

"Is there a market for that sort of thing?"

We have been exhibiting at the Mechelen Antiquarenbeurs since about 2004 and built it into a pretty good fair for us. Of course Brexit was always going to make it difficult, but we hoped sense would prevail...and then came Covid.

The 2020 fair was obviously cancelled; we had intended to visit in 2021 but the omicron variant was spreading throughout Europe and we didn't feel like getting locked-down away from home. As it turned out, the fair went ahead in a reduced form but was still touch-and-go right up to opening time.

We spent a lot of time trying to work out how to get our stock there and back without breaking the law or the bank and still being able to trade, and fortified by encouraging pleas from the fair managers we found a way in 2022.

It only took two weeks to compile the paperwork, with each book or object listed with stock number, author, title, date, place of origin, cost price, weight, box number and purchase invoice number (to prove the cost price). To avoid any misunderstanding with customs officials I also removed the sterling pencil prices and kept printed individual slips (priced in euros) separately to be inserted during set-up.

We always use Eurotunnel and were relatively unscathed by customs inspections, but felt considerably more comfortable having completed the correct documentation. However, I cannot believe there are enough customs officers to physically check everything...



We had arranged to stay the Wednesday night in Folkestone and bought some amazing books from our dear friend Carol Marrin, followed by a very hearty meal in Carol's local, the Radnor Arms, joined by Charlie Unsworth.

Thursday morning we passed through customs and on through the tunnel with little problem, reaching Mechelen mid-afternoon. It was heart-warming meeting up with old friends after a period of wondering whether any of this would be possible ever again, especially after spending a year delivering parcels for Hermes in a parallel universe, yet somehow we had made it!



Mechelen felt a little beaten up, several restaurants closed, shops closed, our hotel deserted (we had to visit another hotel to check in and collect keys) but the **BRAND!** Jazz festival was functioning and we were lucky to get tickets for the American guitarist Marc Ribot (ex Tom Waits, John Zorn) with the amazing Vitja Pauwels quartet in the theatre - a great night to finish a long day.

The Friday morning set-up went smoothly, we have plenty of space, plenty of catching up to do, books to buy and books to sell, and the doors open to a steady flow of customers all day, including several esteemed members of the UK book trade.



We capped the day off in a splendid (surviving) Moroccan restaurant with Marc and Marcia Harrison and Debbie Coltham.

There's no breakfast in our deserted hotel, but there's a small bakery with a seating area at the back run by an elderly chap who seems surprised to see us, yet provides excellent coffee and croissants (and eclairs...), and we head for the fair. It's a reasonably busy day and we find some more good purchases too, which compensates for the disappointingly small selection of beers in the Carrefour (pity... there's lots of room in the van). Despite having all that space, I decided against buying some of the larger books on offer at the fair, even though Jan said I should...



...mind you, I do like a good music book though. Do I know any slightly crazy cellists?

Saturday night is the exhibitors' drinks reception, and a grand opportunity for more trade small talk (and sometimes big talk) and a free drink.

I guess it's true of many towns worldwide that although there may be closures of bigger and more costly restaurants and shops there are opportunities for new, more fleet-footed businesses to open in smaller premises.

The Harrisons treated us to a celebratory dinner in a really good Thai restaurant, packed to the rafters, unlike the, now closed, empty Chinese we visited on our last trip.



St Rombout's cathedral, finished in 1520, dominates the city centre with its huge physical presence, and also dominates aurally with the utterly romantic sound of the carillon, one of the finest in Europe, with an International school nearby providing a constant source of players. There are 538 steps to the top, and the keyboard for the 98 bells is about half way, so the job demands a certain fitness.

It stands about 50 yards from the book fair, and in its shadow is Antiquariat Garcia in one of the most enviable locations for a bookshop in all of Europe.

Packing up at the end of the fair was quite involved, making sure everything returned to the correct box fully prepared for customs inspection, but once loaded we self-rewarded with drinks in our favourite bar, known to us as the “brown bar” (although it’s green), and dinner in what has become our favourite restaurant (if a little expensive).

Golden Carolus is the local brew...



Monday morning we set off for home in one run - we used to travel on the Sunday night and break the journey at Bruges, but the sensational restaurant we liked there no longer opens on Sunday.

We arrived at Calais about lunchtime and went straight to check-in;

“What’s in the back?” asked the UK Border staff.

“Old books”

“Where have you been?”

“To a book fair in Mechelen trying to sell them”

“Is there a market for that sort of thing?...Pull up next to the customs van, please”

It was a very cold morning and a shivering young man stepped out of the van, gestured to the back doors of my van, had a cursory glance, waved for us to move on and got back into his van as quickly as possible. We were through.

Undoing all the paperwork back at the shop took quite a few days, but the trip was worthwhile and we’ll do it again (actually in March when we go to Maastricht).