

## Memory keepers

Restoring the graves of those who fell in Flanders' fields

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## Working till 70?

Suggested change in retirement age gets chilly reception

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## Science in the sun

Nobel Prize winners and Flemish scientists meet in Bavaria

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# Let the games begin

## Antwerp welcomes thousands of athletes and visitors to the World Outgames

Dan Smith

"Antwerp has one of the most LGBT-friendly attitudes of all European cities," says Stef Verdoodt, operations director for the World Outgames. "It's a diverse international city with arguably the most vibrant LGBT community in Belgium." This attitude has helped the city secure the third World Outgames, a kind of Olympics for the gay and lesbian community.

The World Outgames is one of the largest events to be held during Antwerp's year as European Capital of Sport. During the event, more than 5,000 people will participate in 32 sports across Antwerp and other towns in Flanders. Thanks in part to Belgium's record on lesbian, gay,

bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights and the city's multi-ethnic diversity, Antwerp's bid for the games was accepted ahead of submissions from Sydney and Rio de Janeiro.

"Belgium is probably one of five countries in the world where people can't complain about gay rights," says Jean-Yves Duthel, co-chair of the Human Rights Conference that was scheduled to kick off the games today.

Antwerp is home to the largest number of LGBT-friendly cafes, bars and businesses of any city in Belgium. The city is also home to Active Company, a group dedicated to organising regular sporting events for gay people and their friends. Each week more than 400 people take part in an Active Company event.

The World Outgames is awarded to a city by the Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association. While the association provides logistical support, most of the day-to-day responsibility for running the event falls to volunteers. Many hundreds have already signed up, but the team is looking for more. "People can still register as a volunteer, even during the games," explains Verdoodt. "Just go to our website and click the button to join the team."

But you don't have to become a volunteer to get involved. All sporting events, including the opening and closing ceremonies, are open to everyone, and all are free of charge, except the same-sex dancing competition. You can find the times and locations on the event's website or visit the accreditation



## FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope



## Peter Van Rompuy

Family lines, as the dynasty reminded us recently, are important in Belgium. Among the current crop of politicians are numerous examples of offspring following parents: Charles Michel, son of Louis; Melchior Wathelet, son of Melchior; Alexander De Croo, son of Herman; Bruno Tobback, son of Louis.

And Peter Van Rompuy, son of Herman, son of Geertrui Windels, nephew of Eric ... all of them elected politicians. Peter has been in the news this week as one of two proposers of a daring idea on the future of pensions in Belgium, which you can read about in more detail on p4. But it hasn't gone as well for him as might have been expected.

Peter Van Rompuy was born in Brussels in 1980 and studied law at the University of Leuven, following up with a Master's from the university of Stellenbosch in South Africa. He worked for a time as a lawyer, then moved into communications and then, almost inevitably, into the world of politics – first as a parliamentary assistant, then as a cabinet adviser.

His first steps in electoral politics came in 2006 in elections for the provincial government for

Flemish Brabant. The following year, he had a place far down the list for CD&V in the federal election. In 2009, he was higher on the lists for the regional election, but still not high enough to win a seat.

In the fateful election of June 2010, which led to 500 days without a government, he narrowly missed being elected on the Senate list, though he was later assigned a place as one of his party's co-opted senators. And in 2012, he was elected to the municipal council in Leuven (where he lives). When Tom Dehaene (another son of a former prime minister) went to the provincial council of Flemish Brabant, Van Rompuy took over his seat in the Flemish parliament, leaving the Senate.

A rough apprenticeship in electoral politics – or a grooming for the young scion of a political dynasty. By the age of 32, Van Rompuy had been part of every level of politics other than European – where of course his father rules supreme.

Van Rompuy the Younger's pensions proposal, though, has received outspoken criticism from the socialists, liberals, greens, trade unions and even his own party.

## News in brief

Politicians last week paid **tribute to Jean Pede**, a liberal politician who once chaired the Flemish Council – the forerunner of the Flemish parliament – who died at a rest home in Brakel, East Flanders, at the age of 86. Pede started his political career on the local council of Bottelare, East Flanders, and was chairman of the council from 1981 to 1985. Open VLD president Gwendolyn Rutten described him as “a full-blooded politician and an authentic, deep-blue liberal”.

Belgian women should **leave hospital sooner after giving birth**, following the example of the Duchess of Cambridge, according to the deputy chairman of the Belgian Association of Doctors' Unions, Marc Moens. The duchess left her London maternity bed the day after giving birth to Prince George; in Belgium new mothers tend to stay in hospital longer at a cost to the system, Moens said. He proposed that the normal stay be reduced by one day for all but medically necessary cases.

The section of Louizalaan in Brussels between Louizaplein and Stefaniaplein, a notorious bottleneck for traffic, was **closed this week for five weeks** for works on tram rails. Traffic is being diverted to Charleroisesteenweg, Berckmansstraat and Munthofstraat in the direction of the centre, and via Kapitein Crespelstraat and Stassartstraat in the opposite direction.

The **air-sea rescue services in Ostend** last week carried out a second major operations exercise in the space of two weeks, after a first was abandoned when it was found the communications systems used by the 14 different services could not communicate adequately with each other. The second attempt worked better, according to the operations co-ordinator, but more practice will be required before the system

is effective, said West Flanders governor Carl Decaluwe.

The **internet domain extensions .vlaanderen** and **.brussels** will be available by September 2014, according to DNS Belgium, which manages domain names. In a lottery organised last year for new name extensions, the two scored low on the list, which explains the delay. Official permission is expected in four to six weeks, after which administrative processes mean the extensions will be available in just over a year.

The municipality of Tessenderlo in Limburg province has been visited by a **plague of Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs**, at least 18 of which have been captured by the animal shelter in Heusden-Zolder. According to workers at the shelter, the pigs are probably pets that were dumped by their owners and gone on to produce offspring. Tessenderlo mayor Fons Verwimp has proposed a licence for anyone wanting to own such a pig.

A 66-year-old woman from the Evere commune of Brussels is lodging a complaint with the federal finance ministry claiming the process by which public transport authority MIVB **scrapped free passes for the elderly was unlawful**. Nicole Chantraine says it failed to give six months' notice of the change, which took place on 1 May. She also claims the MIVB used doctored figures of the number of ticket-holders affected. An MIVB spokesman said it had done everything legally.

New houses in Flanders will have to be **more energy-conscious from 2016**, the government has agreed. Approving a plan proposed by housing minister Freya Van den Bossche, the government will increase the standard to E50 from 2016, with a view to bringing it to E30 by 2021. At present the standard

for private homes is E70 (the lower the number, the more energy-saving) dropping to E60 next year, but one in three new houses already meets that higher standard, Van den Bossche said.

Cyclists in the 50 regional parks run by Leefmilieu Brussel will no longer be obliged to step off and push their bikes by hand, after a **change in the rules allowing cycling**. “But cyclists do have to keep to the rules and show the necessary respect for other park users,” said environment minister Evelyne Huytebroeck. The parks include Jubelpark in Brussels, Dudenpark in Vorst and Laarbeekbos in Jette.

A Mechelen man has been arrested in connection with an investigation by a magistrate in Dendermonde **into alleged phishing** – the stealing of private data by computer hacking or misrepresentation – which cost a company in East Flanders more than €90,000. The phishers obtained the company's bank details and transferred money to a number of accounts. The man was caught when a bank teller noticed he had made substantial withdrawals two days in a row.

Two men were arrested in the Brussels district of Sint-Agatha-Berchem while **attempting to steal tram rails** from work sites between Keizer Karellaan and Eilandenhoutstraat using a mobile crane. The two, who were employed on the works by a sub-contractor of water authority Vivaqua, admitted they had stolen two rails the day before.

A bus driver working for the Flemish public transport authority De Lijn is being tested for HIV and hepatitis after he was **stabbed with a drug needle** during a robbery last week in Antwerp. The attacker, who is still being sought, stole €15.

## FLANDERS TODAY

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Hans De Loore

## OFFSIDE

## Good fences

Good fences make good neighbours, according to an old proverb. A good fence might have been some use last week to neighbours in Oudekapelle, a district of Diksmuide in West Flanders.

The row appears to be a dispute of long standing. Ria and Luc own a parcel of property, on which stands a house. The house is the property of Luc's parents, who threw the couple out because, as the story goes, next-door neighbour JB told lies about them. For his part, JB claims that the land is his.

Ria and Luc now live in a caravan in the garden and plan to build a house on what they claim is their land. However, JB has friends in high places, according to the couple, and has been pulling strings to block their application for a building permit.

Last week things took a dramatic turn: JB got behind the wheel of an excavator and wreaked merry hell on his neighbours' land, displacing tonnes of earth, virtually burying their van, destroying five protected willow trees and damaging many others (*pictured*). Police arrived, and JB argued the land was his. The case continues.

Crazy neighbours are one thing, but don't go thinking that friendly, affectionate people are any better. The federal police have issued a warning against what they're



Not very neighbourly in Oudekapelle

calling *knuffeldieven*, or cuddle-thieves. The scam goes like this: A stranger approaches you in the street and asks for a simple favour or piece of information. When you give it, you get a smile and a hug in return. Of course no one can resist a hug, and you go off with a spring in your step – but also without a wallet in your pocket or a watch on your wrist. The cuddle-thieves are, it turns out, practised pickpockets, and they've made their presence felt in other countries. Beware of strangers offering hugs, sadly.

Alan Hope



# Let the games begin

## Sports, culture and conference put Antwerp's gay community in the spotlight

► continued from page 1

centre in Antwerp's Central Station until 10 August. There will also be an information tent in the Rainbow Village on Steenplein.

The Rainbow Village will be the World Outgames' focal point. Located next to Het Steen castle on the banks of the Scheldt, the village will offer a place to relax, enjoy a variety of entertainment or visit the booths of sponsors and partners of the games.

Logistical support will be provided by the City of Antwerp. Organisers estimate the games will cost the city around €2 million, mostly for services such as cleaning. "In return, we will have one of the highest numbers of tourists in the city, and we hope the people of Antwerp will join in, too," says Verdoodt. "On average, every registrant at the previous World Outgames in Montreal and Copenhagen was accompanied by 2.8 people. Together they spent around €100 million."

The games should also have a positive impact on visitor numbers

to Antwerp in the longer term. "The city will become a destination for the gay and lesbian community," says Verdoodt. "We saw this after the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association held its annual conference in Antwerp in 2010. The World Outgames will send a further

of Philadelphia.

Over the next eight days, more than 5,000 athletes from 105 countries will take part in sports ranging from archery to yoga. *Antwerpenaars* are spoilt for choice when it comes to picking a sport to watch, as most events are being

**"You cannot judge personal life choices. The only thing that counts in sport is your performance"**

strong message that Antwerp is a LGBT-friendly destination."

Although the event begins on 31 July, the sports competitions begin with the opening ceremony on 3 August at Waagnatie. The ceremony will include the first performance of the official hymn of the World Outgames, which has been composed by Dirk Brossé, the renowned Flemish conductor and composer who is currently musical director of the Chamber Orchestra

held within 30 minutes of the city centre. But in an effort to spread the World Outgames spirit even further, organisers have elected to share the events across Flanders. You can see golf in Aartselaar, field hockey in Brecht and martial arts, wrestling and petanque in Edegem, all in Antwerp province, as well as rowing in Ghent and sport shooting in Mechelen.

Organisers hope that one of the key legacies of the games is

more tolerance of LGBT people, particularly in sport. To achieve this, they have appointed a number of local ambassadors. Flemish singer Kate Ryan was the first, and she has produced the title song for the event. JJ Westerlund, a well-known businessman and Swedish consul has also accepted the role of ambassador.

From the sporting world, junior world archery champion and *Antwerpenaar* Ivan Denis and Belgian football coach Franky Vercauteren from Brussels have also been named as ambassadors. "My whole career has been marked by respect for everyone. This should be the rule in absolutely all sports. Discriminating against someone on whatever grounds is

simply unacceptable," Vercauteren said. "I agreed to participate in the World Outgames to show everyone – especially young people – how sport can form an element of integration. You may not and cannot judge personal life choices. The only thing that counts in sport is your performance."

A number of international stars are also set to descend on Antwerp to celebrate the World Outgames and Antwerp Pride, which is being held over the closing weekend of the games. Swedish singer Loreen, winner of last year's Eurovision Song Contest with her song "Euphoria", will perform at the Supergays party on 10 August, while Boy George will DJ at the main Pride event Wave on the same day.

### UNTIL 11 AUGUST

Across Antwerp and Flanders

► [www.woga2013.org](http://www.woga2013.org)



The World Outgames are set to transform Antwerp into the capital of LGBT sport, culture and human rights



### ABOUT THE WORLD OUTGAMES

### EQUALITY THROUGH ALLIANCE

Antwerp is the third city to play host to the World Outgames. The event is sanctioned by the Gay and Lesbian International Sport Association, a non-profit based in Canada that works to nurture and grow LGBT sport worldwide by working with other sport, human rights and cultural organisations.

In addition to the sporting competition, the World Outgames features a human rights conference and cultural events. All events are open to everyone. The games came into being when Montreal was selected to host the 2006 Gay Games. However, the organisers of the event – the Federation of Gay Games (FGG) – and the city of Montreal were unable to agree on the size of the event. FGG withdrew its support for Montreal's bid and awarded the 2006 games to Chicago. Montreal decided to press ahead with its own games and welcomed more than 10,000 competitors to the first World Outgames. The second edition was held in Copenhagen in 2009. After Antwerp, the fourth edition is scheduled to be held in Miami Beach in 2017.

Over 350 delegates from more than 70 countries are expected to attend the Human Rights Conference that opens the Antwerp World Outgames. To be held until 2 August, the conference features panels on migration and safety, progress in LGBT rights around the world, health and tools organisations can use to achieve LGBT rights in their own countries.

Six keynote speakers from outside the LGBT community will address delegates during the conference. "These six people have all, in their own way and with their own skills, supported, helped and advanced LGBT rights, often in less than easy conditions," according to Tamara Adrian Hernandez and Jean-Yves Duthel, co-presidents of the conference. "We chose them because we

realised our community can count on numerous allies and that one of the paths to equality is through such alliances."

The keynote speakers include Alice N'Kom, a lawyer from Cameroon; Jón Gnarr, mayor of Reykjavik; Bernard Landry, former prime minister of Canada who was instrumental in changing anti-gay laws; Rudy de Leeuw, president of the Belgian General Federation of Trade Unions; Matti Herrera Bower, mayor of Miami Beach, the venue of the next World Outgames; and Jan Peumans, speaker of the Flemish Parliament since 2009.

The Human Rights component will end with the adoption of the Antwerp Guidelines: From Safe Harbours to Equality. This will outline a roadmap for achieving LGBT equality.



# Repairs already needed to Central Station square

## Contractor agrees to fund renovation of the two-year-old esplanade

Alan Hope

The traffic-free esplanade in front of Brussels Central Station, once compared by Brussels-City mayor Freddy Thielemans to the famous Rambla in Barcelona, is in need of urgent repairs, barely two years after being completed.

"The whole construction of the square is a catastrophe," admitted Geoffroy Coomans de Brachène, the city's alderman for town planning. Among the problems: a cycle path that culminates suddenly in a row of stone bollards; the use of an inferior quality of blue slate that has cracked in the cold; and a skylight over the underground Horta Gallery that is covered with roofing felt because it needs to serve as emergency parking. The square was the work of Brussels contractor Wegebo, which so far has declined to comment. According to the city's transport agency Beliris, which oversaw



© Michiel Dumon/Wikimedia Commons

the project, the necessary repairs will be carried out "in the coming months" at the contractor's own expense.

"I'm extremely annoyed about this, especially when you consider that people are so utterly fed up with the number of major works going on

in the city," Coomans de Brachène complained. "But starting over is unavoidable."

### Guardian critical

In other station news, *The Guardian* newspaper has admitted it was behind the times with an

article published last week that described Central Station as "cold, filthy, appallingly lit and stinking of urine". The article provoked an immediate reaction from rail authority NMBS.

"I wonder if the author of the article has been in the station recently," said spokesperson Leen Uytterhoeven. "The station has been renovated in recent years ... with extra exits, more light and more people passing through. Even now, the passage between metro station and train station – one of the most insalubrious parts of the station – is undergoing renewal."

"Okay, hands up," the article's author wrote in an update to the online version. "Central has recently had a bit of a spruce-up and public urination in Brussels may now be confined to that statue of the pissing boy, but the covered-up platforms of Brussels Central are as low-ceilinged as ever."

## Senior police posts cut

The federal government last week approved a reform of the police force which will see the number of directors cut from 84 to only 31. The money saved will be used to put more police officers on the streets, interior minister Joëlle Milquet and police commissioner Catherine De Bolle pledged.

De Bolle will chair a management committee made up of herself and three other members. Each of the judicial arrondissements, of which there will be 13, will have two directors – one for legal

matters and one for operations. De Bolle's proposal to cut even further and have only one director per arrondissement was not accepted by Milquet. However, Milquet was prepared to cut the number of arrondissements from 27 to 13. Because of its special status, the area of Halle-Vilvoorde will have one director of its own.

The changes will affect both local and judicial branches of the police force and will allow the two to work together more effectively, De Bolle said.

## Doctors unhappy about new truancy rules

The professional association of doctors has scheduled talks with Flemish education minister Pascal Smet in September to discuss its misgivings over the government's plan to require a medical certificate for any primary or secondary student missing the last days (or the first days) of the school term because of the family's holiday plans.

Many parents take their children out of school in the final days to avoid the usual early July rush out of town. Keeping children aged six or over

from school without a medical reason is illegal and liable to a fine.

Smet introduced a new rule requiring a medical certificate for absences, but doctors' representatives complain they were not consulted about the measure. "We feel it's not our place to deprive parents who may not be as well off from being able to go earlier and more cheaply on holiday," said Rufij Baeke, spokesperson for the Flemish Doctors' Syndicate. "There's very little going on at school in the last days of term."

## TB sanatorium to tackle growing threat

The Sint-Pieters Hospital in Brussels is opening a sanatorium for patients infected by tuberculosis (TB), which is making a comeback in the capital after years in which it virtually disappeared.

Tuberculosis is an infectious disorder affecting mainly the lungs, although most of those infected show no symptoms. They are, however, capable of infecting others by respiratory fluids expelled during coughing or sneezing. About one in

10 infections develops into the full-blown disease, and about half of those affected die.

"The sanatorium is needed because the number of TB patients has increased, particularly in the Brussels area, after a long period of decline," commented Christiaan Decoster of the federal public health ministry. "To make matters worse, we have determined that there is a new strain of the bacterium that is tougher than usual and which

carries more risk of infection."

In Belgium, the number of cases rose from 1,006 in 2008 to 1,112 in 2011 – an increase of about 10%. For Brussels alone, the number went up from 303 to 376 over the same period, an increase of 24%.

The new sanatorium is seen as an experiment and will take patients from across the country. If it proves successful, a second could be opened in Antwerp, where the incidence of the disease is also higher.



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## THE WEEK IN FIGURES

**358**

tickets handed out last year by train inspectors for smoking on trains; 70% of fines were never paid, according to government enterprises minister Jean-Pascal Labille

**€8,000,000**

approved by the Flemish government for renovations at football stadiums. Clubs can apply for a one-time subsidy of 10% of costs, up to €750,000 for renovations or €2.5 million for new construction

**1,867**

same-sex couples were married in Belgium last year, according to the federal interior ministry: 940 male and 927 female. In 331 cases one partner was non-Belgian, with French and Dutch partners in the lead

**€450,000**

approved by the Flemish government for the upkeep and restoration of six war grave sites – two British and four German – in West Flanders

**€511 million**

cost to the economy of traffic congestion in Brussels, according to the employers' organisation Beci, based on 32 million hours a year lost in delays, plus the estimated cost of air and noise pollution

## FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

### Tax-cification

The federal government was quite successful just before the summer holidays, with agreements on BHV, the budget, the unified statute for white and blue collar workers and police reform. The installation of the new king was the cherry on the cake for prime minister Elio Di Rupo.

All of this is quite an achievement for a government that consists of no fewer than six parties – socialists, Christian-democrats and liberals from both languages – and which has no majority in Flanders.

However, not all is well within the federal government. A number of important decisions, including some high-ranking appointments and measures to reduce the cost of labour, were not made before the summer. Di Rupo is accused of stalling, letting decisions drag on forever. Among the most vocal of critics are the entrepreneurs. One after the other has stood up and lamented the state of competition in Belgium. One of the first was Luc Bertrand, CEO of the Antwerp investment group Ackermans & van Haaren, who called the federal policies "not socialist but Marxist".

Next up was dredging boss Jan De Nul. "Too few active have to support a growing number of inactive. In this country, people simply do not feel like working," he stated in a controversial awards acceptance speech last month. Unless more people work, there will be no perspective for future generations, he said, amongst more accusations of big government.

Last week, Fernand Huts, head of the port-based logistics group Katoen Natie, played on the antagonism some more. He sees a growing bureaucracy. "If you open the newspaper, you see free enterprise and entrepreneurship under attack every day."

According to Karel Van Eetvelt, head of small business organisation Unizo, businesses feel targeted by government through new taxes and the perception of them as being tax dodgers.

Federal finance minister Koen Geens is trying to soothe the ruffled feathers by bringing together fiscal administration, representatives from businesses and the accountancy sector. *Tax-cification*, he calls his initiative.

The similarity to the word *pacification* is probably coincidence, but the meeting has produced one result so far: a restriction of the use of the monster fine of 309% for private expenses booked as business costs, which had become a symbol of government pestering. Whether that is enough to silence the entrepreneurs remains to be seen.



# We will remember them

**As the world prepares to commemorate the First World War, workers in Flanders are busy restoring the headstones of those who fell**

Martin Banks

4 August 1914: the beginning of the First World War. It's a date of such gravity that it will be marked by a series of commemorative events around the world when the 100th anniversary is reached next year. The centenary will finish on 11 November 2018 – Armistice Day. Flanders, naturally, is at the heart of proceedings.

Preparations have been under way in Flanders for years for the four-year commemoration of the First World War, including a rush to restore the headstones of those who fell here. The war's "killing fields" are these days such serene and timeless places that it seems strange to speak of speed in the same breath.

But for those involved in the painstaking restoration, the clock is well and truly ticking to get the work completed in time to mark the start of the "war to end all wars". The anniversary comes as living memory fades of what was then called the Great War – this will be the first major anniversary for which no known soldiers survive.

## Final resting place

Tyne Cot cemetery in Passchendaele held a strategic position in the war, standing in the way of Germany's planned sweep into France from the north. Ten million people are estimated to have died in the war, at least 600,000 in Belgium, of whom at least 550,000 fell in West Flanders. More than 300,000 of these victims are buried in military cemeteries dotted around the Flemish countryside, but at least 200,000 are still missing. Tyne Cot is the largest Commonwealth cemetery in the world but is just one of innumerable Commonwealth cemeteries in 153 countries.

Peter Francis, media and marketing manager for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), explains the process of re-engraving headstones. "We have teams travelling around our cemeteries engraving thousands of headstones and replacing them when they have reached the end of their useful life – about 15,000 a year at present."

The CWGC makes new headstones in Beaurains in France, about 100km south of Ypres. Some 50 tons of stone are brought in each week. Workers fit the slabs, each weighing 80kg, on to etching machines which, guided by digital images, etch an exact copy of the original headstone – regimental shield, name, inscription – into the new stone. They are then shipped out to war cemeteries in Flanders where workers use drill bits to re-engrave stones and make the names more legible. CWGC staff have recently replaced



Craftsmen in Flanders are re-engraving the headstones of some of the thousands of soldiers who lost their lives in the First World War

33 plaques on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres. Each plaque bears the names of some of those who fell in the area known as Ypres Salient and have no known grave. The original plaques had become eroded, and staff at the CWGC's northern Europe area office in Ypres believe the problem was a micro-climate – a wind pattern within the stairwell where the plaques are sited.

The thickness of the new stone plaques at the Menin Gate is 75mm, compared to the originals' thickness of 100mm. This, says Francis,

hard to read. Some gravestones are chipped or cracked and the stones are no longer perfectly aligned. About 2,000 headstones will be replaced with new ones identical to the originals, with another 7,000 being re-engraved. The rows of stones, Francis says, will be realigned into geometric perfection and the landscaping trimmed and renewed. Gravestones generally last about 90 years before the names are erased by time.

Some stones bear names and dates ("Private W. Rae. Royal Irish Fusiliers. 8 May 1915. Age 26"),

is a brave man or woman forgotten, and that is unacceptable to us. With interest in the centenary of the Great War already growing, we are doing everything we can to ensure our cemeteries and memorials are ready to receive visitors and remain a fitting tribute to the sacrifices made by those who died in the two world wars".

But, it is not just about headstones and structures, he confirms. "Horticulture is an essential part of our commemoration of the fallen, and the Commission is probably the world's largest horticultural operation. This involves maintaining kilometres of headstone borders and hectares of turf and trees and shrubs in just about every type of soil and in every type of climate you can think of."

The expected influx of visitors for the commemorations will provide a major boost for the local economy, according to Stephen Lodewyck of Westtoer, the West Flanders tourism office.

Some 365,000 people visited the cemeteries last year, 52% from Belgium and the rest from overseas: mostly the UK and other Commonwealth countries. This generated about €32.5 million in income for local hotels, restaurants

and shops. During the centenary years, Lodewyck says, the number of visitors is expected to increase by 10 to 15%. "These events are clearly going to be very important economically for the whole region, and we expect a substantial influx of people, including many who may be unfamiliar with the First World War. "This is also an opportunity for Flanders to showcase itself to the rest of the world. The global spotlight will be on us next year, and I can tell you that we will be ready." Specific projects for the commemorations include a new visitor centre at Lyssenthoeck Military Cemetery in Poperinge and expansion of the Memorial Museum Passchendaele, which was unveiled this month. There is also the new design and environmental works at Yser Museum in Diksmuide, expansion of Ypres' In Flanders Fields Museum and the new visitor centre below the King Albert I monument in Nieuwpoort. Meanwhile, the CWGC has also placed the first of up to 65 visitor information panels at Ypres Town Cemetery, the first of 500 being installed at cemeteries in the area as part of the commemorations.



# Archiving for the future

Thousands of hours of VRT audio and video will soon be available to the public

Marc Maes

Over the years, the Flemish public broadcaster VRT has built an extensive audiovisual archive: hours of news and programme content stored on different kinds of carriers. With the VerDi project, the broadcaster's archives and documentation department wants to safeguard its valuable content. This autumn, the VRT hopes to conclude an agreement with the Flemish Institute for Archiving (VIAA), opening up the content to the public. VerDi (VRT Erfgoed Digitaal, or VRT Heritage Digital) was launched in January last year, as a follow-up to the DivA (Digitaal VRT Archief, Digital VRT Archive) and some smaller projects, in which, between 2006 and 2011, VRT engineers restored, digitalised and archived 72,000 hours of image material, 14,000 hours of audio recordings and 160,000 photos.

## Massive migration

"With VerDi we resolutely opted for massive digitalisation; for bigger volumes to get better rates from specialised companies on the market," explains Jan Vanregemorter, head of archives and documentation at the VRT in Brussels. Altogether, the VerDi project will digitalise 54,000 hours of digital audio tapes (DAT), 7,000 hours of compact cassettes and 160,000 hours of VHS video tapes. Another 15,000 hours of professional Betacam SP analogue videotape were "baked" in a special oven to fix the magnetised layer on the tape and then digitalised in the VRT's own laboratories. The massive migration operation kicked off in December last year, and Vanregemorter says that concern for the content carriers played a decisive role in the timing.



Hours of film reel archive will be digitalised as part of the VRT's VerDi project

"It may be contradictory but one of the most threatened audio carriers is the DAT – if you engrave a '1' and '0' in a stone table, it lasts for 10,000 years, but content on a DAT doesn't last forever," he says. "The compact audio cassettes were never officially introduced as recording media with the VRT, but reporters often decided to swap their heavyweight Nagra recorders for a quality cassette recorder – in some on-air studios, programmes were monitored or stored on cassette tape, resulting in some 6,000 cassettes altogether." The VRT issued a public tender for the digitalisation of the audio content, and assigned the Brussels-based companies Memnon (DAT) and Sonim (cassettes) to carry out the project before the end of the year. The digitalisation of 100,000 hours of analogue quarter-inch tape is the subject of future negotiations. For the restoring and digitalisation of the video content, VRT appointed

French company Vectracom. A small amount of film is done by VRT. "Thank God that an engineer, back in 1954 when the public broadcaster went on the air, decided to draw up an index of the stored material of the news bulletins in *cahiers* or notebooks – these *cahiers* were a great help to us," enthuses Vanregemorter. "From 1986, the VRT introduced compliance recordings, capturing the broadcaster's TV programmes on VHS tape, in addition to our self-produced programmes stored on professional tape." Until 2011, audio compliance material did not exist. "The VRT radio made use of compulsory compliance recordings – they had to store them for six months – but were then erased for further use. But, from 2011, all the VRT's audio content is stored on digital servers." Last December, the Flemish government gave the green light and assigned the non-profit organisation

iMinds to launch VIAA – a two-year assignment (2013-2014) with a budget of €11.8 million.

"We're sitting on a magnificent treasure of audiovisual archive material," explains Nico Verplancke, director of VIAA. "The second 'A' in VIAA referred to 'audiovisual', but VIAA has a broader scope now: pictures, newspapers, posters, official documents and maps. There's a lot of material to digitalise and preserve for future generations. In the case of the audiovisual content, the main concern was to rescue the information from deterioration, to make it more accessible – retrieving audio fragments from analogue tape is not efficient – and open up all these archives, once digitalised, to the public." Verplancke echoes Vanregemorter's vision on mass digitalisation and advocates the idea of collaboration with other partners resulting in better rates and allowing investment

in top-notch equipment, rather than having lots of small storage initiatives. "Our first mission will be the storage, in multiple copies, of the digitalised analogue material plus the 'digital-born' content from the recent past," says Verplancke. "We hope to start digitalising Umatic and Betacam SP tapes, quarter-inch open-reel audio and audio cassettes by the end of this year. VIAA wants to open up this immense vault of digital heritage information to the public: for education, through public libraries and for scientific research. In total, more than 400,000 hours of material remains to be digitalised: It's a huge challenge.

## Cultural heritage

VIAA proposes a collaborative model. "We don't want to prevent broadcasters commercialising their digital archives, or replace traditional archives and museums. But we will provide efficient and cost-effective services so they can focus on their core business. At the same time, we want to keep the cultural heritage safe and available for society," Verplancke says.

VIAA, operating under the iMinds umbrella, has been working hard to achieve these ambitious targets. A team of eight people were recruited, and tenders for the infrastructure will be launched shortly. The first digitalised tapes should be ready by the end of 2013.

"We at the VRT get immediate results when a new batch of vintage material is digitalised for use in programmes," says Vanregemorter. "I expect the same impact when VIAA opens up its vaults."

► [www.viaa.be](http://www.viaa.be)

# Clean-up experiment unsuccessful

Ultraviolet light has little effect on pollutant particles in Brussels' tunnels

Alan Hope

An experiment carried out in Brussels' Leopold-II tunnel to test a new way of cleaning pollutants from the air has been declared a "waste of money" by a Flemish expert, after the experiment terminated having produced no usable results. The test (*Flanders Today*, 30 January) was run by the European research consortium PhotoPAQ, and involved a process called photocatalysis, in which particles of titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>) embedded in cement applied to the walls along a 160-metre section of the tunnel were bathed in ultraviolet light. That caused the TiO<sub>2</sub> to react with pollutants, mainly nitrous oxide, making it relatively harmless. As explained at the time by Dr Anne Beeldens of the Belgian Road Research Centre, which was



UV rays are not the answer to improving environmental conditions in Brussels' tunnels

monitoring the experiment, part of the goal was to find the optimum level of UV required, as the UV lamps could partially replace the

current ventilation system in the tunnel, reducing energy costs.

A previous experiment in the same spot in 2011, over a shorter distance, proved inconclusive, partly because the UV intensity was not high enough. For the latest experiment, the UV was stronger, the cement was applied more uniformly, and the length of the test section was doubled.

But it was not enough. "The UV component of sunlight in these parts is strong enough, but it proved to be extremely difficult to achieve the same intensity with UV lamps," Beeldens explained. "Also, the humidity of the air in the tunnel was very high, which also reduces the effectiveness of the product."

According to Frans Fierens, an air quality expert with the Flemish Environment Agency, the

experiment was "an unfortunate waste of money". He told *De Morgen* that the process using TiO<sub>2</sub> has only ever worked in the laboratory, never in a real situation. Above all, he said, the experiment was approaching the problem from the wrong angle. "The essence of air quality policy should be to avoid air pollution, not to allow the air to be polluted and then try to clean it up," he said. "The last part is in any case impossible." The most effective measure, according to Fierens, would be to reduce the volume of traffic. "That may not be the most popular measure, but it is the most efficient."

The experiment was budgeted at €100,000 back in January; the actual costs are not known. The entirety of the financing was provided by the Lyon-based PhotoPAQ.



# Raise retirement age, say MPs

## An increased life expectancy could push retirement to age 70

Alan Hope

People now aged 40 could be facing another 30 years of work if a proposal to raise the legal retirement age for a state pension is pushed to 70 years. The proposal was introduced by Flemish parliament members Peter Van Rompuy and Robrecht Bothuyne and has encountered a chilly reception, even from the two members' own party, CD&V.

Van Rompuy and Bothuyne point out the average life expectancy at the time pension regulations were first drawn up was about 65 years. Since then, life expectancy has climbed to around 80, while the retirement age has remained the same. Since the population is growing older, Van Rompuy and Bothuyne argue, the only way to keep the system affordable is by obliging people to work longer.

Federal pensions minister Alexander De Croo warned against reducing the pensions debate



only to legal retirement age. The actual age at which people leave the workforce, he said, has gone down from 64 in the 1970s to 59 now, despite no change in the legal retirement age during that time. The government, he said, plans

a thorough study of the various ways in which people stop working before reaching retirement age.

"A committee of experts is currently sketching out proposals for the long-term evolution of pensions between 2020 and 2040," De Croo

said. The committee is looking at the social as well as economic aspects of future pensions policy. "Affordability should not be the only point on which we focus. Working for longer must also be worthwhile for those who are making the effort." Socialist party president Bruno Tobback, meanwhile, argued that the length of a person's career was more important than his or her age – a position also adopted by Groen spokesman Wouter De Vriendt. Critics, who include trade unions, also pointed out that many workers, among them manual labourers, would simply be unable to carry on working for an extra five years.

Fellow members of CD&V stressed that the Van Rompuy-Bothuyne plan was no more than a proposal, destined to be discussed at the party's annual congress in November and a long way from being adopted as party policy.

## Better info on Brussels taxis

The Brussels-Capital Region is promising "more and better information" about taxis for members of the public, with the launch last week of a new campaign. The region intends to install information panels (*photo*) at all 136 official taxi stands, similar to the timetables posted at bus stops. Each will provide information on fares, the rules governing drivers and a number to call to order a cab. Inside the taxi, too, information will be easier to find. In all cases, information will be provided in Dutch, French and English. The new information policy is



the latest step in a campaign by Brussels mobility minister Brigitte Grouwels to clean up the image of the city's taxi service. Among the changes she has introduced are tougher rules on how drivers dress, a uniform livery for cabs, more places for taxis at ranks and the opening up of bus lanes for taxi use.

"Accurate, multilingual and transparent information for passengers is one of my priorities," Grouwels said. "This is part of my commitment to improve the quality of the Brussels taxi industry, in the interests of passengers and drivers, for the good of the mobility of everyone in Brussels."

## Dutch language learners double

The number of people signing up for free Dutch lessons in Brussels has doubled over the five years of the programme, according to the Flemish education ministry.

When the system of free lessons was started in 2008, there were just over 6,500 enrolments for the academic year. The number has gone up to more than 12,350, with summer courses certain to push the final total even higher. The development was described as "hopeful for the future and clear proof that Dutch no longer has a negative image," by Flemish parliamentarian Paul Delva.

However, Huis van het Nederlands, which offers the courses, are at the limit of their capacity and further growth would be impossible without extra financing. "At the moment, we can still keep up with demand,

but it makes no sense to try to reach more people," said the organisation's director Gunther Vanneste. "Interest would grow, for sure ... but our organisation is not ready for that leap forward unless the government comes forward with more money."



## Mobistar shares nose-dive on earnings news

Shares in mobile phone operator Mobistar plummeted by 30% last week after the company revised its forecasts for the year downward and announced it would not be paying a dividend. The company said that its EBITDA margin for the year could be as much as 39% down on last year, to €300 million.

The company said that the problem was tough competition on the market, a claim that comes as a surprise to most customers, not to mention the telecoms market regulator the BIPT, which believes there is not enough competition.

Mobistar has been suffering from its wireless-only service options, while the two other major players in the market own their own telephone infrastructure (Belgacom) or cable network (Telenet). That allows them to offer a range of bundled services, including fixed-line, digital TV and internet. Mobistar stopped offering

fixed-line services in May this year, unable to keep up with the competition from the two giants.

Under a recent change in the law, it is now easier for customers to cancel a contract with little or no penalty, and Mobistar saw many customers jump ship when Telenet started pushing bundles like King and Kong, which include huge quantities of mobile data.

Mobistar will now be pinning its hopes on a move by BIPT to force Telenet and Belgacom to open up their networks to third parties, which would then allow Mobistar to put together some bundles of its own.

At the other end of the scale, shares in Belgacom jumped 8% in one day last week after positive quarterly results. The company had turnover in the second quarter of €1.583 billion – 1.9% down on the same period last year but in line with forecasts for the year.

## National Lottery under investigation

The National Lottery has been operating "strictly in line with the rules" but will co-operate fully with investigators from the federal competition authorities, a spokesperson said. Competition authorities last week carried out search warrants at the offices of the Lottery, following allegations that it had abused its dominant position in the market.

The complaint concerns the game Scoore, launched in January this year, which allows for bets to be placed on sports matches, mainly football. Critics say the Lottery has entered into exclusivity deals with the owners of newspaper shops

that effectively shut out the competition. The Competition Council is also investigating claims that the Lottery is using funds from its lottery and scratch-card business – where it has a legal monopoly – to illegally subsidise Scoore.

Because Scoore is not strictly a game of chance, it is not part of the

National Lottery's monopoly. But the "several" filers of the complaint – who have not been identified – allege that the Lottery's monopoly position is being used to skew fair competition by cross-funding.



© National Lottery

## THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

### Chocolate

#### ► Pierre Marcolini

Investment group NEO Capital is injecting €15 million into high-end Brussels chocolate producer Pierre Marcolini, in return for 47% of the company's equity. The injection will allow Marcolini to grow overseas, following recent openings in Paris, Monaco and Japan. Marcolini also intends to extend its Belgian production site and employ 50 new staff.

### Energy

#### ► EDF Luminus

Energy supplier EDF Luminus, the second-largest on the Belgian market, has won a public contract to provide the rail authority NMBS with natural gas for the coming two years. The value of the contract for 151 gigawatt-hours (GWh) per year was not disclosed. The company also won the contract for electricity supplies to the NMBS earlier this year.

### Food ► Belgomilk

The largest mozzarella factory in Europe is to be built in Langemark, West Flanders, by the dairy co-operative Belgomilk, with plans to double the capacity of its existing plant where the Italian-style cheese is manufactured. The company is facing increased demand from the Middle East and Asia, managing director Luk Van Gelder said.

### Household ► Ecover

Ecover, the producer of ecological cleaning products based in Malle, Antwerp province, is to open a production facility in Pullman Park in Chicago, its first venture on American soil since taking over Method last year. Construction will begin in November, and the factory, which will create 100 jobs, will be operational in 2015.

### Ports ► Zeebrugge

The total throughput of goods at the port of Zeebrugge fell by 5.3% in the first half of this year compared to the same period in 2012, to 21.2 million tonnes, the port authority said. Figures for both roll-on roll-off and container traffic were down, despite an increase of 5.8% in new cars.

### Public transport

#### ► De Lijn

Flemish public transport authority De Lijn can once more use the side windows of buses for advertising, the Flemish government has decided. The practice was stopped in 2004 because the ads were considered a nuisance by passengers, but advances in materials mean adverts are now more transparent. De Lijn said the change could bring in extra income of €500,000 a year.



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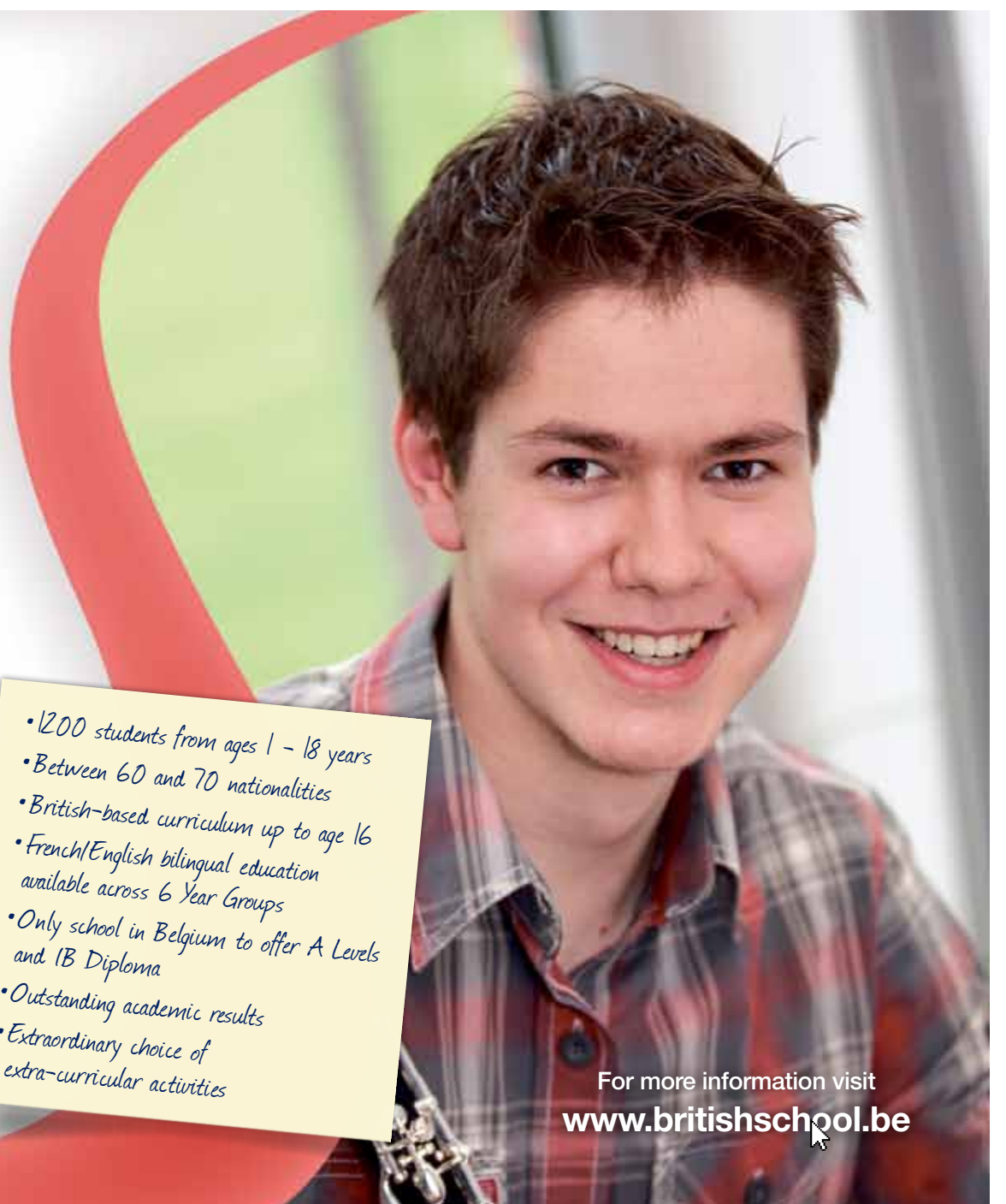
I love the fact that BSB has given me the opportunity to take part in a range of activities outside the academic programme, such as debating at the Model United Nations, speaking in the national finals of the Telenet BBC Public Speaking Awards and playing in the school orchestra.”

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# Meeting of minds

Young Flemish scientists meet Nobel winners at German conference

Senne Starckx

Every year in July, hundreds of young scientists gather in Lindau, Germany, to meet former winners of the Nobel Prize. This year it was all about chemistry. For Pieter Samyn, a Flemish materials engineer who has recently established his own research group at Germany's University of Freiburg, the meeting (*see sidebar*) is a once-in-a-lifetime event, a unique chance to gather new ideas and inspiration after a year of hard work at the university.

"I particularly like the informal discussions with other young researchers about their research and methodologies," says Samyn, 35, during a break between two so-called Nobel lectures. "At present, I have four researchers in my group. Together we are working on a sustainable method to process waste pulp generated by the paper industry. We look for ways to make useful things from it, like biodegradable paper packaging."

Besides his research work, Samyn also teaches paper and biomaterials courses to undergraduate students. "It's not always easy to combine all my activities and to keep something that you would call a social life, too. Here in Lindau, I get the feeling that we are among friends and are all in the same boat."

In 2011, Samyn, from Roeselare, was the first Belgian researcher to win a prestigious grant from the German Robert Bosch Foundation. He received funding of €1 million – to spend over five years – to start his own independent research group. "So I'll definitely be in Freiburg until the end of 2016. But what happens after that, I can't predict," he says.

Like so many young scientists, he also struggles with planning his career path. "Finding a good place to do scientific research these days depends heavily on external funding. So it is still unclear what will happen to me when the present grant has ended."

In 2007, at Ghent University, Samyn got his PhD in materials science – a slightly different field than sustainable paper production. "Being open to various disciplines, as presented here during the chemistry meeting in Lindau, and combining different experiences into a multidisciplinary approach will be key to better understanding and solving the most challenging problems in our world," he says.

One of the keynote speakers at this year's meeting was Richard Ernst, who earned the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1991 for his ground-breaking work on nuclear magnetic



Flemish materials engineer Pieter Samyn

resonance spectroscopy – the foundation of the (now common) brain scan. Despite his age (he turns 80 this year), the Swiss chemist eagerly went into discussion with his much younger colleagues, and he held an inspiring lecture on how to combine extracurricular activities with science.

Samyn says: "I find it really encouraging what he said: 'Professor Ernst' talked very openly about his life and his career, making clear that the scientific pathway is not linearly paved. His underlying message was: Don't give up when things are against you."

Another young Flemish chemist is *Antwerpenaar* Nathalie Busschaert, who also works abroad, at the University of Southampton in the UK. Busschaert, 25, is working on her PhD in the field of supramolecular chemistry, where she tries to develop small drug-like molecules that can perform the same function as proteins.

"The long-term goal is that they can be used as a treatment for diseases caused by certain malfunctioning proteins, or even as a replacement for these faulty proteins," the University of Leuven graduate explains. "More specifically: We try to find compounds that can bind certain molecules and then transport them across cell membranes, which could be used in a future treatment of cystic fibrosis or certain types of cancer."



Nobel laureate Richard Ernst (he won in 1991) in discussion with young chemists from all over the world

She particularly likes the broad and international character of the Lindau Meeting: "Unlike normal conferences, which handle a specific topic, this meeting deals with wider chemistry issues in general – so I can learn a lot and pick up new ideas. It's an excellent occasion to learn from the Nobel laureates themselves about how they got to where they are now and what difficulties they've had."

Busschaert's favourite was Aaron Ciechanover, with whom she had a private lunch on a terrace overlooking Lindau's little marina. Ciechanover, from Israel, discovered ubiquitine, a fundamental protein in biological cells. "Ciechanover told me how he quit his job as a surgeon and started all over again doing a PhD in biochemistry. From

10 possible subjects for his research thesis, he chose the one which seemed the least promising but which looked – at least, for him – the most intriguing. It turned out to be quite a relevant subject, and he won the Nobel Prize with it."

If there is a general underlying advice to all young researchers who come to Lindau – and this holds for the other scientific disciplines, too – it's this: Find your own problem that you must investigate and get to the bottom of it. Busschaerts also picked that up: "Don't do what everyone is already doing," Ciechanover told her. "Because that's not interesting, and you can't compete with the big guys."

► [www.lindau-nobel.org](http://www.lindau-nobel.org)

## A UNIQUE EVENT IN A UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT

This summer saw the 63rd Lindau Nobel Meeting. Since 1951, young researchers from all over the world have gathered in this picturesque Bavarian town, lying on a peninsula in Lake Constance (also called the Bodensee) to meet their heroes: former winners of the Nobel Prize. Just as there are different Nobel Prizes, there are also different Lindau Nobel Meetings. This year's was dedicated to chemistry. Physics, medicine/physiology and economics have their own meeting as does "interdisciplinary sciences" – which brings all the sciences and their laureates together.

## Q&A

Researcher Bino Maiheu of the Flemish Institute for Technological Research (Vito) led a study on the "urban heat island effect" in Ghent

**In what way is Ghent an island?**  
Cities like Ghent are urban heat islands when the nights in the city centre are considerably warmer than in the bordering countryside. Measurements obtained last summer show a nightly air temperature difference of on average three degrees – with peaks of up to eight degrees on hot nights. During the daytime, the difference is mostly limited to around one degree.

**What are the main causes of this effect?**  
The principal reason is that city environments contain a lot of

hard construction materials such as concrete and asphalt. During the day, these materials retain the heat of the sun, which they gradually release during the night. The lack of open spaces hinders an efficient discharge of heat and the circulation of wind. Another factor is the shortage of vegetation, leading to less evapotranspiration – the process by which vegetation exhales water. Trees also cool the environment through the shade they provide.

**Why are hot city nights a problem?**  
The increased heat can carry



serious health risks for vulnerable groups in cities, such as elderly people and infants. During the hot summer of 2003, hospitals in Paris in particular were flooded with victims of the heat. Climate-change experts predict that extreme heat waves will occur more frequently in the near future.

**What are your recommendations for Ghent?**  
Our team, which included researchers from both Vito and Ghent University, recommends increasing the amount of vegetation and reducing the

amount of hard construction materials and sealed surfaces. Concrete measures include creating parking spots and playgrounds with materials such as grass tiles instead of hard asphalt. Combining green and water elements also offers many advantages, as together they form an effective heat buffer all through the summer. On the heat map of the city that we created with our data, we also identified high-risk areas – with a notable lack of vegetation or a larger presence of vulnerable groups.

Interview by Andy Furnière





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# From dream to drama

A snaking green ribbon is all that remains of what was once an ambitious canal project

Text & photos: Toon Lambrechts

Today, the canal between Ypres and Komen stretches out like a green ribbon between the two cities. In many places the waterway has fully overgrown, and despite enormous efforts to build the canal, not a single ship ever made use of it. We pay a visit in the final instalment of our Mysterious Flanders series.

It is 10 July 1913. The local newspaper talks about “a day of doom and gloom for the whole of the Westhoek”. Along the banks of the Ypres-Komen canal, the Sint-Elooïs bridge has collapsed due to sliding mudbanks. For several weeks, it had been crumbling in slow motion, and the collapse meant the end of the attempt to connect the cities of Ypres and Komen via water. It was also a dead end for an undertaking that had lasted 50 years.

The canal was the final piece in a plan to connect the rivers Ijzer and Leie in order to stimulate economic activity in the impoverished region. The idea was not new: The first plans date from the 17th century under the rule of the Spanish monarchs Albert and Isabella. The successive French and Dutch rulers came up with various designs for a waterway, but only after Belgian independence did the first spade enter the ground.

At the insistence of the town of Ypres, a private company was given the authorisation by Royal Decree to start the work in 1863. The path of the future canal was generally fairly flat; only the



The canal never became what it was intended to be, but today it lives on as a paradise for nature and cyclists

height of Hollebeke was a major challenge for engineers. At that point, the canal would cross the Ypres Salient, a long ridge that forms a half-circle around Ypres. The plan was to dig a 1.3km tunnel underneath the hill.

But the works didn't get far: After only 63m the tunnel collapsed. The surface of the Ypres Salient consists of alternating layers of sand and clay, a mixture that slips easily. Yet giving up was not an option. The whole construction site was taken over by the state, which decided to build a new tunnel. For a moment, it seemed to work, and in 1892, the

second tunnel was ready. Scarcely a year later, this tunnel broke down. But man is a stubborn creature with a tireless urge to make plans. This time, the engineers decided to dig a wide trench through the ridge, with the Sint-Elooïs bridge built above. A trench at least cannot collapse, you might think. But even the trench turned out to be a bad idea as the walls kept collapsing, however hard the canal builders tried to stabilise the soil. When the bridge finally collapsed, it was over and out for the Ypres-Komen canal. A year later, the First World War

broke out, and nobody was thinking about digging canals anymore. The English and Germans entrenched themselves in the remnants of the construction, as the whole area was heavily bombed and dynamited. The Great War would change the landscape forever. But until the 1970s, plans to finish the canal would pop up from time to time. Today, the canal is a paradise for both nature and cyclists. The green ribbon runs from Ypres to Komen and can be cycled all the way. Over the entire course, remains of the canal can be found here and there.

The route crosses the Palingbeek nature park, where the weathered remains of one of the sluice gates still sits. You'll also find relics from the war in the park, including a giant bomb crater known as the Caterpillar.

*The Palingbeek visitor centre is at Vaartstraat 7 in Zillebeke. There are activities throughout the year, and an exhibition about the canal this year marks the 150th anniversary of the start and the 100th anniversary of the end of the work.*

► [www.tinyurl.com/palingbeek](http://www.tinyurl.com/palingbeek)

## THE CROSSROAD OF THE ROSES

A dolmen is quite an unusual sight in Flanders. The stone construction you can see in Boezinge was brought here from Brittany after the First World War as a war memorial.

The whole of the Westhoek, the area roughly situated between the coast and northern France, is dotted with military cemeteries, monuments and war relics. Despite its ancient appearance, the dolmen was set up only in 1929. A stone cross and nine granite boulders keep the prehistoric structure company, and together the memorial is known as the Carrefour des Roses, the crossroad of the roses.

The monument was established at the initiative of the French 80th Infantry Division to commemorate the German gas attack of April 1915. The spot was at that time the centre of the Breton sector of the battlefield. Many Breton soldiers lost their lives in this attack, one of the first where poison gas was used.

To commemorate the Breton dead, an attempt was made to create a small piece of Brittany here in Boezinge. The dolmen itself comes from the town of Henanbihen, while the cross, which dates from the 16th century, once stood in the Louargat. The female figures below the cross are wearing the typical Breton headgear.

The different regiments each brought



their stone from Brittany with their name carved into it. Even the vegetation is not accidental: Pine, gorse and heather suggest a Breton landscape in commemoration of those who died here. The monument stands at the crossroads between Langemarkstraat and Poezelstraat in Boezinge.

## THE HEALING TREE

The Ons Lieven Heere Boomke chapel (“the chapel of the Tree of our Lord” in local dialect) is not so different from the thousands of others that you find everywhere in Flanders. But the hedge around this chapel near Poperinge is covered in rags, clothing, teddy bears and bags of hair. This is where pilgrims come to beg for a cure, mainly from fever. It's a busy place, especially on Good Friday. According to legend, a statue of Jesus was once found here. The finder placed it in the church, but the next day, it miraculously moved back to where it had been found, so there was no other option than to build a chapel on the spot that the statue itself preferred. At that time, the area was still forested, so today the chapel is also called the Onzen Heire Bus Chapel (the chapel of the Forest of our Lord).

Previously there were more of these places where such rituals were executed. *Lappenbomen* or *voddenbomen* (rag trees) are trees located at chapels where people would hang pieces of clothing in order to invite healing. Another habit was to drive nails into the trunk of a tree after the nail was rubbed against the sick body part. By doing this, it was hoped the tree would take over the disease. The church has always opposed these customs, believing them to be superstition, but it

has never managed to eradicate the belief in the healing power of trees. Finding the chapel is quite a challenge. On Provenseweg, not far from Poperinge, a small sign indicates the path that brings you to two farms. Between them stands the chapel, hidden in the bushes.







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# Beloved Brussels

## Jolien Janzing's new novel explores Charlotte Brontë's inspirational stay

Rebecca Benoot

Dutch journalist Jolien Janzing, who lives in Flanders, has followed up her debut novel *Grammatica van een Obsessie* (Grammar of an Obsession) with the historical novel *De Meester* (The Master), in which she shines a light on a tantalising episode in the lives of two great 19th-century authors, Charlotte and Emily Brontë.

“I’ve always been interested in 19th-century English literature such as Dickens, Austen and the Brontës,” Janzing explains. “After finishing my first novel, I decided that I’d love to write a historical novel, which is when I stumbled upon this chapter in Charlotte Brontë’s life that isn’t widely known: namely, that she stayed in Brussels for quite some time. With a historical novel I could also combine my love for fiction with my journalistic background. Writing a biography would have been too dry; I love being able to tell a good story.”

Charlotte Brontë became famous for her novel *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847. Prior to this she was just a girl trying to escape rural domesticity by becoming a teacher, a profession that led her and her sister Emily, who would later write *Wuthering Heights*, to Brussels in 1842. Here they learned French at the Pensionnat Héger, close to the site of Bozar today; it was where Charlotte met Constantin Héger, the headmistress’ husband and a man who would change the course of her life significantly.

“If you read between the lines of the letters she wrote to Héger,” Janzing says, “you immediately sense there was more to them than meets the eye. There was a little interpretation necessary because she couldn’t be as open about her feelings as she wanted to be, since Madame Héger might intercept them. But there is

a lot of passion in them.” Madly in love with a married man, Charlotte would later use him as inspiration for *The Professor*, *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*.

Fascinated by the life and times of Charlotte Brontë, Janzing, who previously wrote for *Humo* and *De Morgen*, decided to bring this chapter to life by writing not just another biography but a novel in which she is able to give us a fictionalised picture of what these literary sisters might have been thinking and experiencing at that crucial point in their lives.

“I chose to rewrite Charlotte’s letters to Héger to give a more accurate depiction of my Charlotte – my interpretation of her, that is. I felt like I understood her and her journey. I’m Dutch, but I moved to Flanders when I was little. I was raised a Protestant and was confronted with Catholicism here, so I understood the culture shock she must have felt when she came here. As a fellow novelist, I share her love for language. And we all know what heartache is.”

Janzing gives us a wonderful look inside the mind of Charlotte, paralleled only by her portrait of a vibrant and

bustling 19th-Century Brussels. “I worked as a journalist for some time before transitioning to fiction so I was familiar with the research involved with creating such an elaborate story. The novel took me three years to write because it had to be accurate.

I read everything about Brussels during that period. I also had a large map of the city circa 1835 next to me at all times and help from several people to bring the

city to life.”

*De Meester* is a chronological depiction of their adventures, from the moment they leave home to the moment Charlotte’s life took an unexpected turn. Janzing has created a vivid canvas on which she elaborates not only on the Brontës’ experiences but also the budding romance between Leopold I and his mistress Arcadie Claret, which she alternates with the main story as was the custom in many 19th-century novels. So was addressing the reader directly through an omniscient narrator, also the case here.

Janzing’s novel has a large international appeal and not just because of its subject matter. *De Meester* was the only Dutch-language novel selected for Books at Berlinale at this year’s Berlin International Film Festival, an initiative to bring publishing and the film industry closer together. Books of all genres and languages were presented to international producers for a chance at a potential big-screen adaptation. An English translation is in the pipeline, and the BBC is interested in optioning the story.

*De Meester* is a colourful and atmospheric depiction of an independent, passionate but above all courageous woman who followed her heart, which paved the way for her future. Eloquently written, full of visual flair and depth, Janzing’s book engulfs us in an essential yet not commonly known chapter in Charlotte Brontë’s life that would change her and literary history forever. “For Charlotte, it was a very important episode, as it moulded her as a writer. I don’t think *Jane Eyre* would have been written if she’d never met Mr Héger.”

For more about the Brontë family’s stay in Brussels, contact the Brussels Brontë Group.

► [www.thebrusselsbrontegroup.org](http://www.thebrusselsbrontegroup.org)



Brontë fan Jolien Janzing’s eloquent and enthralling novel depicts Charlotte’s stay in Brussels

## FRESH FICTION

### Het laatste bevel (The Last Order)

by Pieter Aspe • Manteau

Summer equals crime fiction. Luckily Flanders’ most beloved crime author is back with a new case for his detective Pieter Van In, whose idyllic cruise is disrupted by the disappearance of a fellow Belgian. With his colleague Guido Versavel he discovers that not all is what it seems in the Mediterranean. *Het laatste bevel* is classic Aspe: bickering co-workers, crimes of passion and a case that’s easier to crack than a hardboiled egg. Sit back, relax and let the investigation begin.

### Gaius

by Johan de Boose • De Bezige Bij

*Gaius* is the first part of Johan de Boose’s new trilogy, *Het Vloekhout*, in which every part

deals with a moment in time when people thought the end of the world was near. The title character is a Roman theatre director during Nero’s reign who also designed the emperor’s torture chambers. The novel deals with his travels, treachery and torment, topics an ambitious writer such as de Boose, who is known for his poetry and bulky novels such as *De Bloedgetuigen*, doesn’t shy away from. It’s a thrilling novel and a promising start to an addictive trilogy.

### De Keisnijders (The Boulder-cutters)

by Pieter De Buysser • De Geus

Pieter De Buysser’s fictional debut is filled with elegant sentences, idealism and decay, clear references to his past as a theatre-maker. Four people claiming to

be contemporary prophets of the Occupy Wall Street generation build a circular wall out of rubbish, blocking out all ambition and desire. Decades later, when governments have crumbled and Belgium no longer exists, four siblings revive the original rebels’ ideology and take charge of the present dire situation.

### Santa Monica

by Bavo Dhooge • Houtekiet

If you like your crime fiction a little more edgy, try Bavo Dhooge’s latest. Clearly inspired by the writings of Elmore Leonard, he sets the novel in 1976, where bouncer Jack Spark is in cahoots with locksmith Monica Gucci, who supplies him with all the keys he’ll ever need. Jack’s ex-boss Fats Foley also wants in, into the house of billionaire Randy Wells. With snappy dialogue, larger-

than-life characters and prolific plot twists, *Santa Monica* will definitely turn up the heat this summer.



## WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

This year’s 170th edition of the Gentse Feesten attracted **more than one million visitors**, according to organisers. The 10-day festival, which ended on Monday as *Flanders Today* went to press, had already passed the million mark on Saturday and was sure to top last year’s total, though was unlikely to match the 1.5 and 1.7 million figures of the best years ever, 2005 and 2006.

The Free University of Brussels (VUB) will begin offering a two-year **postgraduate course in art connoisseurship** beginning this academic year. The course will include aspects of art history, laboratory techniques, authentication and intellectual property law, including study weekends in Brussels, Ghent, Paris, Maastricht and Vienna, and will be taught by the university’s chair of Adult and Cultural Studies, Willem Elias.

Writer/director Paul Haggis (*Crash*, *Quantum of Solace*) is taking advantage of Belgium’s filmmaking tax shelter to **finish his new movie, *Third Person*, in Antwerp**. Produced by the Antwerp-based Corsan, the film is slated to premiere in September at the Toronto Film Festival. Haggis is currently in the port city putting the finishing touches to the film, including much of the musical soundtrack.

TV coverage of the **abdication of King Albert II** and the succession of King Filip peaked with an audience of 877,696 for the afternoon broadcast on VRT on 21 July. More than two million people watched the channel’s coverage at some stage for 15 minutes or more.

The **Sfinks Mixed world music** festival in Boechout, Antwerp province, went ahead last week with free entry for the first time since subsidies were withdrawn. However, the organisers introduced a ban on food and drink brought in from outside in the hope of compensating for the loss of income through concession sales.

The Flemish comedy *Los flamencos* starring Peter Van den Eede, Mark Verstraete and Herwig Ilegems is one of two films set to **open the Ostend Film Festival** in September. The film, directed by Daniel Lambo, tells the story of three brothers who set out to rob a bank to pay for a trip to Mexico. The other opener will be *Borgman* by the Dutch director Alex van Warmerdam, which stars Flemish actors Jeroen Perceval and Gene Bervoets.

► [www.filmfestivalaloostende.be](http://www.filmfestivalaloostende.be)



Cross-disciplinary slowness

# M-idzomer

Tom Peeters

With only one music stage in the cosy garden and a well-considered selection of performance, dance, spoken word and visual arts indoors, for the fourth consecutive year Museum M in Leuven provides a unique contribution to the Flemish summer festival landscape. As an antidote to the glut of stages everywhere else, the organisers have taken the risk of choosing what the visitor has to see, making it all a more laid-back and focussed experience. Nonetheless, the close collaboration between local concert hall Het Depot, cultural centre 30CC and M results in a very diverse, cross-disciplinary programme. So if there's one band or musician that you're not particularly fond of, you can always stroll around the exhibitions or watch a comedy, theatre or dance performance. The music programme is remarkably discreet and tasteful, often more melancholic, maybe a little darker and surely slower than at your

average rock and pop festival, accentuating singer-songwriting, jazz and folk, from renowned and debuting national and international artists. Take the headliners: Ghent singer Trixie Whitley, daughter of the late Chris Whitley, takes the stage on Thursday with her dramatic voice and songs from her eccentric solo debut *Fourth Corner*, released this spring, creating a smoky, nocturnal atmosphere. On Friday, Ethiopian vibraphonist Mulatu Astatke combines sounds from his home country with a fresh Latin touch, as he returns to the M-idzomer stage two years after his first visit. On Saturday evening, the French pop trio Nouvelle Vague present classic new wave songs and French rock hits in their own sweet way, meaning breezy bossa nova, semi acoustic folk or intimate *chanson*. Finally, on Sunday, the American Wovenhand, aka David Eugene Edwards, will bewitch the audience with his ominous folk and alt-country parables.

If you're looking for another highlight, don't miss Mélanie De Biasio, the new Belgian jazz voice. She's heading a large delegation of female performers. Pianist/singer An Pierlé, the Dutch Janne Schra, making her Belgian stage debut, and Rozanne Descheemaeker, one half of local band Float Fall, also take the stage. But De Biasio is in another league. On her second album, *No Deal*, she showcases her excellent timing, leaving enough space between the notes for emotional connection, and mysteriously guiding listeners on a slower path that allows them to dig deeper. Another plea for slowness and silence comes from the Swiss visual artist Ugo Rondinone, whose poetic *Thank You Silence* exhibition is on display in the museum until 6 October. His little primitive bronze bird sculptures (*pictured*), spread out over the floor of one big room, do alienate. Elsewhere, introverted wax nudes are contrasted by large geometric volumes of soil, designed

especially for M. Rondinone shows us a timeless world which is closer to nature, but paradoxically he had to cover the windows to do this – with clocks in stained glass without hour or minute hand – so no distraction from the outside world could intervene with the viewing experience. "It's better to slow down," he said at the opening of his exhibition. "There is no action, only a mental

action. We need to create our own time, which isn't necessarily on the same wavelength as the time the world is imposing on us." That's exactly why Rondinone's work fits in with a festival that doesn't need to scream out loud and compete in terms of quantity.



1-4 August | Museum M, Vanderkelenstraat 28, Leuven | [www.m-idzomer.be](http://www.m-idzomer.be)

## SPECIAL EVENT

### National Horse Trials

L'Equino knows horses. This summer the Belgian eventing team hosts its 17th national horse trials in advance of the European Championship, held in Malmö, Sweden, from 29 August to 1 September. For those not in the know, equestrian eventing is a sort of triathlon on four legs. Horse and rider compete in three different trials: dressage (horse ballet!), jumping and cross-country. It makes for a busy weekend spread over two specialised equestrian sites in Flanders. Dressage and jumping are held in Waregem. The cross-country competition unfolds at L'Equino HQ, the majestic Kasteeldomein van Baron Casier in Nokere. The grounds of this centuries-old estate are ideal for the event. They're spacious, scenic and brimming with hedges, fences and water jumps as well as purpose-built obstacles for competitors to negotiate. The castle is also the site of an opening night party and closing day barbecue. It's safe to bring the kids along too. While mum and dad are enjoying the sport, the young ones are offered a playground with bouncy castles, make-up booths, crafts workshops and an appearance by children's author Marc de Bel. And entry is free. **Georgio Valentino**



2-4 August | Nokere and Waregem | [www.lequino.be](http://www.lequino.be)

## MORE SPECIAL EVENTS THIS WEEK

### Berlare (East Flanders)

**Waterfeesten:** Summer festival for the whole family, featuring stunts on the water, plenty of concerts, a floating stage, fireworks and more  
**AUG 4 at Donkmeer, Donkiaan**  
[www.donkmeer.be/waterfeest](http://www.donkmeer.be/waterfeest)

### Brussels

**Mini-Europe By Night:** Visit the park while it's beautifully lit and enhanced by a colourful pyrotechnics show involving fire and music  
**Until AUG 17 at Mini-Europe, Bruparck**  
[www.minieurope.eu](http://www.minieurope.eu)

## FOOD & DRINK

### Hapje-Tapje

Leuven's annual open-air culinary festival celebrates its silver anniversary. Hapje-Tapje was a hit from its inauguration, thanks to the winning combination of local charm and phenomenal food. The Grote Markt, Oude Markt and surrounding streets are alive with the sights, sound, smells and tastes of the city's food scene. The culinary market along Muntstraat features some three dozen stands representing just as many Leuven restaurants and caterers. An awards ceremony will reveal the best of the best among them. Jeroen Meus and other Flemish celebrity chefs host cooking demonstrations in the market square. Local bartenders compete in the celebrated Barmannenrace, a test of speed, balance and pluck. Of course beer tastings are on the programme. This year Hapje-Tapje adds music to the mix for the first time. Flanders' ubiquitous retro-flavoured song-and-dance collective Radio Modern invite visitors on a trip back in time to the golden age of swing. **GV**



4 August, 12.00 | City centre, Leuven | [www.hapje-tapje.be](http://www.hapje-tapje.be)

## MORE FOOD & DRINK THIS WEEK

### Knokke

**Culinaria:** Nine chefs work their magic from inside four sea containers turned into professional kitchens for the event, while a large central bar and live music provide the summery atmosphere  
**AUG 2-4 at Zeedijk-Het Zoute 777**  
[www.culinariasquare.com](http://www.culinariasquare.com)

### Tongeren

**Bier Anders:** Beer festival featuring small breweries and more than 100 lesser-known beers  
**AUG 3 15.00-23.00 & AUG 4 12.00-20.00 at Grote Markt**  
[www.bieranders.be](http://www.bieranders.be)

### Turnhout

**Turnhout Culinaire:** First edition of the culinary festival featuring stands set up by local restaurants with tastings of different courses, plus concerts and free cooking workshops for children  
**AUG 2-4 at Grote Markt**  
[www.turnhoutculinaire.com](http://www.turnhoutculinaire.com)



VISUAL

Enduring Srebrenica

The disintegration of multi-ethnic Yugoslavia into independent (and antagonistic) nation-states played out in a series of shockingly brutal events. One of the most savage of these was the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica, in which more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were captured and murdered by Serb forces under the command of notorious war criminal Ratko Mladić. It's the kind of trauma that marks a people for generations. Dutch-German photographer Claudia Heinermann visits the town a mere 18 years later. Emotions are still raw. Survivors and eyewitnesses still live in the same streets where they were once hunted by Mladić's death squads. Heinermann presents more than 70 photographs of present-day Srebrenica and its inhabitants. Poignant portraits are accompanied by equally poignant testimonials. "We have always lived on the mountain," says Nura Mustafić, who lost her husband and three children in 1995, "and I have never wanted to live anywhere else." **GV**



Until 11 November | Kazerne Dossin, Mechelen

► [www.kazernedossin.eu](http://www.kazernedossin.eu)

MORE VISUAL ARTS THIS WEEK

Ghent

**Kom binnen! (Come in!):** Photos of old-fashioned house interiors from across Flanders by young Flemish photographer Evy Raes  
**Until SEP 1 at Sint-Pietersabdij, Sint-Pietersplein 9**  
► [www.sintpietersabdijgent.be](http://www.sintpietersabdijgent.be)

**Peter De Greef (1901-1985):** Selection of ornate covers for sheet music by one of the most productive Flemish designers of musical scores in the period between 1925 and the mid-1950s  
**Until OCT 27 at Design Museum Gent, Jan Breydelstraat 5**  
► [www.designmuseumgent.be](http://www.designmuseumgent.be)

Ostend

**Unpolished portraits:** Photos of everyday people ( friends, neighbours, artists, passers-by, train passengers...) by Flemish photographer Yel Ratjczak  
**Until AUG 31 at Nieuwe Gaanderijen, Zeedijk**  
► [www.uitinwest-vlaanderen.be/70943/unpolished-portraits](http://www.uitinwest-vlaanderen.be/70943/unpolished-portraits)

MUSIC FESTIVAL

Lokerse Feesten

Festival season continues with a blowout in East Flanders. With 38 annual editions already under its belt, Lokerse Feesten is one of the oldest of Flanders' many summer festivals. It's also one of the biggest. Each of its 10 nights is (more or less) consistently themed and headlined by international acts as well as local luminaries. Singer-songwriter night, for example, finds one of Flanders' favourite sons, Arno, sharing the stage with Ireland's Damien Rice and American bluesman Seasick Steve. Hard rock fans will be pleased to see Alice Cooper and Deep Purple back to back, at once a 1970s class reunion and an affirmation of the special relationship between Cooper's US and Purple's UK. Then there's Killing Joke warming up for Iggy and the Stooges (*pictured*). The bad news: Gonzo British rockers Motörhead had to cancel their 4 August headlining slot due to ill health. Their replacement, American metalhead Glenn Danzig, isn't nearly as interesting. **GV**



2-11 August | Grote Kaai, Lokeren | ► [www.lokersefeesten.be](http://www.lokersefeesten.be)

MORE MUSIC FESTIVALS THIS WEEK

Dranouter (West Flanders)

**Festival Dranouter:** Annual folk and rock music festival featuring Daan, Arno, De Nieuwe Snaar, Black Box Revelation, Agnes Obel, Emir Kusturica & the No Smoking Orchestra and De Dolfijntjes, among others  
**AUG 2-4 at Festival terrain, Koudekotstraat**  
► [www.festivaldranouter.be](http://www.festivaldranouter.be)

Geel (Antwerp province)

**Reggae Geel:** The country's biggest reggae festival, drawing thousands of fans of rock, ska and reggae every year since 1978; this year features Busy Signal, Romain Virgo, Capleton, Freddie McGregor, Ken Boothe, Bounty Killer and Third World, among others  
**AUG 2-3 at Festival terrain, Malosewaver**  
► [www.reggaegeel.com](http://www.reggaegeel.com)

Zottegem (East Flanders)

**Montmartrefeesten:** Neighbourhood folk festival with free concerts by Flemish artists, featuring the swinging rockabilly band Backseat Boppers  
**AUG 2-4 at Montmartreplein**  
► <http://tinyurl.com/montmartrefeesten>

CAFÉ SPOTLIGHT

Café Meng  
Grotestraat 2, Genk

Missing your last train home in an unfamiliar city obviously has its downsides. But as the Monty Python crew sang: Always look on the bright side of life. It means you have a lot of free time to explore the bar scene, and, if you're lucky, as I was in Genk, you discover one of those authentic places with a good story attached to it. In the city centre of Genk, but on a rather quiet corner, I found Café Meng. In the local dialect, "Meng" is a nickname for "Herman". This was the first name of not only the cafe's founder but also of two subsequent proprietors, including the

current one – Herman Bijmens. "Still, it isn't a compulsory requirement," smiled Bijmens, who also informed me that I was sitting in the oldest bar in town. Café Meng has been serving customers for over a century. A large photo on one wall shows how the pub looked from the outside in the first decades of the 20th century, but the whole interior exudes the atmosphere of days long past. No wonder: The last time the interior was changed substantially was almost 60 years ago. This made it the perfect location for a movie set in that period.

As owners Herman and Daniella proudly told me, Flemish director Stijn Coninx shot a scene there for *Marina*, his upcoming biopic of the young Italian singer Rocco Granata. In this scene, Granata gives an illegal concert – he doesn't have the necessary official papers to perform. When the police arrive, he escapes through the back door. Granata's concert there may be fictional, but the bar really organises concerts at the weekends. "We invite bands that play the old classics," said Bijmens. I don't know about you, but I can't wait to be stuck in Genk again for the night.



Andy Furniere



BITE

Robyn Boyle

Brasserie Nieuwpoort ★★★★★

It's the hottest day of the year so far, and my partner and I are on our way to sniff up the fresh sea breeze at the coast. But we don't have to go all the way to the beach for that. Most Flemish coastal resort towns have a lesser-known old town just a short way inland. Nieuwpoort is one of them, and its historic market square is about as charming as they come.

On one corner is Brasserie Nieuwpoort, its bustling terrace filled with trendy lounge chairs and parasols. It's packed with all types of people: young and old, fancy and casual, with or without kids. We take our reserved seat on a cushiony bench and leaf through the menu, which is actually a pretty snazzy magazine.

I've been to quite a few brasseries in Flanders, but never one this stylish. Everything has been considered down to the last detail, from the gorgeous glazed faience bar and serene interior to the sprig of fresh rosemary in my partner's gin and tonic. My virgin mojito is properly mixed to sweet-sour perfection with crushed ice, sugar and tangy lime, then prettily garnished with mint leaves and thin slices of granny smith apple. With our aperitifs come teasers of smoked salmon mousse.

With my mind already set on croquettes, a traditional coastal delicacy, I can't help but order the cheese croquettes as a starter, followed by a main of shrimp croquettes. My partner is a little more adventurous and orders the North Sea fish soup starter and plaice for the main, a popular flat fish which is fully in season right now.

I may have overdone it on the double order of fried goodies, but



my cheese croquettes are the best I've ever tasted – their light and crispy outer crust gives way to a soft, battered layer and oozing centre filled with Keiems Bloempje, a lush mild cheese from nearby Diksmuide. The croquettes come with a wedge of lemon to help cut the richness, a little sharp shaved parmesan and a pile of delicate fried parsley.

My partner's soup, meanwhile, is a mouth-watering *bouillabaisse* of mussels, cockles and chunks of white fish floating in olive oil, tomatoes and saffron and served with spicy *rouille*, grated cheese for melting and a couple of thick, oil-drenched croutons.

He's equally pleased with his main, too, which features an

enormous fillet of plaice, very simply pan-fried and drizzled with nutty *beurre noisette*, or browned butter. The incredibly soft white flesh of the fish melts on the tongue and pairs up nicely with the side of homemade tartar sauce, crisp salad and hand-cut fries.

I manage to devour two more good-sized croquettes, this time stuffed with plump North Sea shrimp in a creamy, gooey sauce. A tart and refreshing Rodenbach beer proves yet again to be the ideal companion to this classic dish.

For dessert, I'm forced to pass up things like ice cream, *crème brûlée* and a West Flemish cheese platter, opting instead for a simple cappuccino (ok, make that a "Belgian cappuccino" – more whipped cream than coffee), and the bill please. It comes to a fair €85: on the expensive side for a brasserie, but then, this isn't your average brasserie, not by far.

www.brasserienieuwpoort.be

- 📍 Marktpllein 19, Nieuwpoort; 058.23.15.32
- 🕒 9.30-22.00, daily
- 💶 Mains: €10-30
- 📖 Refined brasserie with an excellent selection of fresh fish and seafood dishes

TALKING DUTCH

Derek Blyth

One country, two kings, three queens

Everyone agrees that this is a complicated country for foreigners to understand. It has seven governments, three languages, two capitals and more than 500 beers. And now, to make matters just that little bit more puzzling, *De Morgen* recently pointed out that *ons land telt nu drie koninginnen* – our country now has three queens.

On 21 July, King Albert II of the Belgians abdicated the throne in favour of his son Filip. The ceremony was dignified and convivial. Most Belgians seemed to welcome the new king and his already popular wife Mathilde.

It was a far cry from the scenes in London the next day when Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, was rushed to hospital to give birth. Both *De Morgen* and *De Standard* noted that *The Guardian's* website had introduced a digital improvement – *'Republiekeïnse knop' verwijderd 'royal baby' nieuws van site* – Republican button removes royal baby news from the

website.

Reporting on the Belgian royal family is much more low-key, so it would probably make little sense to install a Republican button on any Belgian website. The press does not like to dig too deeply into the royal family's personal lives. But odd stories occasionally come to light.

Take *De Morgen's* recent story on how we are now living in the only country in the world with three queens. For we now have Paola, wife of King Albert, who used to be Queen of the Belgians but is now simply *Koningin* Paola, Queen Paola. And we have Fabiola, wife of the late King Boudewijn, who is now *Koningin-Weduwe*, or Dowager Queen. And we have Mathilde, wife of Filip, who is now Queen of the Belgians.

In the last issue of Talking Dutch, I noted that the BBC royalty drama *The White Queen* was filmed in Bruges. But we now have our very own royalty drama playing out behind the high walls of the *Kasteel van Laken*, Laeken Castle, where the

rival queens are said to exchange menacing looks over the dinner table.

Or at least that is the story that is circulating in some of the country's newspapers this summer. *Tussen Paola en Fabiola heeft het nooit beboterd* – things have never gone smoothly between Paola and Fabiola. After Albert and Paola moved into the royal palace in 1993, it simply got worse. *Toen Fabiola als koningin-weduwe terugkwam van een tripje vond ze al haar bezittingen netjes ingepakt in de hal* – when the Dowager Queen Fabiola came back from a short trip, she found all her belongings neatly packed up in the hall.

Hopefully the situation will improve now that Queen Mathilde of the Belgians has joined the warring queens. At least they do not all live under the same roof. *Elk van de koninginnen heeft zijn eigen kasteel* – each of the queens has her own castle. We just have to hope that they don't each have their own army.

The last word...

Simple sovereigns

"They do their own shopping, yes. I think they just enjoy finally being able to go about like ordinary people."

Olivier Rouet, who rents bicycles on the little-known French island of Île d'Yeu, where Belgium's new king and queen went on holiday with their children

The chips are down

"Because July was much too warm and dry, the potato crop just stopped growing. It's already clear that we'll be dealing with smaller potatoes – and so smaller *frietten*." The pleasant summer weather means smaller and more expensive fries in the autumn

Diving for perils

"We find it scandalous that in Japan they hunt whales for food. But it doesn't seem to bother anyone that small dolphins are dying off our coast for the pleasure of a few sports fishermen."

More than 100 harbour porpoise have died in nets already this year – the equivalent of one every two days

Watery wonder

"London was a low point, and I suffered more because my ambitions were so high. This time I tried to enjoy myself as much as possible. And bingo – it worked."

Swimmer Brian Ryckeman won silver in the 25km at the Fina World Championships in Barcelona, the first Belgian medal since 1998

NEXT WEEK  
IN FLANDERS TODAY

Cover story

There are so many reasons to feel guilty about food that quick meals shouldn't be one of them. Correspondent Linda Thompson checks out the new alternatives in healthy fast foods that are springing up across Brussels and Flanders. Homemade soup by bike delivery anyone?

News

Are you confused about recycling? You're not the only one. With all the rules and the different-coloured sacks, it can be hard to keep track of. Add in a language barrier, and it's downright baffling. If you're tired of seeing that little sticker with an obscure explanation of why your plastics are still sitting on the kerb, check out our recycling in Flanders how-to

Tourism

If you're just back from holiday and facing four weeks of (hopefully) warm weather in Flanders, you should put a little local travel on your agenda. The first of our four-part Village Visits series introduces you to the charms of Maaseik

