

OUTLINE

WATERWAYS AS VALUABLE ARTEFACTS IN (YOUNG) CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

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The Netherlands can boast the densest network of navigable waterways in the world. And it used to be even denser before the truck took over half of the transport needs. Railways in our country always transported only a relatively small portion of the total freight volume. The main reason for the importance of transport over water was not in the first place a price factor but the abundance of water. Our far forefathers hardly could get rid of water and dug tens of thousands of ditches to let the water run off to the sea or to rivers. From the Early Middle Ages they tried to conquer new arable land to satisfy their need of food. Be it sand, clay or peat areas, they found a way to reclaim them. Shipping was or became only a secondary purpose and in many cases no purpose at all. Reclaiming inaccessible marsh lands and peat moors was only possible by digging ditches for water run off. As an unintended result the land surface however sank dramatically and came within reach of tidal influence. As a consequence navigable inland waterways – such as lakes, rivers and estuaries – could easily be connected by widening some ditches and building locks, if necessary. From the 14th and 15th century on the navigable network grew denser quickly, especially in the north of our country. So many waterways were needed to get rid of the water abundance there, that constructing roads and building bridges became very inefficient compared to make all farms, hamlets, villages and towns accessible through waterways in appropriate sizes. The densest of dense waterways in the Netherlands was found in the Province of Friesland. Transport of peat bricks and of crops and dairy products developed into their most important functions. Public or private tow paths along most of them were common but a network of (paved) and interconnected roads hardly existed in the North before the second half of the 19th century or even in the 20th.

Waterways in many parts of the Northern provinces still reflect the process of reclaiming and transforming this man made landscape between AD 1000 and yesterday. Waterways in this area also represent different developments in various geographical circumstances – a factor not to be overlooked.

In this contribution we shall focus on the threefold meaning of waterways, namely as:

1. cultural phenomena
2. (parts of) landscapes
3. valuable artefacts

We shall see that protection of historical waterways only seldom goes further than protection of some of its additional ‘hardware’: locks, bridges and dwellings of lock keepers etc. The linear canal structures themselves and the adjacent land and landscapes usually receive(d) hardly any attention. Many kilometres of canals were filled up and as a

consequence part of the local or regional history was wiped out. Recognizing canals and adjacent landscapes as valuable cultural artefacts may add to awareness of our national history and identity, which were and are so strongly interwoven with water.