

Audlem and District History Society

History Shorts 59 by Jeremy Nicholls

To Bruges (but don't tell mother)

Bruges has been a popular destination for the British for a very long time. Some went there when the going got too hot at home, such as Gunhilde, sister of King Harold, after the battle of Hastings and Charles II, when Oliver Cromwell put a large ransom on his head.

Others went there because, from the 13th century until the early 16th century, Bruges was the pre-eminent city and port in the Low Countries, the most dynamic trading and commercial zone in Europe. Merchants came from the Hanseatic cities of northern Europe and from Portugal and the Mediterranean in the south. Trade was lubricated by the development of sophisticated new financial markets and the opening of possibly the world's first stock exchange. Merchants from Bruges had fingers in commercial pies all over the known world, not least just over the North Sea in East Anglia, whose wool was important to the Flemish weaving industry.



*The Burg in Bruges 1691-1700 – Jan Baptist van Meunincxhove
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Among those attracted to Bruges was William Caxton (c1422–c1491) who came to learn the art of printing, and it was there that he produced the first printed book in English.

In the early 1500s, this importance and prosperity came to an end when the channel to the sea silted up. Antwerp quickly overtook Bruges as the powerhouse of the Low Countries. Over the next three hundred years, Bruges drifted into obscurity, its population collapsing from a peak of around 200,000 to 50,000.

In the early nineteenth century, Belgium was the first country in continental Europe to experience the industrial revolution, but it passed Bruges by. However, a growing number of British visitors, often returning from a visit to the battlefield of Waterloo, deliberately came to the city. They loved the quaint streets and squares and decaying buildings and monuments. Bruges became so popular with British visitors that some stayed and opened businesses to cater for their compatriots – tea rooms, hotels and tour guides.



The visitors, perhaps conscious of how much had changed in British cities under waves of industrialisation and population growth, were enthusiastically nostalgic. They encouraged the city to rebuild its crumbling old buildings, and to build new in faux-Gothic.

Remarkably, Bruges emerged almost unscathed from two world wars. Since the 1960s, its biggest challenge has been dealing with the huge number of visitors: over 8 million in 2019, the vast majority day trippers. Despite the numbers, the commercialisation and the fact that a lot of the old is not as old as it seems, it remains a beautiful city. And perhaps it's on a misty winter's day that Bruges is at its most atmospheric and lovely.



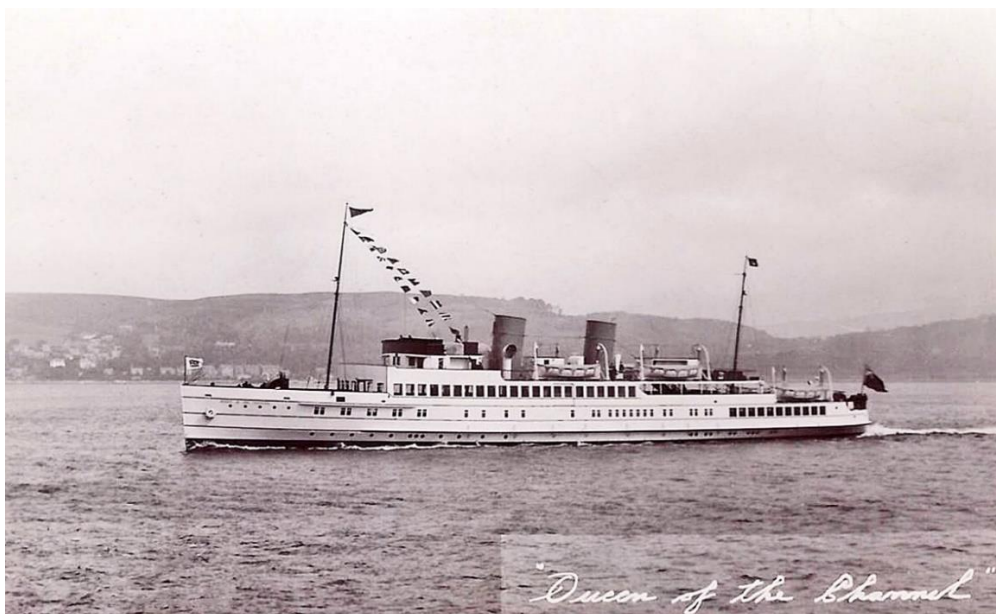
The beguinage, a lay religious women's community founded in 1245.

My father discovered Bruges in the 1930's. He was born in 1920 and lived in Lowestoft, England's most easterly coastal town, in a house overlooking the sea. From his earliest memories he was in love with the sea. But his mother hated it, wouldn't even go on the beach and discouraged my father from having anything to do with the sea. She knew nothing of his Saturday morning trips out to sea on the Lowestoft harbour dredger when he was all of eleven!

After the first world war, pleasure cruises started up again between ports on the Thames and the east and south coasts. In the 1930s, the cruises ventured further afield and French, Belgian and Dutch ports became popular destinations.

I recently came across some notes my father wrote, in later life, in which he talks about his passion for the sea and describes one particular escapade which he managed to conceal from his over-protective mother. I vaguely remember him telling me about it, but as Caxton might have said, it's good to see it in print.

"By the age of 14 I would save my pocket money through the winter months so as to be able to sail from Great Yarmouth to Ostend on Sundays during the summer months", he wrote. He records sailing on the *MV Queen of the Channel* and the *MV Royal Sovereign*, built in 1935 and 1937 respectively, by William Denny of Dumbarton for the New Medway Steam Packet Company. They were fast and would have taken about four hours from Great Yarmouth to Ostend.



MV Queen of the Channel (photo source unknown)

Passengers on these inter-war excursions were able to land in Ostend without passports or other formalities. They must have had several hours in Belgium, because on at least one occasion, my father caught the train to nearby Bruges and visited the city. It will have been a long day and I'd love to know what tale he spun to his mother, though I suspect his father was in on the conspiracy.

From no-passport day trips to Belgium and through subsequent wartime service in the Royal Navy, he gained a passion for travel and peace and he regarded contact with other countries and cultures as the best way of ensuring the latter. He would have struggled to understand how in the 21st century we could have opted to make contacts more difficult with our closest European neighbours.



Above: Jean-Christophe Benoist, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

Below: Marc Ryckaert, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

