

exclusive

Belgium razes the Master's retreat

It was a country house for Rubens, one of Europe's greatest artists. Around it, in the early 17th century, grew a model village, Doel, laid out to a pattern later used to plan the settlement that became New York. Yet the Belgian government is acquiescing in the bulldozing of the entire community, including its listed buildings, to make way for a container port expansion that flies in the face of economic reality. Robin Stummer reports on murky goings-on amid the mud flats of West Flanders – and the lessons for the UK

China is a long way from the Waasland, the low-lying expanse of polder country in the Belgian province of West Flanders. This is reclaimed land, straggling lines of poplar and birch, red-tiled barns, dense reed beds and isolated farmhouses – Belgium's slice of a below-sea-level landscape more often thought of as typically Dutch. As you make your way across this strange region along the western (left) side of the Scheldt river, you notice the container ships powering towards Antwerp's vast port, a few minutes away, or in the other direction, to the open sea, 50 miles to the north.

Often you can't see much of the ships. The banks of the river, built up more than four storeys high in places, can conceal the vessels – leaving the extraordinary sight of mountains of gaudily-painted containers drifting through the landscape, as if magically gliding along under their own power.

The contents of the big metal boxes are mainly consumer goods – cars, televisions, clothes, you name it, which credit-rich Europeans have been devouring for years, as if there were no tomorrow. Most of these goods are made in the Far East. In return, Europe has been exporting, well, whatever. But with the worldwide recession, the feverish intensity of this trade has flowed away, and the Scheldt is far less busy than it was just a year or two ago. Many doubt that the port of Antwerp, and any other European port, will ever again see such levels of business.

No matter. Like a colossal machine – logistically impressive, fundamentally

moronic – the Port of Antwerp is pressing ahead with a huge expansion on the left bank of the Scheldt that is wiping out the last reed beds and mud flats, areas rich in wildlife. But also vanishing is the historic village of Doel and its old buildings, many long since officially listed as worthy of protection by the same Belgian government that is now conspiring with the dock companies in their brutal eradication.

These endangered buildings include the Hooghuis, once belonging to the family of, and most likely regularly visited by, the great Flemish artist and diplomat, Peter Paul Rubens. The Hooghuis is an internationally important building which, one would have thought, is treasured by the Belgian government. Instead, the government is apparently content to see it bulldozed.

Dating from around 1612, the Hooghuis is an imposing mansion, solidly built using a variety of stone and locally-made brick. It was the rural seat of Antwerp patrician-philosopher Jan Brant, who became father-in-law to Rubens through the artist's marriage to his daughter, Isabella, in 1609. The following year, Rubens bought a new house in central Antwerp, and set up his studio there. This survives today as the celebrated Rubenshuis museum.

An hour or so downriver from Antwerp, the Hooghuis served as a bucolic retreat for the Rubens-Brant clan, far from the heat and noise of the burgeoning city. It is extremely likely, though undocumented, that Rubens painted and sketched while staying at the Hooghuis.



ALTE PINAKOTHEK, MUNICH/BRIDGEMAN

Rubens and Isabella in a Honeysuckle Bower, painted by the Master to mark his marriage to Isabella Brant in 1609. Soon after, the construction of their country house, the Hooghuis, began

A short walk from the house, on the edge of a new model village, Doel, that began to grow from around 1612, a small harbour was hewn from the mud for local fishermen, barges and ferryboats plying the route between the countryside and Antwerp.

Doel was planned on a distinct checkerboard grid, the 17th-century Flemish pattern of building which was also used to lay out the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, in “blocks” – a feature which survives in the city that it became, New York.

ISABELLA Rubens bore three children, Clara Serena, Albert and Nicolas, and died in 1626. The artist remarried in 1630, and in 1634, by now immensely wealthy and fêted in royal courts across Europe, the ageing Master bought an imposing castle and estate, Het Steen, near Brussels. Rubens died in 1640.

In 1645 the Hooghuis was remodelled in the Flemish baroque style, probably using craftsmen who were busily adding modern baroque

flourishes to many of Antwerp's older buildings. Indeed, masons' marks at the Hooghuis match some found in Antwerp. By the 20th century the Hooghuis was long past its best. After the war, it served as a café.

In the late 1960s, the mayor of Doel announced that the ancient house would be demolished to make way for a car park. Colette Hermans, a hospital consultant with a passion for old buildings and art, heard about the demolition plans. Horrified, she bought the Hooghuis in 1970. She saved the building, but has not, she is keen to point out, “restored” it. Now in her late 70s and living away from the Hooghuis, Colette is proud of her achievement in keeping the house sound – and in use. During spring and summer, she allows artists to live and work there, and makes sure it is open to visitors. She is sprightly, fit – and not about to give in.

That the house is occupied and in the public eye is, as Colette knows, not merely bonhomie. Doel is being torn down – supposedly in preparation for

Decorative painting of flowers and a parrot adorns an original wardrobe door, in an upstairs bedroom at the Hooghuis. It was possibly used by Rubens and his wife, Isabella



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Clockwise from top left, the front of the Hooghuis, which dates from c1612; in 1645 baroque flourishes were added, hence the date above the doorway; the original door and lock; plasterwork and figureheads above the main fireplace (the stove pipe was inserted after the war); Colette Hermans, saviour of the Hooghuis



the container port expansion. Empty or abandoned buildings, of which there are now many in the village, can vanish in a day. The artists and visitors at the Hooghuis are de facto sentries.

“THE Hooghuis is classified as a listed building by the government,” says Colette, “but this does not mean anything since this can be ignored for a project like expanding the port.”

For years, villagers have been at war with the Port and city of Antwerp

authorities over Doel. Though most of its ancient buildings were replaced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and a nuclear power plant was built at the northern fringe of the village in the 1970s, Doel does, or did, possess several gems. But one by one, as demoralised owners sell up to the dock companies, the houses are torn down. This spring, a Regency delight, the Camermanhuis – ornate decorative plasterwork throughout, and listed – was bulldozed in a day. All that

is left of the house are scraps of early 19th-century silk wallcovering, blowing in the breeze. Another early gem, a water-pumping windmill built in 1612, survives for now, though there are suggestions that it could be dismantled.

Some 1,300 people once lived in Doel. Today barely 80 cling on. Those who want the village erased are allowed to act without restraint. The village police station now only opens for a few hours every fortnight, and the rule of law appears to have

broken down. On one day this year, all of the village’s council-house tenants were bussed out of the area, leaving their near-new houses empty. Vandals pillage abandoned houses untroubled by police, and the few remaining residents regularly receive eviction letters in the name of an ever-changing roster of bureaucrats, private firms and agencies with an interest in the development. Yet, despite the thug-assisted clearing of Doel, there has yet to emerge a clear development

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plan for the site. “That there is no definite plan for the area is deliberate,” says leading local campaigner, Johan De Vriendt. “If there was a clear plan, we could then focus and formulate opposition. But instead we are never quite sure what is going on.” In place of certainty, doubt has taken hold. “If there was not the uncertainty about what might happen here I could apply for a government historic buildings grant to fully repair the Hooghuis,” says Colette Hermans. “But I cannot get a grant in the current uncertain situation... the house might be demolished, or it might be moved – which would be as bad as demolishing it. In some ways moving the house would be the worst option.”

What is happening at Doel is taking place across Europe, most notably in eastern Germany where, as covered by “Cornerstone” last year, Heuersdorf, a village with 40 listed buildings, was bulldozed to make way for open-cast coal mining after several years in which its villagers were gradually demoralised. Some felt intimidated. All quit.

In Britain, selected “stealth purchases” of historic houses by airport operator BAA around the site of the proposed expansion of Stansted Airport has undermined the social and architectural integrity of ancient villages and hamlets. With further major infrastructure schemes proposed, such as the new high-speed rail link between London and the North (see News Briefing, this “Cornerstone”), new power stations, an expanded Heathrow, Britain may see its own versions of Doel and Heuersdorf, and not that far off. With no law, either in England or the EU, to protect communities from deliberate long-term degradation caused by potential development, there is little to stop this happening.

Officially, the remaining residents of Doel are now outlaws. The dock companies, acting in tandem with local and national government, issued a deadline of 31 August to move out. It was ignored. The villagers, with free help from sympathetic lawyers, hope that a hearing in the Belgian courts this October will uphold their right to stay put. They have already been to court some 60 times. They might be lucky.

More information at www.doel2020.org



Demolition in Doel. The Belgian government is unable or unwilling to prevent the destruction of the entire village, including several listed historic buildings, even though the economic basis for its eradication vanished with the worldwide recession



Above (left), recently cleared housing in Doel leaves its 17th-century grid pattern layout clearly visible. Block by block, it is being bulldozed. Above right, the village before the demolitions began, a thriving and much-loved historic community



Above, the last of a huge 17th/18th century barn, on farmland near Doel – cleared for the ever-expanding, but not ever-busy, Antwerp container port. Below, the attic in Rubens's Hooghuis



Above, Doel's windmill, built 1612, pumped water from low-lying farmland until 1928. Behind it, the nuclear power plant. Below, the Hooghuis. The next victim?



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