

# HISTORY

## Rotem, village on the Meuse

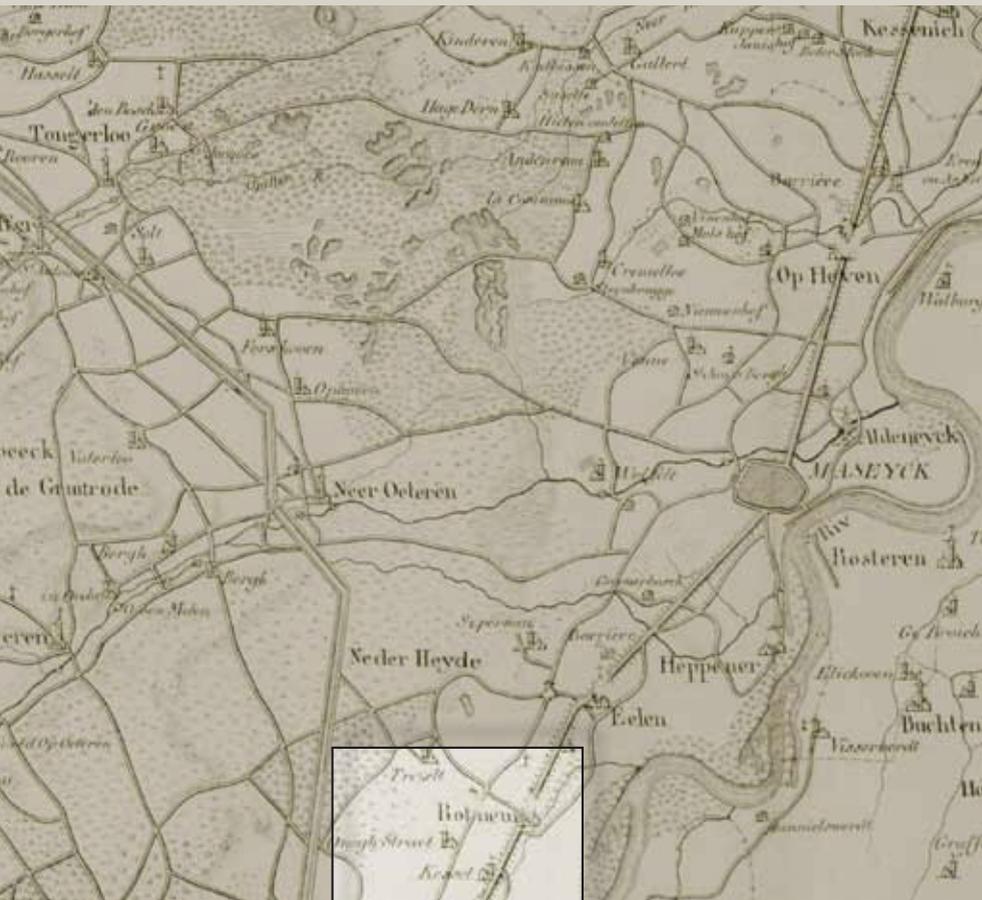
Slowly the river Meuse winds its way from south to north. Parallel to it, outside the valley, runs the Roman high-road which connects Tongres with Nijmegen. In winter, fed by snow and rain, the river overflows and deposits fertile silt in the forelands ensuring rich crops. When Franconian invaders settled in this region in the 4th and the 5th century they found everything they needed. To the east of the settlement, not more than a farm, there was water and pastures for the cattle. To the east, in the forest of the plain, wood for the hearth, litter for the stables and acorns for the pigs. Every 4 to 5 miles settlements arose which would gradually develop into villages like old Rotem. On the territory of Rotem several feudal courts existed but their location and route through history are difficult to trace. An important role was played by the courts Kesselshof and Olmenhof and the knightly estate Biesenhof. It is certain that Ommerstein has arisen out of those.



The court of Kessel



The first time the name Ommerstein appears in documents is in a 1662 deed which indicates that Ommerstein formed one territory with Kesselshof. In 1732 the Court Ommerstein is mentioned for the first time. From this follows that Ommerstein had replaced Kessel as the legal centre of the fief. Age-old traditions die slowly and the castle kept the name of Kessel for a long time until 1783 when the castle got its current name. The origin of the name, however, remains uncertain. It does not appear in the old regional register and nor was any of the former owners named that way. 'Stein' is a common name and points to a stone building, a castle or manor, but it is impossible to give a suitable explanation for the first part of the name. The estate may originally have been called 'Olmerstein', the stone house near Olmenhof. On the other hand, it might be a 17th century imaginary name 'Ommer Stein, Immer Stein', meaning 'solid as stone forever'. A historic document has yet to turn up which can shed light on this.



Ferraris map 1771-1778

Castle Ommerstein and its inhabitants

# ORIGIN OF OMMERSTEIN

Certainty about the inhabitants reaches back till the end of the 18th century.

- Lawyer Joes G.H. Smeets and his wife Anna Gertrudis Smets. They lived here from 1783 probably to his death in 1805. A French census mentions the couple, together with 2 servants and 5 housemaids.
- From 1813 onwards until his death in 1866 the castle was inhabited by baron de Schiervel, the first president of the Belgian Parliament, and his wife Adelaide Smeets.



After that four generations of the family Moreau de Bellaing lived in Ommerstein:

- Knight Charles Raphael Moreau de Bellaing and his wife Eleonore de Lenarts together with their 4 children (1866-1895).
- Knight Theodore Moreau de Bellaing and his wife Marie Louise Gilliot with their children (1895-1931).
- Knight Charles Moreau de Bellaing and his wife Suzanne de Zantis de Frymerson and their children, together with Mr and Mrs George Meekers-Vanhees (1931-1964).
- Knight Jean Moreau de Bellaing and his wife Aline Blaise de Wasseige and their 4 children (1964-1998).



Mr and Mrs Jos and Jeanine Vaessen bought the castle with all the land and the farms. In 2002 the castle with all its outbuildings, castle farm, domain and lanes were officially listed because of its historic, architectural and sociocultural value. A full restoration was started in 1999 and was finished in 2007.



# LANDSCAPE AND PARK

Ommerstein consists of a multitude of parcels. Meadows alternate with plough land, clusters of trees with park, and through all of this two brooks, the Kogbeek and the Zuurveldbeek, the latter flowing out into the former, wind their way to the Meuse. The Kogbeek hasn't got a natural source anymore and is only irrigated at high water level. After the Meuse had changed its course in the 15th century the brook found a slow but new destination draining into an old river bed, the Dijkbeek. A unique sight is the park which was laid out in the typical landscape style by the then owner baron de Schiervel around 1830.





THE VARIETY IN PLANTING, FAIRLY REMARKABLE IN BELGIUM, GIVES OMMERSTEIN A UNIQUE CHARACTER AND BRINGS NATURE AND CULTURE TOGETHER IN A HARMONIOUS INTERPLAY

The previous century was a time of rigid geometry and over-cultivation of neatly trimmed box tree hedges. But the romantic 19th century did away with all that. The geometric, tailor-made beauty of Versailles was replaced by English landscape style. A lay-out of clusters of trees and shrubs in varying colours and asymmetric build-up, view-throughs and a variety of spacious lawns with solitary trees created a landscape that reflected the contemporary longing for sentiment and natural surroundings.

The 19th century rage for exotic trees brought a great variety of trees to Ommerstein. A 1990 survey by the study group dendrology of the University of Liege has yielded an impressive inventory. Apart from the oaks, beeches and lime trees the group identified:

- the highest Lebanon cedar in Belgium, a multitrunked specimen planted by de Schiervel in 1813, 20 metres high and with a circumference of 8 metres;
- a North African Atlas cedar (*cedrus atlantica glauca*);
- a few specimen of the bald-cypress tree (*taxodium distichum*) with typical aerial roots;
- a sequoia gigantea, or mammoth tree from California, 25 metres high and with a circumference of 3,6 m;
- a pinus mugo, an exotic mountain pine with a circumference of 4,2 m;
- a pinus strobus, or Weymouth pine, a tree from the Great Lakes region. The sort was imported around 1780 by baron L.J. de Villenfagne of Zolder and is mistakenly called fir locally. With a circumference of 4,2 m it is the most sizeable of its kind in Belgium.
- a quercus robur tortuosa, an exotic oak sort;
- two tulip trees or magnolias, 20m high;
- American bird cherry prunus, or prunus scrotina from North America, a very aggressive tree called bird pest locally.

## The buildings

The visitor enters Ommerstein via an imposing staircase in Belgian hardstone. Castle and outbuildings are partially surrounded by the remains of a horseshoe-shaped moat, fed by the Kogbeek. Originally this moat surrounded the whole of the buildings. The draw-bridge in front of the entrance appears to have become ramshackle and was pulled down in 1905.



The brick façade, a typically classicistic façade, forms the northern side of the living area and offers the visitor a structure of 3 layers, basement included, and 7 bays. On both sides of the front door there are shuttered-windows. The back façade is 7-bayed as well, whereas the side façade to the west has 5 and the one to the east 2 in the tower. Like most historic buildings in the Meuse region the whole has been built in three traditional materials: brick ('baksteen') made of maaslandic clay, white sandstone ('mergel') from the surroundings of Maastricht and hardstone ('arduin') from Namur. The basement has 8 windows at the front and 6 at the rear. The massive foundations show the original ground plan. The front façade is crowned by a classicistic triangular fronton with the date MD.CCLXXXVI (1786).

Every renovation added a new part to the roof construction so that in the end the whole formed a somewhat unusual but expressive composition. The central volume carried two separate shield roofs whereas the lateral expansions to the right showed three smaller roofs. This unique roof was partly removed when during World War II the Germans installed an observation post for the detection of allied aeroplanes. After the war the building got a slate roof in the style of the French architect Mansart. It consisted of two parts, a slightly sloping upper part and, halfway, a steeper lower one containing the dormer windows. The roof has now been fully restored in its original condition.

The outbuildings are situated to the left and the right close by the castle. The outbuilding on the right served as a stable, the left as a coach house and housing for the steward. Thanks to their parallel position, they seem to form a monumental entrance to the castle. Even if the castle of Ommerstein was built in different historic periods it possesses an unmistakable harmony and symmetry typical of classicistic architecture.

When the castle itself was built is not exactly known but there is no reason to doubt that the date 1772 inscribed in a sand-stone block of the tower is accurate since the style explicitly points to the 18th century.

From the 19th century onward we are well informed about the history of the renovations. 'The Atlas of unnavigable watercourses' offers us the oldest available ground plan. It shows us that by 1840 a part of the moat had already been filled in. The front façade consisted of only three bays: a front door flanked on both sides by one window, whereas the protruding tower was situated against the east façade. At that time the castle itself was only half the present size. The much larger outbuildings were partly pulled down shortly before 1854 and the remaining parts were rebuilt and given their present-day function. The castle itself remained unchanged during this renovation.

Around 1902 one of the outbuildings was considerably reduced in size, whereas the house was enlarged on both sides with two bays. In the process the tower, which originally was situated against the side façade, was fully incorporated in the castle giving the building a more regular and harmonious look. The same year a small part of the moat to the right side was filled in.

The last renovation took place a short time before 1906 when the two outbuildings were expanded giving them their present-day form. Several stages of renovations could be traced in the interior of the castle as well leaving it with little of its original character.





## The tower

The square tower to the eastside of the castle is 6 metres wide and contains three rows of windows. Without any doubt it is the oldest part of the buildings. In the westside of the tower a sandstone cornerstone carries the date 1679 and the same inscription was found on the second floor. This date certainly refers to one of the later renovations, since the style of the tower clearly shows that it was erected earlier. The use of sandstone blocks and the wrought iron curl anchors are typically 16th and 17th century. Typical, too, are the layers of white sandstone ('speklagen') in the inside walls of the tower. The two cellars with barrel vaults under the tower point to the same period.

In a 1860 drawing the tower is depicted with a pear-shaped spire, but it is certain that it was not the original one and it must have been erected before the renovation of 1772.

When in the summer of 2003 the plasterwork was removed in the tower chambers, remarkable details came to light showing that the tower had been built separately. The walls contained unexpected construction elements as loopholes, and a sandstone door and window frames. Especially the presence of bow windows and doors in the west façade is irrefutable evidence that the tower originally stood on its own. Reasons to build a tower in an estate were twofold: it had a strategic purpose but it could also be built for reasons of prestige as was almost certainly the case in the estate of Ommerstein.