

1

**The Senne today in Anderlecht**  
Musée des Egouts (sewer museum)



**From the Middle Ages to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century**

The River Senne, which is neither wide nor deep, flows from south to north (**figure 1**). It is a tributary of the River Schelde which flows into the North Sea past Antwerp. Etymologically, Brussels means “hamlet in the marshes”, reminding us that the city was founded as a small port in the damp Senne valley. The first written reference dates from the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. With its neighbouring hills on the eastern side of the valley, the small port was one of the three areas responsible for the city’s growth. Flat-bottomed boats initially exported grain from the large surrounding agricultural estates before being used for increasingly diversified trade.

During the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, water mills constructed on the River Senne stimulated economic development of the district around *Saint-Géry* Church. Brussels soon became the embarkation point for navigation along the River Senne, although it would previously also have been possible to travel further upstream. It is likely that the successive hydraulic work projects completed for the mills led to the creation of three islands.

The largest was *Saint-Géry* island. At the end of this island, the main arm of the Senne joined a smaller channel known as the *Senne de Ransfort* which entered the city from the west. A little further to the south, was an island called *Overmolen* (meaning upstream mill) also known as *Saint-Jacques* or *Petite Ile* (little island). The third island, which was small and almost triangular in shape, was located downstream of *Saint-Géry* island and home to the *sauvoirs* – pools fed by the river, which were used to stock fish before they were taken to the market for sale.

Water from the Senne and its tributaries was also essential to the development of industrial activities such as tanning, brewing and textile production which contributed to the city’s wealth. A first set of city walls was built round Brussels in the 13<sup>th</sup> century followed by a second, more extensive wall in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The water also served for defensive purposes, filling the moat outside the walls. It was also instrumental in fish farming and fed various ditches dug throughout the city which served as additional protection in the event of flooding and provided water for low-key industrial activities. Finally, the

river was also used as an outlet for industrial waste.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Senne no longer met commercial needs as it was too shallow and meandering. A canal – built at great expense – replaced it in 1561 as the main waterway, providing a fast trade link between Brussels and Antwerp. Docks were dug for the new port, so the old river port fell into disuse and was converted into a fish market. To facilitate access, the small stretch of the Senne between the market and the *Saint-Géry* district was covered over at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, forming the foundation of the current *rue des Poissonniers*.

2

**Cartoon of the 1850 flood at the Vieux Marché-aux-Grains (old grain market)**  
Royal Library – Print Cabinet



**The River Senne in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the river’s remaining usefulness for defensive, food-production and energy purposes was all but lost. The walls were gradually dismantled and moats filled in, thereby ending the river’s role in fresh water fish farming. Most of the water mills also fell into disuse. The Senne was then reduced to an outlet for household and industrial waste which continued to increase exponentially due to the economic development and demographic growth in Brussels over the period. Moreover, it was now considered unacceptable for the Senne, which regularly broke its banks, to continue to flood the whole of the lower town (**figure 2**). Following the dramatic 1839 flood, an investigating committee was appointed to suggest ways of remedying the situation.

3

**The River Senne looking downstream from Vanniers bridge (1867)**  
Archives of the City of Brussels



However, it was not until the 1860s that a real desire to address the problem arose, primarily due to new public health concerns. The increasingly polluted river water smelled noxious and was identified at the time as being responsible for the spread of infectious diseases such as cholera which decimated the population of Brussels several times, although in reality, this epidemic was due to the bacterial contamination of drinking water. Moreover, the districts flooded by the Senne were seen as overcrowded, dilapidated and unhealthy, and judged unworthy of the capital of the young Belgian State (**figure 3**).

## 4

**Work on the first covering at the current Place de la Bourse (1869)***Archives of the City of Brussels***First covering of the river (1867-71) and the central boulevards**

In addition to two reports from specialist commissions and following a call for tenders, the City Authorities finally received around forty proposals to clean up the river and prevent flooding. The various plans proposed separating the river from the sewage drains but opinions diverged as to the future of the river itself; some recommended that it be canalised in the open air, generally by diverting it out of the city centre to the west, whereas others suggested covering it over.

On the recommendation of Burgomaster Jules Anspach, the city council chose the proposal put forward by architect Léon-Pierre Suys in 1865; this involved covering the Senne and laying out a monumental boulevard over the top interspersed with squares which would then fork into two symmetrical branches to the north (in a Y shape). Supporters of the proposal considered it had the advantage of greatly modernising the lower town in the same way that Haussmann had transformed Paris. The new districts replacing the old unhealthy housing stock would help attract a wealthier, bourgeois population.

Furthermore, the boulevards would provide a fast link between the *Midi* and *Nord* railway stations.

After the buildings to be demolished had been expropriated for health reasons, thousands of inhabitants were faced with finding new accommodation. Work began in early 1867. Such a huge project required over a thousand workers. Although initially entrusted to a private company – the *Belgian Public Works Company* – founded by English financiers, the entire operation was eventually taken over by the city itself. Much of the fabric of the old city centre was ripped out while the river was temporarily diverted. Along with two new, separate sewage drains, a double brick channel was constructed over a stretch of nearly two kilometres (**figure 4**). At the end of 1871, the waters of the Senne rushed in after the sluice gates of the large new *Midi* lock were opened.

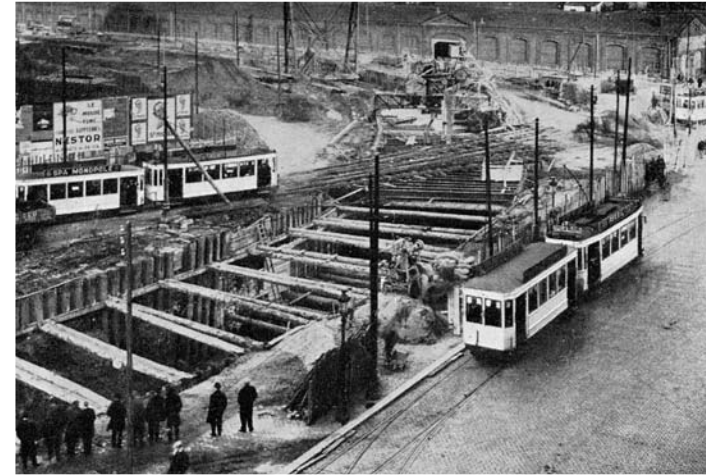
The new boulevards on the surface gradually took shape. Impressive public buildings such as the stock exchange and the central market were erected. Houses and apartment blocks with shops on the ground floor vied with each other to be the

most original, encouraged by competitions rewarding the most beautiful façade. In the early 1890s, the old Augustine Church, which had been spared by Suys's plan, was demolished, enabling a vast square to be laid out – the current *Place de Brouckère*. However, although the wealthy bourgeoisie liked to stroll along the great boulevards, they were not keen to live there. They preferred to set up home in the chic districts that were springing up to the east of the city, such as the Leopold quarter and avenue Louise.

**The second covering of the river (1931-1955)**

Although covering the river successfully prevented new floods in the city centre, it did not stop the water from inundating rapidly developing neighbouring areas up and down stream. Two spillways were created to direct excess river water into the canal in the event of flooding. However, these proved insufficient. In 1930 the decision was taken to extend the covering over of the Senne upstream (in Anderlecht) and downstream (in Laeken). It was also decided to divert the river from the city centre so that it passed underneath the boulevards of the ring to the west. This new double channel was larger and built in reinforced concrete. Work was interrupted by the Second World War so it was therefore only completed in 1955 (**figure 5**).

## 5

**Work on the second covering at Place de l'Yser***CIDEP not-for-profit association (centre for information, documentation and studies on heritage)*

## 7

**Reconstruction of a branch of the Senne flowing in times gone by underneath a building belonging to the former Riches-Claires Convent.***Musée des Egouts (sewer museum)***The present day**

The River Senne flows underground over a distance of six kilometres from Anderlecht to Laeken, flowing underneath the boulevards of the ring to the west of the city centre. You can see it in the open air before it goes underground near *Midi* Station (*rue des Vétérinaires*) or flowing through its second channel, by going down to the lower level of the *Musée des Egouts* (the sewer museum) (*Porte d'Anderlecht*).

Much of the infrastructure from the first set of works underneath the central boulevards remains, despite the creation of an underground tram (called the pre-metro) in the 1970s (**figure 6**). The two sewage drains remain in use and the two channels through which the Senne used to flow still come into their own in heavy rain. They collect the water that spills out of the two drains and return it to a purification plant to the north.

The transformation the first project brought about in the city centre was so great that most residents of Brussels have no memory of the river. Several initiatives have however been taken to stay in touch with the past (**figure 7**) and there are those who dream, despite there being no plans on the drawing board, of seeing the River Senne once more open to the skies in the centre of Brussels.

## 6

**Plan for the 'pre-metro' constructed under the first covering which now serves to evacuate excess water spilling out of the sewage drains***Musée des Egouts (sewer museum) – Illustration J.J. Maquaire*