

## BASED IN BELGIUM 1975

### **Monday 8<sup>th</sup> September**

The holiday officially began when our alarm rang at the unearthly hour of 03:30 - groan! Alan and I had been living in Dover for five months and Alan's job as a Radio Officer with Townsend Thoreson Car Ferries allowed him a discount with both the Channel crossing and accommodation at the De Haan holiday village in Belgium. My Mum and Dad had also joined us for a 10-day Belgian stay.

We managed to leave the house at 04:20 and drove to the docks in Alan's car through a dark and sleeping Dover. However, there was plenty of activity at the docks, as our passports were checked and we drove onto the Free Enterprise VIII and down into the hold. As Alan normally worked on this ferry on the Dover to Zeebrugge run, he knew the Captain well and took us up to the bridge. We thus had a brilliant view as the ship slowly manoeuvred out of the harbour and into the Channel, sipping cups of tea courtesy of Townsend Thoreson.

Once in the Channel, we spent most of our time in the Radio Officer's cabin, where thanks to Alan, we were brought tea and toast for four. We did have a quick walk around the deck, but even though the sea was calm, there was a strong breeze and we soon scuttled back inside.

At 10:00, we all tramped back on the bridge and watched the ferry approach its berth at Zeebrugge on a dry but cloudy morning. Once again we were treated to a gratis cup of tea or coffee, which was much appreciated. Mum said she liked this preferential treatment, especially when she looked down from her lofty position on the bridge to the commoners on the deck below!



**Free Enterprise VIII at its Zeebrugge berth**

We were wished a happy holiday, then hurried down to the hold to collect our car. After driving down two hair-raising ramps, we were finally on Belgian soil. Our passports were checked and we were asked if we had anything to declare. I refrained from saying anything silly and then we were free to drive away and explore Belgium, with also hopefully a small part of Holland.

Our first impressions were that the land was undeniably flat and some of the roads were cobbled and difficult to drive on. The signposts seemed to be in two different languages, French and what we presumed must be Flemish.

We drove through Blankenberge and on to Bruges (Brugge), the capital and largest city of West Flanders in the Flemish region of Belgium. Alan parked the car and we began to walk through what was obviously a very historic city, stopping at Tourist Information to pick up a useful booklet describing places of interest. We then stopped at a nearby toilet, but the charge was 3 francs and we had no change, so simply had to wait... The toilet was by a very high clock tower with a stage and rows of seats underneath, which we later discovered was a theatre called the Albert Hall.

Standing patiently in the square were several horses and carts ready to transport visitors around the city – the sound of these horses' hooves as they trotted around on the cobbled streets, along with the sound of church bells frequently ringing, seemed to give Brugge an endearing, quaint atmosphere.

However, we declined this form of transport in favour of following Alan and the tourist booklet around the city, looking at places of interest, such as the Basilica of the Holy Blood; Jerusalem Church; the City Theatre; the world's first stock exchange and other old buildings. We wanted to see the lace-making centre, but it was closed. As we walked down the street, though, we saw two people dressed in lacy costumes and a camera crew.

As it was gone midday, we decided to have lunch and walked into the nearest likely-looking eating place we came across. It was an Italian restaurant and I really should have ordered spaghetti bolognaise along with Alan, Mum and Dad. As it was, the scampi I ordered turned up still wearing their shells and I came over all English and pathetic. Alan broke up one shell for me, but I imagined the scampi tasted peculiar and couldn't bring myself to eat any more. My lunch therefore consisted of bread and white wine! There was also a pervasive odour of garlic in the air, which probably put me off too, as I'm no fan of smelly garlic.



**Ristorante Italiano in Bruges/Brugge**

Feeling a certain lack of energy at this point, we decided to make a tour of the city on its canals. It wasn't exactly cheap, but it was a unique way of viewing the city and well worth the expense. Our boatman pointed out the places of interest to us in four different languages as we cruised along, which was really quite impressive. The tour lasted for around half an hour, but the sun had come out and by the time we left the boat, we were all sweltering.

At this point, exhaustion had nearly overtaken us, so we walked back to the car and drove to the De Haan holiday village. After clocking in, we had a much-needed drink, bought some food and moved ourselves properly into chalet 253 at approximately 16:00. The chalet seemed very spacious and pleasant, although the walls were a little on the thin side.

We had a simple tea of various items on toast, followed by an investigative evening wander around the chalets. However, our early morning start had obviously caught up with us and we were perfectly happy to return to our own chalet to prepare for an early night. We actually went to bed at 21:30 – Alan and I were assigned the bunk beds, but crazily decided the top bunk looked big enough for us both...

### **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> September**

I awoke on my 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday after a somewhat restless night, as the top bunk bed was most definitely not as roomy as it looked! Mum claimed that the walls of hers and Dad's bedroom were so thin that she could hear the child next door breathing. It wasn't exactly an auspicious start, but I had an enjoyable time opening cards and presents and we breakfasted at around 09:00.



**Chalet 253, De Haan holiday village**

Dad was unfortunately feeling a little under the weather with a head cold, but after he'd taken a couple of *Disprin* tablets, he said he felt perky enough to accompany us on our day's excursion. We therefore packed some lunch and Alan drove us into De Haan, where the sun had made an appearance, but there was a fair bit of wind. De Haan seemed to be a pretty seaside resort, with many of its buildings looking very attractive with low red roofs.



**De Haan**

After buying postcards and walking along the sandy sea front that stretched for miles, we wandered back to the car and set out for Brugge, as Mum wanted to visit the lace-making centre. We stopped for our picnic lunch on a handy grassy verge, but as we'd forgotten to pack glasses or cups for our orange drink, Dad decided to seek out a lager in Brugge. By this time, it had become so windy that our sandwich wrapper blew away – we hated to litter the Belgian countryside, but we could hardly go chasing over the fields for it.

We soon arrived at Brugge and parked in the same place as before, then walked towards the lace-making centre. Somehow we became waylaid and ended up eating waffles with fresh cream in a tea shop. Dad was definitely happy – and come to think of it, so were the rest of us! The lace-making centre was open and it was most interesting to watch the women at work with their pins and bobbins and witness how lace is made. Alan got into conversation with the woman in charge and found out the best shop for buying lace.

As we left the centre and walked along, the rain decided to come down fairly heavily and we ended up sheltering in none other than C & A, one of my favourite shops. However, I refrained from buying anything and the downpour ended as abruptly as it had started. We then continued to The Little Lace Shop, where Mum and I bought a pretty piece of lace each for 95 francs.

By that time, our legs and feet were aching, so we were quite glad to get back to the car and return to the chalet. Dad had volunteered to take on the role of chef and cooked us a delicious beef curry, which was washed down with some red wine. Needless to say, hilarity overcame us all and we laughed until we actually cried! Mum and Dad had very kindly bought me a birthday cake in Brugge, which was a lovely finishing touch to the meal.

As darkness fell, the rain came and the wind blew, so we spent a cosy evening in the chalet, which included a supper of tea and chocolate – the day's walking had apparently made us hungry. Alan and I decided to forget our foolishness with the top bunk bed in favour of trying out the bed settee in the lounge.

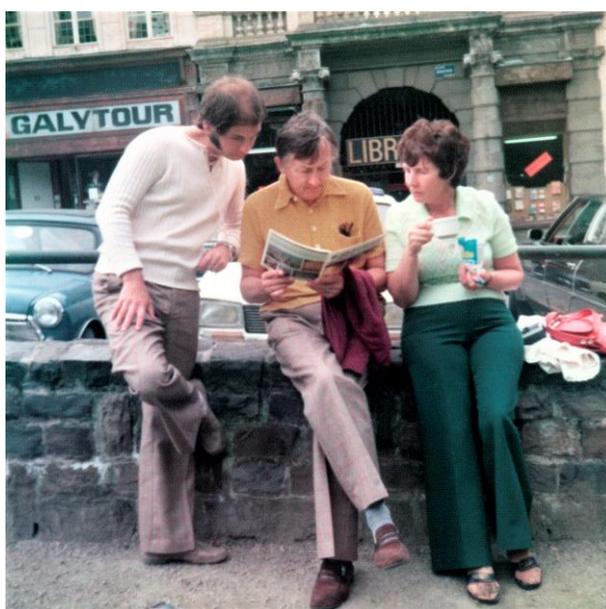


**A grand Grand Marnier birthday cake**

**Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> September**

We awoke to sunshine and Mum asking for a cup of tea! The bed settee had been decidedly more comfortable than the top bunk, so we were in good spirits as we ate a Continental style breakfast. Having decided on a trip to Brussels, we packed some lunch and set off on our day trip to Belgium's capital city. Alan drove us along the motorway (or possibly autobahn) for around 85 miles, seeing lots of trees and fields full of crops on the way.

As we neared Brussels, there was a slight contretemps about which way to go and Dad directed us through a tunnel by mistake. As it turned out, though, the tunnel took us through to what looked like the city centre, so Alan parked the car in the first available space. We then walked down the street in search of Tourist Information and managed to find it only after Alan asked the way from a policeman sporting a gun in a black leather holster on his hip.



**Consulting the (English) booklet**

At Tourist Information, we were given a booklet about Brussels, but had only walked about 50 yards down the road when Dad discovered the booklet was written in French, so we had to go back to procure an English one. Alan said he needed to find a toilet, but when he found one in a shopping arcade, he was taken aback to see it cost 5 francs and decided to wait!

We found a nearby piece of grass on which to sit and eat lunch, perusing the booklet to find a route to show us all the places of interest we were ... interested in. Before we embarked on this trek, however, we had all become desperate for a toilet, so there was nothing for it but to fork out 5 francs each.

It was an extremely interesting afternoon, as Brussels is obviously steeped in history and culture. The central market place is known as Grand Place and started out as a cobbled market place around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, although many of its buildings were added later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The impressive Hotel de Ville was completed in 1444 and is quite a Gothic masterpiece.



**Grand Place**

The Royal Palace was also impressive, although the current facade was built after 1900 on the initiative of King Leopold II and is not used as a royal residence. There was also a tower, other very old buildings and many statues.

Talking of statues, we simply had to find the Mannekin Pis, which turned out to be smaller than imagined, although it was bronze and perfectly formed. It had started life as a fountain that once played an essential role in the distribution of drinking water from as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it gained more importance in city life and has been stolen several times.

The Anglo-Belgian War Memorial was very moving, commemorating the support given by the Belgian people to British prisoners of war during World War I. The monument depicts a Belgian soldier and a British soldier standing together, with scenes at the side of ordinary Belgian people tending to wounded British soldiers. It was designed by the British sculptor Charles Sargeant Jagger and was inaugurated by the Prince of Wales in 1923.



**The Mannekin Pis in full flow**



**The Anglo-Belgian Memorial**

We stopped for refreshment twice during the long afternoon, once at a bar for a drink and once near the end of the visit for an ice cream. We were aghast at the price, but when our Negrita ices were served, we discovered they were delicious and well worth 30 francs each. By about 18:00, though, we decided it was time to call it a day and returned to the car, happy with memories of magnificent Brussels. Belgium may be a small country, but its capital is beautifully big.

It was 20:15 by the time we arrived back at the chalet and immediately prepared some more or less instant food, since we were all ravenously hungry. We were so hungry, in fact, that even Smash, tinned meat and peas tasted good. The remains of my birthday cake for dessert tasted even better and soon afterwards we started to wend our way to bed. There was rather a nasty thunderstorm with sheet lightning and heavy rain taking place, so we were glad to be warm and dry inside on our third night.

### **Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> September**

The sun was shining when we awoke, which must have inspired Mum to make a cup of tea for us all at 08:15. We decided to have a lazy day after the walking fest of the previous day and lingered over breakfast, discussing where we could go. It was just as well we weren't in a hurry, because the water heater refused to give us any hot water. It was an interesting challenge to all get washed by boiling numerous kettles of water and took us the best part of an hour.

When the fault was reported, we were told someone would come to fix it at midday, so we opted for a quiet stroll to the holiday village supermarket before returning to the chalet for coffee and lunch. A man duly arrived to fix the water heater and told us it had been because the pilot light had gone out. A common problem, it seems, but fortunately the problem was easily solved.

At about 13:00 we drove to Ostend under cloudy skies, but on arrival the sun came out to welcome us. It went in again, but not to worry. We walked past part of the docks and into a shopping centre, which was an arcade with music emanating from various loudspeakers. It was quite pleasant strolling past all the shops, stopping now and then to gaze at interesting window displays. We bought some fruit, then left the arcade and walked on to the sea front.

The sea was quite choppy with a brisk wind, but it was very invigorating. We reached the end of the promenade and on the way back stopped at a café for ice cream. Again, we were slightly shocked at the prices, but a girl came to serve us before we could disappear. It cost us 120 francs (£1.50) for two ice creams and two lagers, so we decided this was our treat for the day.

We wandered back to the car, stopping at souvenir shops en route. With the help of Mum and Dad, I contrived to buy Alan one of the lovely coloured steins he'd been admiring without him knowing and presented it to him at our simple evening meal, which was cheese and mushroom pancakes, tomatoes and lettuce, followed by some huge Golden Delicious apples we'd bought in Ostend. I'm pleased to say Alan was suitably impressed with his stein.



**Choppy Ostend**

After changing into some vaguely posh clothes, Alan drove us into Brugge for the third time, as we planned to see a 'Pageant of Light and Sound' that we'd noticed being advertised. It was due to start at 20:00, so we paid our very reasonable entrance fee of 20 francs (about 25p) per person and sat with much anticipation on wooden seats facing the impressive Gruuthuse Palace courtyard and the Church of Our Lady. The old, imposing towers of the buildings around us and the stirring music already coming from a loudspeaker created a uniquely atmospheric mood of historic times.

At 20:00 precisely the loudspeaker music stopped, the lights went out and there was an expectant hush from the audience. The place wasn't packed with people, which meant there weren't too many 'people sounds' interfering with the sound of silence. The pageant then began, with music by Mussorgsky emanating from several loudspeakers around the courtyard, together with lights from various positions playing on the palace building and the church.

I found it extremely evocative and was absolutely entranced at the combination of light and sound. It was my first experience of such a display and I didn't want it to end. The finale, when it came, was the most exciting part of all, as the whole church and then the whole palace were floodlit in synchronicity with a crescendo of music. Then there was complete silence, in which it seemed almost wrong to breathe – and the wonderful pageant was over.

Feeling very uplifted, we strolled back through the streets of Brugge, although the combined smell of frying food and smelly drains brought us back down to earth pretty quickly! The Continent (or at least the parts we've visited) seems to be somewhat afflicted with drain problems. We were all reluctant for the evening to end, so decided to stop at a bar for a final drink of the day, where Alan and Dad ordered beer and Mum and I chose coffee.

As we continued to wander back to the car afterwards, Alan and Dad finally succumbed and bought two packets of chips, which we all then ate in the car. The chips were small and salty, a pleasant change from the fat, limp, greasy chips that are sometimes served in England. It rounded off the evening perfectly and we all went to bed feeling tired but happy – especially since we arrived back just in time to miss a heavy rain storm.

### **Friday 12<sup>th</sup> September**

The day began with heavy rain and the appearance of Dad in the lounge to make tea at 07:35. As it was such a miserable morning, we all stayed in bed until 09:15, then reluctantly arose to have breakfast and prepare for the day's outing.

We set off at 11:15 and drove for an hour until we reached the Belgian/Dutch border at Sluis. The man at the checkpoint waved us on without even glancing at our passports, which was oddly disappointing. Alan found a free car park and then we walked around the souvenir shops, interested that the price tags were marked in both Dutch guilders and Belgian francs.

As we'd made it into Holland, we felt almost duty-bound to see a windmill and luckily managed to find one easily enough. It had been restored after being heavily damaged in World War II. I was surprised at how huge it was and felt quite dwarfed standing below it to pose for a photo.



**Restored windmill at Sluis**

It was too cold to sit out anywhere for our picnic lunch, so we went back to the car to eat our sandwiches. While we were there, an English woman knocked on Dad's window and asked if we'd seen any ladies' toilets because she was desperate and the only 'Ladies' she'd seen had been closed.

We had also experienced a distinct lack of conveniences on our Continental travels, but Mum told her how we solved the problem, by going into a bar or café for a drink and using the toilet there. This is precisely what we did after Dad and Alan went to a bank and cashed a cheque for some Dutch money.

We returned to the car and drove further into Holland. As far as we could see, the land was totally flat, with a windmill or two in the distance and lots of fields full of various crops. We didn't see much water, except one small canal. A path ran alongside the road for cyclists, which is something we'd noticed in Belgium.



**Alan and Dad being blown about at Vlissingen**

The sky was blue, but when we got out of the car at Vlissingen ferry terminal, there was a strong wind blowing. Undeterred, we walked along a path and along to the end of the dyke – our first ever Dutch dyke. We watched a fairly big ferry ploughing its way across the water and then retraced our steps back to the car.

Alan drove slowly along the flat roads on our way back, so we could enjoy seeing the passing countryside. Once again we were simply waved through the border checkpoint. Does it have something to do with GB joining the Common Market?

As we neared De Haan, the clouds became heavier and it started to rain. While Dad was cooking pizza, it rained and hailed to the accompaniment of thunder and lightning, which lasted on and off for most of the evening. We spent the remaining time of our fifth day reading and playing cards until we went to bed at 09:15. It had been a day with a stormy beginning and a stormy ending!

### **Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> September**

We set off late at just gone midday and drove along the coast, past Ostend, Nieuwpoort, De Panne and through the checkpoint into France. The weather was sometimes predominantly sunny and sometimes predominantly windy, but Alan parked the car at Dunkirk (Dunkerque) and we all got out for a walk. Unfortunately, the sun then disappeared for the rest of the day, but we walked around the town trying unsuccessfully to find a memorial for the British soldiers who had been killed on the beaches of Dunkerque.

After Mum asked a woman who didn't speak English, we found a memorial to the soldiers of Dunkerque, but it wasn't what we were looking for, so we decided to leave the town itself and visit one of the cemeteries we'd passed on the way in.



**British War Memorial at Dunkerque**

The one we picked turned out to be a municipal cemetery, but Alan asked a man, who directed us to a memorial a little way down the road. It was the British War Memorial, especially for British soldiers killed in the 1940 battle at Dunkerque and the subsequent evacuation. We signed our names in the visitors' book and walked away saddened at the human suffering and terrible loss of life.

However, Mum was not satisfied. She remembered some photos that her sister had shown her of a memorial at Dunkerque that had seemed to be more colourful than the one we'd just visited. Dad, on the other hand, felt a desire to visit the beaches where the evacuation of Dunkerque had taken place. Alan asked at a garage, but nobody spoke English and the directions he was given led us to a war memorial for the Commonwealth.

Another memorial we found was for the people of the town we were in, at which point we decided we weren't going to find the place in Mum's sister's photos. We went to the beach, though, where Dad saw the sand dunes, so he was satisfied. It was a very sobering thought to remember the events of May-June 1940.

It was time to return to De Haan, so we slowly drove back past the checkpoint, where we were waved through again – obviously we looked completely innocent, or else the guy was terminally bored? Dad was hungering after a restaurant meal, so at approximately 20:00, Alan drove us to the small restaurant in the holiday village. We weren't being horrendously lazy, the reason we used the car was because it was pouring with rain again.

We enjoyed the relaxing meal, although it was somewhat expensive and very filling. After fruit juice or soup, Alan and I chose scampi, Mum chose sole meunière and Dad chose a well-done steak and mushrooms, with all our meals accompanied by salad and chips. For dessert we ordered four Dames Blanches, but as there was no vanilla ice cream, we were given chocolate ice cream instead (four Dames Brunnes?) complete with nuts and chocolate sauce.

I mustn't forget to mention the carafe of white wine that Dad ordered with the meal – and I also mustn't forget to mention that it went straight to our heads, because we'd hardly eaten all day...

Mum and I finished with coffee, while Dad and Alan had lager. Feeling full, but definitely lighter by around £10 in the wallet department, we drove back to the chalet and whiled away the evening in various pursuits until bedtime.

### **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> September**

We slept on this morning until 08:30, possibly because we'd all been woken at 03.30 by a group of noisy English people shouting just outside our chalet. We had a slow morning, not setting off on our travels until 11:45 on a cloudy day.

Our destination was Ghent (Gent in Dutch) in Belgium, where we arrived at about 13:30 and immediately after parking the car, ate our packed lunch. Seeing there was a pleasant looking café nearby, we went in to have a cup of filtered coffee for 27 francs each and, of course, to use the facilities.

It was surprisingly cold once we were outside again, but after consulting Tourist Information, we listened to a pre-recorded guide of the city, dutifully following signposts marked TOERISME that led us to places of interest.

Ghent is the capital city of East Flanders in northern Belgium and its medieval buildings are preserved and restored to a very high standard. In fact, one of the churches we saw on our self-guided tour was in the process of being cleaned from top to bottom. We'd also noticed old buildings in Brussels being cleaned.

The signposts led us to a museum and since it was free and presumably warmer inside, we went in. It was an old house with lots of beautiful furniture and wall paintings. Upstairs, a guide in a smart grey suit came forward and began talking to us about the furniture. He was a very amiable man and when he discovered that we were English, he did his best to talk to us in our own language.

He seemed to take an instant liking to Mum, sometimes even touching her politely on the arm to draw her attention to various items. He did, in fact, make the visit much more interesting and seemed so pleased to show us around that Mum gave him a 10 franc note for his troubles. He said goodbye with pink cheeks and a happy smile. I suspect that he may have made Mum's day and possibly the other way around as well!

Downstairs once again, we signed our names in the visitors' book, but I stupidly walked away with the pen by mistake. The downstairs guide came running after us to reclaim the pen – which was rather embarrassing. It turned out quite well, though, because we were given two free books about Ghent. From these books, we found out that we'd begun the tour halfway around, whereupon Alan took it upon himself to lead us around the other half.

It really was a most pleasing afternoon's tour, in which we learned a surprising amount of interesting information, such as the fact that a peace treaty between England and the United States had been signed at Ghent in 1812. We also saw many places of interest, including the Castle of the Count of Flanders, St David's Church, a big cannon (the very pleasingly named Groot Kanon) and a big bell that used to be rung when Ghent was under attack in days gone by – the Grote Triomphante, which must have taken a whole lot of ringing:



**Dong! The Grote Triomphante**

There was a fountain that consisted of five naked men staring at the water – it's odd what sticks in your memory. It was actually called The Fountain of the Kneelers, although they were definitely standing rather than kneeling and why they were naked is an unfathomed mystery. This strangely compelling fountain was the brain child of Georges Minne, a contemporary of Rodin.



**The Fountain of the (standing) Kneelers**

We returned to the car feeling quite cold, but remained undeterred in our exploration of Ghent and decided to drive on and look for a Florelei Garden advertised in one of our free books. Alan and Dad tried to follow a map of the district where the places were numbered, but after some confusion, Dad discovered that Alan had been looking at the page number by mistake...

Fifteen minutes later, we thought we'd arrived at the flower garden, so parked the car and paid 30 francs each for the entrance fee. However, our flower garden turned out to be a trade fair. We thought we might as well make the best of it and wandered around the stalls displaying all kinds of machinery, wines, cheeses, sweets and other food. We were given a free sample of a local speciality called Kletsoppen, a caramelised peanut biscuit, although I didn't find it especially wonderful. I was probably disappointed about the Florelei Garden!

There was a special exhibition about Switzerland, which was very colourful and interesting, but everything was written and spoken in foreign languages, so we couldn't fully appreciate it. As compensation, we splashed out on a 10-franc ice cream each and then walked along by the outdoor stalls, past many inviting smells of frying chips, pancakes, doughnuts and waffles, past trays of mussels and other sea food, as well as many other delicacies. I suspect poor Dad thought it was sacrilege to walk past all this inviting fare.

It was 18:30 by the time we made our way back to the car and drove back to De Haan, where it was raining again. Dad was chief cook and served up an admirable Spanish omelette, chips, peas and tomatoes with a bottle of wine, followed by pears and ice cream for dessert. By the time we'd finished washing the dishes, though, it was 22:45, so we hurried quickly to bed, as the following day was planned for our exciting trip to Amsterdam.

### **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> September**

Dad appeared as a vision of loveliness in the lounge for an early morning cup of tea at just before 07:00 and we managed to set off on a sunny morning in De Haan at 08:45, arriving after a on a sunny afternoon in Amsterdam at 13:30.

We'd called in en route somewhere in Holland for a drink and the conveniences in a place that very much resembled the services on English motorways and were charged 6 guilders (over £1) for two cups of coffee and two lagers.

Alan stopped on the outskirts of Amsterdam to enquire about parking and was advised that it would be best to take a street car into the centre. However, he decided to drive straight into the city and hope for the best, fortunately finding a parking space by the Rijksmuseum, known as the home of the Dutch masters and famous for its displays of paintings by Rembrandt.

Suitably armed with cameras and purses, we started to walk. It wasn't very long before we were all nearly mown down by a speeding horde of cyclists and later on, Alan and I were nearly run over by a car, so we became ultra-cautious every time we had to cross a road. There were, in fact, hundreds of roads, streets and side streets, but Alan and Dad followed a map and we managed to find our way to the canal front (as opposed to the sea front).



**The River Amstel**

After passing by many canals and old buildings, the consensus was to go for a round trip (delightfully called a Rondvaarten, or Rundfahrt in German) in a luxury covered barge on the River Amstel. We were pleased to discover we were allowed a discount because we came from the Townsend Thoreson holiday village – a discount is always pleasing! As we stepped on to the barge, a young man called, "Allo!" and took a photo of each of us - strange! However, the sun was shining for our Rundfahrt, adding to the enjoyment.

Throughout the trip, a girl at the front of the barge pointed out various places of interest through a microphone. As we sailed slowly down the canal, passing under many bridges, we saw legal and illegal houseboats, a prison built in a bridge, the Burgomeister's house, the smallest house in Amsterdam with only one door and one window and many other old buildings. We sailed into Amsterdam Harbour and saw a British tanker, a Greek ship and two dry docks, then we slowly cruised back to where we had started from.



**Anyone for a Rundfahrt?**

As we stepped off the barge and started to walk away, we saw our photographs pinned up on a stand along with all the other passengers' photos. They cost 50p each, but were unique souvenirs of a special day, so we succumbed – we were on holiday, after all. Alan and I just bought one photo that included the both of us, whereas Mum and Dad had to buy one of each of them.

We were very surprised to realise it was gone 16:00, so headed for Tourist Information to find out what time the museums closed. We were unlucky, because they all closed at 17:00 and Dad was also unlucky, as we didn't have time enough to visit the Heineken brewery for a free sample!

We strolled along the busy streets instead, looking in souvenir shops. Everything seemed very expensive, although that didn't deter Mum and me from being hopelessly touristy and buying a wooden windmill each that lit up and played *Tulips from Amsterdam*. The man in the shop was dressed in Dutch costume, the only one we ever saw in Holland.

We bought some postcards of windmills and tulip fields before looking for somewhere to have a drink that wasn't too expensive, as our wooden windmills had taken up roughly a third of our Dutch money. We learned that Amsterdam was celebrating 700 years from 1275 to 1975 with special events being held all year long, but as we'd never been to Amsterdam before, we weren't sure what was normal or what was special. We finally found a reasonably priced bar near where the car was parked and enjoyed a much-needed drink. Mum and I had chilled orange juice, while Alan and Dad had Heineken lager.

After a short rest in the car, we walked back to the centre and stopped at The Traveller's Grill, which Dad had been eyeing up earlier, since he was hankering after a Tourist Special meal for 10 guilders 50. He had a dodgy sounding pea curry soup, cod balls, French fries and peas, followed by ice cream. Alan, Mum and I chose cheeseburgers, chips and salad, followed by chocolate crème parfait, which seemed just like chocolate mousse. We all drank a glass of lager with our meal and walked away very satisfied indeed.

Darkness had fallen while we'd been eating and the city lights were bright. There was still a lot of traffic and the trams still whizzed by. Alan led us to somewhere he was curious to see, the red-light district of Amsterdam called The Windows, where prostitutes displayed themselves to the public by sitting in brightly-lit windows. When the blinds were drawn it meant business was in progress...

We saw a few of these 'windows' in between sex shops, cinemas showing pornographic films and sleazy looking bars. Then we came across the 'ordinary' prostitutes, standing by doorways in ones and twos, some of them quite frankly as ugly as sin. Although it was true that mostly men were thronging these streets, it was quite normal for tourists and 'respectable couples' to walk by, simply looking at the sights – although to be honest, I felt too embarrassed to do more than glance furtively in the windows.

After having seen one street like that, there seemed little point in seeing any others, so we headed back to the normal streets, where even the canals seemed cleaner. By the time we arrived back at the car, it was 21:45 and we were nearly on our knees. Mum and I felt extremely sorry for Alan and Dad, who took turns to drive back to De Haan, so we kept ourselves awake in order to talk to them.

Mum said she'd imagined Amsterdam to be smaller and quainter than it actually was and thought that so-called progress had spoilt it a lot. The only thing the rest of us were surprised at was the expense of everything, as our guilders seemed to have evaporated into thin air. The motorways were lit by bright yellow lights that helped to keep us all awake and we reached De Haan safely at 02:20. Dad made a cup of tea, before we all literally fell into bed after an exhausting, but highly memorable day.

### **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> September**

Our last day! Mum made a morning cup of tea at 10:00 and we lingered over breakfast, still tired from the previous day. However, we didn't want to waste our disappearing time, so after a quick soup lunch, drove into De Haan for some souvenir shopping. However, the shops were shut for lunch, so we decided to go to Holland - just like that!

It was sunny and warm as we arrived at Sluis and we enjoyed ourselves walking around and indulging in a bit of a spending spree. Unfortunately, the storm clouds were gathering in the distance and by the time we left the small border town with our gaily wrapped parcels, bottles of wine and cheese, it was raining.

Once again, we drove past the checkpoint into Belgium – goodbye Holland! The only point against it, I thought, was the abundance of sex shops we saw in Sluis and Amsterdam. Otherwise, the people were very friendly and the scenery pleasing. I was interested as we drove along to see the first white cows I'd ever set eyes on in Holland and then further along, I noticed some in Belgium too. Little things please little minds (although they were normal sized cows, really).

When we reached De Haan, we parked in the town and went to spend our last 57 francs. We ended up rather cleverly, I thought, buying a packet of mints for 50 francs and a stamp for 7 francs. Then penniless (francless) we returned to the chalet, where Dad was chef again and treated us to egg, chips and baked beans, followed by pineapple and ice cream, complete with a bottle of wine.

We spent our last evening in Belgium mainly packing and playing cards. Mum and Dad went for a pre-bedtime stroll, but Alan and I were feeling too lazy and stayed behind. We then all eventually went to bed for the final time in chalet 253, De Haan holiday village, at 22:30. Goodnight!

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> September**

Alan and I were the first to wake this morning and took tea into Mum and Dad, only to discover they were still peacefully slumbering. They seemed grateful for the tea, though? We then all had breakfast, completed our final packing and left chalet 253 for ever. Alan dropped the keys in at Reception and we drove through a quiet De Haan and on into Zeebrugge. However, it was about then that it dawned on us the Free Enterprise VIII always left port at around midday. As it was, it was only just 09:15 and our ferry hadn't even arrived yet – oops!

We decided to leave our car the first in the queue and went for a walk along the sea front. It had been raining and I know this for a fact because I sat on a seat that had a pool of water on it. The sun decided to show itself as we strolled along the promenade, though, so I was able to dry off. Only a very few people were about, daily life seems to start and finish later in the day in Belgium.

Alan eventually noticed the Free Enterprise VIII arriving in the distance, so we walked back to the docks and watched the ferry being unloaded. There seemed to be lots of lorries coming off the ship, we were quite amazed at the number.

At last we had our passports checked and were the first car to drive on (and the first to drive off at the other end). We selected some front row seats in the Observation Lounge, while Alan went up to the bridge and radio room for a chat. He didn't return until after the ship had left, he does love to chat. We were actually late leaving because of an unusually heavy load of freight and cars.

However, our friendly off-duty Radio Officer returned with some good news, that he'd arranged with the purser for us all to have a free meal in the restaurant. We therefore gratefully made our way to the restaurant and availed ourselves of a jolly fine free lunch. Alan and I had gammon steak, Mum had fish and Dad had a rump steak. Dad also ordered a bottle of white wine, which was light and not terribly expensive (seeing we didn't have to pay for the food!)

The rest of the voyage was uneventful, with Mum and I reminiscing happily in the Observation Lounge, while Alan and Dad disappeared into the bar, talking about heaven knows what. Our trip to Belgium and beyond had been quietly delightful, giving us a small glimpse of the history and culture that lie beyond our British shores. I had been particularly pleased at the ease with which we could travel into two different countries, which added to the pleasure of the experience. I think it's safe to say we were all happy that Alan's job at Townsend Thoreson had been the encouragement and means by which we all benefited from this surprisingly enjoyable holiday.

**NB:** An anomaly had occurred when the front number plate was renewed on Alan's Triumph 1300 just before our trip to Belgium. He had no time to do anything about the fact that while the rear number plate was the correct KTT 999E, the front was the slightly wrong KKT 999E. Throughout our Continental travels, though, nobody appeared to notice...

