

## **Antwerp & The Polders of Kruibeke**

**11-13 May 2012**

**Lisa Howard & Mark Betts, Norwich, UK**

Mark and I were both thrilled to hear we had won the Estuary Park Trip competition. Neither of us had been to any part of Belgium before so we were very keen to visit Antwerp and find out more about the work of the STEP project.

### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May**

As we got off the train at Antwerp Central Station and started walking down the platform we were wondering how we would recognise our hosts – we needn't have worried as it was impossible to miss Xavier the roe-deer and local mascot as he waved at us excitedly! After such a warm welcome we knew it was going to be a great weekend. Ably assisted by Ina from Waterways & Sea Canal and a representative of the Agency for Nature and Forests, Xavier escorted us (and our fellow Dutch winners, Theo and Anna-Marie) to the nearby 4 star Lindner Hotel, just a short walk from the railway station, in the centre of the diamond district and in an excellent location for exploring the city. After a welcome drink (Mark unwittingly chose a rather strong Belgian beer called Duvel which translates as 'devil!') and a run through of what we would enjoy over the weekend, we had a quick freshen up before a tasty 3 course dinner at the hotel.

### **Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May**

After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, we ventured down to reception to meet our friendly and knowledgeable guide for the morning, Maarten from the department of Waterways & Sea Canal. Our first stop was the Museum Aan De Stroom, or MAS for short. The exterior of Antwerp's newest and biggest museum is adorned with an impressive 3,000 aluminium hands (Antwerp's symbol of choice). MAS also boasts wonderful panoramic views across the city, the port and the Scheldt river from the roof terrace. From this elevated position Maarten was able to show us some of the progress that has already been made as part of the Sigmoplan (the long term plan to protect the region from flooding) and explain why the flood risk exists. It is anticipated the changes, that are still very much work-in-progress, will reduce the chance of flooding here from once in 70 years to once in 350 years.

Maarten then took us down to the water's edge to explain how the city's current flood defences work. We visited part of a 6km long section of rough ground running along the riverside. The site of the former port facilities, it is within the flood risk area and predominantly now used for free car parking but will eventually be redeveloped. The existing flood barrier is a 4½ft 135 year old concrete wall which is gated in some areas and can be closed if a particularly high tide is expected. The wall is approx 3ft short of the height required for the Sigmoplan but the construction of a 7½ft wall would effectively cut off this large stretch of the city from the river so alternative solutions to retain both visual and physical access to the river have been developed.

After a very interesting couple of hours, Maarten dropped us in the centre of Antwerp for some free time to explore. With the help of some excellent signage we began to discover the city, first taking in the Grote Markt (market square) which is dominated by the flag adorned Stadhuis (town hall) and with the impressive Brabo Fountain at its centre. A short walk took us to Groenplaats, another busy square and home to the stunning Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal (Cathedral of Our Lady), a gothic masterpiece with a beautiful tower.

We're not huge fans of shopping but felt a walk along the Meir (the main shopping street) should probably be experienced and in doing so we came across a few unexpected surprises including the mouth-watering Chocolate Line where we could see the master chocolatiers at work. We also discovered the Stadsfeestzaal – a former event hall that was destroyed by fire in 2000 but that was restored to its former 'gold' glory and reopened as a shopping centre in 2007. The elevated champagne bar was hard to miss!

Heading back towards the riverside, we discovered Het Steen, an imposing medieval fortress and the oldest building in Antwerp. Although most of the maritime exhibits that used to be housed here have now been moved to MAS, rows of huge decorative boat sheds still exist.

No trip to Belgium would be complete without indulging in a waffle or two, from one of the many alfresco cafes and bars – we had ours topped with chocolate sauce and vanilla icecream!

We paid a fleeting visit to Rubenshuis where the famous Belgian artist lived and worked before heading back towards the hotel, taking a route through the railway station. Antwerp Central Station is a tourist attraction in itself with its grand entrance and decorative ceilings.

Ina picked us up from the hotel and drove us to the very pretty village of Bazel, approximately 20 minutes west of Antwerp. Bazel, Rupelmonde and Kruibeke make up the municipality of Kruibeke. This was certainly a change of pace and scenery from the bustle of the city. We checked in to 'De Vuylschaperij', an idyllic B&B run by the very welcoming Hilde and Luc and their two equally friendly dogs, one of which was called Duvel!

Next stop Hofke van Bazel (which we were told translates as 'the little garden') – the most amazing restaurant serving probably the most exquisite food either of us has ever tasted! From the moment we arrived we knew we were somewhere special. The staff were all incredibly efficient and professional as well as friendly and the ambience felt exclusive yet also very relaxed. So not to spoil the experience of our fellow diners I resisted the urge to take photographs of the food but each course was so beautifully presented it almost seemed a shame to eat it! Aperitifs were served in the glass topped wine cellar before the menu and wines for the evening were introduced to us. We then moved upstairs to our romantic table for two by the fire and enjoyed two deliciously fishy starters, a tasty pineapple and mango sorbet, a main course of pork with potatoes and vegetables (I'm not a particularly big fan of pork but boy this was good!). Already feeling rather full we passed on the cheese course and went straight for dessert which was a wonderful combination of various strawberry creations. Mark opted to finish with coffee whilst I choose a tea from the extensive tea menu which was served in a charming little teapot along with a beautiful selection of handmade chocolates. Mark asked one of our waiters, Andy, if he would mind calling us a taxi to take us back to our B&B. Mark gave Andy the address of the B&B only for him to come back to our table two minutes later and offer to take us there himself as it was such a short distance away – now that's what I call good service!

## **Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> May**

Waking up to the sound of the birds singing and with the sun shining through our curtains, we were eager to learn more about our new surroundings. So after a tasty breakfast overlooking the garden we were picked up by Tina from Waterways and Seacanal to continue our adventures.

Tina drove us out to the 600 ha construction site of the Flood Control Area Kruibeke-Bazel-Rupelmonde which is being developed to prevent flooding by the Scheldt when there are extreme storm tides. We saw the imposing new sluice gate and some of the dykes that have already been created. We took a long walk around the reedlands, woods and marshes whilst Tina explained how the surrounding woodland and wetland areas will be used for ecological development and sustainable recreation.

We headed back into Bazel where there was just time to take some photographs of the pretty church and picture perfect Wissekerke Castle before another delicious lunch at De Wase Wis.

Back out into the glorious sunshine and Tina escorted us to a jetty where we met Erik Blommaert one of the aldermen of Kruibeke before taking a 2 hour boat trip along the Scheldt on board the Tolerant. On the return trip our friendly skipper told us that he had been to Norwich many years ago and had friends who lived near the Norfolk Broads!

It was then finally time to head home, our heads full of stories to tell our friends and family and our camera bursting with photographs of our trip.

Thank you so much to everyone involved in organising this wonderful weekend for us. We really enjoyed our day in Antwerp and feel privileged to be some of the very first tourists to visit the Polders of Kruibeke.