

Bricks from Belgium

The international dimension of Flemish bricks and brickwork (Flemish bond !) can be traced in different European countries. Not only the export of building materials and building techniques to England, France or the Netherlands makes great stories... foreign technology also tried to get a foothold on Flemish clay soil. The interaction worked both ways, but is seldom told or taught. Despite the fact that even clay mixing machines originated in the former DDR can be found, installed and all by former East German workers in 1965, long before the *Wende*.

Tales of migration, changes of technology, even reorganization of brickworks can be presented in a Flemish or European theatre. Only a few independent locally owned brickworks are still operational, the remainder closed or incorporated into the Austrian multinational Wienerberger. With production sites throughout Europe, Wienerberger makes the history of brickmaking a *de facto* European story. The reasons behind this success tell a gripping story in which local customs, choices whether or not or when to embrace new technologies, ultimately resulted in the closure of numerous small brickworks. The use of state of the art technology, investment, research & development of new brick products and a long term management policy have changed the local market into a global one.

All these historical, technological and management stories, and their consequences can still be visited in the Rupel region in Flanders. The hamlet of Noeveren tells the evolution of the brickworks from the 17th century until the last decade of the 20th century. Renovation and restoration work on three former brickworks (Lauwers, Frateur & Peeters-Van Mechelen) tell their own and a regional story, embedded in a European dimension. The new heritage story line is under construction and due to open in 2019 or 2020 as a “open heritage” site.



Harry van Royen, is historian, trained at Ghent University, and worked on behalf of different heritage projects and heritage organizations. A keen interest in all things Cistercian, also pioneers of brick making in the Low Countries, and industrial archaeology, ranging from breweries over gas works to brick works, eventually brought him to Boom, where he currently works for Heritage Rupel. He advises the brick work museums and other (built) heritage curators in the area. He works from an office in a former clay pit, nowadays world renowned as the venue of Tomorrowland.

