

## The Mad Marquis



A paper by Robert Pocock, images from the personal collection of Robert Pocock,  
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Hidden away a few miles to the South West of Brussels is a true gem. Mercer, referring to the 23rd Light Dragoons, introduces it thus: "... the officers were somewhat surprised at seeing guns pointed at them from several embrasures, and at the same time a venerable turbaned head, projecting from one of them, demanded, in good English, how they dared trespass on the property of the Marquis d'Acornati."



This incident went on to draw many officers, including Mercer, to visit what is now a jewel in the crown of Belgian heritage. In our lust for rushing around the battle routes, the months spent in the cavalry encampments before battle are too easily forgotten, yet something we are always delighted to offer as an addition to any Waterloo tour.

For Mercer Gaasbeek “became a favourite lounge, and I passed many a delicious morning wandering about its cool shady walks.” The grounds are indeed beautiful, whilst the mostly rebuilt Chateau appears disneyesque, yet utterly beguiling.

My first visit to Gaasbeek was a pilgrimage, following the campaign routes of Mercer so wonderfully described in his 'Journal of the Waterloo Campaign'. The tree-lined avenue described by Mercer is still there, as are views sketched by him at the time. The Chateau itself has since been restored, but many of the original features remain, whilst the woods and parkland are full of intriguing follies.

When ready to depart I asked if the castle held any records from 1815, whereupon the archivist was asked to appear. Beginning to explain my interest in British officers visiting Gaasbeek in 1815, he replied with the words "Cavalié Mercer". Wow, you know I replied. He then said "I have been waiting for this day all of my life." I think he meant his career, but what warmth and interest he has kindly shown me on this and subsequent visits.





The quixotic Marquis, Paul Arconti, who received Mercer was a former Mayor of Brussels. Well travelled, he enjoyed dressing both himself and his rooms in Ottoman finery. Mercer describes him wearing “a white muslin turban, somewhat soiled, but plentifully beset with precious stones ... an ample caftan of blue cloth ... tied across the chest with strings... A crimson silk sash girded his waist, in which was stuffed an

Oriental poignard (knife) ... entirely covered with precious stones. In his right hand he carried a short spear, and in his left a small cor de chasse (French horn)".

They stood within a "... lofty room, with a coved roof, painted in blue and white stripes in imitation of the interior of a Turkish tent ... ornamented with an imitation of golden cords and tassels. Round the walls were suspended trophies formed of sword, daggers, pistols ... almost all Oriental."

Despite the beautiful grounds, around him the castle was falling into disrepair, mostly devoid of furniture, the servants and horses hardly in keeping with the grandeur of the place. Not so now, the rooms are halls of beauty and the Chateau is open to the public.

First established 800 years ago, the castle came into the ownership of Lamoral of Egmond, Knight of the Golden Fleece, a pivotal figure in many political and religious conflicts where constantly being on the right side was of critical importance to survival - for which he eventually and literally lost his head in Grand Place, Brussels, apparently displaying great dignity before the final act, on the orders of the Spanish king.

Over the years the castle has had its fill of destruction, now displaying interior artwork of the French burning down the Chateau in 1684. But best avoided when the Marquis took Mercer on a tour of his estate was his monument to Napoleon, a triumphal arch which predates the Arc de Triomphe, through which he had intended a direct road from Brussels to Paris to pass (despite it being located in the wrong direction!)







From 1796 the castle and lands - including 17 villages - passed to the Italian Arconati Visconti family. Best described as 'flamboyant', Paul Arconati he served as Mayor of Brussels, where he kept an imposing home, now part of the Government estate, whilst decorating his country home with the fruits of his travels. A little painting pointed out to me by Bouwijn Goosens the archivist displayed in the castle records the Marquis on horseback, decked out in the oriental finery that Mercer describes:



*View of Gaasbeek Castle circa 1805, Jean-Baptiste De Roy, Gaaasbeek collection*