

1

Detail of the map of the Austrian Netherlands drawn up by Count Joseph de Ferraris, 1770-1778

KBR



Location

This ancient municipality, which since 1921 has been part of the City of Brussels, is located to the north of the Brussels region. It is adjacent to Laeken and Vilvoorde. The Senne River, on the left bank of which it developed, formerly marked the boundary with Haren. This is the historic border that is used in this summary document, even though today, the 1120 postcode and the land registry use the canal as the boundary.

Two distinct villages born in the Middle Ages

Neder-Heembeek and Over-Heembeek were two villages that sprung up in the Middle Ages, each of which corresponds to one parish. The first is north of the second (**figure 1**). The name "Heembeek", which they share and which is first mentioned in 1057, refers to a habitat (*heem*) near a brook (*beek*). This name is also given to

the stream next to which the two entities grew up, one downstream (*neder*) and one upstream (*over*). The landscape of the region is hilly, crossed by a few other tributaries of the Senne, known as the Tweebeek, Saint-Landry and Beyseghem. The two village centres were built on a small crest above the valley of the Senne, each around its parish church.

That of Neder-Heembeek, dedicated to St Peter (later also to St Paul), was first built of wood around the 10th century, then reconstructed in stone in the 11th and 12th centuries. The massive Romanesque tower, without its gate and pierced with loopholes, suggests that it too might have served as a refuge for the local population. That of Over-Heembeek, which is first mentioned at the beginning of the 12th century, was also rebuilt in stone during that period, with a defensive tower: it was then dedicated to Saint Nicholas.

These two buildings will later undergo significant transformations (**figures 2 and 3**). Moreover, a few small hamlets which rose up during the Middle Ages joined one of the two parishes: Beyseghem, Hoogleest, Neerleest and Ransbeek.

The whole area was divided amongst three demesnes: Neder-Heembeek, Over-Heembeek and Crayenhoven. Their proprietors were important landowners, as were the abbeys of Grimbergen and Dielegem. The area was mainly agricultural (animal husbandry, grain cultivation, market gardening). It also included a quarry of white stone, mills and breweries.

A landscape featuring a hospice, a canal, castles, inns and farms.

At the end of the Middle Ages, a hospice hosted indigent elderly people in a complex of five identical small stone houses (**figure 4**).

From the second half of the 16th century, the physionomy of the Senne valley was altered by the digging of the Willebroeck canal. This straight, wide waterway, created by the City of Brussels, was inaugurated in 1561. The canal enabled boats with heavy cargo to travel quickly between Brussels and Antwerp. However, it disturbed the natural course of streams towards the Senne, which thus required major hydraulic works.

2

Old church of Saints-Peter-and-Paul, postcard, 1920-1925
Archives of the City of Brussels



3

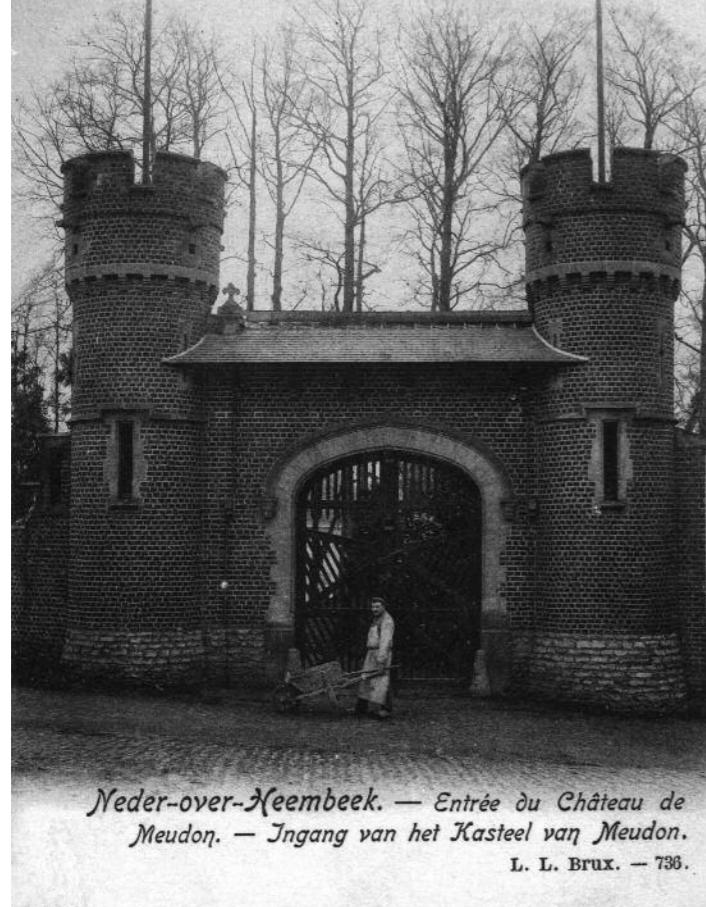
Church of Saint-Nicholas, postcard, 1920-1925
Archives of the City of Brussels



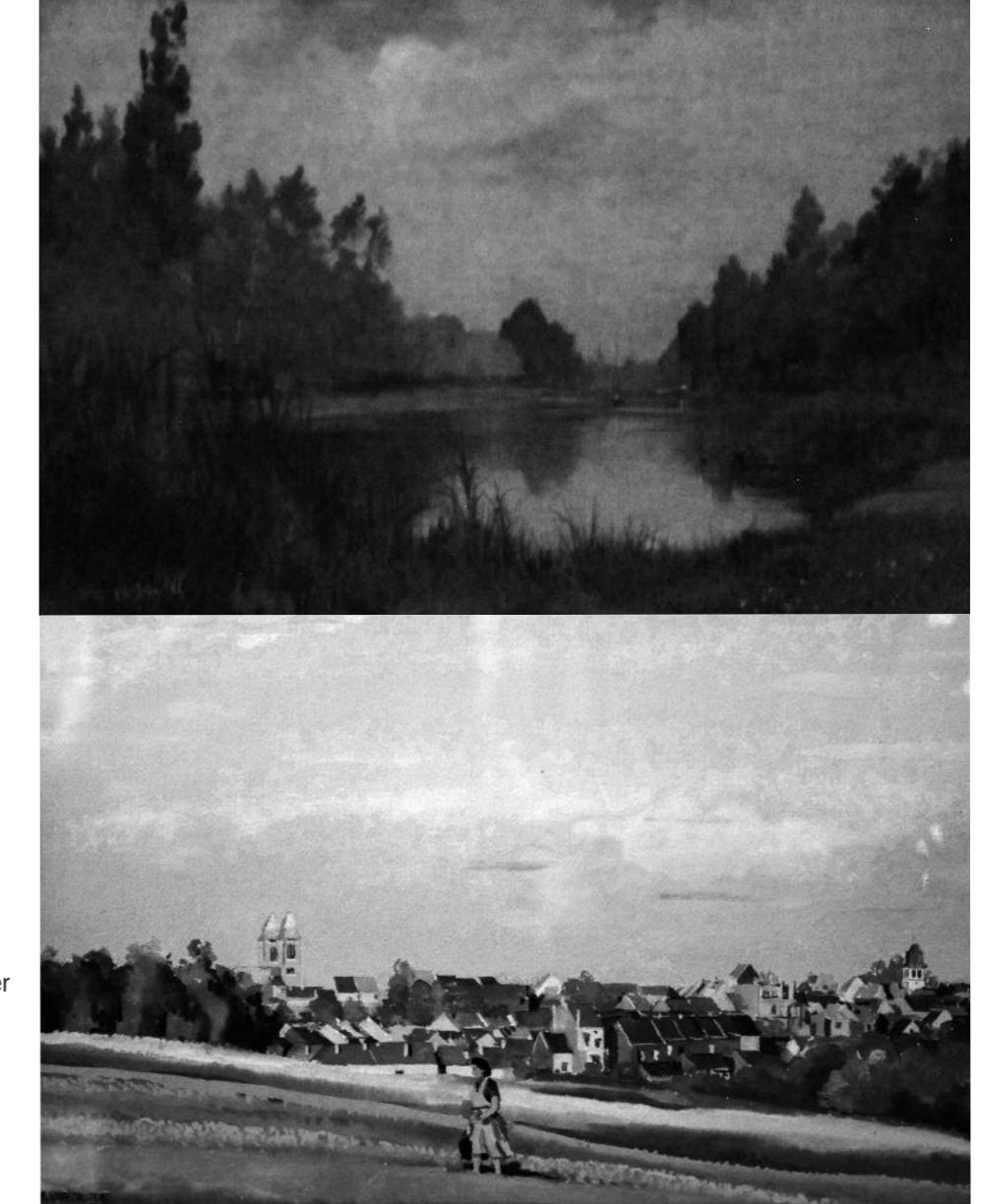
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Photo of the hospice known as "De Kluis" before its restoration in 1965



**5**

**Entrance to the castle of Meudon,
postcard, 1902-1904**
Archives of the City of Brussels

**6**

**L. Crépin, the Willebroeck canal at the
place known as (Petit) Marly, 1884**

Several prestigious residences left their mark on the area. There is evidence from the 15th century of a residence belonging to the lords of Neder-Heembeek, later known as the "Casteelken" (little castle). The home of the lords of Over-Heembeek was probably built on the site of a farm in the 17th century; it was later known as "Beyaerd". To the north is the castle of Crayenhoven, later known as Moriensart, built in the 16th century. Two new country manors were built in the area during the 17th and 18th centuries: the castles of Roses and Meudon (the latter incorporating the old "Casteelken"). None of these prestigious residences has survived, with the exception of a few features (entrance gate, pavilions and stables) of the Meudon domain (**figure 5**).

The appeal of the bucolic surroundings of the canal drew the residents of Brussels to relax in one of the area's inns. Two of these, rebuilt in the 18th century, followed the trend – like that of the Meudon domain – by taking the name of one of the châteaux around Paris: Versailles and Marly (**figure 6**). They would later be converted into country manors. All of them have now disappeared.

The two villages are home to a number of farms. One of these, known as "Den Bels", survives to this day in the form it took in the 18th-19th centuries. Made up of several buildings around an inner courtyard, built of brick with a foundation of stone and lime, the complex is a good illustration of the appearance of the farms of yesteryear. Located on the edge of Vilvoorde, another farm that also served

as an inn is remembered for its name, Buda, which later extended to its surrounding area. This name refers to the recapture of the Hungarian city (later merged with Pest to form Budapest) from the Ottoman Turks by a coalition of Christian states in 1686. Its population remained small throughout the *Ancien Régime* period. At the end of the 18th century, Over-Heembeek comprised around 230 inhabitants and Neder-Heembeek had close to 270.

Unification

As early as the 17th century, the two parishes were served by the same parish priest. At the end of the 18th century, the incorporation of these regions into the French Republic brought in its wake the abolition of the old feudal system. In 1814, the two villages were merged into a single municipality, named Neder-Over-Heembeek. The merger led to the construction of a single town hall in 1864 and the creation of a single municipal cemetery at the end of the century. However, the new entity lost most of the hamlets of Neerleest and Hoogheest in favour of Laeken, so as to enable King Leopold II to realise his urban projects and the extension of his palace gardens. In 1921, Neder-Over-Heembeek was annexed, along with Laeken and Haren, to the City of Brussels, which sought to create an outer port to the canal zone adjacent to these three municipalities. The City thus also acquired an interesting real estate reserve.

Industrialisation

The 19th century saw the industrial development of the Brussels region, in particular around the canal zone. However, Neder-Over-Heembeek remained largely agricultural in focus. Only with the arrival of the Brussels mills in 1907 and the Alliance brewery in 1919 did the zone begin its industrial transformation. The development of the maritime outer port in the 1920s-1930s would gradually attract businesses of all kinds to the area: coke works, chemicals and petroleum products, building materials, electricity, metal salvage, etc. These industries took the place of the former manor houses along the edge of the canal. It was at this time that the Senne River was mostly covered over. The current Buda bridge was built in 1931 and rebuilt in 1955 to improve communication between the two banks of the canal and to form a link to the Haren-Schaerbeek railway marshalling yard. In the second half of the 20th century, many industries disappeared from the outer port, replaced by various service industries active in logistics in particular, including a major postal sorting station. The Solvay industrial group took over the site of a former cork factory for its research and administrative centre. A container terminal was put in. The infrastructure for regional utilities were gradually put in place: a waste incinerator, a waste dump and, more recently, a wastewater purification station. Rowing clubs and a new river cruise terminal continue to give the canal zone a recreational dimension.

Urban development

The rural municipalities adjacent to greater Brussels were gradually urbanised in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Located next to Laeken and the royal palace, Neder-Over-Heembeek was of particular interest to King Leopold II. At the end of the 19th century, he envisaged turning the Meudon property into an embassy district, but that project never materialised. Keen to encourage the bourgeoisie to settle in the vicinity of the royal domain, the king fostered the drawing up of the first urban development plan for Neder-Over-Heembeek. The plan took shape at the beginning of the 20th century, providing for the construction of major arteries while leaving the land allotment to the developers. Houses and apartment buildings (whose construction was facilitated by the Condominium Law adopted in 1924) began to appear. This growth was also facilitated by the development of public transport connecting the area to Brussels city centre. A new urban plan adopted in 1933 set out, zone by zone, the framework for the future development of the entire Heembeek area. At the intersection of the former boundaries of Neder- and Over-Heembeek, the municipality laid out a new centre around the Art Deco church of Saints-Peter-and-Paul, completed in 1935, marked by its twin brick towers (**figure 7**). It replaces the former church (destroyed, except for its Romanesque tower, by lightning in 1932), as well as the deconsecrated church of Saint-Nicholas (today the site of a cultural centre).

7

M. Van Cauter, panorama with the churches of Saints-Peter-and-Paul (to the left) and Saint-Nicholas (to the right), 1945

Urbanisation received fresh impetus in the second half of the 20th century. To meet the lack of affordable housing, substantial social housing was built, such as the garden city of Val Maria (1950s) and the buildings on the avenue de Versailles (between the mid 1960s and the early 1980s). The reserve of land available for building also allowed for the building of the Queen Astrid military hospital in the 1970s. Housing projects continued to rise until the beginning of the 21st century, with the challenge of meeting the demographic pressure while preserving a high quality residential framework. Green spaces are preserved and laid out, such as the public park occupying the site of the former Meudon Castle gardens, the valley of the Begijnbos, the common pastures and the valley of the Tweebeek. Sports infrastructures are available to residents. A new public transport line will provide a faster link to the centre of Brussels. In 2020, Neder-Over-Heembeek has a little under 20,000 inhabitants.