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The Beemster Polder

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1612

The Beemster Polder

The Netherlands and water

There is a good reason for the fact that the Beemster Polder is listed on the Unesco World Heritage Register. The draining of this lake in 1612 is a shining example of how the Dutch “created” large areas of their country in the north, west and south-west of the Netherlands. The Netherlands took shape by man battling the elements. It started with small-scale land reclamation and the building of dykes in the Middle Ages. The scale became increasing larger from the sixteenth century onwards with the draining of lakes and peat bogs, and, for the time being, work was wound up in the twentieth century with the laying down of the Flevo polders and the Maasvlakte.

In 1607, a group of Amsterdam merchants and town administrators decided to drain the Beemster which at the time was a large lake. It promised to be a

financially lucrative project that moreover would contribute to providing food for the fast-growing town of Amsterdam. A high, strong dyke with a length of 38 kilometres was built around the lake; around that dyke, the ring canal was dug. After this, work began on pumping the lake dry, using no fewer than 43 windmills. An engineer, Jan Adriaenszoon Leeghwater, was responsible for the building and placement of the windmills. A series of mills had to be built, each slightly higher than the last, so that the water was gradually pumped into the ring canal.

In 1612, the lake was dry and the polder could be laid out. Roads were laid, channels and ditches were dug and farms were built. The design was well-ordered in a tight geometric pattern. The Beemster Polder’s fame is due to this parcellation and design.

Over the centuries, a great deal of tinkering was done to the system of water management in the Beemster. For a long time it was the windmills that had to ensure that the residents kept their feet dry and that the water levels were suitable for land cultivation. In the late nineteenth century, the windmills were replaced by steam-driven pumping stations, and later still by diesel and electric-driven pumps. Today, the Beemster is divided into over fifty sections, each with its own water level. Farmers need a low water level under their land, while village residents want a high level to prevent the posts under their houses from rotting on



contact with air. The ideal water level for cattle farmers is somewhere in between, while nature conservationists have their own requirements.

In the past, water was only pumped away to prevent flooding but today, in dry periods, water is also pumped into the Beemster. This is possible because the IJsselmeer, the former Zuiderzee, now contains fresh water of a quality suitable for agriculture.

The power of the wind and windmills once allowed the Beemster waters to be drained and land to be reclaimed. Today electricity and computers are used to manage the water levels.

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Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The life story of Leeghwater
Agriculture and cattle farming in the Golden Age
The Dutch landscape (polders, dykes and mills)

Secondary education sector

Water boards and water management
Technology (drainage and mills)
The background of land division
The landscapes of the Netherlands

Past and Present

Water management, then and now
Unesco World Heritage List

In the Treasure Chest

Aerial photograph of the Beemster Polder

References

Places to Go

Beemster
Cruquius: Cruquius pumping station

Books for young people

Peter Smit, *Jan Jans Weltevree* (10+)

Background literature

Herman Kaptein, "Jan Adriaensz. Leeghwater (1575- ca. 1650)" in Els Kloek (ed.), *Verzameld verleden: Veertig gedenkwaardige momenten en figuren uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*, Hilversum 2004.

Websites

www.beemsterinfo.nl
www.beemster.net/erfgoed.htm
whc.unesco.org/en/list (world heritage list)