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## The great flood

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1 February 1953

## The great flood

The danger of water

Late in the night of 31 January 1953, the dykes of the province of Zeeland gave way during an enormous storm: 1,835 people lost their lives, 72,000 people lost their homes and 200,000 hectares of land were flooded. A national disaster. Across the whole of the Netherlands, money and clothing was collected, evacuees were warmly welcomed and aid arrived from abroad.

The disaster could have been much worse. If the dykes of the province of South Holland had not held, another 30,000 might have drowned and a further one million would have been made homeless. Because, behind these dykes, close to the Dutch IJssel, lies the lowest part of the Netherlands. The waters would have reached levels of over seven metres in most places if these dykes had burst.

To prevent such a disaster reoccurring, soon after the flood, work was begun on the Delta works storm surge barrier.

Plans had been made earlier to strengthen coastal flood barriers, but due to the war and post-war reconstruction they had not been implemented yet. All the gaps between the islands were closed by dams. The sea and river dykes were strengthened and a storm surge barrier was built in the Dutch IJssel.

As they went along, the engineers realised that not all the arms of the river should be sealed off because this would cause the unique natural environment to disappear. For this reason, a storm surge barrier was built in the Oosterschelde with openings that are only closed in the event of an emergency. The Westerschelde could not be sealed off from the sea, because it provides access to the ports of Antwerp and Ghent. Consequently, the sea dykes were simply reinforced here.

Thanks to this enormous project, the south-western Netherlands is much more secure against flooding than ever before. At the same time, new bridges and dams

have improved the accessibility of the islands of Zeeland, which has fostered the development of industry and tourism in the province.

The great flood of 1953 clearly illustrated how vulnerable large areas of the Netherlands were to flooding. It is now known that the danger is not only from the sea, but from the great rivers as well. Climate change is causing rainfall in Europe to become unpredictable and this affects the water levels of the great rivers. In 1993 and 1995, the situation in the

Netherlands was critical: some of the great rivers were on the point of flooding. This led to the implementation of a large number of projects to strengthen the dykes. However, experts believe that just raising the dykes is not the solution. They think that the rivers should be given more room, that building on river-forelands should be stopped and that areas should be designated for the temporary storage of excess water. This philosophy translates into learning to live with water and not in conflict with it.



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## Sub-topics

### Primary education sector

The Netherlands, land of water  
The St. Elizabeth Flood (1421)  
The draining of the IJsselmeer

### Secondary education sector

The geography of the south-western Netherlands  
Spatial planning and water management in the Netherlands (NAP - Amsterdam Ordnance Datum)  
The consequences of better links with Zeeland for the inhabitants of the area  
Water boards

### Past and Present

Should the environment have a higher priority than security and economic issues?  
Dutch engineers in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina

### In the Treasure Chest

Model of a lift-lock  
Photo album of the great flood

## References

### Places to Go

Vrouwenpolder: WaterLand Neeltje Jans  
Ouwerkerk: Watersnoodmuseum  
Trip across the Westfrieze Zeedijk  
Cruquius: Steam pumping station

### Books for young people

Bert Jansen, *Rikkert en de ramp*  
Hans Petermeijer, *De nacht dat het water kwam*  
Jan Terlouw, *Oosterschelde, windkracht 10* (12+)

### Background literature

Kees Slager, *De ramp: Een reconstructie van de watersnood van 1953*, Amsterdam 2003

### Websites

[www.watersnood-1953.startkabel.nl](http://www.watersnood-1953.startkabel.nl)  
[www.neeltjejans.nl](http://www.neeltjejans.nl)  
[www.deltawerken.com](http://www.deltawerken.com)