

Welcome to the Historic overview of the Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain, founded in 1890. The BLCC has changed radically over the years but, at its heart it has remained an organisation that is successfully helping its members to do trade with the United Kingdom.

In order to maintain the most complete overview of important historical events, we invite members to forward any interesting information they may have about past events, including anecdotes. You may send your emails to [blcc@blcc.co.uk](mailto:blcc@blcc.co.uk)

### **31 December 2007:**

The Chamber continued to perform well in 2007, increasing their turnover with an 10% margin. One of the highlights of the continuing reorganisation in 2007 included the agreement with IRIS from Belgium to set up an intra-net and extra-net, facilitating the daily operations between the different offices of the BLCC and allowing members to access BLCC documents and files independently.

The Chamber also continued to promote Belgium, Luxembourg and their regions' products in the U.K. We jointly participated with the regions, at several shows including: the London Fabric Show, Interbuild, Midlands Manufacturing, All Energy, Total 2007 and the International Food Exhibition. On the occasion of the Interbuild Food Exhibition, we organised a "Belgian Night" in which Belgian stand holders invited their suppliers and customers. Over 350 guests attended, making it the most popular event, closely followed by the First Maatjes Thames Cruise in June and the Golden Bridge in November.

As part of the Chamber's on-going strategy to assist Belgian and Luxembourg companies who wish to do business with the UK, we delivered 4 presentations of the London 2012 Games to – amongst others – Unizo, FIT and the Olympic Business Club (OBC) members in Belgium. The BLCC also organised the visit of the OBC to London during which the members met the buyers of the Olympic Delivery Authority, the London Organising Committee Olympic Games, HOK Sports Architect and Bovis Lend Lease. The BLCC was also invited by the Brussels Chamber of Commerce to do a presentation on "How to do business in the UK."

Another highlight on the BLCC 2007 calendar was the organisation of the conference 'Belgium as a Paneuropean Location for Pension Funds' in London and attended by Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and Minister Bruno Tobback. Over 140 top CEO and CFO's from the pension fund industry attended.

The business services continued to grow with the salary administration counting over 3 times as many employees compared to 2005.

In November, the Chamber held its 11<sup>th</sup> annual 'Golden Bridge Export Award' ceremony. This event, in recognition and support of the export achievements in the UK of Belgian and Luxembourg companies, took place at the Millennium Gloucester Hotel in London. The award was presented during a Gala Dinner by the Belgian and Luxembourg Ambassadors and attended by nearly 200 people. Deme Environmental Contractor and MobileXpense were the 2007 winners.

Ever conscious of offering our members the opportunity to meet at social summer events, we held our annual 'Golf Day' in June and a day at the 'Artois Championships' at Queen's Tennis Club to which members may invite their corporate clients. Both attracted record attendance.

In September 2007, the BLCC co-organised a talk by Viscount Etienne Davignon with the support of H.E. Ambassador Veranneman de Watervliet which was well attended.

Paid membership stood at 122 at the end of 2007, a modest but important increase of 8 which is hiding the fact that we had no less than 24 new paying members compared to 2006. The sustained policy, started in 2006, of recruiting long-term members who regularly need and use our services resulted in a significant decrease of resignations compared to the previous years.

The Young Chamber president Xavier Rijmenans handed over his presidency to Patrice Bataille.

### **31 December 2006:**

After a rather dramatic 2005, 2006 seemed business as usual. However, it was a crucial year in further reorganising the BLCC, making it financially healthy and more independent. Highlights of the continuing reorganisation in 2006 included the Certification of the BLCC by the Belgian Federation of Chambers of Commerce. This accolade allowed the BLCC to obtain subsidies from Belgium and the various regions. Furthermore, the lease at Vauxhall Grove expired in October and the registered address was changed, for the time being, to our Northern office.

In 2006, the Chamber continued to promote Belgium, Luxembourg and their regions' products in the U.K. We participated at several shows including the London Fabric Show, Interbuild, 100% Design and the Farnborough Air Show in collaboration with the regional export agencies.

As part of the Chamber's on-going strategy of assisting Belgian and Luxembourg companies who wish to do business with the UK, we exhibited at Business Exchange in Namur organised by the local Chamber of Commerce. We participated in the FIT Export Days as panel member in June, co-organised a visit by UNIZO to London, participated in the AWEX seminar in Namur about doing business in the North of England and co-organised a visit of the members from the Brussels Chamber of Commerce with Brussels Export in November.

In November, the Chamber held its 10<sup>th</sup> annual 'Golden Bridge Export Award' ceremony. This event, in recognition and support of the export achievements in the UK of Belgian and Luxembourg companies, took place at the Radisson Portman Hotel in London. The award was presented during a Gala Dinner by the Belgian and Luxembourg Ambassadors and attended by over 200 people. Winners were EVS Broadcasting SA and Metris NV.

During 2006, a number of networking evenings were also held with other foreign Chambers of Commerce such as Norway and the Netherlands. Belgian Dinners were re-branded to Benelux Dinners with Neil Kinnock as speaker in January and Jan Callewaert, winner of the Golden Bridge 2005, as speaker in September. We held our annual 'Golf Day' in June and organised a day at the 'Artois Tennis Championships' at Queen's Club to which members may invite their corporate clients.

In September 2006, our website was re-launched at Duvel Moortgat's Bar Music Hall.

### **20 June 2006:** Back in business.

At the 115th General Meeting, the board is pleased to announce that the BLCC is

back in profit. The first full year under new management shows a considerable increase in business services income and membership. The Chairman can already promise even better figures for 2006.

During the same year, Anne Gerard from Belgium is appointed as the new Events Manager.

**01 July 2005:** Project subsidies

At the beginning of the summer in 2005 and after intensive lobbying by the CCI in Brussels, a new form of subsidies is made available to the Belgian Chambers Abroad. This time, subsidies are project based and provide maximum 50% of the total investment needed. No need to say that these are substantially lower than before but they provide a welcome extra to other revenue streams which are increasing slowly but surely.

**14 February 2005:** Re-launch of the BLCC and TYC

On Valentine's day, H.E. Ambassador Thierry de Gruben organised a reception as a sign of the diplomatic support in London for both the BLCC and the Young Chamber. The Chamber can face a bright future again. Willem Sels, TYC president hands over his presidency to Xavier Rijmenans and his new board.

**25 January 2005:** Extra-ordinary General Meeting at the KBC in London.

On 25 January 2005, an EGM was convened to inform the members of the changes in the Chamber.

At the board meeting afterwards, the full board resigned and Michel Vanhoonacker and Elisabeth Delahaye were elected as Chairman and Director respectively and a new era began for the Chamber without Belgian Federal support. Luxembourg and more in particular H.E. Ambassador Jean-Louis Wolzfeld continued to provide financial support giving the BLCC a life line for the time being.

Immediately the new team started organising new events for 2005 and everything was done to increase income from the crucial business services. Margaret Millgate, previously employed by the BLCC in the accounting department started working on an independent basis guaranteeing continuity in the salary and VAT administration department.

**2004:** Karel De Gucht

At the end of 2004, the Federal Government, in particular Minister Karel De Gucht, decided to stop subsidising Belgian Chambers Abroad with immediate effect. This unexpected and abrupt decision jeopardised the survival of the BLCC as over half of its income came from this source.

The BLCC board decided that the only way forward was to close the BLCC. Michel Vanhoonacker approached the board and offered to preserve the BLCC and to take over the lease of the office.

**2001:** The Young Chamber

The Young Chamber (TYC) - part of the Belgium-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce (BLCC) - is the platform for young Belgian and Luxembourg people living in the UK.

TYC was created in 2001 to enhance the relationships between young professionals of the Belgian and Luxembourg communities. TYC organise regular activities that help those young professionals to integrate in their new living environment. Given that, The Young Chamber is part of the BLCC, members of TYC have also priority access to the activities of the BLCC, often at reduced prices.

For more information about the TYC, please visit [www.theyoungchamber.org.uk](http://www.theyoungchamber.org.uk).

**1979:** Luxembourg joins in.

In 1979, the Luxembourg and Belgian Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain merged to create the current Belgian-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce.

**1945:** Post War period

It was not until 1945 that the Chamber could once more resume its part in the domain of commercial relations with Belgium. In 1948, in order to announce abroad the products and services offered by Belgium, it published the first edition of its annual directory "WHERE TO BUY IN BELGIUM". From a very small circulation of 2,000 copies for the first issue, the welcome which this publication received resulted in a much larger subsequent distribution and the 1966 edition had a circulation of 10,000 copies, which reached selected importers in the United Kingdom and more than 60 countries overseas, representing one third of the world's purchasing power at the time.

Shortly thereafter the Chamber revived the practice, fallen into disuse during the previous ten years, of periodically holding luncheons. It was proud to be able to welcome, as guests of honour, between 1952 and today, many personalities from the political, financial, commercial and industrial worlds, both British and Belgian.

It was in 1945 that the Belgo-Luxembourg Economic Union was re-formed, and in February 1948, at The Hague, the Benelux was born. In March 1957, the Treaty of Rome was signed and the Common Market, the fruits of more than a century's toil, came into existence.

**1940:** The Second World War

Trouble was spreading throughout the world and the new disasters of World War II were soon ravaging Europe. This time commerce between Britain and Belgium came to a complete standstill and the Chamber was cut off from the majority of its members.

Undeterred, it turned its activities in another direction and with the unreserved support of the Belgian Colonial Minister in London, took the initiative of establishing a Colonial Information Office designed to aid the expansion of commercial relations between Great Britain and the Congo, even though, as the military situation intensified, there was a corresponding contraction of all other types of activity. Subsequently, with the same aim in view, the Chamber formed the "Belgian Congo Buyers and Shippers Section".

**1918:** The inter-war period

The inter-war period should have been one of peaceful battles; it is sufficiently recent, however, for us to remember the economic confusion, the political chaos and the innumerable conferences which led to nothing. In the place of gold, there

arose a paper currency. The traditional commercial policy of even Great Britain had to undergo modification and the synchronization which existed between the policy of Britain and that of Belgium was to be broken.

During that period, the Chamber was to pursue its activities further in the direction of the objectives for which it had been founded: documentation, mediation and protection. It published the Anglo-Belgian Trade Journal, later replaced by the Journal of the Belgian Chamber of Commerce, and succeeded by Belux Magazine and the News Letters which the Chamber issues today; it strove unwaveringly to aid and assist economic relations between Belgium and the United Kingdom and set up its courts of arbitration and its litigation department.

**1914:** First World War

Then came the 1914-1918 war.

When this unexpected blow of destiny struck, it was the British who were to bring the Chamber to the forefront of the Belgian institutions outside Belgium. Permission was granted, by virtue of the confidence placed in the Chamber, to collect alone more than £21,000 for the Belgian refugees who had already been welcomed so warmly in Britain. Belgium remains as grateful for this today, as on that first day.

**1900:** The early 1900's

It was during this early period that the Chamber produced a number of valuable surveys and took an active part in a number of Congresses and International Exhibitions, such as that of Paris in 1900. The Chamber played a major role in organising British participation in the Universal Exhibitions held in Belgium in 1905 and 1910, even though the Chancellor of the Exchequer refused any subsidy to his compatriots.

**1890:** The original Belgian Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain is born. The Belgian Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain was created in 1890.

A few months junior to the Belgian Chamber of Commerce in France, it is, therefore, the second oldest of the Belgian Chambers of Commerce outside Belgium and one of the founder-members of the Fédération des Chambres de Commerce Belges à l'Étranger in Brussels which links them all together.

This Chamber came into being at the time when the gold coin was universal currency and formed the basis of a free economy, the time of vast markets with much smaller demands and far less competition than at present.

Even in those days, Belgian enterprise was making itself felt throughout the world; there were Belgians building the underground railway system in Paris, as well as railways and tramways in China, Odessa, Turkey, Mexico and the Argentine (where they were also erecting whole cities and building sugar refineries and glass factories); drilling for oil in Baku and Rumania; pioneering in Egypt (where they created the town of Heliopolis); and organizing public services in 76 cities throughout the world.

The British Empire was their most important export market, and already 18% of their industrial production crossed the Channel for the British market alone – not yet through the Channel tunnel, although there was already talk of it.

Although the concept of an Anglo-Belgian Chamber of Commerce had already existed in a latent form for some time in the minds of the founders, it did not become fact until the international tension engendered in 1890 over the Independent State of the Congo, moved them to action and form an association with the object of defending Belgian colonial interests, in particular at the memorable meeting at the London Chamber of Commerce on 4th November of that year, called to discuss the situation.

Those were also the days when, by claiming payment of Income Tax for the first time from the Chamber, our British friends officially acknowledged its existence! It had already received some recognition in the Press, in flattering articles in the "Précurseur d'Anvers" and the "Gazette de Charleroi" in 1897, and in the "Sheffield Weekly" in 1900.