

Brussels' historically fascinating European Quarter is the subject of a new book. **Eoin O'Neill** took a stroll with its author

Doing the EU walk



How it used to look: the Berlaymont monastery, above, and a view of Cinquantenaire from Rue de la Loi, top right

Descended from a long line of *bruxellois*, legal expert and writer Thierry Demey knows the capital like the back of his hand. As such, he decided to write a guide book to the city and in particular to the European quarter – what used to be there and what stands now.

It may have started off as a hobby, he says, but after two years of research, writing, image gathering and translat-

ing – the book is in French, Dutch and English – this has become his life. So, a copy of *Brussels, Capital of Europe* in hand, we embark on one of his suggested walks.

We begin in Place du Luxembourg/Luxemburgplein between the statue of John Cockerill – the British industrialist who moved to Belgium in 1779 at the age of 20 and was responsible for mainland Europe's first railway line running from Mechelen to Brussels – and the

European Parliament buildings, once the site of Brasserie Léopold, Brussels' last big brewery.

Next, we enter Demey's favourite area in the European district – Parc Leopold – which, in its time, has housed a zoo and a botanical garden. The zoo quickly went bankrupt due to the lack of trained keepers and the death of most of its animals. The gardens, however, remained and were maintained by botanist Jean Linden, who bought the 27 acres of land after the

zoo closed in 1876 and lived in the park.

Linden's house still stands next to the European Parliament, commonly referred to as *Le Caprice des Dieux* because it resembles the French cheese. Kept as a monument to the man and his time, the contrast between the orchid lover's home and the large glass structure only metres behind it creates a startling juxtaposition of old and new. Demey had originally intended to use this image for the cover of his book but was advised not to – many Parliamentarians feel that the relic should have been torn down.

As we reach the exit of the Parc Leopold, heading towards the Justus Lipsius (the EU building Demey likes least), we come to the George Eastman Dental Institute named after the philanthropist (1854-1932) and founder of the Kodak Company, who built dental clinics around Europe. Today the institute has been converted into offices but when it was opened in 1935, it provided free dental care for Brussels' poorer children. The top floor is one large, narrow, well-lit room, which used to house 26 dental chairs. Despite the Art Deco murals designed to distract the young patients from the terrors awaiting next door, the waiting room too must have been a scary place to be.



The Berlaymont was originally the site of a girls' school run by nuns

The most impressive sight in the European quarter is the unobstructed view up Avenue de Tervueren/Tervurenlaan towards the three arches of the Cinquantenaire. Building heights around the Cinquantenaire are restricted to protect the vista. The Berlaymont, at 13 floors, is one of the EU buildings that have been capped by this ruling (although there are just as many underground floors for those Eurocrats who don't require much natural daylight).

Perhaps it is this unlucky number of levels that has fated the Berlaymont (originally the site of a girls' school run by nuns from which it takes its name) to a turbulent history since its construction in the 1960s. In fact, so mountainous were the files on the Commission headquarters that Demey dedicates a chapter to the series of botched operations. The pinnacle of the saga has to be the decade (1995-2004) it spent under a white sheet while asbestos was removed from inside. ■

Brussels, Capital of Europe, is available in shops in English, French and Dutch for €38. For more information on the European district visit www.badeaux.be.



Where there were brewers now there are MEPs: Brasserie Léopold, above

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