secrecy room doesn't divulge all its secrets. The exact construction history of the eldest part of the Belfry is mere guesswork. Everything points to the initial intention to build on the ground floor a semi-underground floor, with an entrance, a window and a latrine. For unknown reasons, this plan was never carried out.

The secrecy room was fitted up as a records department in 1402. Here, the valuable privileges describing the city rights were kept in heavy, fortified and chained trunks attached to the floor. The room is spanned by an impressive cross rib vaulting with a central round opening, through which the bells were lifted. During WW II, the German occupation forces installed a false concrete floor. The lower floor was used as a command post. A doorway led to subterranean corridors, used by the Germans to reach their shelter in the belfry.

Since 1339, four stone tower keepers (from the guilds of Saint George and Saint Sebastian, the butcher's guild and a city trumpet player) adorned the tower's corners. In 1870, the last original tower keeper was carried down. This last original keeper and the casts for the new statues, prepared in 1913 for the renovation, are now being conserved in the secrecy room.

Tower Keepers Room (floor 1)

The Spire

The construction of the Belfry likely started in 1313. In the beginning the works made progress, but because of wars they were delayed several times and even suspended during ten years. In 1334-1335 the construction of a chime room and four angular towers was started, but the works had to be delayed again. A provisional wooden spire was placed on the tower. In 1442, when the tower keepers moved to the Belfry, the unfinished angular towers became watch houses with individual spires. In 1543 the crowning of the tower had to be raised to place the carillon. The crowning had been changed several times, adapted to the growing number of carillon clocks and architectural fashion. In the middle of the 19th century, the tower was renovated drastically.

The city architect, Louis Roelandt, proposed to replace the wooden spire by a cast-iron campanile. His project was approved and in 1854 the renovated tower was inaugurated. Due to the lack of maintenance, the cast-iron spire started to rust and around the turn of the century, its demolition seemed inevitable. Having the prospect of the 1913 World Exhibition, the Belfry was renovated thoroughly and Valentin Vaerwyck designed a new stone crowning. In 1913, on June 22nd, King Albert inaugurated the new crowning.

The Dragon

When the construction of the municipal tower was almost finished in 1377, it was crowned with a weathercock, true to tradition. Inspiration of fairy-tales and legends lead to the choice of a dragon. The mythical creature is seen as the guardian of the valuable municipal charters and privileges in the secrecy room. In 1380, the first dragon was placed on the tower.

In the 16th century, the dragon was made spitting fire at public celebrations.

Burning barrels with pitch were hung around the weathercock, which gave an impressive spectacle. Each time the tower was renovated, the dragon was washed up as well. In 1839, when the wooden spire was pulled down, the dragon took its last flight down.

After all those years, it was weather-beaten and only a few original copper plates and pins remained. Only in 1854 a new dragon was put on the tower, which had to be repaired in 1979. But after studying the state of the dragon, it became clear that renovation was no longer possible.

The current dragon barely differs from the former. It consists of a stainless steel skeleton, covered with red copper plates, with a length of 3,82 meters, a height of 1,91 m and a width of 1,50 m. It weighs 455 kg. On November 8, 1980, it was lowered from a helicopter.

The Bell Museum (FLOOR 2) and Roland bell (floor 3)

The Bells and the Carillon

Due to the growing importance of the cities, bells and chimes became more and more important. The society was organized by the bell chiming at dawn and sunset, at working time etc. Most of the population was illiterate, so audio time indication was very important. After the Battle of the Golden Spurs (1302), the guilds took part in the Ghent city council. The construction of the belfry, a layman's tower, was the symbol of their power. The alarm bell had to be housed in this tower. In 1377, the Roland Bell was lifted into the finished bell room.

The Roland Bell was also the hourly bell. Because the hourly chiming always came unexpectedly, there had to be signals announcing it on smaller bells. Later, these smaller bells were

connected with a keyboard of sticks, so that the bells could be chimed manually. This was the predecessor of the carillon.

Pieter Hemony

In the middle of the 17th century the Belfry carillon, founded by Jacob Waghevens from Mechelen, had become too old and too small for a town the size of Ghent. The council decided to renew and enlarge the carillon. The bell founders Frans and Pieter Hemony from Zutphen (Holland) were known for their craftsmanship; they had already cast the most melodious bells of the Netherlands.

In 1659, on March 8th, Pieter Hemony signed a contract with the city council for the construction of 32 bells. The old carillon and the Roeland Bell were placed at his disposal for their metal. Hemony founded another 5 bells which brought the total number to 37.

The bells, decorated with the names of the councillors, the town weapon, graceful friezes and beautiful crowns, were delivered with a perfectly round shape and without irregularities. Besides, Hemony had been able to tune them magnificently. Hereby he was asked to found another 3 big chime bells, the Triumpants, that harmonized with the carillon.

Further Developments of the Carillon

During the 18th and 19th centuries, bells were regularly added to the carillon while bells that had seen better days, were melted and founded again. Famous bell founders were appealed to for this job, such as Jan Pauwels from Ghent, Georges Du Mery from Bruges and Andreas Lodewijk Van Aerschodt from Leuven. As a result of the construction of the stone spire for the World Fair of 1913, Omer Michaux added a complete octave to the carillon, which now consisted of 52 bells. In 1929-1930 the carillon underwent some important changes. After having tuned the bells,

Louis Meire replaced a number of disapproved bells by Hemony bells from the carillon of the Baudeloo abbey and by his own Hemony imitations. The 13 Michaux bells were removed and donated to the museum.

Around 1960 the carillon was in such bad condition that it had almost become unplayable. The city council decided to renovate the carillon thoroughly. In 1966 the bells were taken to the bell-foundry of Asten in Holland, where 28 bells were restored and 25 new bells were founded. Now the collection consisted of 53 bells. In 1982 the carillon could be played again. To reach the highest tones, the 54th bell was added in 1993.

The Mechanical Clockwork and the drum (floor 4)

The mechanical clockwork

The appearance of mechanical clockworks supposed to be the transition between a natural and an artificial regulation of time. In 1380, the first clockwork was installed in a city tower. Every thirty minutes it put into movement the hammers of both the small bells as Klokke Roeland's.

In 1457, the wooden cogwheels were replaced by an iron mechanism and a ring with only one indicator was placed on the tower.

In 1659, the carillon was renovated and the old mechanism was replaced by a pendulum clock. Only in 1684, the second pointer (the minute hand) was installed. The current clockwork, by Louis Meire, dates from 1913 and is a masterly example. Every day, it is wound up manually.

The drum

The first Ghent drum dates from 1377, was made of wood and had a fixed music pattern. In 1457 it was replaced by an iron drum. In 1543, a new drum, which was linked to 16 bells, was installed.

In 1659, Pieter Hemony cast the copper drum

which is still being used today. It was prepared to play 40 bells.

Therefore, 17600 square holes had to be accurately filed and drilled in the drum. The mechanism of the copper chiming drum can be compared to that of a music box. The drum is connected with the parent clockwork, which moves it every 15 minutes.

During the rotation, the pins touch the lifting levers at the top. The hammer touches the bell because of the traction on the hammer wires. A spring pulls the hammer back immediately so that the bell sound can boom widely. Every two years, just before Easter Sunday, the melody of the chiming bells is changed.

Playing the Carillon

During the restoration of the carillon, the cabin of the carillonneur was placed at the level of the bells which improved the transmission between the keyboard and the bells. The acoustic improvement and the retuning of the carillon according to the historical timbre, now have the carillon sounding warmer and more harmonious than ever.

Nevertheless, there is a great difference between the blending sounds of the carillonneur and the rather stumbling and soulless arias of the mechanic drum.

When the carillonneur strikes with his closed fist or with the flat of his hand on the ash wooden batons of the keyboard, the clapper is brought to the interior wall of the bell. Because of the weight of the clapper, the heavy bass bells are played with the foot pedals.