



Mother with child by Jan Wolkers

Plantsoen

The city's park Het Plantsoen¹³ starts at Jan van Houtbrug and runs down nearly the entire length of Zoeterwoudsesingel. The park was created at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in order to offer recreation to the citizens of Leiden. In 1835, the municipal architect Salomon van der Paauw was given full responsibility over the development of the park. A year later, the park opened to the public. Since then, a lot has changed. At the end of the nineteenth century, houses were

built after reclaiming a section of the land at the 'back end' of the park by draining and filling in 4^e Binnenvestgracht. A row of weavers' houses (near number 20), that used to be right on the water's edge, is still there. Later still, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Levendaal was also drained and filled in to create a wider road. A bit further on in our walk we will see De Plantage that also used to be part of the park.

¹³ www.hetplantsoen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Beheerplan-Het-Plantsoen-v-1.1.pdf

Although it is now smaller than it used to be in the nineteenth century, the park (along with Hortus) is still the best spot in Leiden for a peaceful picnic on a warm summer's day, with or without hamper and blanket. The trees you'll see there are all relatively young, because 93% of all trees in Leiden were chopped down for firewood in 1944 during De Hongerwinter, or Winter of Hunger, during the Second World War. Approximately one fifth of the current tree population dates back to pre 1944.

Once you have reached the monument, you can enter the park.

First, you walk past the aviary built in 1939, to replace the old one from 1867. There are also a few swings and slides behind the aviary. You can wander along the paths as long as you wish and enjoy a plethora of plants and a huge diversity of trees. Scattered around the park there are benches where you can take a rest and gaze over the water, but you could also take it easy on a picnic blanket, stretch out on the grass for a bit and soak up a little sun. If it is exceptionally hot, you could choose to cool down by the fountain that has graced the park with its presence since 2012.





To get there you cross the Van Disselbrug. At this point you can see where the bridge rests on two dams which are part of Het Plantsoen, which means that the bridge did not need to be constructed over the whole Singel. The original bridge, designed by E.F. van Dissel in 1901, was made of wood which meant that it didn't last long. The bridge you see now dates back to 1963. It is the ideal place to feed the ducks: young children are less prone to toppling into the water, and you can access the birds from both sides of the bridge. Incidentally, feeding is not encouraged, because it causes problems attracting sea gulls to the city. But it is still a very pleasant thing to do for mothers with little children.

“It is the ideal place to feed the ducks: young children are less prone to toppling into the water, and you can access the birds from both sides of the bridge”



The houses that overlook Het Plantsoen, date back to the end of the nineteenth century. There are exceptionally beautiful specimens with plenty of architectural detail typical of the day. Families, distinguished citizens, but also students live there. A few businesses are housed there as well.

Very few of these houses allow a glimpse inside, with one or two exceptions, such as number 45. Sheila Lever lives there with her husband. She established Het Plantsoentheater in her home. To accommodate each performance she adapts a large part of her house. The audience sits up close to the actors, which creates an intimate atmosphere. The theatre programme is usually quite limited during summer. The theatre season starts in September.



Now walk to the end of Het Plantsoen until you reach Levendaal. On the opposite side, you will see the outline of the park and the stately houses. You can now choose to cross over and walk up De Hogewoerd at café De Plantage. However, you could also choose to walk round the corner on Het Plantsoen to get to 4^e Binnenvestgracht, and have a quick look at the weavers' houses close to number 20.



Enter Tevelingshof at number 4

Large and small

Just the houses on the right hand side have the address '4^e Binnenvestgracht'. If you look left then you will see the back of the building, what used to be the servants' and suppliers' entrances, of houses that are located on Het Plantsoen.

Interview Sheila Lever

One of the houses on Het Plantsoen where you can 'sneak more than a preview', is the Lever's house at number 45. Sheila Lever and her husband have lived there since the early 1990s. The house is a listed monument, and combined with the numbers 41 and 43, it used to be *Hotel Parkzicht*. Nowadays it is a council listed monument¹. It was designed, in around 1880, by the Leiden architect W.C. Mulder.

When Sheila's oldest daughter was a baby she used to take her for walks in the pram, back then she lived on Hogewoerd. On her walks, she would often cross through Het Plantsoen, and she used to wonder what it would be like to live in one of those fabulous nineteenth century houses. In 1990/1991 that dream became a reality. Sheila has worked as a freelance actor since 1984, and later she started directing her own theatre productions, so she was looking for a space of her own. In 2003, she created her own theatre in her house, and called it *Het Plantsoentheater*. To accommodate each new production she adapts a large part of her house to the requirements of the show. "Our house and our daily lives are an endless source of inspiration to us. One of my latest productions draws connections between the life style of the nineteenth century and modern living in the twenty-first century. One aspect I focus on is the memories we have of the different roles that are visible in the partition between the upstairs and downstairs living quarters. The question is: do these differences still play out in the present? In those days, servants had a clear role in relation to their employers, but exactly how different is the relationship between an employer and an au-pair or a cleaner in today's society?"

Het Plantsoentheater breaks the mould of our fixed views on theatre and builds up a tension: the audience sits huddled together with the actors occupying the same relatively small theatre space. In doing so, an intimate atmosphere is created, which simultaneously causes a certain degree

of unease and tension. This atmosphere benefits the productions, in which Sheila wants to create a mirror for herself and for her audience.

During the *Open Monumentendagen* (open house days for listed monuments) and *De Kunstroute* (the art route) Sheila has noticed that people are very keen to come in and have a good nose round old buildings. People often wonder what life must have been like back in the day, but they are also curious to see what it is like living there now.

"It's largely been thanks to the *Open Monumentendagen* that we have heard stories about our house, anecdotes that have previously been unknown to us. We came to learn of a notary who lived here for a considerable length of time. In the 1960s it was a shelter offering aid to the needy. We heard about that through the aunt of an acquaintance of ours. She used to come here as a young girl, when her mother was a servant for the family that lived here."

By using the house and its history as a source of inspiration for theatre productions and by welcoming the public into her home, Sheila is able to unveil the past, allowing stories to come to light.

(For more see: www.plantsoentheater.nl/)

¹ www.rijksmonumenten.nl/monument/515093/herenhuis/leiden/





Roman Era

When you cross Levendaal diagonally towards the left moving away from Gerestraat and Geregracht (see also the poem *Ode to Joy* by John James) you walk past Wielmakersteeg and Nieuwebrugsteeg towards Koenesteeg.



In the seventies and eighties of the previous century, the whole area known as De Haver- en Gortbuurt, was rejuvenated as part of a large improvement scheme by the city council. Often, the characteristic Weavers' Houses and some of the smaller labourors' houses were pulled down completely and built back up from the ground. Walk along the Weavers' Houses up to Kraaierstraat. Then you turn right in the direction of Levendaal. Walking down Haverstraat and Gortestraat you will also notice the restauration work that was done to the streets. At Levendaal you turn left, then immediately round the corner you will find the hofje

(courtyard) known as Bethlehemshof, at number 109. In the seventeenth century this hofje used to be called De Houcksteen and it was maintained by The Flemish Baptist Church. A different Baptist Church ran Betlehemshofje on Langegracht, but unfortunately, the hofje fell into disrepair. The administrators sold the hofje in 1810 and invested the capital gained from the sale of Bethlehemshof back into De Houcksteen, which has been known since then as Bethlehemshof. If you look up before passing through the seventeenth century archway you will see both names of the hofje enscribed in stone.





Once you are there, you will see Cananefatenpoort to the right of Lambertushof. This gateway dates back to the beginning of A.D.: back then there were already people living here at this location. The river known by the Romans as Limes flowed past their dwellings. If you pass through the gateway you end up in a criss-cross of streets (Wielmakerssteeg, Spilsteeg), where the houses resemble the Weavers' Houses we saw on 4^e Binnenvestgracht. There are also streets, such as Bolwerkstraat and Dwars Bolwerkstraat, a reminder that this once used to be an elevated area, in fact the name Hogewoerd carries the word Hoge meaning high.



Going back as far as the Roman Era, this used to be an important route along the River Rhine. Along the eastern part of the street, which can be seen as you walk from the direction of Café De Plantage, you will see many different gables, such as the neck and spout gable, including a variety of ornamentations. These houses date back to the city expansion of 1659, and they are roomier than those in the western part with

all its narrow alleys. There is a lot of student accommodation in Hogewoerd, and the Christian student fraternity SSR is located at number 108. On the corner of Bolwerkstraat and Hogewoerd there is a building with quite a striking industrial appearance, bearing the inscription "Fabriek van Gebr. Van Wijk". It used to be a blanket factory at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nowadays it is an apartment complex.

