

Boston Hanse Group visit to 44th International Hanse Day in Gdansk, Poland

A tale of politics, markets, bricks, cranes, amber, burghers and Shakespeare

During the Middle Ages, the Hanseatic League began as a network of long-distance merchants that developed into a powerful association of cities. For more than 400 years, the Hanseatic League shaped the economy, trade and politics of northern Europe. Today these cities are reconnecting with their great past and in 1980 in Zwolle the modern Union of Cities THE HANSA was formed to revive the common cultural heritage and, with almost 200 member cities, is one of the largest volunteer associations in the world.

The City of Gdansk has many centuries of long history and heritage but is also a symbol of change and progress. It is against this backdrop that the serious business of the meeting of the modern Hanse took place. In between the grand parades of the opening and closing ceremonies various forums regarding economics, the environment, tourism, cultural partnerships, youth Hansa and the mayors summit were held. There were also free guided tours, art installations and archive workshops. The outputs agreed at the mayor's summit are varied but include the below.



Boston Hanse Group

The Hanseatic League had several kontors or trading locations along the Eastern seaboard in England and although the Steelyard in London was the most important, Boston was the second most important port in the country and had its own kontor. The Boston Hanse Group, lead by Alison Fairman, is dedicated to reviving this cultural heritage and promoting modern trading, tourism and cultural links with the modern Hanse cities.

Earlier in the year I joined the Boston Hanse Group on its trip to the 44th International Hanse Day in Gdansk in modern day Poland. The “Day” is actually a misnomer because the festival has expanded to several days and took place from the 13th to the 16th of June 2024 under the motto “Change Begins Here”.

- To implement urban planning and management that includes rational water management
- Hanseatic cities as a platform for exchanging of views, ideas, social, cultural and economic solutions
- Inspire among citizens conscious decision making and taking responsibility for one's choices
- Active participants from all sectors: central government, local and regional government, NGO'S and activists working with a common goal in mind

The Market



Photo courtesy of Julian Kirby

At the heart of the International Hanse Day lies the market place where the participants meet one another and promote their own towns or cities. Our market stall promoted Boston, Kings Lynn and Beverley, and some members of the team are in action above promoting the hanseatic trails and the new cultural route "Hansa England"



Gdansk

Gdansk is one of the cities featured in the tourist guide, the *European Route of Brick Gothic*. It is a shining example of a city built of bricks during the Gothic period and its fine public buildings and churches testify to this and it is a rival to Lubeck.

In the background of the photo of St Marys Basilica you can make out modern cranes in the background. Gdansk had a famous shipyard that was home to the Solidarity (Solidarnosc) movement led by Lech Walensa in the early 1980s. Solidarity gave rise to a broad, non-violent, anti-communist social movement that, at its height, claimed some 9.4 million members. It is considered to have contributed greatly to the fall of communism.

The Solidarity Chapel

The Solidarnosc chapel is contained in St Bridget's church and holds crosses from the Gdansk shipyards after workers' strikes in 1980 and 1988. In the niche there is a figure of Christ in his tomb that comes from the original interior of the church. Lower down there are urns with the ashes of victims of Poles murdered during World War II. There are ashes and soil from places of execution in Gdansk, Gdynia, Krakow, Poznan, Silesia and Warsaw.

There is also an urn with the ashes of members of the Polish pre-war minority from Gdansk, murdered in the Mauthausen-Gusan concentration camp. Ashes of officers murdered in Katyn and soldiers who fought at Monte-Cassino and from other concentration camps are also here.

The fabric of St Bridget's church was largely destroyed in the second World War and a lot of the interior fabric has had to be rebuilt. Amber was gathered locally and shipped from Gdansk and a plan was made to create an altar made of amber. Visitors and congregation members have all given generously to restore the main altar and although not finished yet, the altar is a most striking feature in the church.

The Gdansk crane

There is no doubt that consignments of Amber and Hanse merchandise would have been handled by the medieval crane in Gdansk. The crane is first mentioned in 1367 but the iconic restored brick version, was first built in 1444. At one time this was the biggest working crane in the world, used for cargo transfer, putting up masts on ships as well as doubling as a city gate. When it was first built the lifting mechanism was powered by men walking inside the large hamster wheels at its base.



Hamburg's promotional fire Engine

The Rathaus (Old Town Hall)



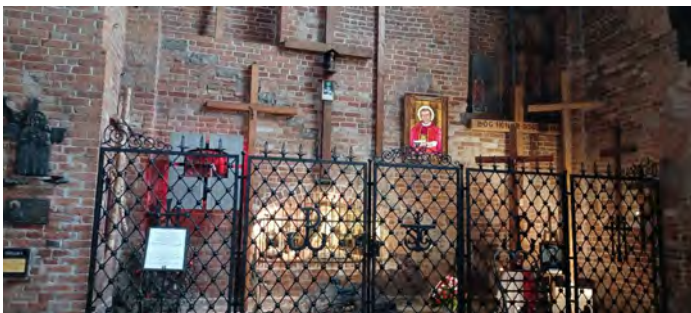
St Mary's Basilica



St Bridget's Church,



Solidarity Chapel



Solidarity Chapel and the figure of Christ



Wealthy burghers

Gdansk (or Danzig to use its German name) has been under the control of various regimes and kingdoms. Its boom from the Hanseatic trade largely stems from the 14th and 15th century but it has been under the control of Polish rulers, the Teutonic knights, Prussian and German empires and was also occupied by Sweden. There has been a thriving community of merchants and burghers despite the fluctuating changes.

A former merchant's house has been opened as a museum and occupies a prestigious location in Długa Street, the main thoroughfare of Gdansk. The Uphagen family were from Flanders and left there due to religious persecution. The male members of the family were amongst the city elites and held many offices including lay magistrates, councillors and important roles in the reformed church.

In March 1945 the Uphagen house was burnt down but later the decision was made to restore it and now it is open daily to the public.

Amber Altar



Photo courtesy of Julian Kirby



The Shakespeare theatre

Gdansk has a curious link to Shakespeare, it was well known that English actors staged some plays in a 16th century theatre and it was called the Second Fencing school because it also held sword fighting and dog baiting. It was not certain where the old theatre was but this old painting gave a clue as the nearby buildings are still extant. It was based on Shakespeare's Fortune theatre, it was similar to the Globe Theatre but was square instead.

A local professor wanted to rebuild the modern theatre on what he thought was the original site, he was proven right as during excavations some of the original timber posts were found. The modern theatre is fabulous it has an Elizabethan stage that rises up from floor and the usual Italian or box stage. The roof also opens to replicate the outdoor performances.



The crane





Uphagen house



The first floor Saloon



The Grandfather clock and 19th Century stove



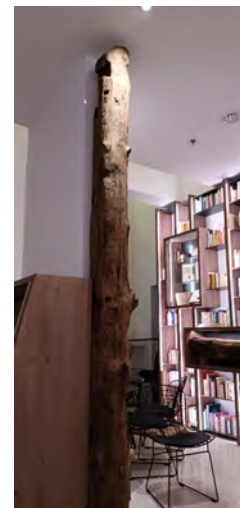
The second fencing school



Old building adjacent to Shakespeare Theatre



Modern theatre interior and timber post





Długa Street, the main thoroughfare in Gdansk

The 45th International Hanse Tag will take place in Visby, Sweden.



Anne Coyne