

# How to get back a good walking infrastructure in the Dutch polders?

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## Abstract

Only if you rebuild paths, can the Dutch polders with clay and peat soil in the lower part of Holland become a walking environment again. Paths that are attractive for rambblers, paths where walkers are the main users. Currently accessibility of the countryside in Lower-Holland, also the most densely populated part of the Netherlands, is pretty bad. With great difficulty makers of walking routes plan their long distance paths, they have also developed some short routes. But more is needed to create a real walking environment, like in the past when most Dutch polders knew a dense network of footpaths.

Using examples, I will outline – using old and new maps and photos in a powerpoint presentation – what is involved to get back an area really attractive for rambblers. This includes not only new paths, but improvements to the landscape as well. I paid particular attention to Walcheren, a former island in the South-West, where in 1944 all paths were swept away in one blow. Almost the entire island flooded after the British bombed the dikes in an attempt to expel the Germans. “Restoration of footpaths is outdated in this era of progression”, the commission responsible for reconstruction ruled in 1946. Now, half a century later, step by step a new network of footpaths is under construction. Key to the delivery of this network is making connections with ongoing water and nature development projects. Cultural heritage and landscape are other keywords that the apostle of new paths must have in his vocabulary for successful results. He must also ensure that ‘walking’ is enshrined in the policy. Otherwise his story will not be heard, or the finances required for realization of new footpaths are much harder to get.

The lessons from the examples presented, may also be of assistance in the areas in Higher-Holland with sandy soils. There, the network of walking paths is better preserved, but these areas could use a qualitative leap for the Rambler.

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# How to get back a good walking infrastructure in the Dutch polders?

HARRY BENSCHOP

Only if you rebuilt paths, can the Dutch polders with clay and peat soil in the lower part of Holland become a walking environment again. Paths that are attractive for ramblers, paths where walkers are the main users. Currently accessibility of the countryside in Lower Holland, also the most densely populated part of the Netherlands, is pretty bad.

## Many footpaths disappeared

How you can develop long distance paths and circular walks in that part of the Netherlands? Foreign makers of walking routes are asking this frequently when visiting Holland. Many attractive roads and footpaths are disappeared in the last fifty years. More than 40.000 kilometres, is once calculated by the Advisor for the Landscape. He gives the Dutch government advices for a good landscape. All these kilometres of paths are vanished. Especially by reconstructions of the countryside, and of course by building villages, towns and industrial estates. Others are paved, and for that reason less attractive for ramblers. In the last ten or twenty years, an other problem is added. Highways, canals and railways become more and more barriers for the walker. Only if you walk many, many kilometres more, you can go inside from the one attractive region in the other, however mostly over unattractive roads with many traffic, and frequently very dangerous for the Rambler. A serious problem of the last years become the circular roads around cities and greater villages. They makes that a Rambler can not reach the countryside from his house; he is forced to go by car! And the Rambler who comes by train to make an walk in a region far from his house, he has the same problems to walk from station into the attractive countryside. You will understand that the problems I mentioned above about highways, railways and circular roads are not a specific problem of Lower Holland, it is a problem in the whole country. So I do not pay attention to it, to propose solutions. My focus today is to the specific problems in the parts of Holland with clay and peat soils. Problems which we do not have in the regions with a sandy soil, at least less. In those regions many roads and paths which a sandy surface are disappeared, however you can mostly find attractive alternatives.

Of course, you can plan a long distance path in Lower Holland, we do have some in the western and northern regions of our country. However it is difficult, you wish that you can make a better route. You are lucky as maker of a long distance path when there are dunes, woods or wildlife conservations areas. Outside these, you have mostly a problem. I know, there are developed some short routes around villages in the last years. But more is needed to create a real walking environment, like in the past when most Dutch polders knew a dense network of footpaths. How to get back, that is the question today. Using examples, I will outline what is involved to get back an area really attractive for ramblers. This includes not only new paths, but improvements to the landscape as well. I paid particular attention to Walcheren, a former island in the south-west, where in 1944 all paths were swept in one blow. Other examples I found in other regions of the province of Zeeland, where I am active at the Water Department.

## Walcheren

In 1944 almost the entire island of Walcheren flooded after the British bombed the dikes in an attempt to expel the Germans. Salty seawater was over the island, no tree has survived except in the city of Middelburg and in the dunes.

Until 1944 Walcheren knew a very dense network of footpaths, paths which were used to go in the shortest way from the farms to school and church in the village. Until the beginning of the 20th century, when a pumping station was built, these paths were almost every winter the only accessible ways to walk from one village to the other. Nearly all roads and the meadows as well were just every winter flooded, by rainwater this time.

“Restoration of footpaths is outdated in this era of progression”, the commission responsible for reconstruction ruled two years later, in 1946. Remarkable, certainly if you know which advice a very known Dutch name in nature policy, Jac. P. Thijsse, had given to the director of the Planning Department in 1939, just before the war starts: “Please be concerned about the network of footpaths. It is wonderful. You have to beware it and, if possible, you may extend it.” Nevertheless the entire network of more than 100 km disappeared in the reconstruction in the late forties, except two little tracks of about one kilometre each.

Now, half a century later, step by step a new network of footpaths is under construction. Not the same tracks as in earlier times, nowadays other things are leading. That is the story I will explain to you.

## **Lines in the landscape - dykes**

Using lines, is one of the keywords. Lines of each kind or particular elements. Old lines, disappeared or nearly disappeared lines. Lines that are telling a story, lines which are the remains of history. Let me give you some examples.

First I have to tell you that some fifteen years ago volunteers had an idea to connect Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, by several footpaths in all directions with the coastline (and the former coast) of Walcheren and to care that one can walk along the coastline: a wheel with spooks. In the dunes there is no problem at all, but on the east side, where Walcheren is nowadays connected with the former island of Zuid-Beveland, the volunteers had to make new paths. Their eye caught on old dykes along the Sloe, the disappeared water between Walcheren and Zuid-Beveland. Over there the ships to the port of Middelburg were mooring in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some farmers who used these dykes have given permission to walk on it. At some places you can clearly see that you are walking on an old dyke and you can really imagine that beneath you there was water a long time ago.

On the north-east side of the island there is a dyke along the Lake Veere, a former stream canal called Veersegat. Clearly you can see that this dyke had to defend Walcheren until recent times, to say exactly until 1961 when the first of the Deltaworks has finished by closing the Veersegat from the sea. On this dyke too, farmers have been given permission to walk. Two dykes, each with another identity and another story. Walking on it, you can see yourself the difference.

In the polder of Walcheren there are no other dykes than the circular dyke around, which was constructed already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. In other regions of Zeeland just the pattern of dykes, constructed during many centuries, gives the identity to the landscape. On the map you can see the difference between dykes along the last stream channel and dykes that were built to win a little piece of land, one after each other. Many of these dykes don't have nowadays a function to defend the land against the water; they are in agricultural use. It is very attractive to walk on it and we are happy that some farmers have given permission to it. Planning a

walking network in this region north of Goes in Zuid-Beveland, we had the idea that you can see the difference between the dykes on a map only, but in the field as well. Our solution: different trees or bush on each kind of dyke. So the rambler can 'read' the landscape, how it was growing, how it has been developed. One dyke, the last dyke along the Lake Veere, has already a personal identity. This dyke was fortified after the last flooddisaster in 1953 with a small wall, named to his creator De Muralt.

A last example of dykes, this time in Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen in the southern part of Zeeland. There some dykes are restored, in nature development projects we had enough clay, to build the original landscape. It concerns dykes that have been dig off in the last century. On the restored dykes new connections for ramblers have been made.

## **Railway tracks**

In the UK for instance old railway tracks are in these days lines that remind their use. In Walcheren there were tram tracks too, but after the flooding in 1944 these lines didn't come back. So we cannot use it for our purpose.

In Zuid-Beveland there is on one location a dike denomination (coupure), for an fully disappeared railway track. If high water was expecting, the coupure was closed with wooden shelves. At the same moment as the walking network in this region was realised, the coupure have been renovated, as point of interest for the rambler.

In Zuid-Beveland too, there is an old circular railway track that connect most villages in the southern part with the main city of Goes. One part is used today as a steam track for tourists trains. Some parts are leaved almost a century ago and are impenetrable or just vanished at all. Another part has stopped in 2008 as a freight track to the harbour of Vlissingen. Ramblers can use these track in the walking network that has been opened from this spring. We are happy that it isn't become a cycle route. In the Netherlands there are many examples –I would say to much – that old railway tracks are transformed in cycle paths, mostly paved and less attractive for ramblers. One very good example, near Den Bosch in the province of Noord-Brabant, I like to show you. In an old railway track over the Moerputten, open water by digging out the peat, there is a old railway bridge with a length of several hundred meters only accessible for walkers. The connecting embankments over several kilometres are to be used by walkers only as well.

The same danger of transforming in a cycle route threatened the tow path along the Kanaal door Walcheren, the last used connection from Middelburg to the sea. After the flooding of 1944 it was in agricultural use. This spring the tow path between Middelburg and Veere is being reopened, only for walkers, one of the spooks in the wheel.

## **New lines**

Two other spooks in the network are situated along waterways. Both waterways had to be redesigned to make sure that there is enough space in it to catch the water by heavy rainfall. In the new bank a small footpath has made at the same time. Nearly nobody was been acquainted with these waterways: the Domburgse Watergang and the Veerse Watergang, waterways from Domburg and Veere to the pumpings stations. Only in heavy winters with temperatures under zero degrees skaters used in the past the ice in the waterway for their skating trip to Veere or Domburg. The redevelopment of the both waterways have made new lines in the landscape, now known by many ramblers, two new spooks in our wheel as well.

There was another issue by the reconstruction of the waterway towards Domburg: to accentuate the quality of the landscape that is pointed out as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. One of the aims in these areas is to ameliorate the accessibility on a way that people

can enjoy the attractive landscape. The advantage is that the reconstruction for landscape and watergoals and the ameliorating of the accessibility (for your understanding: new footpaths) can be financed in one time. With these projects the government will assure too economic activities, like farmers serving drinks and offer campsites. That is good news for the rambler too. An adventurous path has been created between Middelburg and the coast, with styles (more particular in Holland than in the UK) and little boats to tow yourself to the other side of the waterway.

In Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen we have another line: the Staats-Spaanse Linies, a defense line between the Dutch and the Spanish in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. To make these lines more known within and outside the region, fortifications are recently restored or made more recognizable. The dykes between the fortifications are accentuated too, on such a way that this defense line, over more than 80 kilometres between the coast and Antwerp, can be better experienced. With the reconstruction of the Staats-Spaanse Linies, the infrastructure for cyclists and walkers will be improved. It is an other change to make an attractive walking network in this border region with many creeks and old cities.

Near Veere on the island of Walcheren creeks will be restored next year. It is a water development project, aiming for a better quality of the water. The creek will be better recognizable as well, from the seaside until the very last ends. And you can guess already, for the rambler are made new footpaths in the same project to discover the creek from the beginning to the end.

At least three projects in Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen., two of them in the neighbourhood of Aardenburg, nowadays a little town of about 1500 inhabitants, in earlier days an important city. The old entry from the sea to the town, in the last centuries a long and narrow silted polder, is restored in a nature development project. You can now enjoy the new entry, walking over about five kilometres along the new canal.

At the other side of the town an old peat canal is restored; this project finds his roots in a water development project. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century little boats are transporting peat to town, used as fuel. Along this narrow canal, with a very specific identity, you can made a walk from this summer on. Some new bridges and styles are constructed and an other five kilometres of the network, which has to be opened within two years, is ready.

The last example I will show you is another nature and water development project near the village of Zaamslag in the east of Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen. An old bridge over a creek was recovered, in the middle of the fields. Consulting old maps, we have seen this bridge was part of an old path from a little hamlet to the church of Zaamslag. Plans are making to restore this connection as a part of the entire project.

## **The key**

You see, key to the delivery of new networks and other walking infrastructure, is making connections with ongoing water and nature development projects. Cultural heritage and landscape are other keywords that the apostle of new paths must have in his vocabulary for successful results. He must also ensure that ‘walking’ is enshrined in the policy. Otherwise his story will not be heard, or the finances required for realization of new footpaths are much harder to get.

A good organization is needed from both side, from the ‘walking’ side as well as from the side of water and nature development projects, to have results. Ideas for connecting ‘walking’

with other projects you can find in old and new lines in the polder landscape, I hope I have outlined with the mentioned examples.