

Visiting the beguinage – Programming

Each 1st Sunday of the month

Opening hours from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. – Guided tour *Architecture & History*, 2 p.m.

More information: ww.erasmushouse.museum

Erasmus House & Beguinage Museums, an initiative of Fabrice Cumps, Mayor, and the Alderman of Anderlecht, with the support of the Brussels-Wallonia Federation.

Partners of the beguinage restoration project

Municipality of Anderlecht (contracting authority)

Urban.brussels (subsidising authority and technical consultant)

Erasmus House & Beguinage municipal museums

Arter (architecture & planning consultancy)

Arthur Vandendorpe (contractor)

CReA-Patrimoine (ULB), ULg

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THE BEGUINAGE OF ANDERLECHT

The restoration of the smallest beguinage in Belgium was completed this year. The building will be re-opened in two phases. First, the public will be able to discover the work done to show what this extraordinary heritage site that is unique in Europe originally looked like.



Along with Erasmus House and the Gothic collegiate church of Saints Peter and Guy, the beguinage of Anderlecht is a remarkable listed historical complex in the heart of Anderlecht. It consists of two wings enclosing a walled garden with a well, with architectural components dating back to the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries, and could house up to eight beguines or lay sisters. After the French Revolution it served as a hospice and housing for poor women, then was closed briefly in 1928 before re-opening in 1930 as a local folklore and history museum. The permanent exhibition was dismantled in 2020 in order to start the restoration of the building. The second phase of re-opening will consist of a new museum project for the beguinage to meet the requirements of a contemporary institution rooted in the present. This project is currently underway and will be finalised in autumn 2023.

History of the building

The beguinage was founded by Saint Peter's Chapter of Anderlecht in 1252, at a time when Anderlecht was sparsely populated and rural. Today, it is an extraordinary, emblematic heritage site in Brussels. A programme of multidisciplinary studies supported by urban.brussels financing has been ongoing for several years to untangle its complex history and analyse its architecture by means of archaeological, dendrochronological (dating through the study of incremental tree growth), and archival investigations. The results of these investigations refute the dates given traditionally in tourist brochures and mainstream Internet sites such as Wikipedia. They advance a less linear development broken down into three major periods:

1. The wood, daub-and-wattle, and thatch structures of the late Middle Ages (15th-16th c.)

The oldest part of the complex revealed by the research is a vestige of a half-timbered building that is partially preserved inside the current right (west) wing of the beguinage. The wood frame has been dated to 1435-1460 thanks to carbon-14 laboratory tests and documents in the beguinage's archives. A smaller house, which has since disappeared and been replaced by the northern part of the current left (east) wing, was added to the building in 1484/85, according to accounting records. The building was then enlarged to the west in the early 16th century (1511-1513), with the two buildings continuing to be used as the beguines' main living area until the start of the 18th century.

2. The brick and stone architecture of the 18th century

The beguinage underwent several phases of transformation in the 18th century that culminated in the appearance that it has today. The half-timbered building was partly destroyed and replaced by a new structure made of brick and white stone (west wing). Only two of the five walls were kept as interior partitions (around 1719/20). At the same time, the southern part of the east wing (known as "the Grande Dame's Chamber") was raised in the alignment of the small 15th century house, which was destroyed and replaced in 1756 by the current house to form the northern part of the east wing.

3. The 20th century or the period of restorations

This architectural complex has come down to us in a remarkable state of conservation despite several rounds of major restoration. The first one took place when the beguinage was opened as a museum (around 1930). The second one, of considerable magnitude, took place in the 1970s and was particularly detrimental to the brick-and-stone external walls, which were almost totally replaced in the west wing. Luckily, the internal wood structures were spared. The third restoration, which began with studies in 2010 and was completed in 2022, was carried out in a favourable scientific context and subject to a stricter deontological framework, with the greatest respect for the original structures.

The beguines

The beguine movement was created in the Liège area in the 12th century by women seeking a new way to express their faith. It then spread to all of northern Europe. The beguines or lay sisters settled in groups of houses, called beguinages, always in the vicinity of a church. These beguinages could house a large number of women. Thus, 1200 beguines lived in the Great Beguinage of Brussels (destroyed), close to 200 lived in Leuven's beguinage, and so on. Several beguinages have been preserved, most of them in Flanders. After being designated by the clergy and paying an entrance fee, the postulants donned the habits of beguines and moved into one of the beguinage houses with their meagre private possessions and funds. There they lived a religious life devoted to charity according to a flexible rule of life. They were independent, were not cloistered, and pronounced no perpetual vows. Some of them even held "public" positions, i.e., as teachers and midwives. This independence made them suspect in the eyes of the ecclesiastic authorities, who kept them under closer supervision. Nevertheless, the beguine movement persisted and produced significant poetic and spiritual works.

Our knowledge of the beguinage and beguines of Anderlecht concerns primarily the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. The up to eight (maximum number) beguines – often widows, spinsters, or elderly women – lived as a community in the beguinage, although they most likely each had their own bedrooms. They were women of modest means, often from local families (landowners, affluent peasants) or a canon's entourage. The beguinage, which was a sort of hospice for single women, provided lodgings and protection within its walls, but the beguines had to earn their livelihoods on their own.

Study of the beguinage's archives has, moreover, made it possible to see the organization of their daily lives, their great proximity with the canons' chapter and, more generally speaking, parish life in Anderlecht. The 16th-18th century sources underline in effect the importance of the beguines' activities for the Church: the beguines were servants for the canons or parish dignitaries, did little jobs for the collegial church (sewing, cleaning, passing round the plate during services, caring for nuns and monks who were ill, etc.), and were closely watched by the canons who, moreover, were not averse to imposing a new beguine of their choice on the community when a place was vacated.

The French Revolution led to the end of the chapter and beguinage of Anderlecht, as well as to all the other religious orders. After a stint as a charity office and housing for poor women, the buildings fell into complete disrepair as the years went by, to such an extent that they were definitely closed as dwellings around 1928, before being re-opened as a museum two years later.

The new museum – Permanent exhibition

The Beguinage Museum will be a place focused on the history of the beguines, who lived there for several centuries, and the history of Anderlecht. These two themes will be presented separately in the two wings. The older west wing will be devoted to the beguines (with their placement in the European context of the movement) and the east wing will focus on and enhance knowledge of the local history, first inhabitants, and many treasures of the municipality as well as the noteworthy architectural vestiges of Anderlecht.