

The Belgium Lottery, EL, and WLA Celebrate the 580th Anniversary of the world's first lottery



This article is excerpted, with permission, from the websites of the Belgium Lottery (brugge1441.be), the WLA (world-lotteries.org/insights/editorial/blog/necessity-is-the-mother-of-invention), and the EL (european-lotteries.org).

To commemorate the anniversary of the pioneering 1441 lottery in Bruges, the Belgian National Lottery organized a 4-day festival and exhibition. Lottery players, industry leaders and lottery fans from Belgium and across the world gathered in Bruges to relive the draw of 1441 during a historical evocation at the Christmas market, complete with tombola and a chance to win great prizes. Between December 1 and 4 of 2021, an exception was made to bring the special Extra Lotto and EuroMillions draws to Bruges. Guests were also treated to a festive open-air performance of Carmina Burana, and enjoyed city walks to experience the atmosphere of the first-ever draw in virtual reality, as well as an exhibition about the origins of the game in medieval Flanders, with an accompanying book being published.

Necessity is the mother of invention: The story behind the world's first Lottery

In the mid-15th century, Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, imposed a hefty fine on the city of Bruges as punishment for a violent revolt by the local craft guilds. This action inadvertently set the stage for the development of the modern lottery. The fine was so huge that it depleted the city treasury. The restive population was hostile to higher taxes, so the city authorities needed to innovate to create a new source of revenues. City authorities then realized that their control over licenses to do business could be monetized. Specifically, the wine porters or schroders of medieval Bruges (now part of Flanders in Belgium) had the monopoly on unloading barrels of wine in the city's port. The barrels of wine were then dragged to customers' homes and lowered into their cellars. It was a lucrative business, because the porters were allowed to levy taxes on the imported barrels and keep the money for themselves in lieu of wages. The office was a privilege granted for life and awarded by the city for a fee. It occurred to the city

leaders that, in addition to the fee that was collected on a regular basis, and in addition to raffling off the position of schroder and the economic rent that went with it, they could create additional raffles, or lotteries, to raise more money for other purposes as well.

As time went on, these lotteries came to be held for other prizes, such as allocating prime positions of market stalls, with the proceeds earmarked to fund public works like strengthening the city walls and ramparts. These first documented lotteries, which also bore the name "Lottery" and had the characteristics of a present-day lottery, took place in Bruges, Belgium, in 1441. The lottery model invented in Bruges was quickly replicated in cities across Europe.

The lottery goes public

In 1441, when the schroder's craft of a man named Pieter Den Hondt was due to be raffled off, the city authorities made an important decision. In addition to the first





take part, and everyone had the same chance of winning. The additional cash prizes persuaded large numbers of people to play, and although the tickets were not cheap – the equivalent of several days’ wages – they were affordable by any burgher or merchant in medieval times. Players would not run the risk of financial ruin in a reckless game of chance, but would just try their luck for a bit of fun.

Of course, players hoped to win a prize, but the collective aspect of taking part and attending the draw together was just as important. The medieval lotteries turned into community festivals. A stand would be erected in the marketplace so the citizenry could gather for the draw. As trumpets blared, an “innocent hand”, the drawperson, would solemnly pull the names of participants from a basket, and a reader would announce who had won a prize. The habit of writing a saying or poem (often salacious) on the lottery ticket instead of one’s own name soon developed, causing hilarity when it was read aloud from the stage.

Nearly 600 years later, this underlying objective of having fun together while collecting funds for good causes still inspires lottery players all over the world and will continue to drive the lottery industry forward. By finding innovative solutions to its own challenges, and sharing the secrets of its success with other jurisdictions, the burgemeesters of medieval Bruges laid the foundations for the worldwide lottery community we know and love today! The organiser’s aim, usually a city but sometimes also sometimes a private organisation, was obviously to make a profit. But the attribute that makes the modern lottery, as invented in Bruges, so special is its service to society for its ability to finance collective needs: strengthening the city walls, building a hospital or a church, or paying off debts, as in the case of that first draw in 1441.

Lotteries were the first form of “Crowd-funding” – long before the word was even invented.

“Good causes around the world today owe a debt of gratitude to Bruges’ city leaders during medieval times for their foresight and pragmatism. Lottery players everywhere have embraced the same sense of collective responsibility and upheld the underlying principle of having fun together for the greater public good.”

– **Rebecca Paul Hargrove, WLA President**

prize of the municipal office of Schroder, additional cash prizes of varying amounts would be offered. As a result, large numbers of people wanted to take part, even if they had no intention of becoming a Schroder, resulting in a lot more money ending up in the coffers of the Bruges city administration.

This “brand extension” of lottery was a welcome development, helping the city fund additional projects. Instead of placing the burden on its citizens by raising taxes, the city decided to offer cash prizes in the lottery to coax them into buying a ticket voluntarily.

The idea quickly took root. Other cities in the region sent envoys to ask for advice and soon copied the Bruges example. Over the next few decades, at least 82 lotteries were created across Belgium and the Burgundian Netherlands before spreading to Germany, Rome, Genoa, and Venice. By the sixteenth century, lotteries existed all over Europe.

Even the name given to the 1441 event in Bruges, *lotinghe* – which is based on the Middle Dutch word “lot”, meaning “fate” – would be adopted by many other languages: *lotteria*, *loterie*, *lottery*, *lotereya*, etc.

“We are proud to be celebrating the anniversary of the world’s first cash lottery in 1441. A lot of things have changed in 580 years, but the Bruges aldermen’s ability to innovate, inspire the populace, and share their experience with other cities undoubtedly helped to lay the foundations for the vibrant worldwide lottery community we know today.”

– **Jannie Haek, CEO, Belgian National Lottery**

Collective fun, collective benefit

These very early lotteries had all the essential characteristics of the games we know today: They were public events – anyone could