

Stropersbos



Welcome in the Stropersbos!

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Municipality border



Heath Dog-violet
Water Violet
Heather seedling
Sphagnum
Heather

Welcome in the Stropersbos!



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The Stropersbos (Stropers forest) covers an area of 350 ha and the area falls under the municipalities of Stekene and Sint-Gillis-Waas. It is an official Flemish nature reserve and domain forest, a protected landscape and the area is part of the habitat charter area 'Forests and moors of sandy Flemish Easterly area'. The valuable nature was restored with the support of the European LIFE programme.

The variety in moisture and wealth of nutrients make this area a varied landscape, which is divided through the centre by the Line, a historic remnant of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1702. In the north there is the foothill of the Maldegem-Stekene ridge of wind-blown sand deposits. This elongated dry ridge of sand is nutrient-poor and was mainly planted with pine trees. As a result of the project, heather and heather-poor grasslands once again populate this nutrient-poor area. Towards the Line, the natural seepage and the central depression form the ideal conditions for a permanently moist alder forest with typical seepage plants such as Water Violet. The depression is a relatively level area with micro-relief and many small watercourses.

There is a second, less dry ridge of sand deposits in the south, which contains predominantly loamy sand. The land use here is a mosaic of forest, farmland, pastures and holiday homes. In a large grazing block, the nature forms a tree-rich wastine (wasteland landscape). In the southeast, the pine stands gradually change over to a varied moisture-rich deciduous forest with an occasional open batch of heather.

Species-rich verges along the paths offer a connecting trail for many species of plants and animals.

Action was also undertaken on behalf of the recreational users and the forest management. We invite you to explore the area and witness the beauty that nature has created from this new starting situation for yourself.



Curve in the Line with grassy zone



What is nature development?

Nature development is the project-specific and area-specific restoration, development and protection of valuable nature by arranging an area as suitably as possible and allowing a suitable environment to form. The Flemish minister for Living Environment can set up a nature development project and have establishment activities performed to maintain the valuable nature in an area or to create a suitable environment for fauna and flora.

In Flanders, there are two government authorities that work together: the Agency for the Environment and Forest (ANB) and the Flemish Land Agency (VLM). The two authorities together draw up plans and documents for each project and coordinate the study work. The ANB executes the policy, manages the project and takes care of the budgets. The VLM provides the secretarial work for the project, guarantees the project management and ensures that the contractors perform the on-site activities.

LIFE and nature development hand in hand

Thanks to the nature development project (2001-2010) and the LIFE project (2006-2009) the correct initial situation was once again created for many valuable types of vegetation: the area was moistened to benefit the alder forests, the floor was turfed to benefit the heather and alien vegetation was removed so that spontaneous forestation would become possible in the south.



LIFE & NATURE DEVELOPMENT

What is LIFE?

The LIFE programme is a financial instrument of the European Union. The aim is to assist member states in the implementation of the European rules concerning nature and the environment. In the framework of the European bird and habitat directive, each member state of the European Union designates areas where unique plant species or animal species occur, or areas where the entire habitat is worthy of protection. All these areas together form the Natura 2000 network and are thus protected internationally and in a sustainable manner.

Vulnerable habitats become even more vulnerable if they are fenced into an area that is too small and become isolated from other valuable areas. Natura 2000 takes into account the fact that a nature area does not stand on its own. Valuable projects that are implemented to provide even more protection or restoration of areas in the NATURA 2000 network are eligible for financial support. The Stropersbos also forms part of this network and is recognised as a habitat policy area. The restoration measures in the Stropersbos could count on European support thanks to LIFE-Nature. This means that 50 % of the cost price is paid for by the European Union. Thanks to these funds and Flemish budgets via nature development, these rare alder forest and heather habitats were restored to their former glory. A LIFE project does not only have financial benefits, as openness and communication are also valued. The LIFE-Nature project has facilitated many more moments of contact, both locally and regionally as well as nationally and even internationally. There are opportunities to exchange experiences with other projects and the knowledge about the area becomes more widespread. The contents of the interventions have a more solid base. Thus, LIFE was not only a continuation of the nature development project, but also a consolidation.



History of the area

People have resided in and used this area for a long time. Articles from the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age have been found at various sites in the area. The early occupation is easy to explain. The higher location of the wind-blown sand ridges offered protection from high water levels and possible attacks. Nearby, in the depression and along the river-banks, there were large open areas with moist soil that was easy to use as pasture land.

The forest over the entire area started to decline from the second half of the 8th century. Grazing in the mixed deciduous forest destroyed beech trees and oak trees, leaving behind only grass heath with oak and beech tree remnants. After 1000 A.D. even these remnants disappeared, mainly as a result of sheep grazing, creating large forest-free heaths that expanded continuously.



Visualisation of the old defensive wall (2009)

In the 12th-13th centuries the area was again covered in forest and belonged to the so-called Koningsforest that covered more than half of the Land van Waas⁽¹⁾ at the time. After the Carolingian kings, the forest became the property of the dukes of Flanders. The sovereigns saw the maintenance and protection of the forests as a very serious task and the task was only entrusted to their confidants: “the forestiers”.

This period was followed by a period of large-scale medieval land reclamation, which caused most of the forest to disappear. The land reclamation took place on such a large scale that - at the end of the 16th century and in the 17th century - there were almost no large, continuous forest complexes left in Waasland. By the end of the 16th century there was probably no forestation left in the Stropers, consisting only of marshes and farmland.

During the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries the Low Countries experienced a continuous change of rulers. Lines were drawn right across Staats-Vlaanderen (one of the Common Lands) in order to protect the southern borders of the “Republic of the Seven Provinces”. The Line in Stropers was constructed around 1702 by the Marquis of Bedmar, under orders of the French, as protection during the Staats-War of Spanish Succession. The older Fort Sint-Jan, probably built around 1585-1590 on the orders of Alexander Farnèse, Duke of Parma, was included as an important point of support in the Bedmar Line.

On the Ferraris map (approx. 1771-1778), the forest area of the Stropersbos is limited. There were a lot of wastines on the wind-blown sand ridges. The topographical maps that follow on from the Ferraris map show an increase in the forest area. Sometimes smaller areas are temporarily or permanently converted back to farmland or pasture land. Since Ferraris, only a limited number of forest plots have been continuously covered in forestation.

The end of the wave of land reclamation occurred around 1880. Reforestation took place on a large scale between 1880 and 1895. By the middle of the 19th century most of the wastines had disappeared. The current forestation and rabbit structure stems mainly from the late 18th century and the 19th century. The planted softwood supplied the mining industry and the construction industry during the industrial revolution. During WW I the “Stropersbos” was managed as a middle wood forest, during the interwar period it was managed as coppice forest. Around 1950 a number of barren areas in the forest were transformed into coppice forest.

(1) The area covered the entire area of the municipalities Kemzeke, Sint-Gillis, Sint-Pauwels, Nieuwerkerken, Sint-Niklaas, parts of the municipalities Waasmunster, Belsele, Stekene, De Klinge, Kieldrecht, Vrasene, Haasdonk and further to the north, across the present Belgian-Dutch border to Hulst, where the forest Hulsterlo, referred to by Reinaert, was an offshoot.

What did the area look like before the project?



Rabbet



Plat alongside the Braemstraat before the works (2007)

Before the start of the project in 2001 the area was a patchwork of various types of vegetation with clearly defined borders. The forest area was a collection of remnants from historic forest formation. The plot formation consisted of irregular to square blocks and for a large part extended back to the large-scale medieval land reclamation of the 17th and 18th centuries. There are many channels and ditches in the forests areas. As the area was actually too moist, the ditches were excavated to allow the water to run off, sometimes only a few meters apart. The earth from these ditches was dumped on the ditches (rabbets), so that the growing site was on a higher and drier location. Long rows of trees or bushes were then planted and managed as coppice or middle wood.

Pine trees were also planted on a large scale in the Stropers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thin wood supplied the mining industry and the construction industry during the industrial revolution. A large part of the area consisted of boring, dark pine forests without any undergrowth.

Furthermore, an eco-hydrological study pointed out that the area was drier than it had been in the 17th century and at the start of the 20th century. The structure and composition of the alder tree forests had deteriorated significantly in some areas as a result of the lower water table, particularly in the summer. The ditches system or rabbet system also immediately carried away and ground water that seeped up. This also caused the typical seepage vegetation to disappear.

The small and isolated open areas in the forest with relics of heather and heather-poor grassland suffered as a result of the dense growth of the forest. The management plan was unable to keep up with the birch accumulation and bramble overgrowth. The indigenous tree species were also crowded out by exotic species in some areas. A lack of signposting along the walking routes meant that recreational activities were not structured and the area was not attractive to the general public.

Coppice and middle wood forest

Coppice consists of deciduous tree species that are regularly cut down to near ground level for the wood. The dormant nodes on the remaining stem then bud and the cycle starts again. Traditionally, coppicing is performed on dry, sandy soil. Middle wood forest consists of two layers: an incomplete upper layer with high-stemmed trees and a lower layer of coppice. The coppice and middle wood forests consist mainly of oak, birch and black alder.





Why this project?

Due to the variation in elevation, moisture and nutrient richness, this area can support the development of a variety of important habitats, such as alder forests, dry and moist moors, heather-poor grasslands, structure-rich oak-birch forests ... There may have been relics of these important vegetations before the project, but these were often dispersed or poorly developed. This also resulted in a deterioration of species-richness. The most important causes were the dehydration, the absence of management, a non-existent recreational pressure and unmodified use (production forest, farmland, intensive pastures ...).

The aims of the project were obvious: counteract the dispersion and create the correct starting situation again for the environment that was lost. On the one hand the project focussed on the maximum development of the wet alder forests and on the other hand on the restoration of the moors vegetations and heather-poor grasslands.

The target is to develop a varying landscape that transitions seamlessly: forest nuclei, light open areas, privets, grasslands ... the wet forests vegetation is given a new chance through the restoration of the old (original) water table. This is a landscape that was very common in the middle ages, but has now become very rare even on a

European scale. In the middle ages, the nutrient-poor sandy soils were used intensively for pasture and this created extensive moors. The moist soils became marshes where the forest could develop without disturbance.

At a later stage these soils could also be used in other areas due to all sorts of measures: drainage and (chemical) fertiliser made agriculture possible on nutrient-poor sandy soils, the placement of rabbits created the possibility of forestry (coppice and middle wood) on more moist soils. Furthermore, the acid rain ensured a continuous supply of nitrogen, which also caused everything to become wilder and thus the nutrient-poor situation was lost.

All this ensured that the moors, heather-poor grasslands and wet forest vegetations became rare across the whole of Europe. By creating the correct starting situation once more, this landscape is given the chance to develop again.

Recreational users were not forgotten either. In addition to a number of walking routes, there are also paths for differently-abled individuals, a rubber boots path, a play zone and a riding path.



What happened during the project?



1. Plat before the works.
2. The Harvester chops and processes the trees in one movement.
3. After the Harvester the crown wood and stems lie on rows.
4. A small crane clears the plats.
5. The stumps are removed.
6. The nutrient-rich layer of forestlitter was scraped away.
7. A new starting situation.
8. Soon a common view?

What happened during the project?

These measures were not drawn up on the spur of the moment. A lot of research preceded the planned activities. An eco-hydrological study provided proof that the area is in the process of dehydration. The original situation was determined based on a groundwater model, soil sampling, old maps, thorough vegetation analyses, aerial photographs and land use. The chance of the original vegetation developing again was also estimated each time. Sub-areas were drawn up with specific targets based on all these data. During the project a good starting situation was created once more, allowing nature to take its course and allowing valuable vegetations to develop.









Permanently moist to wet forest due to restoration of the historical water level

Alder forests occur in moist areas. This type of forest has deteriorated significantly due to dehydration. The use of weirs and dams to bring the water level back to the old level will ensure the spontaneous recovery of these alder forests in many places. Weirs on the Line and the Maatbeek, together with dams spread throughout the area will hold the water in place for longer, thereby extending the 'wet' season. The dehydration of the area is a problem particularly in the dry summer period and this is exactly when the weirs and dams will do their job. The raising of the water level will start the process of spontaneous forest formation. Small forests with black alder will start to appear in the deciduous forest to the north of the Line, brightened up by marsh marigolds and water violets. Alders will also gradually replace the pine trees to the south east of the Line. Fish ladders on the main waterways will divide the total difference in elevation into smaller section so that fish - that swim against the current - will be able to bridge the difference in elevation more easily. The elevation of the water level will be conducted in two phases over a period of five years.






The rabbit structure will be maintained and will be used to achieve the rehydration. Building dams with sandbags in the ditches will ensure that the water is retained for longer periods. The height of each of the 39 dams has been chose to ensure that the rain water still runs off gradually, whilst the seepage water (ground water that spontaneously seeps up through the soil) can once again reach the root zone of the plants. This will ensure that specific seepage plants will rapidly establish in the area once more.

The standing water will slowly become land, resulting in the rabbits gradually becoming less high. This opens great perspectives for water vegetations. The numerous channels will harbour a great variety of valuable water vegetations and will facilitate many points of transition from wet to moist to dry in the Stropersbos.

Goals

-  Wasteland with heath and heath related habitats
-  Permanent moist to wet forest (Alder swamp forest)
-  Dry to moist mixed deciduous forest (active conversion)
-  Wasteland development of mixed deciduous forest
-  Creation of light-rich verges
-  Open grass
-  Northern grazing unit
-  Southern grazing unit

Measures

-  Clearing of forest and removal of stumps
-  Removal of stumps
-  Removal of alien trees
-  Removal of spontaneous formation
-  Removal of forest litter

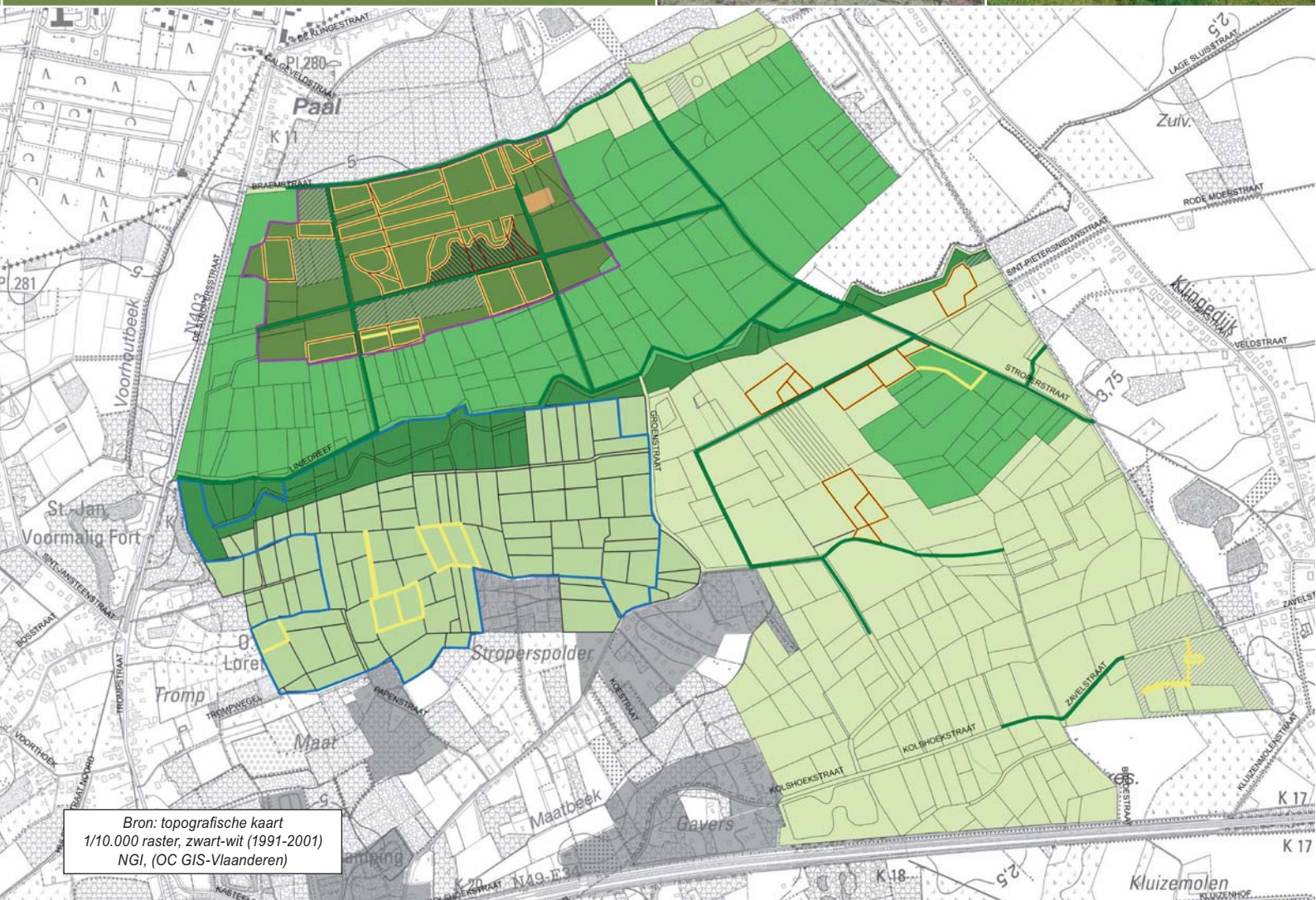


Heather-poor wastine (wasteland landscape): heather and barren grasslands restored to former glory

In the northern pasture block there were patches of heather that are evidence of the vast moorlands of days gone by. Viable seeds had been lying dormant in the dry and nutrient-poor soil for decades. The thick layer of forest litter from the planted pinewood forests made germination impossible. For this reason, the pine forests were cleared in these areas, the stumps were removed and the layer of litter was scraped away so that only the sandy nutrient-poor soil remained. This created an ideal situation for the moors and heather-poor grasslands. Here and there, groups of trees were spared in this open landscape, to create a heather-poor wastine with forest nuclei. Every year sheep will graze this landscape "intensively" for a brief period and thus exhaust the soil even further. They also create a natural dynamic resulting in a mosaic landscape with small forest nuclei that gradually transition into an open lowland with moors and heather-poor grasslands. A grazing block accessible to walkers was set up to make grazing possible.

Tree-rich wastine: spontaneous forest development in the southern grazing block

The southern grazing block consisted mainly of pastures and farmland. As a result, the soil is rich in nutrients and the chances of heather succeeding here are slim. Therefore, the emphasis here is on the development of forests where large grazers (Galloway cattle, horses, ...) will ensure natural dynamics. A number of plots with alien trees were cleared and left to allow reforestation to occur spontaneously. The animals are left to roam free in this area, resulting in a varied marking pattern.



Dry to moist mixed forest: active forest formation

In the southeast and north east of the area the rehydration is less obvious and less spontaneous forest formation will occur. Active forest formation is required here; in order to ensure a varied naturally mixed forest here too. Clearing and thinning will take place on a limited scale, as set out in the management plan, at regular intervals over a period of 25 years, after which the open areas spontaneously transition into forest. In this way, a structure-rich mixed forest will gradually replace the monotonous pine-wood plantations. Again in these zones there is a good chance that moorlands and heather-poor grasslands will appear. The still viable seeds in the soil will benefit from these new open areas. A number of plots with very good chances of forming moorlands have already been cleared and will form permanent open areas in the forest.



Ponds receive a natural covering

The former fishpond along the E34 and the ponds in the southeast (adjacent to the play zone) and their surroundings will undergo a thorough renovation. The banks were given a new profile, which allowed natural vegetation to develop.



Renovation of the Bedmar Line

The Bedmar Line along the Belgian-Dutch border is an extensive reminder from the 18th century of the battle between the Spanish and the Dutch. The Line consisted of a moat with a protective wall behind it. A redan, a triangular projection, was built at regular intervals (approx. 250 meters). The redans ensured that the attackers could be fired upon from multiple points. Following the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, the farmers were once again allowed to use the Line and the typical shape disappeared in many places. In this area the shape was fairly well preserved. The defence wall along the forest house has been restored over a short distance (35 m). A boardwalk leads to the construction, which will be accessible to walkers. The Fort Sint-Jan from the 16th century is also a reminder of the battle between the Spanish and the 'Republican Netherlands'. There are now two viewing holes for you to look at the moat. This measure was implemented in consultation with the owner.

More light in the road verges

Often the forest casts a shadow along the track over the road verge and this causes the transitions between forest and open space to be abrupt and sharp. A gradual transition from grassland over shrubs to trees is much more interesting for many plants and species anyway (small mammals, butterflies, insects ...). The edge of the forest (the mantle) contains species that need the cover provided by the forest, but also like plenty of light. On the outer edge (the edge) where the forest transforms into grassland is home to plant species that are less resistant to being trampled. Therefore the verges along the paths were tackled. By opening them up in certain places and managing them suitably, the verges receive more light, so that interesting vegetations are able to take root here.

The first results: woodlark and heather return



Woodlark



Heather

In May 2008 the work in the Stropersbos was still in full swing when the first results became noticeable. A breeding case of the woodlark was reported in the cleared plots (former coarse pine). Of course this was taken into consideration and the turfing activities were temporarily switched to another zone.

The heather plants were also soon spotted. The first germinating plants were spotted on recently turfed plots only several months after the start of the turfing activities. It goes without saying that all the employees proudly admired these first seedlings.

While walking through the forest and open heathland in early summer, you might notice the field cricket on your way. Thanks to recent evolutions, the sound of this funny creature is back in Stropers, quite a southern atmosphere ...

The **woodlark** looks like the more common skylark, but can be distinguished by the shorter tail, the clearly visible supercilium (line above eyebrow) and the absence of white on the sides of the tail.

The nest is built on the ground, near a tree that can be used as a singing perch or lookout perch by the male. The woodlark's diet consists mainly of insects and other small animals. Usually, you will hear the woodlark singing before you see it. Whilst singing, he will glide in large circles above his territory. At the end of the song he will glide down in a spiral flight. The woodlark is a bird found mainly in dry sandy areas and it prefers moorlands with shrubs and dispersed trees.

The **field cricket** lives in dry, slightly covered habitats, such as moorlands. They dig a burrow under a tussock of grass or under plant roots. A type of podium is cleared in front of the hole, where the cricket can sun itself, attract females and chirrup, being able to hide quickly in case of disturbance. They also hide in the hole during bad weather and seal the hole at the start of the winter in order to hibernate. Their song is a rolling, clear sound. The field cricket occurs in only a few places in Flanders, including here. Their numbers have increased spectacularly since the start of activities.

Recreational activities in the Stropersbos

The new organisation of the area will direct the recreational use. Various loops will connect to the centrally located footpath. Where necessary, the footpaths were elevated or a boardwalk was built. In addition, a path - from the fort Sint-Jan to the Line - gives people with a limited mobility the opportunity to enjoy the area.

Two connections were made between the existing riding paths and the Nobel cycle route was redirected through the Stropersbos. The cycle junction network also traverses the area. A number of car routes, riding routes and long distance routes have a rest stop in the Stropersbos. There is a play zone with natural play elements such as tree trunks and stumps in a contrast-rich environment near 't Kalf. Finally, the entrances (Fort Sint-Jan, Klinge and 't Kalf) will be spruced up. The three entrances will be fitted with a bicycle rack, a picnic table and information boards. Information boards will also be placed at other sites in the Stropers.



Swing gate in the southern grazing unit



Grazing by sheep in the northern grazing unit



Grazing by Galloway cattle





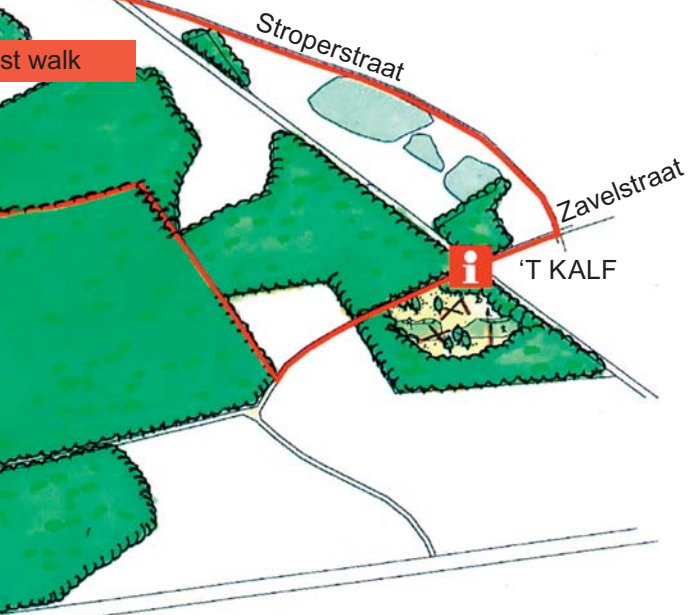
The new entrance Fort Sint-Jan



Pietersnieuwstraat



st walk



Walking routes, cycle routes and riding paths

The green walking loop, or Field Cricket walk, (4,2 km) is the central walking route in the area. This walk leads you past the heather-poor grasslands in the northern grazing block, the permanently moist alder wood forests, the dynamic landscape in the southern grazing block and the cultural-historical Line.

The red walking loop, or King's Forest walk, (4,2 km) starts at 't Kalf and leads you through the southeast of the area. You will walk through the moist, mixed deciduous forest with open moors and past the southern grazing block. You can also easily combine the red and the green loops.

The blue rubber boots path (3,8 km) is the best way to really get to know the dynamic tree-rich wastine in the southern grazing block. The name is intended literally, rubber boots are a must. The light blue loop (0,7 km) provides a brief introduction to the southern grazing block and the reconstructed wall along the Line. You can easily combine this loop with the green walking loop.

Differently abled individuals can follow the purple route (2 km) to the southern grazing block and the reconstructed wall along the Line. This route is also accessible for wheelchairs.

Horse riders can use the two connecting routes. Cyclists are also welcome on the selected paths.

Play zone with natural play elements



Stories from then and now



1943 - Simonne Begyn with friends
Anna Suy (in front right),
girls from the Koestraat (in the back right)

Many people have beautiful or interesting memories of Stropersbos.
Below you will find a selection of the stories that we received.

Stropersbos during World War 2

... My story starts with the occupation by the Germans, so May 1940, when I was six years old. We had only been occupied for two or three days when a rumour started at school that an aeroplane – and not just any plane but a Belgian Air Force plane – had landed next to the Stropersbos in a field belonging to the De Paepe family. This was very exciting news to us. When school finished at four o'clock we all ran home and then on to take a look. And sure enough, there was the aeroplane with the familiar round tricolour of Belgium. This was the first time that we had seen a real aeroplane – even though it was deserted – and we walked around it several times, a great experience!

I was a member of the scouts and – if the weather was good – we would walk to the Stropers every Sunday to play games there. The German soldiers had built a wooden guardhouse on the corner of the Stropersstraat, but they never bothered the scouts.

At the time there was also a shortage of fuel and as almost everyone had a pen with a pig in it, this meant that we had to make chips. Every year, wood was sold from the Stropers plots. This was done on a certain day, with a bailiff who sold on site by auction. The plots were bordered by the narrow ditches that can still be seen today. The lots were offered for 100 – 200 or 300 Franc, depending on the type of wood and the amount of wood that was there. It was always hardwood, because the pine trees were for the mines. But then came the harsh winter of 1942 – 1943, which was long and very cold. Then there was no controlling the population. The Stropersbos was their target. The people chopped down the entire forest. Every tree and pine was felled and there was nothing left of the Stropersbos. Standing on the Klingedijk, you could see the people riding across the provincial highway from de Paal to de Tromp. The forest was as flat as a pancake! Only the Mastendreef, which ran right through the forest, was untouched. What a sight for sore eyes! ...

Willy Herdewel (De Klinge)

A little house in the Stropersbos

The house is still there, all alone in the middle of the forest. The house belonged to my grandparents. Our grandfather was a forest ranger and there was a meander through the forest, called the Line. There were beautiful paths (dreven), the Mastendreef, the Tunneldreef and many more. My father lived there for years, together with his brothers and sisters. After his wedding we moved to 't Kalf and the forests were nearby once more. We spent our holidays there, together with many other children from 't Kalf. We dug deep wells, but if a tractor needed to get past we had to fill everything up again. Something we definitely did every summer was collect pine cones, bags of them. These were used to start the fire in winter. In the evening, when it was time to come home, my father would whistle using his fingers. That is how we knew that dinner was ready. It was a wonderful time. We still cycle through the forest regularly. It remains a treasured memory.

The text on our grandfather's death notice said:

*The forest was weeping softly on this wet winter's day
Around the house where Jan, satisfied that life's struggle had been completed,
forever to rest peacefully will lay.*

Yvette Palmkoeck (Holstraat 20 - Sint-Gillis-Waas)

A blissful childhood

... I grew up in the neighbourhood called De Paal. When I was a small boy, "aunt Stien" from next door would often take me for a walk in "den bos van Paep" (the forest of Paep) that was directly behind my parents' house, separated by the Galgenveldstraat that used to run into the Galgenveld of Hulst. According to my father there was a broad moat that used to run parallel to this street and connected indirectly to the Gentse vaart (Gent canal) and fish used to swim there when he was a child.

From there we would go to the Bramenstraat, where the shepherd would walk past in those days. We walked in the direction of De Klinge. At the end of the Bramenstraat we turned left, in the direction of 't Kalf. On the right, approximately at the end of the Mastendreef, there was a wide stretch of water that people called the Hondenput – rumour had it that young cats and dogs were placed in a bag and drowned here.

When we were slightly older we used to catch "oepadoelen" (tadpoles) in the canals to the left and right of this centuries old footpath.

The Stropersbos was usually off limits – I can still remember that we used to get chased by forest rangers on their bicycles and had to run so fast that our lungs hurt just to avoid getting caught. We also used to look for poisoned eggs that had been set deliberately to kill the natural enemies of the pheasants.

Once there was a fire on a "vaag" (wasteland) that lay on the right towards the end of the Bramenstraat, just at the beginning of the Stropersbos. At home, we saw a thin smoke plume rising straight out of the forest – it must have been on a Sunday. The fire brigade had to collect their water from the "put van Paep" (Paep's well), a large water well that was dug to obtain water for the retting of flax. A group of us, young boys, went to have a look and the fire brigade gave us materials to extinguish the fire. ...

... In the past, the water from the rettery also drained away via a canal along the Bramenstraat. Of course this used to provide unexpected pleasure, but also wet (and smelly) clothing. Aunt Stien once judged the distance incorrectly when trying to cross the canal and she fell in backwards.

Theo Vereecken



*Clearing canals: Jêrome Begyn (in front) Pietje Dekkers (in the back).
Middle man: Mister Schepper and son (1944)*



Sports in Stropersbos

Since August 1968 I have been a member of athletics club KAA Gent (people used to say “The Gantoise”). As a resident of Sint-Gillis-Waas, it was not that obvious to become a member of a club from Gent. My mother came from the region Gent-Oudenaarde and I made the decision after a family visit to Gent and a practice race (park race in Gent).

As a resident of Sint-Gillis-Waas, I had to look for a suitable training course and so the Stropers became my daily training partner. Every track, every path, every tree or plant I could find blindfolded. I “borrowed a surveyor’s wheel” and measured everything so that I could record the exact distances in my training logbook and pass this on to my coach at the time. Hundreds of people with an interest in athletics joined me in exploring the Stropers. I invited everyone to join me. Even the plot of land that I purchased – and later the house built on it – are very close to the Stropersbos (Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat).

For many years now I have been coaching and coordinating various top class athletes and clubs in the area. The physical preparations for the season always took place in the Stropersbos.

I definitely have a great “love” for the Stropersbos. Of course I am very pleased to hear that management activities and other modifications will take place over the coming years. Let us protect and maintain this “green lung” and maybe we can leave a small piece of nature for our children and grandchildren.

In all those years I have had many experiences in these forests. If I start telling about those experienced you will be glued to your seat, listening, for several hours.

Marc Hoste

A forest as a playground

I was still a young school child in the late 70s when my grandfather, dressed as Sinterklaas, appeared from the Stropersbos in a carriage. It was a wintery Sinterklaas day, the snow clung to all the branches and lay thick on the ground. All the children from the Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat ran to greet the carriage enthusiastically. Unfortunately, I was not allowed to join them that day, as I would have recognised my grandfather’s voice, but the photographs and stories tell me that it must have been a special day for the children of the street that leads to the Stropersbos.

In those days there was no tarred cycle path bordering the Stropersbos, as there is today. No, the old railway tracks were still there and we cycled next to the railway sleepers or balanced on the tracks. Occasionally one of the neighbourhood boys would fall on the cinder path and one had to grit one’s teeth when the stones had to come out one by one. The nettles stung our legs when we cycled past, but that did not matter, because that was how things were. To this day, I still call that cycle path “the railway track”. Just as one of the paths, the one that ends at the railway line, is still called “the cuckoo”.

Our racing track was located at the start of the Stropersbos. A rectangle of ditches and hills where we could race our BMX bicycles, or any ordinary children's bicycle would do. In the summer we played cops and robbers until late at night in the racing track that we had dug ourselves. The mosquitoes did not worry us. The racing track is no longer there, there is nothing left to see of the tracks that we wore down.

In August it was time to pick blackberries. There were large blackberry bushes behind "the bench", which is still there but has since been modernised – the first bench that you see when you walk into the forest from the Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat. We would come home with a full bucket and I was always disappointed that a whole bucket of blackberries would only make 1 or 2 jars of jam – hours of picking and your arms and legs full of scratches. But you forgot all about that when you tasted the most delicious jam ever.

We often built camps between fallen trees or in the shrubs. At the beginning of 1990 there was a very severe storm over Belgium that wreaked havoc in the Stropersbos. I had never seen the forest like that: there were uprooted or broken trees everywhere. It was quite exciting to crawl between all those trees and branches. We talked for hours, sitting on a fallen oak tree.

How many children can say that they had a forest in their back garden to play in?

Lies Van de Velde

Experiences in the Stropers 1936 - 1945

When we headed towards the Stropersbos with our removal van my mother asked: "Are you sure we will find that forest and arrive before nightfall?" My father reassured her, mentioned several cities that we would drive past, the large highway to Hulst and the street with a very large beech tree at the start, that is it: the Koestraat.

The Koestraat wasn't a street, but rather an overgrown path with overhanging branches, lots of thistles and nettles and deep ditches. The driver of the van did not think it was very funny. He said that he would never forget that journey ...

Our first night in that dirty house was very noisy. We heard rats scurrying about overhead, or were they doing ballet? And even squeaking, but my grandmother said that the squeaking "was from the mice" that were living with us. She had to hold me in her arms all night, I was so scared. Mr Stien Gijssels said that he would find us when we arrived and sure enough he found us. He came at night, pounding on the doors and shutters and rattling the door handles. After four nights my father had had enough, he crept outside with his gun and fired a shot in the air. There was a loud bang, but it did help. The little guy that had been teasing us so terribly left us in peace.

My mother's biggest worry was finding a school, a baker and a grocer. The latter was not a problem, the grocer also sold bread, a stroke of luck.

My mother heard that Lisette Braem from the Tromp, who lived opposite the shop owner, went to school in the Hellestraat. That was a good indicator. That same day I was enrolled with the sisters (nuns) at the school for girls and my brother was enrolled at the school for boys. Lisette and I were in the same class until my eighth study year. We did our first communion, our confirmation, in that beautiful little church in the Hellestraat on 24 March 1942.

Pietje Dekkers came to offer his services – he was recruited to help in the forest – and thus witnessed mother's fall on the path. She rode her bicycle into a ditch that was not visible because of the high grass. This was the impulse for and the start of the clean up in the Stropersbos. The result was a cycle path that was easy to ride on and a broad road for horse and carriage, as well as cars. The Koestraat had become a street once more, a public road as indicated on the ordnance map ...

The forest is first and foremost an important source of raw materials. Pine trees were planted on dry soil. Conifers (Epicéa) were chopped or sawed down every 40 to 50 years. Using the permanent forest inventory, set up by my father, you could see which section of forest could be used for large orders from dike builders, the mining industry or paper industry, or on occasion the army. The clearing (chopping and dragging out) was a time consuming process, particularly the peeling – if the buyer had requested this. The dragging out was performed by Henri Drumont, he would arrive with his yoke and pole for the heavy work and would pile the conifers up to seven layers high on the edge of the forest or in the path. Henri Drumont was also a coal merchant and lived on the Statiestraat in the Klinge. His three daughters became my friends ...

My brother Jérôme became friends with boys from his class at school. Sooike Verlinden and Gustaaf Billiet ... Gustaaf could cope with anything. Torn trousers, wounded legs and hands. It never seemed to bother him. These two friends were always in the forests. They looked for and found all sorts of things, such as wasp's nests. My father exterminated eleven wasp colonies, which the boys had found. But they were usually looking for bird's nests in trees and shrubs. The bird's nests were examined very carefully. Are there any eggs yet? How many? Are they speckled? What colour? They knew the inhabitants based on these signs of recognition. If there was any doubt they would consult the ornithology book. The nests of large birds were usually located in high trees and then they had to climb, which was easy with a rope. A loop around their feet and then up to the nest. Lowering back down was a different kettle of fish – torn stockings, pants or vest, or even scratches on bare legs, as in my case. The rascals usually sent me up the conifers, the rough bark injuring my skin. If I fell, hurt myself and blamed them, I was sent home. Girls are nothing but trouble they would say ...

The Stropersbos was severely neglected. Most of the paths were overgrown, plants that should not be there were growing in abundance. A blackberry bush can be useful, but the weed would grow vines in trees and shrubs and rob the forest of light and sun.

My father was assigned the task of clearing the entire area where necessary, to manage the forest and to take care of the wildlife, in order to hold shooting parties in future ... Persistence and a good workforces paid off and the forest changed after three years. The cleared waterways ensured run-off and drainage, which is necessary for certain species of trees. The planting with priority for conifers was implemented in 51 plots, each with a number and some even with a name. During the entire summer and well into the autumn they hunted rats, birds of prey, magpies, crows and mongoose, as well as polecats – a ferret-like animal that preys on young wild animals – and cats.

On my walk to school I was often given a heavy parcel. The pastor who served at the school was fond of cat meat. The reverend nibbled every morsel of every cat that was caught ...

The gamekeeper's cabin lacked most basic facilities, particularly electricity. That was about to change. My father made a generator in the shape of a windmill. The windmill was placed on a high tripod and supplied with a counter weight. We were able to use the wind to generate electricity, which was stored in batteries in the attic. The stronger the wind, the more electricity we had. Even our radio, which my father had built himself, played on that electricity. And it was free! ...

The annual procession to the chapel of Our Lady of Loreta in the forest was very special. Many people would come from all over the area. This took place on the same day each year. A copy was made of the black Lady from Italy for our forest chapel. Prayers were offered for all sorts of illnesses and sick people.

...

I still feel a child-like joy when I think back to those times. It was wonderful to live in the Stropersbos as a child, always free, never any danger, a daily dose of healthy air and a different concert to enjoy whilst walking every night. The Golden Oriole praising God on his flight over the wastelands, but swearing all the way down. The thousands of crickets that managed to escape small children's hands. The many butterflies in all sorts of colours with meaningful names. They were all there. And were there mosquitoes? Of course, lots of them!

The Stropersbos friends are still friends today, all married and moved on. They meet several times a year, share everything good and bad and are still always there for each other. So a forest can influence a person's life ...

Simonne Begyn (Pastoriestraat – Relegem)

Photos: 1) 1937 – De Stroopers. Forest cleared out and ready to plant. Richard Begyn (behind), Jérôme (6 years), Urbain (1 year), Baas Stalaert, wild bearing. 2) Richard Begyn (left) with two friends, also trackers during the hunt. 3) 1944 – Simonne Begyn in front with kitten; Jérôme Begyn with hat between holidaymakers. 4) 1938 – Simonne Begyn, class photo (Hellestraat, Stekene). 5) Simonne Begyn (right) with Suzanne and Annie Drumont from Klinge-Waas. 6) De Stroopers (1937), Richard Begyn squat in front between the hunter, after the hunt. Jérôme Begyn, boy alongside the hunters.





The area after LIFE

The Agency for Nature and Forest owns most of the grounds in Stropers. The will take responsibility for the management of the area. All management measures were included in an integrated forest and nature management plan. The plan offers support to the area managers.

In particular, the heather-poor wastine in the north of the area, the active forest transformation in the southeast and combating the Black Cherry require a great effort from management.

The correct starting situation was created in the north, but a combination of sheep grazing and - where necessary - extra mowing management are essential to maintain and develop the heather-poor wastine.

In the south, large grazers will ensure a natural dynamic in the spontaneous forest development, the correct starting situation was created here and nature will no doubt turn it into something beautiful.

The black alder forests will be able to develop spontaneously due to the rehydration and they too will not require much support. The rehydration itself will be closely monitored thanks to a network of ground water level indicators. The rehydration can be adjusted if a number of unexpected effects are observed.

In the southeast, plots with softwood plantations will be regularly felled over a long period, after which they can spontaneously turn to forest. This will lead to the gradual development of a mixed, varied forest here too.

Historical management processes will be applied once more at a number of locations. Coppice stands and middle wood stands have an entirely unique flora and fauna, which will be allowed to develop once more due to the use of these management processes.

The ANB will also manage the recreational infrastructure.



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