

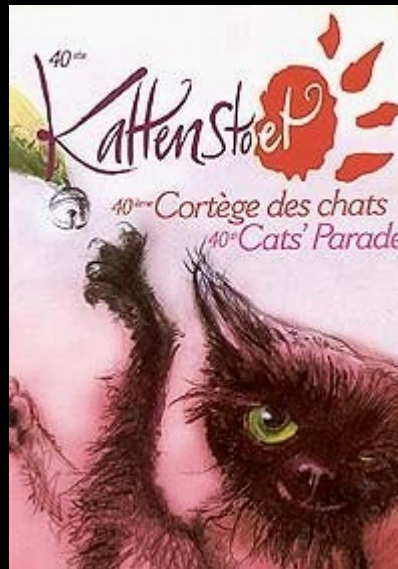
The Ypres Cat Festival

Cats' Parade

or *Kattenstoet*

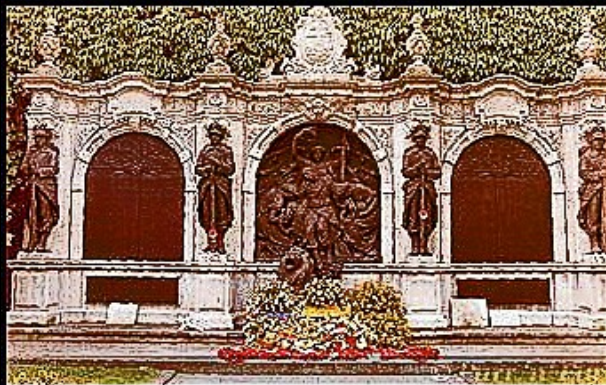
(2004+)

(Page checked December
2025)



[[Kattenstoet 2006 images](#)]

In 2003 I travelled to Ypres (in Flemish, Ieper) in the West Flanders province of Belgium, centre of some of the fiercest and most prolonged fighting in World War I, and a place with many [museums](#) and memorials to that tragic era, such as the central war memorial (*below left*). The town is also home to the Menin Gate (*below right*), where the Last Post is still sounded every evening in memory of all those who died. However, my interest was a happier one: the Cat Festival held every third year on the second Sunday in May, and for the 40th time in 2003. In its present-day form it was first held in 1955.



There is a 1959 postage stamp from Belgium (*below left*), one of a set of stamps showing various carnivals, that depicts a jester apparently juggling little cats. The story behind this is that in earlier times Ypres was an important centre for the wool trade, the wool being collected up in the town's huge Cloth Hall (*below right*) before sale. All that wool attracted hungry rodents, and so cats were used to control their numbers. However, when the wool had been sold later in the year, the cats were no longer needed, and so they were thrown off the tower — a job that fell to the town jester.



This barbaric practice ceased in 1817, and in more modern times has been replaced by a festival celebrating the history and tradition of the cat. The jester (*below left*) is still present at the celebration.



On the Saturday afternoon of the festival weekend a treasure hunt was held for local children, but the event proper opened on the Saturday evening with 'witches' (*above right and centre*) and 'cats' — together with a few of the carnival floats and bands — processing through the town, followed later by a fireworks display on the town ramparts. Some of the floats were very large and elaborate and pulled by Belgian heavy horses; guiding them through the narrow streets without damaging the parked cars must have presented quite a challenge!





The main event took place on the Sunday, consisting of a huge and colourful procession that took two hours to pass — fortunately it had just finished when the rain started! Some 2400 marchers take part in this parade. It began with floats from some of the sponsors and of course a brass band. In fact there were a number of bands, one entirely mounted on heavy horses (*photo above*). The main body of the procession was split into sections, each one being introduced by children carrying placards announcing the theme, and balloons with cat faces (*above*).

Different themes included *Cat Worship in History* (with *The Egyptian Cat* – *below*), *The Cat in Language and Legend*, *The Cat around the World*, *The Ypres Cat* and *The Condemnation of Cats and Witches*. These tableaux were interspersed with flag throwers, stilt walkers, and generally 'all the fun of the fair'. The large number of children and young people who took part in the whole thing struck me particularly. And, of course, everyone was dressed up and made up with cat features, and in many cases cat costumes.





Some of the ingenious and imaginative participants are shown below, including a 'cat bicycle'; a pair of 'draught cats'; some evil-looking cats from a float bearing a large cauldron engulfed in 'flames'; some characters mounted on beautiful Haflinger horses (I think) and bearing cat banners; and the unmistakable 'cat that everyone loves to hate' — Garfield.





Not shown are numerous other floats and participants, such as 'gravediggers' accompanying a deceased cat 'king'; Chinese lion dancers (absolutely breathtaking); characters from the musical *Cats*; a half-open 'sardine can' float; and many others.

Towards the end of the cortège was the personification of the toy cats, the huge figure of **Cieper**, 'King of the Cats' (*below left*). I gather he is a permanent part of the proceedings, and very impressive he is. Perhaps even more impressive is his wife **Minneke Poes**; her costume is made from poppies at the top, and her hat is composed of little cat figures (*below right*). She and Cieper were 'married' in 1971 and have a 'baby' Pieperke, 'born' in 1983 and making his first appearance the following year. I didn't notice Pieperke on this occasion.



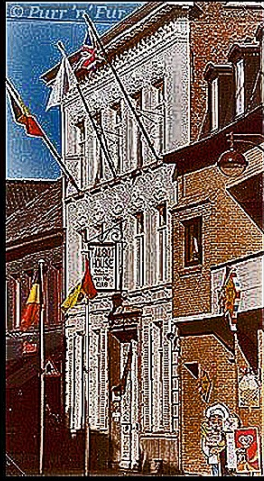
Not too long after the end of the procession (by which time it was raining quite hard), the jester appeared on a little platform high above the crowd on the Cloth Hall tower (*below left*), and toy cats were tossed down to the crowd. The number of hefty people scrambling to pick these up made it much easier to buy one at the tourist office, which is what I did (*below right*). To round off the event, some 'witches' were burned in the town square later in the evening, and that marked the conclusion of the festival.



It's possible to pre-purchase a ticket that, at reasonable cost, gives a good seat in a large stand in the main square to view the procession. Included in the price also were a WW1 museum visit, and a simple but tasty three-course lunch on the Sunday in one of the town cafés. I booked via the internet and the ticket was waiting for me to collect it at the town Tourist Office on the Saturday. There are not many hotels in Ypres, which is quite a small town, and I didn't decide to go until just a couple of months beforehand. However, I found the Belgian Tourist Office very helpful and they were able to find me a room for the weekend in [Poperinge](#), a little town 15 km away and with its own [WW1 history](#). It was a 10-minute train ride to Ypres, with trains every hour.

In 2003 I chose to travel to Belgium by Eurostar train to Lille in France, from where trains run to Ypres and Poperinge (the end of the line), although a change had to be made in Kortrijk (Courtrai). Anyone planning to go to the next event in 2027 would be well advised to make arrangements some months ahead, as it becomes heavily booked.

NB: the *New York Times* has a useful [further description](#) (*archived copy*) of the Festival from 1989, although obviously the prices and some of the information about Ypres will be well out of date now.



2006 Festival

Many images from the 2003 festival are included in our article above, but several visitors to Kattenstoet 2006 kindly responded to our request for photographs of the event, and we are very grateful to them. A selection was made of over 50 photos that we felt best gave the atmosphere of the event and covered as wide a range of subjects as possible. There were some 'old favourites' that were also present in 2003 — including of course Minneke Poes and Cieper — but also some new participants, and for the first time we had images of the concluding bonfire. The pictures aren't arranged in order of appearance in the procession, as of course I don't know what that was, but I think they're in a reasonable progression.

Please note that the 2006 images are the copyright of the photographers and are not to be downloaded or reproduced without permission. The contributing photographers, in alphabetical order, were Richard Brooke, Helen Casey, Deborah Erbs, Peggy Way and Irene Whitwell. Visit the [gallery of Kattenstoet 2006 images](#).

2027 Festival

The next Kattenstoet Festival is due to be held on the weekend of 8–9 May 2027. Brief details can be found at the [Festival site](#) (English page, also available in Flemish and French).

See also these links: [Facebook](#) (*mostly in Flemish*) | [Instagram](#) ('Visit Ieper')

There is [another cat festival](#) at Catskill, New York State, USA that's held annually and involves cat sculptures.

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