Waterloo, A History in Postcards

A paper by Robert Pocock, originally printed as a series in the Waterloo Journal during 2016 & 2017. Images from the personal collection of Robert Pocock, published by CampaignsandCulture.com

Peppering the field of battle are properties that, despite damage on the day, have withstood the test of time. Maps, drawings, paintings, eyewitness and visitor testimonies attest to the destructive events that these properties suffered, endured and in many cases survived.

Many of the precious original drawings and paintings of these battle-weary buildings handed down to us are interpretations of what the artist saw. Many more are copies or re-interpretations of another artist's work by those who were never there, and so even in the months and years shortly after the battle the depictions vary enormously.

The evolution of these evocative properties adds another dimension for the modern battlefield tourist. Since the adoption of the battlefield preservation act of 26th March 1914 no changes can be made to existing buildings or structures without government authorisation, indeed the Government is even authorised to expropriate them! The benefits to us now are incalculable.

Yet well before Government intervened, the local community had an interest in preserving these buildings, as their homes, livelihoods, and to draw economic benefit from travellers keen to visit the furnace of Europe's destiny. Soldiers, poets, clergy and artists drew the battlefield, but in time photography enabled postcards to record snapshots in time as the properties and their immediate surroundings evolved.

The Brussels Road

Cutting through the heart of the Waterloo battlefield is the Charleroi-Brussels road. Numerous old postcards record the many monuments that line this road, from the Belgian, Hanoverian and Gordon on Wellington's ridge, to the Hugo and Wounded Eagle on the French ridge.

We start at Wellington's overnight headquarters in Waterloo. Built in 1705, by 1815 this was the widow Bodenghien's inn and stables. In the late 1800s this opened to the public, becoming a proper museum in 1955 and the Wellington Museum that we know today in 1975. Signage on the face of the property prior to the museum states "In this house is to be seen the bed in which the Duke of Wellington slept the glorious eighteenth of June 1815 … the room not only contains the bed, but also many things most interesting to English people." The adoring travellers could then calm themselves in the Café Restaurant, enjoying the advertised Allsopp's Pale Ale or Imperial Stout (in fine condition!) stiffened-up with a choice of Irish, Scotch or Canadian whisky, London gin, Schweppes or a gentler Horniman's tea!

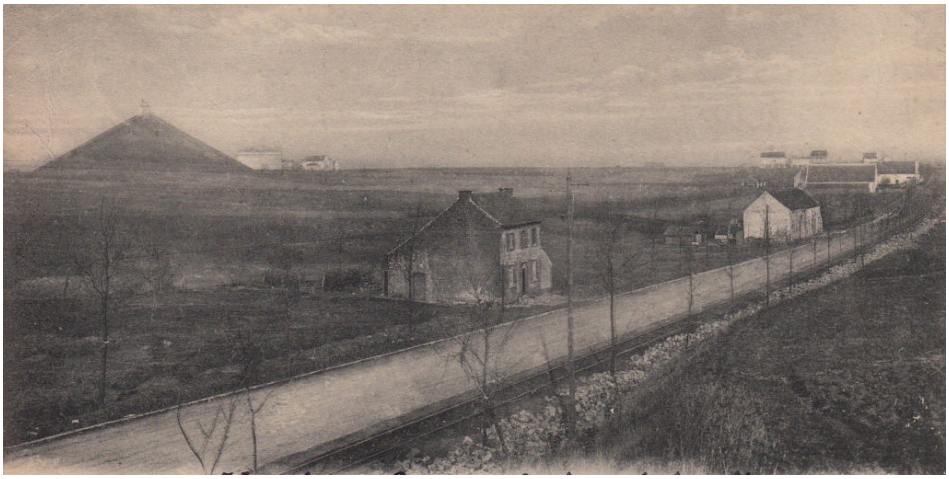
A haven of calm offering tribute to the fallen is the Royal Chapel opposite the museum. This wonderful echo-chamber of a building was inaugurated in 1690 in the hope that the Hapsburg Charles II of Spain & The Southern Netherlands would sire a son. He failed, leading to the War of the Spanish Succession in which the Duke of Marlborough proved himself such a masterful leader, campaigning over much the same territory a century before Wellington. The main church was added behind in 1826:

Moving towards the battlefield we reach the strategically vital fork in the road, splitting towards Nivelles and Charleroi. Following the Charleroi road towards the allied ridge we pass the great Mont St Jean farm complex, which took its current shape in the 1770s, and where the Life Guards dug potatoes on the morning of the battle. The most recent evolution includes an excellent medical museum and micro-brewery. This image looks North to Mont St Jean village, showing the tramway that led South to the battlefield, and taken long before the Royal Army Medical Corps tablet was erected in 1981:

The intriguing and commanding property in the distance is Cheval Castle, built in 1895 on the road fork by a Frenchman who made his fortune in chemical fertilizers. Comprising 4 towers and 99 windows, he slept in his castle just once, but his daughter and her husband occupied it through to 1962. It was demolished to permit road widening in 1966, and you can now walk over the site by visiting McDonalds.

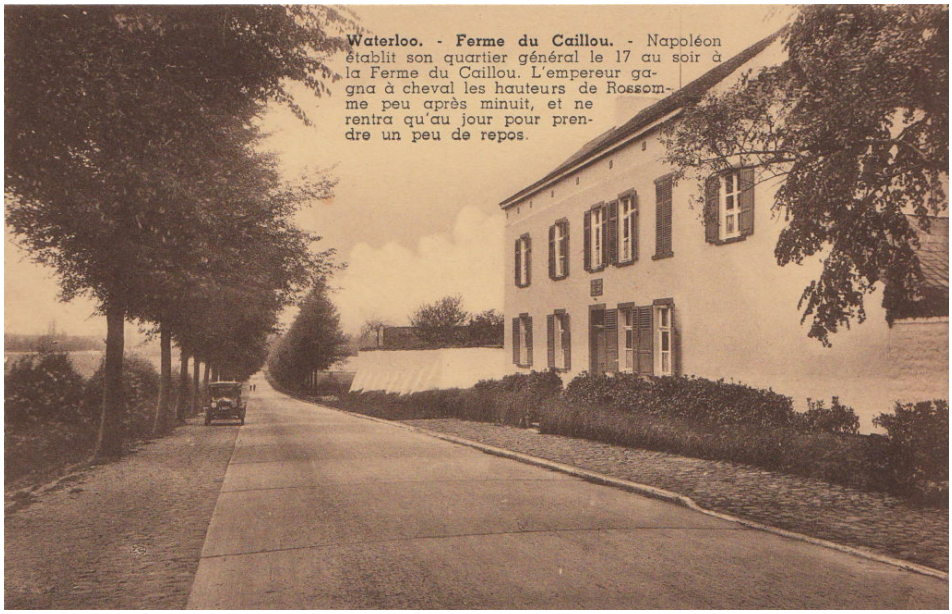
Now over the allied ridge to La Haye Sainte. Famed in battle, and little changed today, it hosted military topographer William Siborne from May to November 1830, the man to whom we owe such thanks for collecting so many first-hand accounts of the battle. To the right is the tramway which was extended beyond the Lion mound for the crowds attending the unveiling of the wounded eagle monument on 28th June 1904. In 1898 a tram also connected Braine L'Alleud railway station to the battlefield:

Further down the road towards the French ridge we come across this haunting view. The two nearest houses are post-Waterloo, but beyond them is La Haye Sainte and up on the ridge the Lion mound, the Panorama and the buildings at the crossroads.



Moving up to the French ridge we reach Belle Alliance, which has its own chapter. Beyond this was the modest home of Jean-Baptiste De Coster who made his fortune telling tales of being seized to act as reluctant guide to Napoleon during the battle. The house still exists, but with a brick façade:

Heading on South beyond the heights of Rosomme we finally reach Le Caillou, now home to Napoleon's Last HQ Museum. Now set back from a wide road, this image illustrates how much the road network has changed. Plundered and torched, the ruins were put up for sale within five weeks of the battle, whilst a substantial claim for losses was prepared, so little of this building is original:



Le Caillou has become famous for displaying the original table, chairs and cloth used by Napoleon, although how these could have survived the looting and destruction, before being remarkably discovered over 50 years later is beyond me. Like Wellington's bed, the allure of relics must have been compelling.

The Lion Hamlet

Standing proud, disdainfully facing the French border, overlooking the 'mournful plain' described by Victor Hugo, the imposition of Le Monument may well have "ruined" Wellington's battlefield by removing much of the escarpment. Yet this mighty mound, and the community of properties that grew up around it on the allied ridge has been at the forefront of visitor attraction, doing much to sustain the interest of the masses to this most important of battlefields over so many years.

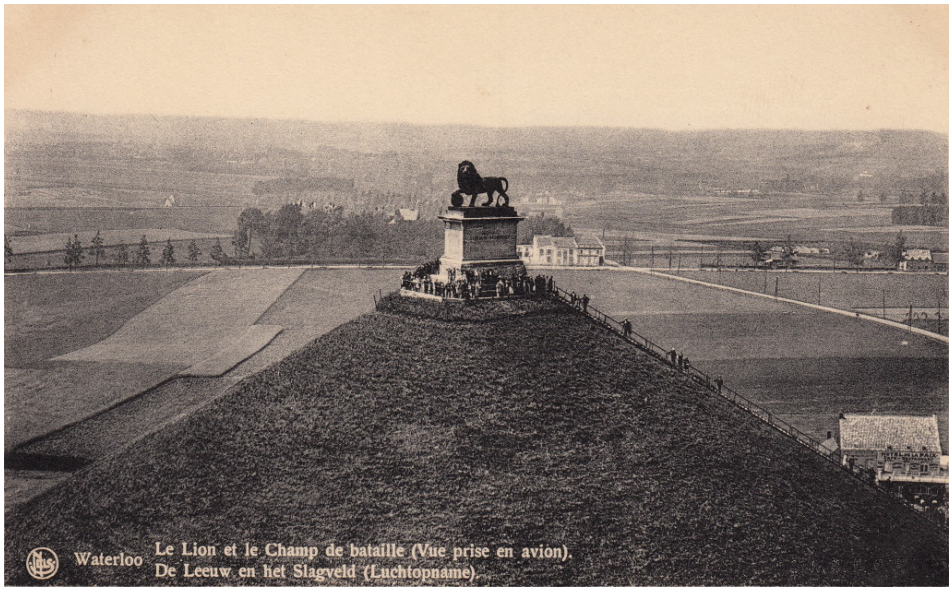
In the immediate aftermath of Waterloo, the opportunity to cement the identity of William I's Kingdom of the Netherlands was too good to miss; memorialising a monumental battle on the soil of such a young Kingdom, on the spot where its eldest prince had played his gallant part, shedding blood whilst leading the united Dutch and Belgian troops who played such a conspicuous role in the defeat of Napoleon.

In the aftermath of battle competitions of painting, poetry and architecture were established. Queen Wilhelmina, originally a Prussian princess, took a keen interest in selecting the architectural winner, sorting the plans from sarcophagus, ossuary, stone and brick monuments, arch and fountain to the winning mound design.

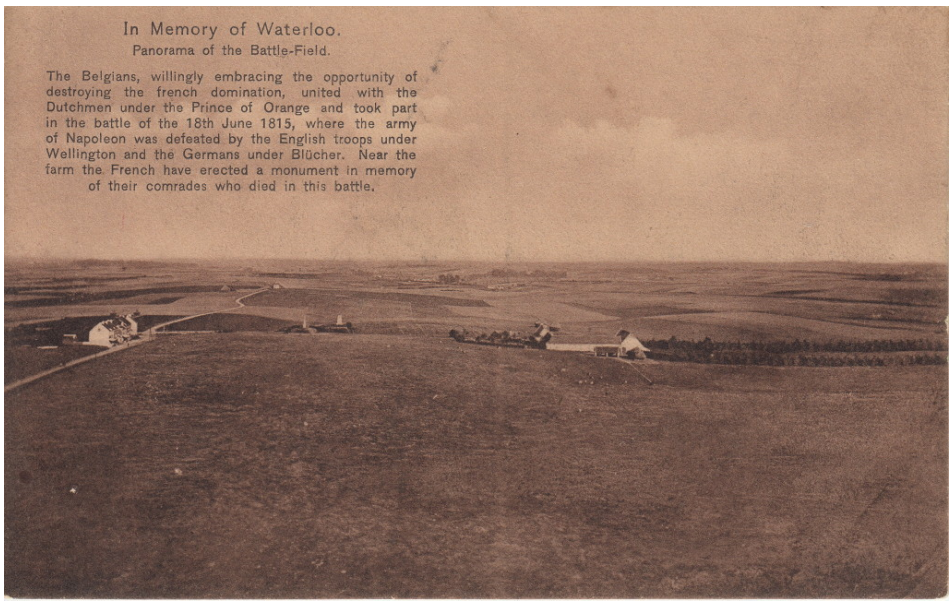
The mound and lion were described by their architect Van der Straeten, the lion symbolising victory, the paw rested on the globe signifying the repose of Europe. Construction commenced in 1824 and was completed in October 1826, the mound over 40 metres high surrounded by 140 blue stones. The 28 ton cast iron lion, sculpted by J-L Van Geel from Malines, forged in Liège, is formed of nine pieces, each being pulled by 20 horses on the final part of their journey to the mound. The

pedestal and plinth raises the monument over 50 metres tall. There was no formal unveiling ceremony.

Our first image looks towards the Nivelles road and Braine L'Alleud before the construction of the motorway, showing the lion mound with some interesting undulations and views in the surrounding landscape. Many of these features are either no longer present or obscured by development and trees. At the foot of the mound is the Hotel de la Paix, built in 1904 as a private dwelling, becoming a hotel in 1932:



This view from the lion mound to the crossroads, across to Papelotte and beyond shows a wonderfully open view due to the almost total absence of trees. Taken before the construction of Le Monastère de Notre-Dame de Fichermont in 1913, and before the private driveway running down to La Haye Sainte, with no vegetation in the sandpit area and a much deeper curve than exists today along the Rue de la Croix:



The only house to be built before the mound, in 1823, became a cabaret (inn), evolving into the Hotel des Touristes. This hotel shared the same fate as Hotel de la Paix, demolished in 2013/4 to make way for the underground Memorial museum. Then in 1828 a Waterloo veteran was given the job of guardian of the mound, for whom a small house was built, then rebuilt in 1929, before finally being demolished to make way for the Visitor's Centre. The post of guardian continued through to 1989.

By 1834 three thatched houses had been built near the crossroads. As this row of properties evolved, one constructed in 1882 as a café-restaurant (since extended, and still the closest restaurant to the crossroads) was known as "La Vue de l'Arbre de Wellington" looking over to the former location of the famous Elm. The image below shows what is now the frontage of Le 1815 Hotel, formerly the Grande Musée du Chemin Croix and Restaurant des Monuments:

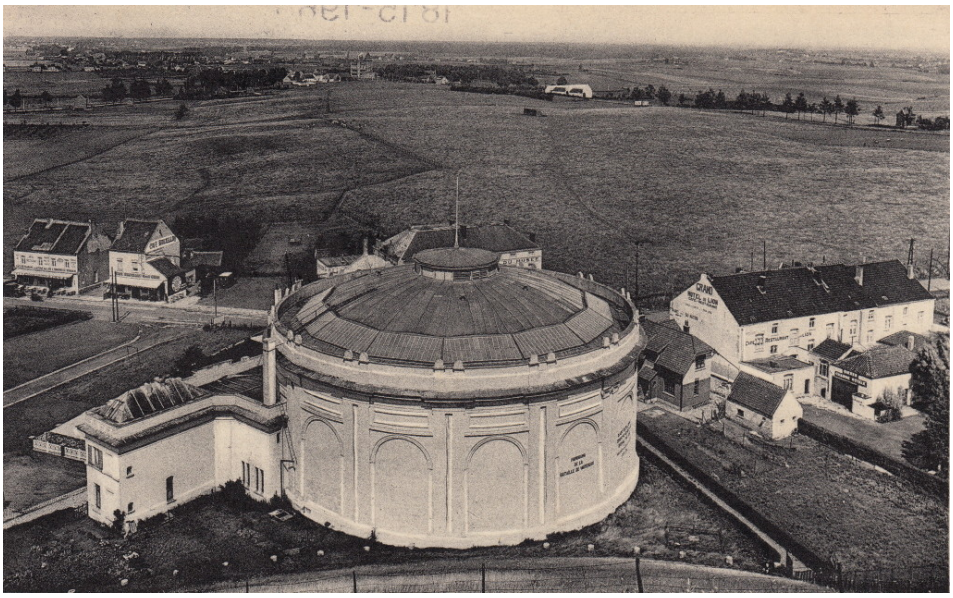
Much of the British appreciation of the hamlet revolves around Edward Cotton, a Waterloo veteran in the 7th Hussars and author of "A Voice from Waterloo". Mr & Mrs Cotton moved to Mont St Jean in 1828, and subsequently to a house adjacent to the guardian. Cotton became the doyen of battlefield guides, until his death in 1849 when his body was interred beside Guards officer Blackman in the walled garden of Hougoumont. His collection of battlefield memorabilia was subsequently displayed by his niece in the Hôtel du Musée in the lion hamlet, often referred to as the 'Cotton Museum' although the building wasn't constructed until after his death.

This image taken from the top of the mound shows the largest building, the Hôtel du Musée. Just to the left in front of Hôtel de Musée the tall building is Hôtel des Touristes. Further to the left are the 1902 Waterloo Hotel (and subsequently Cotton discotheque!), and to its left the 1893 hotel, restaurant and tearoom Laiterie du Lion / Le Hussard, both demolished in 2015:

The above image also shows, behind the line of large trees, Mont St Jean farmhouse, and to the left of the trees the tall Castle of Mont-St-Jean. This imposing property was built in 1895, demolished in 1966, and now ignominiously is the site of the McDonalds “drive-thru”. Similar ‘march of history’ is evident just across the roundabout on the location of the modern Jaguar Land Rover dealership, which stands on the site of the former Hôtel des Collones, where Victor Hugo stayed whilst polishing his grand tome Les Miserables (and much Waterloo fiction!), seen below:

The distinctive rotunda building was created in 1911 to house the famed Dumoulin panorama as the great French cavalry charges swept the ridge. Still one of the largest paintings in the world, and restored to its full beauty for the bicentennial, 110m. long x 12m. high it took ten months for the team of painters to complete. This again changed the lion hamlet considerably, and 1913 saw the building of the adjoining Le Grand Hôtel du Lion and Hôtel du Prince d’Orange, part of which survived until 1989 to make way for the Visitor Centre, alongside part of the Le Wellington Café which

survived until the Visitor Centre was demolished as part of the bicentenary improvement scheme:



Over the years the lion mound has survived many threats to its existence. In 1831 French troops passed this way in support of the Belgian Revolution, damaging the Prussian Monument in Plancenoit and threatening the lion, behaviour that was promptly corrected by their commander, Marshal Gérard, who in 1815 had fought at both Ligny and Wavre. By 1832 the now independent Belgian parliament saw the lion mound as a sign of Dutch oppression and odious to their friends the French, but all was protected by locals keen to preserve their roaring tourist trade. In 1918 proposals were presented to blow up the lion as a means of celebrating French-Walloon solidarity, or less severely to turn its face to the North, but by 1925 these were replaced by plans for the demolition of the entire monument! In WW2 the mound featured anti-aircraft defences. Thankfully it survives.

Initially there was no intention that anyone should climb the mound, but log steps were added in 1835, the 226 steps in 1863, then the viewing platform at the top in 1864. This image shows the somewhat unkempt bushy look before today's robotic lawnmowers enabled the current close-cropped shave:

The prime location of the mound, at the centre of Wellington's ridge, built on ground so hotly and valiantly contested on the day of battle, has witnessed much change over its two centuries of life. The huge investment for the 2015 bicentenary has dramatically improved the visitor experience, but at the same time we have lost some history. These old images help us to understand the experiences of those early battlefield tourist pioneers and provide a vital connection to the landscape as it once was.

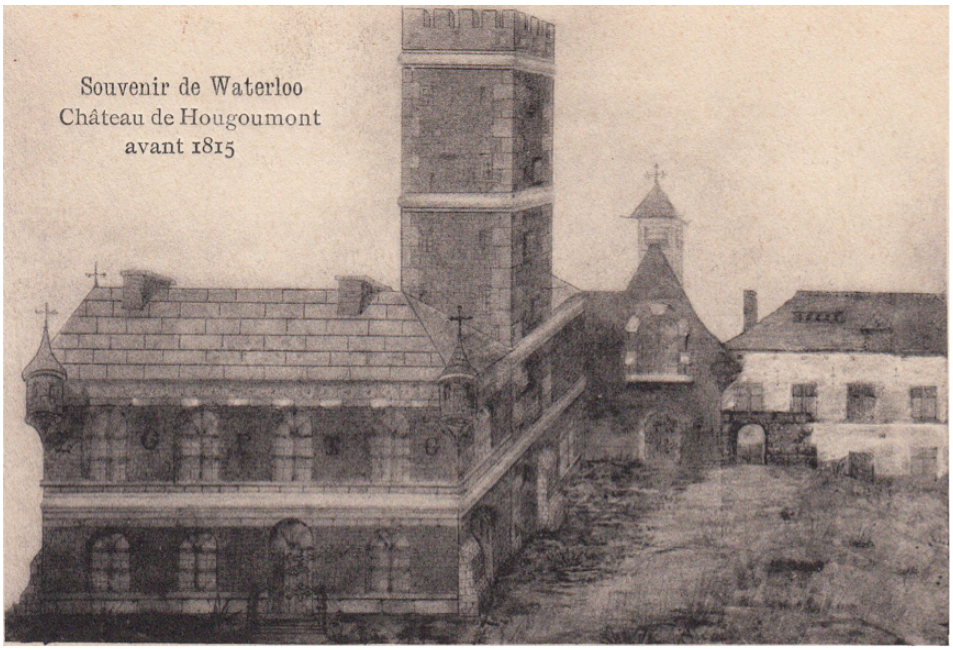
Hougoumont

Hougoumont, Hougomont, Goumont, Gomont. This multi-named, tightly knit assemblage of château, home, farm, chapel, woodland, orchards, gardens, walls, hedges and gates, ditches and lanes has impressed itself upon our psyche as a stoically defended killing ground of huge international significance.

Often argued as being the "key to victory" of Waterloo, the shattered remnants of fruit-trees, flowering shrubberies, woodland and alleys of holly and yew that bore witness to the events of 18th June 1815 are long gone. Yet three great lighting-scarred

Sweet Chestnuts still stand near the South Gate, and of these just one clings to life, an enduring witness to the heroism and horrors of war and the trials and tribulations of Private Clay. Peppered with musket balls, massive, gnarled and ancient, this tree is a surviving link with this place on that famous day.

The extensive sketches and paintings following the battle show us varying and often misleading images, so it is good to jump the decades to the age of photography to get a 'feel' for what Hougoumont and its surroundings appeared to the Victorian and Edwardian traveller. But to prove the point, our first postcard is just a drawing, giving a wild interpretation of how the Chateau looked prior to the battle. This image is very different to other images of the Château (such as those now on display at Hougoumont), in design, style, layout and finish, a warning that artistic licence knows no bounds!



The ground and property are also giving up their secrets, with the current superb works of archaeologists challenging and adding to the received wisdom of the past two centuries. The bicentennial restoration of the property now preserves this great fortress for future generations, but what of its history before the battle, and what can we learn about its evolution following the battle?

The local historian Jacques Logie found two mentions of "Gomont" in the 1300s, the second as a "tenure and home". In 1474 the Order of St John of Jerusalem (the Knights of Malta) sold, for 100 crowns, 'the Goumont' comprising 24 bonniers of land (a bonnier being a measure of the amount of land that could be sown with around 8 bushels of seed). As the estate passed through various hands and grew in size the château was built, before passing in 1671 to a Spanish Lowlands courtier, whose grandson became Lord of Gomont. Left to a childless widow in 1791, the land then passed through marriage to an Austrian Knight, Philippe Louville, who had previously built a large house 'Hotel d'Hougoumont' in Nivelles in 1771.

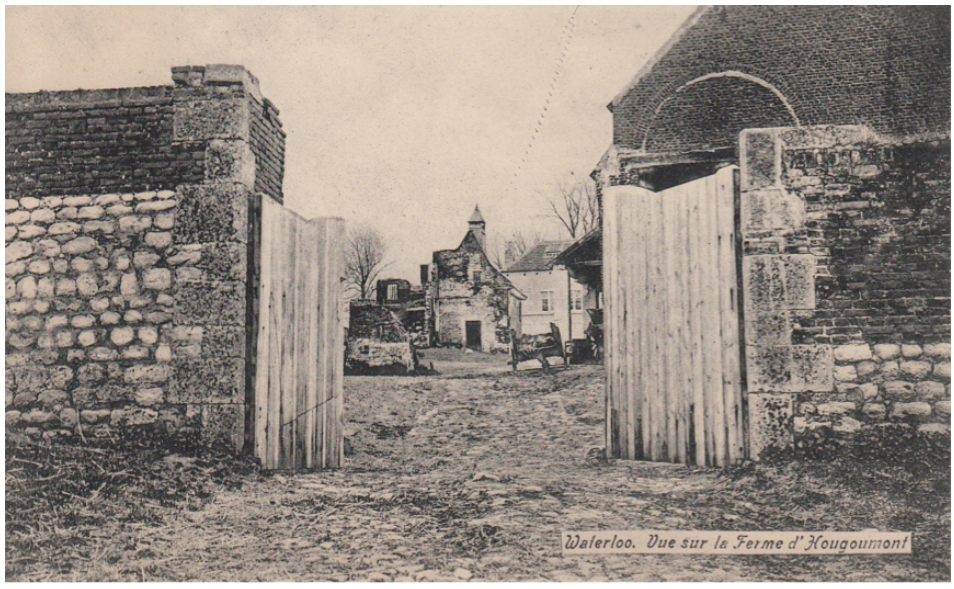
The layout of the extensive woodland and formal gardens surrounding “Chateau d’Hougoumont” in 1771 is recorded in the beautiful cartography of Ferraris. By 1815 the land-use was much changed, mostly turned over to farmland, with a gardener living on site. In May 1816, the 86 year old Louville finding that he was unable to restore his damaged estate, sold it. Whilst the new owner pledged to preserve Hougoumont, the long-suffering gardener who had survived the travails of battle was required to leave his home. Hougoumont remained in private hands until 2003.

Postcards of Hougomont are numerous, so we can only show a small selection here. Our next card is typical of the familiar scene taken of the chapel, connected to remnants of the Chateau that was destroyed on the day. Rustic workers are often a feature of these images:

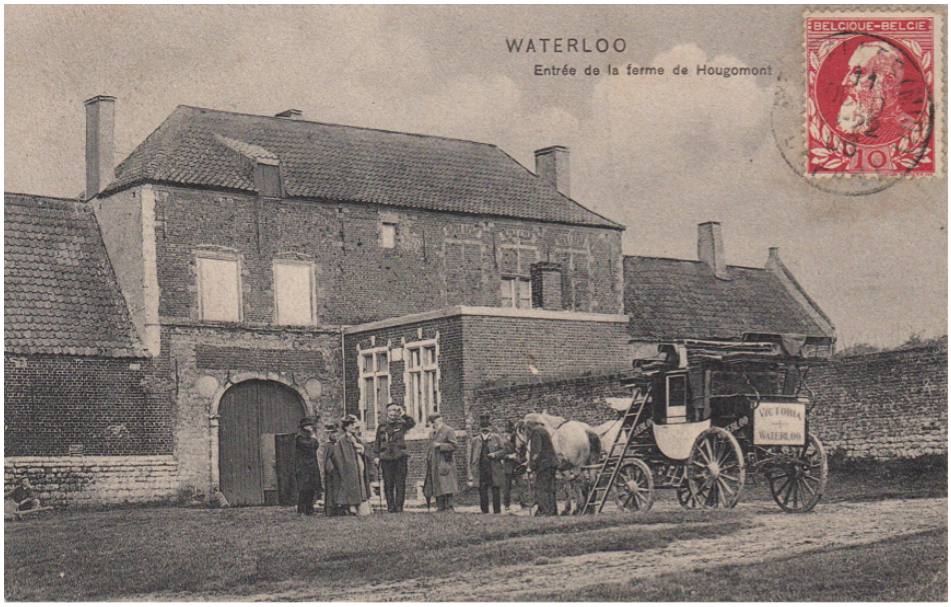
Moving back we take in a wider view of the working farm complex, looking toward the gardener’s house and the South gate, above which today is the cosy and tasteful apartment now let by the Landmark Trust:

Turning around to look down towards the North Gate, various postcards over the years show many different forms of gate, heights of wall and changes in land-use beyond the gate up towards the allied ridge. In the foreground is the well, much collapsed since the end of the battle, which itself became a popular photography spot thanks to Victor Hugo's myth of 300 French bodies:

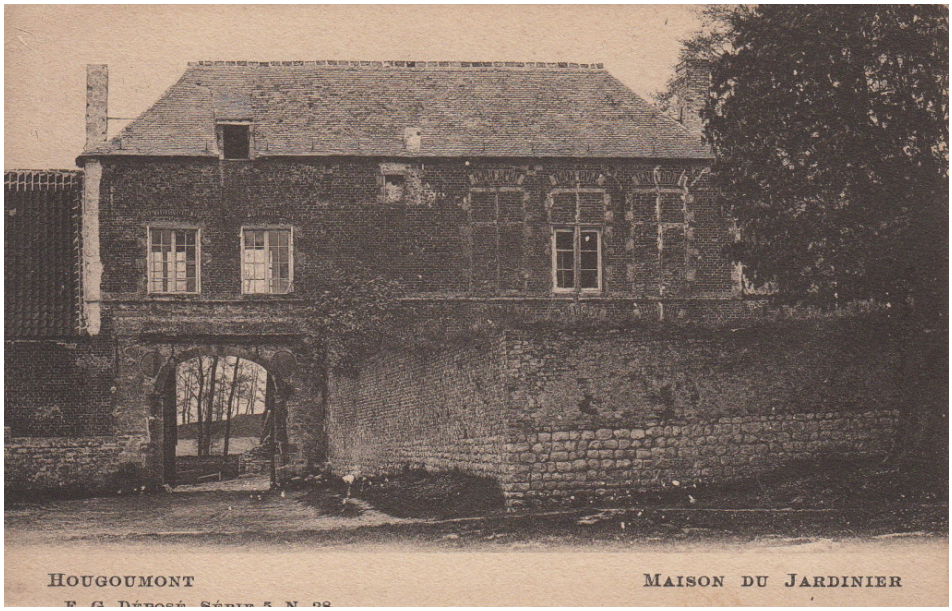
This famous view from outside the North Gate appeared on many cards, echoing the famous ‘closing of the gates’ event. Again showing many different sections and levels of brick and stone, confirming that the walls that we see today are not what the soldiers of 1815 saw. Just visible are pillars which used to extended the main barn out into the courtyard:



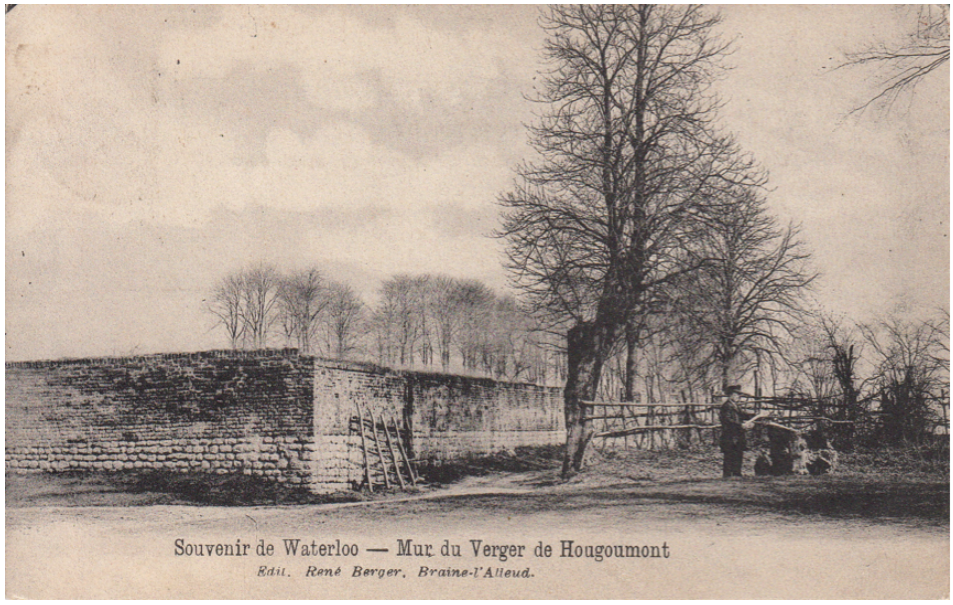
Walking around to the South Gate we have two images. The first shows the onset of organised tourism, with the Victoria to Waterloo coach and some very well dressed ladies and gentlemen:



The second, older view without the ugly extension, since demolished, is particularly unusual, showing two glazed windows above the South Gate with a view right through the Gardener's house, into the courtyard and up to the ridge beyond:



Walking along the South side of the wall we reach the corner of the formal garden wall. The preparation for the defence of these walls on the night before Waterloo has consumed much ink, and it is intriguing to reflect on the latest thinking that the loopholes were actually prepared by Frenchmen, loyal French royalists, as they prepared to defend Hougoumont against the revolutionaries back in 1794!



Climbing back in to the formal garden (not encouraged today!) we head back to the courtyard and a very unusual view showing the internal West wall of the complex with low farm buildings that today are simply not there. From studying the many maps drawn from 1816 and 1820 they appear to have been erected long after the battle:

This final evocative image of the crumbling North Gate amply shows the state to which Hougoumont can deteriorate without love and care, a reminder that restoration has been essential and necessary to the Hougoumont story ever since the battle:

La Belle Alliance

La Belle Alliance, centre of the French line, objective of the victorious allied advance and witness to the defeat of the Imperial Guard has an ample place in history. Its name was used for a Prussian celebratory square in Berlin, and it is, for many Frenchmen, still the preferred battle title.

Looking back to the turn of the 18th Century the land on which La Belle Alliance now stands was in the ownership of ‘General Jaco’, a mercenary commander who was to embarrass a portion of Marlborough’s Anglo-Allied army in the first Battle of Waterloo in 1705, more of a night-time raid upon drunken troops, much celebrated in France and later described by Winston Churchill as the ‘unfought’ Battle of Waterloo.

Construction of the main building, a farmhouse, took place in 1764/5. The barn at the back (Plancenoit side) of the main building was added in 1772, with a small bakery attached to the south. The largest barn that we see today, on the North side closest to the road junction, was built after the 1815 battle.

Paving of the route running beside the farm from Mont St Jean to Charleroi commenced in 1680, and took over 30 years to complete. The paving was some 2 to 3 meters wide, flanked by summer paths taking the total width to 5 to 6 metres. As observed on the 17th June 1815 on the allied retreat from Quatre Bras, the dust from coal carts drawn from Charleroi to Brussels blackened both the mud and many a soldier along the route.

The name “La Belle Alliance” has been used as a backdrop to the successful partnership of Wellington and Blücher’s armies, adding froth to the dispute over the precise meeting place of Wellington and Blücher after the battle. Yet its name was established well before 1815. The beautiful 1777 cartography of Ferraris, an Austrian who mapped in detail and wondrous colour what is now modern-day Belgium, records the Cabaret La Belle Alliance as a cluster of three buildings.

Local historians’ research has built on the observations of one of the early battlefield visitors, Walter Scott. The ‘old and ugly’ builder of the 1764 farm married, in the same year, an apparently beautiful young girl Barbe-Marie Tordeur, who died just a year later. She remarried in 1766, choosing a farmer from Plancenoit who died in 1770, whereupon she promptly married the farmhand, only to expire herself in 1777. It seems that the original marriage to the pretty peasant girl, or perhaps the regularity of marriage, raised some mirth within Plancenoit, encouraged by the local priest who coined the phrase “Belle Alliance”. Naturally, many variations of the tale exist!

In June 1794 La Belle Alliance, now under new ownership, would have witnessed the march of the French forces on their way to secure their victory over the Dutch-Austrian army on Mont St Jean plateau and on to Waterloo, following up on their success at the Battle of Fleurus. One of their number was a newly- promoted 25 year old, Brigadier General Soult, whose return 21 years later as Chief of Staff was to be less successful.

By 1815 La Belle Alliance was owned by a Plancenoit brewer who rented the premises to the innkeeper. Paintings in the aftermath of the 1815 battle show the roof-tiles dotted with artillery shot, with the barn behind depicted as a wreck. There followed five months of intense tourism to the ‘Hotel’ La Belle Alliance, and suspicion that the Inn was serving meat sliced from the victims of Waterloo, before the property was sold for a huge sum to a Glaswegian.

With the demise of the travelling coal trade the inn lost its purpose, and by the mid 1800s it seems La Belle Alliance simply became a farm. But postcards show many interesting evolutions from this point.

This first image (below) appears to be one of the earlier cards, with a set of mature trees lining the cobbled road. This and most subsequent cards show the marble plaque above the door, claiming this as the meeting place between Wellington and Blücher:

The cobbled road is well shown on this next image, originally black and white, subsequently colour-enhanced, with young replacement trees planted opposite the building beside a new pathway which opens up the view. Fewer trees are planted on the right, and a road sign now points to Plancenoit:

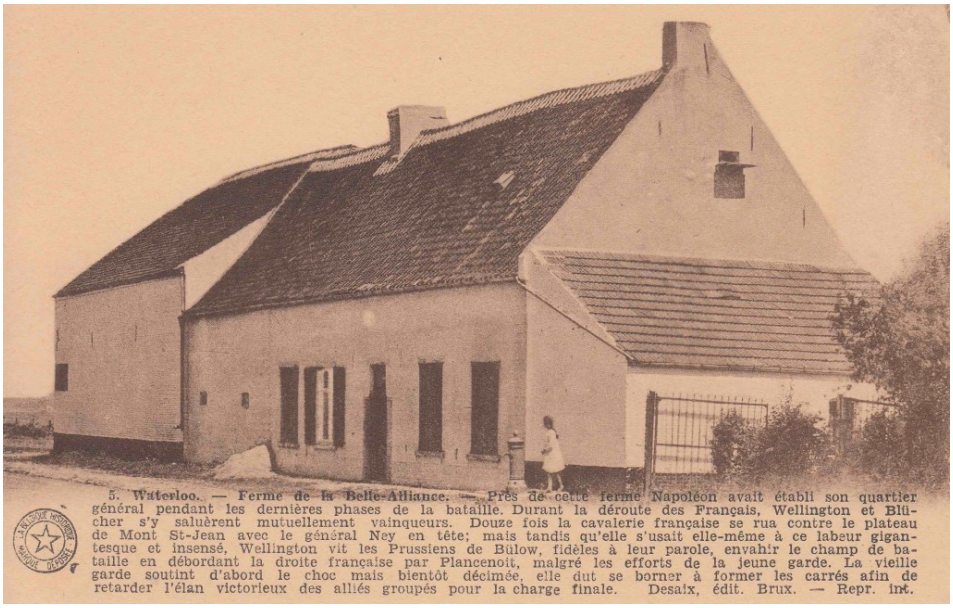
Our third card below shows the property now with a hoarding recording the meeting of Blucher and Wellington, and the attraction “Chambre Historique de Napoleon”, although most historians would now agree that the meeting occurred elsewhere and that Napoleon certainly never slept there! If that wasn’t enough to bring in the punters the “Café Restaurant” also promoted “Heinz Sauces Tomate Baked Beans Olives”. Heinz only started to go global from 1886, and the postmark on the rear of the card reads 1926, so this image has a broad range of possible dates:

Next is broadly the same image with its signage, shuttered windows, and the addition of a few young trees beside the simple Plancenoit signpost. The post- Waterloo barn beside the road junction features “Auld Reekie”, now and possibly then an Islay malt, or some other evocation of Edinburgh’s nickname, as the North barn evolved into an advertising hoarding:

By the time that Ford Autos were advertising on the site the inn is closed, trees have grown, the signpost has some ornate additions, the road has been resurfaced and a water pump has been added to the front of the property. The smaller entrance door has been bricked up and the windows either side made smaller. The sign above the water pump “La Dernière Heure Bruxelles” refers to a French language newspaper established in Brussels in 1906. A small ventilation hatch has been created high up on the side of the property and many roof tiles replaced. The marble sign above the front door has vanished:

This slightly earlier image (the water pump and newspaper sign are yet to be installed) shows that “Ford” could easily be interchanged for other brands. Two sets of shutters on the right are missing, but we see a good view down the avenue of maturing trees towards the allied ridge:

Reverting again to a farm, this image with the girl beside the water pump is perhaps the best-known and most widely available antique card:



Later, beside a modernised road sign, the property falls on hard times, becoming little more than a dishevelled roadside hovel. All shutters have gone, a modernised road sign has been erected, but at least the barns either side have been repainted and re-roofed, and it sports that modern essential, an aerial above the door. A replacement marble plaque has re-appeared above the door, now set slightly lower than the original plaque which has since found its way via La Caillou to the Musée Wellington where today it can be seen in the garden:

And finally, this unique view shows La Belle Alliance from the North, in its early days, perhaps just after the line of mature trees in our first card had been removed. This is the view, as it would have appeared to travellers arriving from Brussels, with the welcome word “Estaminet” on the wall. Looking this word up in the dictionary, we find the definition “a small café, especially a shabby one”:

Poor La Belle Alliance. Within a few years of the battle it received royalty from the Netherlands, Russia, Prussia and Britain, since when it has attempted to re- invent itself many times. But standing alone, away from the attractions of the lion mound with its famed Panorama and succession of museums, it seems that it has always struggled to be little more than a shabby also-ran!

Bibliography & recommended further reading:

Charet and Pattyn Cecille. Mont Saint Jean 6-7 juillet 1794 (book, French)

Micheal Damiens: micheldamiens.wordpress.com

Véronique Denis-Simon: 200 years of stories around the Lion Hill (book, French)

Tim Sutherland & team: tls509.wixsite.com/archaeologyawaterloo

Tondeur, Coppens, Courcelle & others: Waterloo 1815 Les Carnets de la Campagne (books, French)

Pierre de Wit: waterloo-campaign.nl

Waterloo Uncovered: https://waterloouncovered.com

Alasdair White: Of Hedges, Myths and Memory:
http://marsethistoria.nl/images/recentonderzoek/hougoumont.pdf