

Rolling into Roosendaal station, the first stop on Dutch territory, our international train was carefully guided around a scruffy maroon two-car set waiting to set off on its shuttle service to Belgium. As if to make a point, our intercity was brought to a halt at the northernmost end of the platform, removing the slightest opportunity to even consider returning south, to Antwerp.

At the guard's whistle a few minutes later, the seven carriages made a final statement to underscore that we had moved into a different country: the train shifted to the rightmost track on the line - in Belgium the train had been running on the left.

So what else is visibly different here in the Netherlands, I wondered. Until 1830, there was no border here: the Netherlands stretched further south, all the way to France, and the Northern and Southern Netherlands - hence the plural that persists in the official name to this very day - were one country. Maybe better try to spot similarities here.

Looking out of the train window at the Sugar Union factory, I thought that a sweet tooth is one of the things that is common on both sides of the border. Only the other day I had enjoyed a freshly-baked crêpe in a Brussels park, a simple concoction consisting of a paper-thin pancake, lavishly covered in vanillated sugar, rolled up and cut into bite-size portions. Served still warm in a card bag, the same shape you get your chips in, it was just what I needed to satisfy my rumbling stomach after the Belgian beer-tasting of the day before. Maybe the sugar had been produced at Roosendaal's Sugar Union.

After built-up Belgium, the landscape of North Brabant

province appeared almost empty. (The geographic qualification in the name indicates that the region lies to the North of the real Brabant, which is in Belgium.) Straight tree-lined roads diagonally crossed our railway line - or perhaps the tracks cut across the roads at an angle; after all, the roads must have been there first.

In the villages we passed, like Oudenbosch and Zevenbergen, new-looking single-floor industrial buildings were situated in pleasant green grass borders - not cramped at all. On the horizon, though, below bulbous grey clouds, heavier industry made its mark in the shape of a concrete cooling tower, some tall chimneys and rows of pylons probably transporting the electricity generated there to other parts of the grid.

A couple of miles on, six wind turbines lined the Hollands Diep, clearly visible as our train sped across the one kilometre long bridge spanning this expanse. More and more of those slender spires with their Mercedes-star-shaped rotors were popping up in windy areas of the country - which is everywhere.

The arrival of the 21st century windmill was often greeted with hostility by local residents, who preferred the landscape as it was in the 19th. Despite public protests and drawn-out appeal procedures against these wind power farms, the government always won. The three-bladed turbines along the Hollands Diep spun slowly in the weak breeze, in a superior gesture of self-confidence, brushing aside the protests of the past.

A slight nervousness began to be felt as our train approached Rotterdam, a major hub in the rail network where many of my fellow passengers, together with Mr Sing

and myself, were to change trains.

But first - as they always say on radio programmes after they've read out the preview of the show - but first, Dordrecht. A city on a river, dominated by the fat tower of Our Lady's Church, also known simply as the Big Church, completed in the 15th century.

With ships navigating the Dordtse Kil, the city of Dordt as its inhabitants call it, is an echo of the city that Rotterdam once was. Steadfastly trading, transferring cargoes, selling goods, meanwhile earning vast sums of money which were proudly ploughed back into the city. Merchants built their richly decorated homes along streets whose names derived from the trade: Wine Street, to name but one. They were displaying their wealth, but also contributing to the building of the churches and the expansion of the city, out of a sense of what I can only call 17th-century civic pride.

Dordrecht still looks like that, respectably frozen in its former glory; it was eclipsed by its young upstart neighbour Rotterdam in the 18th century, which is growing and developing still, but now looks nothing like it used to, way back then. But that's another story.

Even the view from the train when crossing Rotterdam's Meuse river has gone. We pass through a tunnel and arrive at the city's new central station. Mr Sing - I am adopting Paul Theroux' penchant for inventing names for people he meets on his travels - having got up too early twice before to change trains, now finally descends from the train to catch his fast connection to Amsterdam. The young, businesslike Mr Sing had asked me, on platform 5 back in Brussels whether 'this' was the train to Rotterdam. After two commuter trains had passed, it was, and we could both

board the brightly-liveried carriages taking us North. Having crossed over to the fast train waiting for us, we took separate seats on the short haul from Rotterdam towards Amsterdam. When I left the train at Schiphol Airport, I reached over to shake his hand, and wished him a pleasant stay in Amsterdam.