



BELGIAN EMBASSY  
**LONDON**



17





## **17, Grosvenor Crescent, London, the Belgian Embassy in the United Kingdom**

On March 10th 2006 the Belgian Embassy in London moved from Eaton Square, where it had been located for more than eighty years, to nearby 17, Grosvenor Crescent, in the prestigious district of Belgravia.

For four years, comprehensive renovation to the premises has been meticulously prepared and carried out. Hence, it will not be surprising that precisely this new chancellery of the Belgian Embassy in London has been chosen as the first subject of a series of brochures in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spotlights its premises abroad.



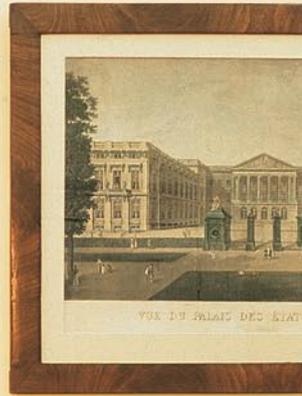
The United Kingdom was involved at first hand in the creation of the Belgian State in 1830. London was the place where the five great powers gathered and decided to *establish a new state*.

The London Conference resulted in a treaty in which it was laid down that the new Belgian state would forever remain neutral. On June 4th 1831, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg was elected as the first King of the Belgians. He was the widower of Princess Charlotte, the only daughter of King George IV of Britain.

When its troops invaded Belgium in 1914, Germany violated the neutrality Belgium had to guarantee pursuant to the provisions of the 1830 London Treaty. This resulted in the British participation in the *First World War*.

The armies of the United Kingdom fought numerous battles in the violently disputed part of the Belgian territory that would later be called *Flanders' Fields*.

The bravery of the Belgian army, fighting under the command of King Albert I, inspired admiration and sympathy, especially in the United Kingdom.





The German troops invaded Belgium for the second time on May 10th 1940 and the army had to ask for terms after 18 days. Yet, prominent members of the Belgian government and members of parliament and of the army managed to escape to the United Kingdom. In October 1940 a Belgian *government in exile* was formally established in London. Amongst them was Minister for Foreign Affairs PH Spaak.

A commemorative plaque outside the previous Belgian chancellery in Eaton Square pays tribute to the numerous Belgian volunteers who joined the Belgian forces in Great Britain.

After the war the United Kingdom and Belgium were active as co-founders of *international organisations* like the United Nations, the IMF, the World Bank and NATO. In 1973 the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community, which evolved into the present European Union. From the very start, Belgium strongly supported Britain's application for accession. 'Brussels', seat of the major European institutions, became a concept to the British.

At present, an estimated 25,000 Belgians are living in the United Kingdom and 32,250 Brits are living in Belgium.





The premises of the new embassy are part of the *Grosvenor Estate*, named after the Grosvenor family. It was on the land of this family that the fashionable districts of Mayfair and Belgravia developed.

Georgian Street and the 'Crescent', a crescent-shaped row of houses, were designed in 1833 and finished in the early 1860's. They were developed in order to create a direct communication between Belgrave Square and Park Lane, Mayfair, Hyde Park Corner and Hyde Park.

Nowadays this area includes numerous major embassies, institutions and clubs.

The English architect **George Basevi** (1794-1845) designed the building. Classical London terraces are among his best known work. He built most of the houses in Belgrave Square, except the corner houses.

This Victorian style building is a **listed building**, which means that any radical changes during the renovation would have been out of the question. The façades and the roof have been restored, the volumes maintained and the remarkable architectural elements have been allowed to stand out well.

On the outside, a second staircase to the basement was built to lead the stream of visitors to the consular services. This wrought-iron staircase was made almost identical to the first one, safeguarding the homogeneity so typical of London façades. Inside, openings had to be made in some walls in order to accommodate counters.







Fortunately, the building is blessed with a favourable orientation, as to the incidence of light. Hence the choice of simple wooden blinds.

In the open space offices, the natural light is supported by design lighting. The prestigious rooms have been embellished with beautiful chandeliers or with opaline suspension lamps, their curves echo the curves of the mouldings and cornices.

At night the composition and the ornaments of the façades are illuminated by an automatic lighting system. The scene then seems to convey the magic of *a painting by René Magritte.*







The embassy has been built naturally around the magnificent central staircase that was carpeted 'in the London style': a brick-coloured stair carpet is fixed to the white steps by brass carpet rods. The balustrades provide a finishing touch in black. The wooden handrail has kept its original features.

Similar tones have been chosen for the entrance hall that opens onto the monumental staircase. The floor with chequerboard pattern in red and light grey marble was bordered in black.

The veneered wood parquet and the solid oak parquet were fitted 'in the English style' and in a herringbone pattern.



*The basic principle* in the interior design project was that the new chancellery deserved new furniture. New design was an excellent alternative to antique furniture.

Each of the *common rooms* has been given an individual atmosphere.

The *consular services* are located in the basement and on the ground floor. The basement had to be transformed in order to create an area in which the consular services could work efficiently. There had to be sufficient light and comfort. A floor with light beige tiles was chosen, contrasting with the bright red of the rear wall. The counters are partly hidden from view by a translucent glass partition.

For the visitors to the consular services, a row of handy, elegant burgundy chairs was placed against each wall of the waiting room and secured into the floor.







The *meeting room* can seat 25 people and has an oval table and low cupboards. The chairs were upholstered with camel-coloured leather.

The most prominent portrait of the Belgian Kings in the embassy is an illustrious painting of King Albert I by André Cluysenaar in the meeting room. King Albert I is portrayed as supreme commander of the Belgian armed forces at the front in Ypres.



*The ambassador's office* is located on the second floor.

The desk in the ambassador's office was inherited from Minister Paul-Henri Spaak. It is a two-sided mahogany writing table, a so-called '*bureau plat*', in George III style, manufactured in the twentieth century.

On top of the listed mantelpiece is a French glass mantel clock of the second half of the nineteenth century, made by Vicenti in Paris. Above the fireplace is displayed a portrait of the First Belgian King, Leopold I, by the Belgian painter Polydore Beaufaux. This portrait dates from the end of the nineteenth century and was inspired by the famous portraits of monarchs by Wintherhalter.

An elegant burgundy leather suite awaits the visitors. They can view an engraving entitled "Vue du Palais des Etats-généraux", famous nineteenth-century building in Brussels. They may also notice a portrait of "Marie-Henriette, Duchesse de Brabant", who married the second Belgian King, Leopold II in 1853.

On the first and second floor are the offices of the ambassador's closest assistants. Each diplomat's office has a red or green suite. The desks were made in Belgium and manufactured in noble materials like wenge wood and are characterised by pure forms.

The two top floors have been reserved for the *representatives of the Belgian Regions*.



The old chancellery held a wealth of art works. There were paintings on canvas, tapestries and works on paper, many of which were due for repair. Some works needed a new frame, cleaning or a conservation treatment, but for others a more radical restoration was necessary. Most of these works of art were transported to Belgium for expert restoration. Afterwards they were meticulously installed in the common rooms and the private offices of the new building.

A series of five twentieth-century *tapestries* embellishes the staircase and emphasises its stylish character. One of these tapestries is a *chinoiserie*, a tapestry with Chinese and South East Asian style elements. On the left hand side an eastern merchant is holding an umbrella while a western trading fleet drops anchor. The action takes place in a setting with an exotic building and exotic vegetal motives in the back.

The tapestry's design is probably based on the models of the Frenchman J.B. Pillement or François Boucher, who designed for the tapestry workshops in Aubusson, France, in the eighteenth century. These French tapestries were based on a rare knowledge of the countries in the Far East. The trade of exclusive china, tea, spices and lacquer was one of the favourite themes.

This chinoiserie was woven around 1950 in the Royal Manufacture of Tapestries De Wit in Mechelen in Belgium.



The Liège painter *Edgard Scauftaire* immortalised his wife in this painting. The cubist style is visible in the background, the representation of the woman, her features and her cardigan.

Scauftaire lived from 1893 till 1960. He was a painter of portraits, nudes, still lifes and interiors. He painted on canvas and murals, he was a designer of carpets, stained glass and mosaics.

This work is a loan from The Flemish Community. Some other interesting paintings on loan from this institution are a painting by *Henri-Victor Wolvens* and two colourful paintings by *Rik Slabbinck*. On loan is also a drawing entitled 'Tower Bridge and London Bridge' by the Brussels graphic artist *Jacques Muller*.

Generally, the works of art in the Belgian embassies are created by Belgian artists. In London two paintings by foreign artists need mentioning: one created by a Canadian-English artist, called *Richard Jack*, and a second painting made by the New Zealand-English painter *Oswald Birley*. These are portraits of the notorious Belgian ambassador baron Cartier de Marchienne. Several watercolours depicting a Belgian cityscape by the English nineteenth century artist, *Henry Medlycott*, are displayed in a diplomat's office.



## Colophon

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## Technical details

### ***Address***

17, Grosvenor Crescent  
London SW1X 7 EE

### ***Surface***

Net surface 1,186 m<sup>2</sup>

### ***Building period***

early 1850's

### ***Renovation period***

June 2005- February 2006

### ***Owner***

Grosvenor Investments Limited

### ***Architect of the renovation:***

George Trollope- Property Consultants-  
Chartered Surveyors

### ***Design furniture***

Alternative Furniture Solutions

### ***Builder's employer***

Building Department of the Ministry of Foreign  
Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development  
Cooperation



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