

## Summary

### Snuffs and snuff mills.

The snuff habit arose in the sixteenth century in the French court and for two centuries remained something that was used by upper classes. There were never many wind mills which ground snuff tobacco even at the highest point of snuff use. Especially in the cities whims were used. Ghent had a lot of these in the city centre in the eighteenth century, where they caused much noise! In contrast to the Netherlands, in Flanders absolutely no remains (of such mills) have been kept.

#### The snuff mill at Laarne

Img. 1. Photograph from before 1923: the mill still functioning. The last wind mill in Flanders which produced snuff, was in Laarne. We are lucky to be able to describe in full detail its history and technique, thanks to the depositions which I noted down in 1984, and 2001, told by Ghislain Plaetinck (Laarne, 1919-2002).

He was the son of the last snuff maker Joseph Plaetinck-Van the Wiele. Ghislain was married to Bibiana Bosman (1923-1998) and lived from birth on the spot of the former snuff mill. Although he was scarcely 4 years old when the snuff mill stopped working, he could still remember the design which remained for some time in the fuselage. The specific mill, a round stone gallery mill, was located on the south side of the current Dorpsstraat, the road between the church and the castle of Laarne.

#### 1. History

The building master was Joseph Paelman (Laarne 1834 - Ghent 1907), a mill builder from Laarne. On 6th February 1858 he got the authorization from the 'Bestendige Deputatie van Oost-Vlaanderen' allowing him to place a wooden wind mill above one of his own buildings, which would serve as a grain flour-mill, flour peeling file and snuff mill. According to the land register it concerned a corn mill and in 1906 the mill was renovated as a tobacco mill. Till about 1923 the snuff mill remained in use. The closing down relates to the lesser use of snuff. Also the mill was very old-fashioned in comparison to the mechanical snuff factory Cornand from Eeklo, that was the most important competitor. Around 1935 the cap and sails of the Laarne mill were stripped off. In 1944, only the tank remained without the drive mechanism. That tank started to show many cracks on the top and in 1953, it was entirely demolished.

#### 2. Construction and technique

Img. 2. Photograph between 1923 and 1935: the stationary mill. The cone-shaped fuselage of this gallery mill had a normal height (16 meters), but was small: below it had a diameter of 4.5 m and above still only two meters. The winding mechanism is traditional with long and short quarter bars and cross beams. The front beam was located however very close to the poll end. Extra beams between the two quarter beams ensured the necessary strengthening. There were five construction layers. From top to bottom: the cap gear floor, the sack hoist floor, the stone floor, the meal floor and the ground floor. This is the traditional classification of a gallery mill.

The snuff production process. The dried tobacco leaves were stamped in 6 vase like designed, oak pots. These pots were approximately 40 cm high and were stuck in a wooden table the surface of which lay a meter above ground. Two pots had a top diameter of 20 cm wide, which corresponded with the length of the 2 knives of 2 stamping-bars. The four other pots were narrower, which corresponded also with the four other, narrower cross knives. Stamping happened therefore in two phases: a harsh turn and a fine finish. In between both phases the snuff was poured into a sieve. (to see hereafter). Everything that remained behind, underwent a new stamping cycle. With wooden, concave scoop spoons the snuff was removed from the pots. The so-called hand mills stood on the side, such as our informer told us. These consisted of half a meter long, horizontal iron shaft on which pins had been mounted. When twisting a wheel with oar transmission, these pins worked as knives to cut tobacco. The stamped tobacco or snuff was poured onto a large round sieve with a diameter of approx. 60 cm and a 15 cm high edge. The finished product was kept in two and the three so-called (conserve barges) storage boxes of 1.20 m long. They were long and thin. On one side they had straight and on the other side a slanting partition. They were covered at the top with hinged cross eyed planks which kept the aroma unblemished. To give the desired piquant fragrance to the snuff all kinds of ingredients were added during and after the process. Our spokesman remembered aromatic herbs and French wine. The secret of this production was always scrupulously kept. As well as native also foreign - especially American - tobacco types were processed.

#### 3. Sale of the snuff

From the (conserve barges) storage boxes ( see above) the snuff was put into small white papers bags, which were foreseen with brown tax branches (tax strips). The snuff products were sold in the shop next to the home. Many Delft snuff pots decorated the shop. There was also a servant with a horse and cart that set off in the region to bring the products to customers in Laarne, Destelbergen and Heusden, but also in the city of Ghent. Would a reopening of a snuff wind mill be not desirable? Possibly this is just as utopian as... the return of the snuff habit!

WB

