



Kasteel van Loppem

STICHTING JEAN VAN CALOEN

Web Magazine of Loppem Castle.

No. 8 — July 28, 2025

**1975-2025,
a golden anniversary**

From an aristocratic summer residence to a public monument

A 'medieval' castle as a country residence

In 1848, Charles van Caloen (1815-1896) and Savina de Gourcy Serainchamps (1825-1912) inherited, in addition to their townhouse in the centre of Bruges (Dijver 11), the neo-Classical country estate at Loppem. However, the couple decided to demolish the summer residence and build a new 'medieval' castle in the neo-Gothic style to emphasise their staunch Catholic beliefs. The neo-Gothic architectural style was closely associated with the 'Catholic Revival' movement. The English architect Edward Pugin (1834-1875) created the first plans. Several designs from 1856-1858 have been preserved. Construction started in 1858, but the manor's patrons grew less fond of Pugin's work, and they asked their friend Jean-Baptiste Bethune (1821-1894) to take over the design and building. He was responsible not only for the architecture but also for the entire interior. Savina was an art enthusiast and a practical person who preferred efficient solutions. She ensured, for example, that the kitchens would not be located in the basement, which was common at the time, but on the same floor as the dining room. She also commissioned Bethune to install a goods lift.

The van Caloen family took up residence in their new castle on 2 July 1863. Each year, from early May to mid-November, they would seek out the tranquillity and respite from the summer heat found in the natural surroundings of the castle grounds.

Charles van Caloen (1815-1896),
circa 1860-1865.

Photo taken by Parisian photo-
grapher Nadar (Gaspard-Félix
Tournachon)

Jean van Caloen Foundation,
Loppem Castle



Savina de Gourcy Serainchamps (1825-1912), circa 1860-1865.

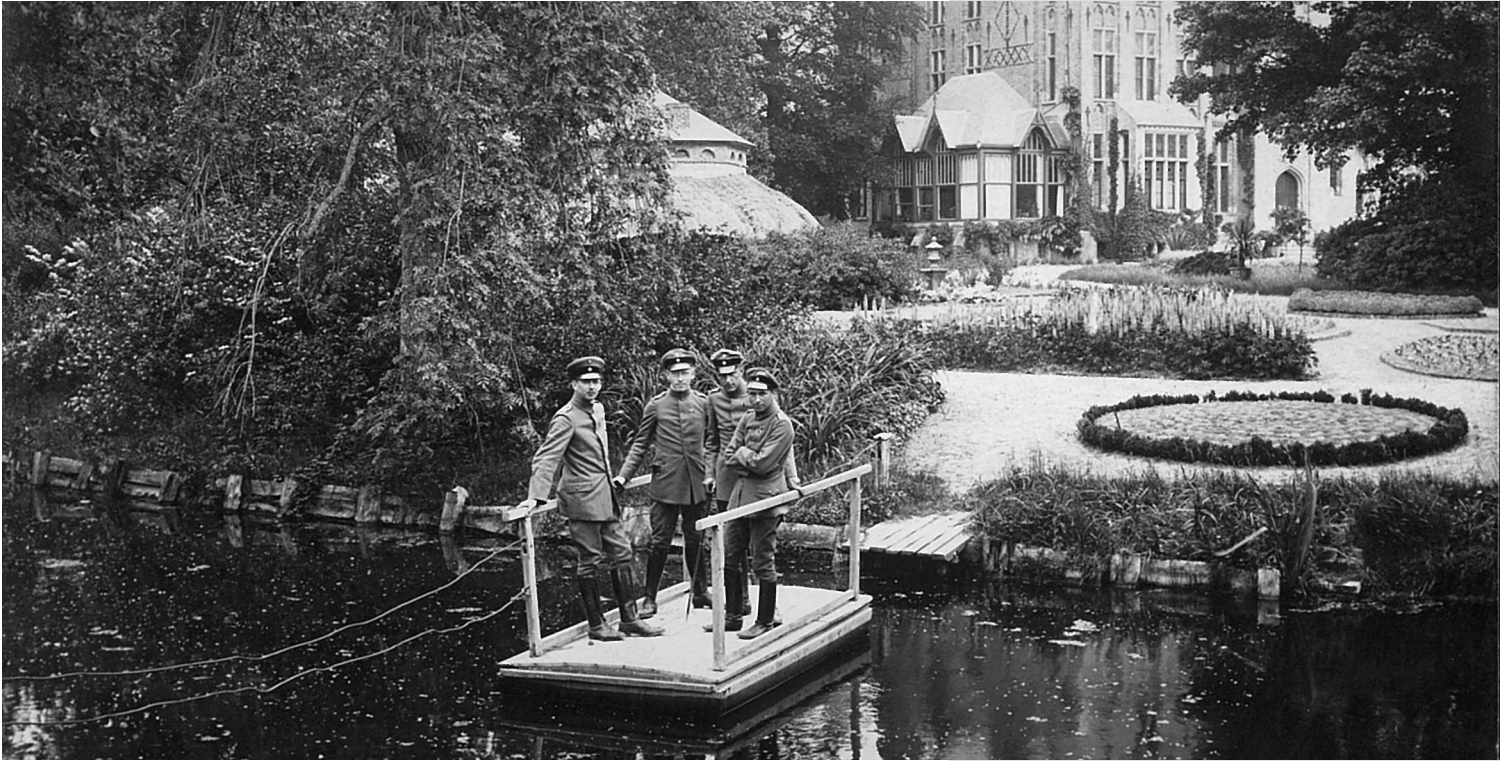
Jean van Caloen Foundation, Loppem Castle

The summer residence became a permanent residence, and even served as a royal palace for a

After Savina de Gourcy, who was widowed in 1869, passed away in 1912, their son Albert van Caloen (1856-1933) and his wife, Marie van Ockerhout (1858-1940), along with their children, moved into the residence. This generation continued to live immersed in the neo-Gothic world and way of thinking.

German officers stayed at the castle during the war years from 1914 to 1918. Note the old veranda and the lush greenery covering the walls of the annexe, which houses the Red Drawing Room.

Jean van Caloen Foundation,
Loppem Castle



From 14 October 1914, officers from the German high command stayed at the castle. Albert and Marie, along with their four youngest daughters, had to be content with three rooms on the ground floor and two bedrooms. The rest of the castle was out of bounds for them and would remain so until the German occupying forces retreated on 17 October 1918. During the final months of the occupation, a bomb shelter was built next to the castle's service entrance. The shelter is still there today. From 24 October to 21 November 1918, King Albert and his family stayed at the castle, making it the headquarters of the Belgian army, an international meeting location and the seat of the executive government during the diaspora. Critical decisions for the future of Belgium were made here, including the implementation of universal male suffrage, the recognition of trade unions and the right to strike, and the conversion of Ghent University into a Dutch-speaking institution.



An image of the ensuite bathroom in the guest room used by the royal couple. Despite the royal presence at Loppem Castle, the bathroom fittings were very basic in 1918.

Brussels, Royal Palace Archives

A difficult legacy

The young widower Jean van Caloen (1884-1972) had been living at Dijver 12 in Bruges with his young son Roland (1920-2014) since 1926. His parents, Albert and Marie, had designated him as the heir to the castle and its expansive grounds. Jean hesitated for a long time about whether he was willing to accept this inheritance. Decades later, his notes¹ show that the question was constantly on his mind from the moment he became a widower. « Il y a une grande part d'attachement personnel (about the castle and his memories of his beloved grandmother, Savina de Gourcy), à certains vieux tableaux et portraits dont je me sens quelque peu esclave. Espérons que je finirai par me sentir supérieur à cela, mais ce ne sera possible peut-être qu'après que je les aurai eu et aurai pu les arranger à mon idée. Puis ne suis-je pas seul à apprécier ces choses dans la famille et à même de les mettre en valeur ? (16 March 1932) ». When his father died in 1933, he felt burdened with his residence in Bruges and the castle at Loppem, where his mother remained until her death on 1 July 1940. « ...Et il y a mille réparations à faire à Lophem, ni bain convenable, ni eau, ni électricité: au moins un million a y mettre pour que ce soit ce que je devrais avoir. Une bibliothèque inflammable notamment à bâtir sur l' « onderstand ! » (13 nov. 1933). Vendre Lophem, trahir ses grands-parents ? »

According to Jean, his parents struggled to maintain the estate. The castle had no electricity at that time. That was also the reason Jean cited to Major Van den Heuvel on 18 May 1940 when



Fire extinguisher in the castle, 1920-1940

the major requested the castle for King Leopold III and his entourage. He then proposed that the king stay at the nearby Witte Huis (White House), where his brother Karl van Caloen and his family lived, and that they could take residence in the less accommodating castle. On 25 May, Leopold III left the Witte Huis for Wijnendale Castle. In July 1940, Loppem Castle was converted into barracks for German troops, who had heaters installed in December of that year, with Jean bearing the cost.

Despite the dark days of the occupation, Jean van Caloen concentrated on the future. He realised, like his grandparents' generation, that combining a city residence with an antiquated castle was no longer practical. He decided to build a comfortable house near the castle where

he could later live with his art collection and the family archives. One thing was of utmost importance to Jean: both had to be removed from the castle, for fear that everything would be lost in a fire. After considering several options, Jean van Caloen ultimately chose the Bruges architect Luc Viérin (1903-1979). Viérin designed a fire-resistant residence in the Bruges style, which was constructed between 1948 and 1950, opposite the stables, where the dog kennels and a cherry orchard once stood.

The four-year presence of German troops, and in particular the brief occupation by Canadian and British forces during the liberation, had clearly left their mark on both the castle and the surrounding grounds. Jean van Caloen immediately had the castle restored. His last journal entry from Dijver 12 was dated 18 June 1950. He moved soon after, and permanently settled into his new home in late July 1950. Here Jean lived amidst his collection of medieval art and the family archives, which he continued to research. Every afternoon, he would enjoy a meal in the castle's dining room. Maurice Van Overmeire and his wife, Marie, served Jean van Caloen as his driver and cook, respectively. They lived in the castle.

The establishment of a Foundation

Now that Jean lived in his 'hermitage' and as he delved deeper into the family archives, the question arose, 'what about his legacy's future?'. This question continued to haunt him, particularly because Roland – his only child – had also made it clear that he had no intention to marry. What was going to happen to the family castle if there were no grandchildren for him to welcome? During a stay in Turin in March 1950, Jean came across a beautiful, but completely dilapidated Renaissance palace that had once belonged to the Scaglia family (related to the van Caloen family). It broke Jean's heart, « ...quel dommage de ne pouvoir racheter tout ce palais pour arrêter sa ruine et le conserver à la mémoire de nos ancêtres Scaglia. Sans doute un jour, Lophem sera-t'il aussi abandonné à des étrangers, qui en tireront partie sans aucun égard et peut-être bientôt ! ».

After many conversations between father and son, they came up with a solution. On 20 December 1951, together with his son Roland, Jean van Caloen founded the non-profit organisation *Stichting van Caloen in Loppem*, with the goal of preserving and maintaining the castle, the outbuildings, and the entire domain as one indivisible whole². In addition to the actual maintenance of the inherited estate, it also provided for the procurement and study of the family archives, libraries, family heirlooms, portraits, art-

works and collections. Jean passed away in 1972, and Roland van Caloen continued his father's work. It was not an easy task, as the castle was once again in a relatively poor state, the surrounding park had to be maintained, and the numerous works of art deserved a better home. Roland van Caloen and the board of directors of the (by then renamed) *Stichting Jean van Caloen* (Jean van Caloen Foundation), decided to open the castle and park to the public. It was no mean feat to allow 'strangers' in a park, where only recently signs warning of caltrops and traps had been posted!



Sign marked 'HIER LIGGEN WOLFYZERS'

Two warning signs have been preserved, reminding us of a not-so-distant past when poachers and other unwanted trespassers were not welcome.

Jean van Caloen Foundation, Loppem Castle



Jean van Caloen (right) and his son Roland, 1970

Jean van Caloen Foundation, Loppem Castle

Loppem Castle is opened to the public

In 1974, the castle park was leased for a symbolic franc to the (then) municipality of Loppem - now the merged municipality of Zedelgem - which has been responsible for its maintenance ever since.

A first step towards opening the castle doors to the public took place in the summer of 1975, following an initiative from the Jean van Caloen Foundation. The 'Koninklijke Vereniging der Historische Woonsteden en Tuinen van België' (Translation: the Royal Society for Historic Residential Cities and Gardens in Belgium) was responsible for the estate's maintenance and supervision. This society commissioned Mr and Mrs Roger Rogghe as 'administrators', who gave guided tours in several rooms in 'Historic Loppem Castle'. The maze was also opened to the (younger) public on 5 June 1976. To retain some sense of privacy – and to safeguard Joseph van Caloen (1853-1932), later known as Dom Gérard's rock collection – Roland had the garden of 'le petit musée' encircled by walls and covered by a roof shortly after 1976. This small building was later restored and furnished as a small pied-à-terre.

It was Karel Poma (1920-2014), the former Minister of Culture in Flanders, who officially opened the new permanent exhibition of the medieval art collection on 6 April 1984. This collection, assembled by Jean van Caloen between 1908 and approximately 1955, comprises wooden and stone sculptures, altarpiece fragments, paintings, as well as ivory and alabaster pieces. This collection was relocated to the former bedrooms on the first floor of the east wing. These rooms were of minimal art historical value, making them easier to convert into museum spaces with display cases and adjustable lighting. From then on, visitors could become acquainted with this unique patrimony.



The castle park was designated by ministerial decree on 27 August 1985 as a protected landscape. A few months later, on 25 November 1985, the main castle with its outbuildings became a protected monument due to its historical and artistic value.

On 1 August 1975, the castle opened its doors to the public for the first time, with Roger Rogghe as the first guide.

Jean van Caloen Foundation, Loppem Castle

Unieke verzameling van Caloen in het kasteel van Loppem

LOPPEM (Zedelgem) — In aanwezigheid van gemeenschapsminister van cultuur Poma, goeverneur O. Vanneste en tal van andere prominenten, werd in het kasteel van Loppem overgegaan tot de opening van de doorlopende tentoonstelling van de „Verzameling Baron Jean van Caloen”.

Het betreft een aantal gotische beelden uit de 13de tot 16de eeuw, 15 authentieke gravures van Pieter Brueghel de Oude, waaronder het bekende werk „De 7 hoofdzonden” alsook een verzameling manuscripten, zgn. getijdenboeken uit de 14de en 15de eeuw. De hele verzameling werd samengebracht in een daartoe opgefriste vleugel van het neogotische kasteel van Loppem. Deze verzameling van Caloen zal permanent toegankelijk zijn tijdens de openingsperiode van het kasteel, van

april tot en met 1 november. Er is dagelijks toegang van 10 tot 12 u en van 14 tot 18 u. Behalve op maandag en vrijdag. Geleide bezoeken kunnen ook aangevraagd worden bij konservator Rogghe, tel. 050-82.22.45.

Tijdens de openingsplechtigheid werden de aanwezigen verwelkomd door Damien van Caloen, die heel speciaal mevr. Bussers, werkleidster bij de Kon. Musea in Brussel, en Paul Van de Botermet dankte voor de hulp bij de samenstelling van de tentoonstelling. Mevr. Bussers belichtte daarop de verzamelde beeldhouwwerken, gravures en manuscripten, die zich tot voor kort verspreid in het kasteel bevonden. Alles samen werden zowat 60 stukken voor deze permanente tentoonstelling weerhouden. Daartussen 3 merkwaardige madonna's, 2 Boergondische beelden van de H. Isidoor en de h. Jacobus, plus de

bovenomemde etsen van Brueghel. Bussers liet opmerken dat er geen kronologische of geografische ordening werd nagestreefd.

Zij beklemtoonde nog dat deze tentoonstelling wil aantonen wat een verzamelaar in z'n leven zoal bijeen kan brengen. Minister Poma beschouwde het als een grote eer deze unieke tentoonstelling in het historische kader van het kasteel van Loppem te mogen openen. Hij loofde de werking van de Stichting van Caloen die erover waakt dat een wetenschappelijk hoogstaand archief voor het nageslacht wordt bewaard. In verband met het kasteel van Loppem deelde de minister nog mede dat in 1979 een aanvraag werd ingediend om het kasteel als monument te klasseren. In december '83 werd hiertoe een beslissing getroffen. Eveneens in december '83 werd de procedure ingezet om de hele kasteel-

omgeving als landschap te klasseren, terwijl nu nog naar een oplossing wordt gezocht voor de museumfunctie van het geheel. Met de gebruikelijke heildronk werd de unieke verzameling van Caloen daarop door de minister opengesteld, en werd onder geleide van mevr. Bussers een eerste rondgang gemaakt.

(DAR)



Minister Poma en goeverneur Vanneste samen met de initiatiefnemers van de Stichting van Caloen. (dar)



Een prachtig beeldhouwwerk uit deze uitzonderlijke tentoonstelling. (dar)

The opening of the castle's medieval art exhibition was, for Roland van Caloen (fifth figure from the right), an ode to his father Jean, the art collector and founder of the Foundation that now serves the castle, the outbuildings and its collections (Het Nieuwsblad, April 1984).

A professional approach to visitors and collections

Roland van Caloen (1920-2014) had inherited his father Jean's passion for 'collecting art', although his interests tended towards different forms, such as old book bindings, first editions, autographs, graphic art and world art. Nonetheless, he managed to acquire several notable works of art to supplement the collection that his father had assembled. Although both Jean and Roland have passed away, the Jean van Caloen Foundation continues to adopt a targeted acquisition policy that aims to further expand the current art collection. In addition to a few paintings and sculptures, the Foundation has acquired several medieval enamel pieces, an art form that was previously missing from the collection.

In 2013, two former bedrooms were converted into museum spaces that focus on the life of Roland van Caloen, his voyages, and his interests in far-flung places. A collection of world art in a neo-Gothic castle may not be the first thing the average visitor expects, but it makes for an interesting addition. Meanwhile, the outside of the castle underwent thorough renovation from 2013 to 2015, including the facades, roofs, drains, woodwork, stained-glass windows, and ironwork. An enormous task, but essential for the future. The castle remained open to the public during the restoration work.



Visitors standing in front of the castle during a guided tour.

© Michel Goeman

The end of the First World War and the political decisions made at Loppem in 1918 were commemorated in 2018 with an exhibition titled 'Loppem Castle in 1914-1918' (4 April – 11 November 2018). Using photographs taken by Queen Elisabeth, the royal chamber and the king's desk were reconstructed to reflect their appearance in November 1918. The visitor is made to feel like a privileged witness to this pivotal moment in the country's history. This commemorative year concluded on 27 October with a symposium, 'Loppem 1918, The King, the Great War and the social contract,' in which eight historians presented their views³.

All the information panels and descriptions are presented in three languages (Dutch, French, and English). In addition to display cases, some areas have been fitted with glass locks to protect the collection. In this case, visitors can partially enter the enclosed room, but they are unable to touch the objects. In other rooms, barriers have been

positioned, and carpets define the route. Several rest points with benches enhance visitor comfort. A reception counter with a shop, CCTV surveillance, a cloakroom with lockers, toilet facilities, and a ramp for visitors with limited mobility are other essential features of a modern museum. Interested visitors who wish to learn more can choose a brief visitor guide or a more detailed, scholarly reference on the castle's history, the family, and the collections. In addition to guided tours of the castle, with certified guides, and tours of the park – which features local and exotic plants and trees and includes views of the maze, icehouses, and islands – with a nature guide, the castle also offers engaging and educational treasure hunts for younger visitors. Today, Loppem Castle's communication channels include a website, social media accounts, a newsletter, and a web magazine. The castle staff and members of the Jean van Caloen Foundation strive to offer added value to visitors who come to explore the castle.

In 2022 and 2023, popular walking tours were organised, during which visitors were introduced to various events around the castle and its residents by embarking on a journey through history. Meanwhile, the number of local and international visitors continues to grow⁴. In addition to cruise tourism, the castle primarily focuses on individual and more culture-oriented visitors. In 2024, we fell just short of 20,000 visitors (compared to 4,000 visitors 14 years ago), but numbers continue to increase, and we

are gradually approaching our maximum capacity. We should not forget that the castle was originally designed as a family home, with a unique interior featuring fragile finishes and collections. If we wish to preserve and pass on this unique heritage for future generations, we must remain vigilant and continue to emphasise the importance of high-level maintenance and quality.

Loppem Castle's main strength, aside from its stunning natural surroundings, is the culmination of three elements: the neo-Gothic architecture and interior which, despite the wars and the negative reputation this style acquired from the 1960s to 2000, have remained largely intact; the national history that was written in these rooms in November 1918; and the impressive, diverse, and high-quality art collection. It is these elements that many appreciative visitors experience and refer to in our guest book.

Benoit Kervyn de Volkaersbeke

Notes

1. Jean van Caloen kept notebooks in various sizes and formats from 1903 to 1960. These included writings related to both personal and family-related matters and events, philosophical thoughts, observations about life in Bruges, his resistance to and years at the front during the First World War, the occupation in 1940-1944, political choices, art acquisitions, his travels, his research in the archives... he entrusted everything to his friend, « mon cahier ». Sometimes his entries are daily, at other times they are spaced several days or weeks apart.
2. The establishment of the non-profit organisation *Stichting van Caloen in Loppem* was announced in the Belgisch Staatsblad on January 12, 1952.
3. The symposium was organised by the Jean van Caloen Foundation with the support of professors Sophie De Schaepdrijver (Pennsylvania State University) and Laurance van Ypersele (UCL), both specialists on the First World War period. In 2022 (planned for 2021, but postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic), in the stables on the castle grounds, a two-day symposium took place titled 'Jean Baptiste Bethune, neogotisch gesamtkunstenaar. Terugblik vanuit vergelijkend internationaal perspectief', a retrospective on the life and works of Jean Baptiste Bethune, organised by the Jean van Caloen Foundation, the Bethune Marke Foundation and KADOC-KU Leuven. Both events drew a large number of interested visitors.
4. In 2024, in addition to visitors from most European nations, we also welcomed guests from Australia, South America, the United States and Canada.

The Blue Drawing Room, ca. 1965
Photo taken by Meertens (Photo-shop), Bruges

Jean van Caloen Foundation,
Loppem Castle

