

The Houtem annual fair

A large annual winter fair is held every year on 11 and 12 November in St. Lievens-Houtem (East Flanders). Tens of thousands of visitors come from far outside the province to inspect and buy horses and cattle, to enjoy the popular carnival atmosphere, to eat and drink and meet kindred spirits. Nowhere in Flanders is the grandeur of the annual fair as lively and prominent as in St. Lievens-Houtem.



History

There are various reasons why the St. Lievens-Houtem annual winter fair is so popular and topical. Its establishment in a centuries-old pilgrimage tradition is most probably one of the main reasons. The Houtem annual fair has its origins in the Middle Ages with the worshipping of Saint Livinus as its theme. The summer pilgrimage and annual fair was initially larger than the annual winter fair but over the course of history, the pilgrimage on 12 November (supposedly the date of Livinus' death) became much greater. The St. Lievens procession from Ghent to St. Lievens-Houtem was an initiative of the St. Baafs Abbey whereby the wake of the pilgrims on the way to Livinus' tomb also drew in merchants and they all congregated in the village. Cattle, merchandise and textiles were traded but there was also drinking and feasting. The cattle could graze on the large grass square (now the market) where a drinking place was provided. Whether St. Livinus really existed or not is not important, the fact is that the St. Baafs Abbey presented the supposed Irish bishop as the evangelist of the region and organized a pilgrimage after his death in order to visit the holy reliquary. The St. Lievens procession and the Houtem annual fair that arose from this can be considered as a model for the Middle Age processions and annual fairs. From the seventeenth century, the mainly pilgrim events evolved more and more into a real annual fair with a significant cattle and horse market and a popular festival. The annual winter fair saw variable periods of success. The last 15 to 20 years in St. Lievens-Houtem have however seen a revival of the tradition with around 50,000 visitors each year.



Loss of the annual fairs

Elsewhere in Flanders, the traditional annual fairs are falling into disuse as cattle are being traded in other manners. The popular event in St. Lievens-Houtem is however linked to a Catholic pilgrim ritual that is kept alive. The Houtem annual fair is inseparably linked to the local (cultural and agrarian) identity in which Livinus plays a crucial role. The Houtem annual fair has therefore been included as part of Flanders' intangible cultural heritage since 2008. The fact that the St. Lievens-Houtem annual winter fair is a much-visited popular festival is largely thanks to the persistent efforts of the local population and the local authorities. It is now the last open-air cattle and horse market in Flanders. The place where everything happens, the former large grass square is preserved thanks to the creation of a market square and still forms the epicentre of the annual winter fair.



International market

The local authority invites a European region every year to guarantee the international character of the Houtem annual fair. Business is carried out with traders and merchants from various regions just as it was in the Middle Ages. Everyone still feasts with a will and dances, drinks and eats until daybreak. The Houtem annual fair can be considered as the last great annual fair of Flanders with religious and Middle Age traditions including the sealing of deals “on the shake of a hand”. It is only logical that the Houtem annual fair has been proposed to Unesco for recognition as tangible cultural heritage.