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Giants from Flanders  
Hooker's Milk Factory  
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# French giants of the north visit Buckingham

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 **Jack Steggles**

No-one watching our last Christmas parade in Buckingham town centre could have missed the Giants from Flanders. The man stood high enough to peer into upstairs windows. He was an effigy of Thomas, a musketeer who married a lady of Zuytpeene where they lived and were buried some 200 years ago. He came with his daughter Adelaide.



Her effigy was put together by the villagers of Zuytpeene, a little place lying to the west of our twin town of Mouvaux. Flandres is a region whose inhabitants have a great sense of pride and decorum. It straddles both sides of the Franco-Belgian border. The French side lies in the Nord Pas de Calais,

known as the country of festivals and giants. To the south is Picardy, famous since the Great War. Over 300 giants can be found in this regional territory. They are symbols from large towns and may represent imaginary heroes, historical figures or even animals. Carried by one or more persons they attend festivals alone or as a couple, sometimes as a family. In fact each giant has his own day of celebration going back sometimes to the sixteenth century. The giants are born, they grow, marry, found a family and die just as we humans do.

It is difficult to determine the origin of all this but many authors allude to giants in their writing. The tradition goes way back in time. The giants of Nord Pas de Calais are not the only ones, neither are they the first in France. These can be traced back to the sixteenth century as the Gayants de Douai. Gayant is the local patois for 'Géant' and is heard still in Picardy. Their first giant was an effigy of St Maurand, patron of the town in 1530. Before that, the practice is believed to have started in Spain. At one time the area was under Spanish domination.

With competition the custom developed until the end of the seventeenth century when the Church objected to some of the frivolity. It seems that the Bishop of Arras prescribed just what the giants could and could not represent but their creators decided not to play ball. In

effect they downed tools. Then the seeds of revolution took root and the tradition almost disappeared until the nineteenth century. When it revived it did so under a different form. Religious significance had been lost and giants came to symbolise city burghers and founders. The twentieth century saw widespread development with giants appearing even in towns of modest size.

Seeing these effigies for the first time one immediately wonders how they are put together. The apparatus for carrying and working the giants is placed in a pannier built of wicker or light wood. One man can hold up as much as 135kg (300 lb). The support for the head and shoulders is connected to this frame so that the carrier is able to balance the giant to make it dance, wave to the crowd or embrace another giant. An assembly can be carried by one or more persons. Many kinds of festivals may attract a parade of giants, especially 'Ducasse', sometimes called 'Fermesse'. This is the communal annual fête held by towns in northern France, Belgium and parts of Holland. Giants also come out for medieval fêtes and gastronomic celebrations. Each effigy is chosen to be suitable for the occasion and it parades year after year. The figures are chosen to impress everyone watching from the casual observer to faithful followers of the art.

The whole business gained the support of the heritage industry and became international under the wing of UNESCO. One of 43 new masterpieces of cultural heritage proclaimed by the Japanese Director-General late in 2005 was "Géants et dragons processionels de Belgique et de France". It was judged to

be an essential part of the traditional identity of the people of the area. By that time more than 350 giants took part in events. Some of the best known are the original Gayant of Douai, Reuze Papa and Reuze Mama from Cassel, Martin and Martine of Cambrai, Binbin of Valenciennes, Bimberlot of Le Quesnoy, and Gargantua of Bailleul.

Some of the fêtes held in the kinder months attract giants from many parts of the World. One couple comes from Sheffield with effigies of 'Peace and War'. Their warlike giant resembles something out of Star Trek. Some of these events have a competitive element with the award of prizes.

*Visit the website  
[www.nordmag.fr/culture/les\\_geants/geants.htm](http://www.nordmag.fr/culture/les_geants/geants.htm)  
to see amusing pictures and learn more of events*

