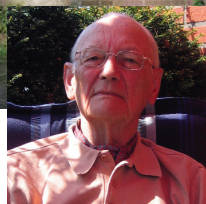


In Search of the Identity of Asperen

Titus Weijschedé
John Mulder



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Fourteen interviews with ex-soldiers, inhabitants and administrators

Titus Weijschedé
John Mulder

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Introduction

The area around Fort Asperen receives a lot of attention at the moment. The area is a tourist attraction, especially for walkers, cyclists and art lovers. It is part of the area development project called 'Lingekwartier'¹.



Fort Asperen

This is a cooperation between Staatsbosbeheer², the Province of Gelderland, the municipalities Lingewaal and Geldermalsen, the district water board Rivierenland, project agency Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie³ (NHW) and Stichting Fort Asperen⁴. The parties want to establish a widely supported area development around Fort Asperen.

At the same time the European Interreg IIIc project 'Cultured' was started at Gent University. The objective of 'Cultured' is to exchange knowledge between fourteen European partners on how cultural heritage

can play a part in the development of its own immediate surroundings. Alterra is one of the partners and brings in, in consultation with project agency NHW, the Lingekwartier project with an exemplary function.

The theoretical objective of the Cultured project is that regional area development can only take place if innovative ideas are introduced⁵. These can be social, cultural or physical innovations. Innovative ideas are not however a guarantee for success. A good idea will always have to fit into the identity of the region, to make sure that it's embedded for a long time. If we look at this objective for the Lingekwartier, the developments

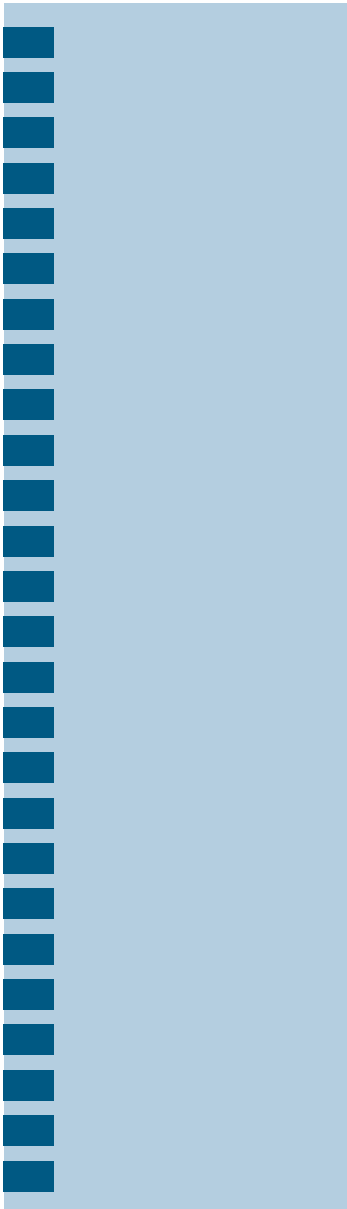
¹) Lingekwartier literally means: the area around the River Linge

²) the Dutch Forestry Commission

³) The Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie was a military line of defence that extended from the former Zuiderzee near Muiden to the Biesbosch.

⁴) Fort Asperen Foundation

⁵) Prof. Allaert, 2004



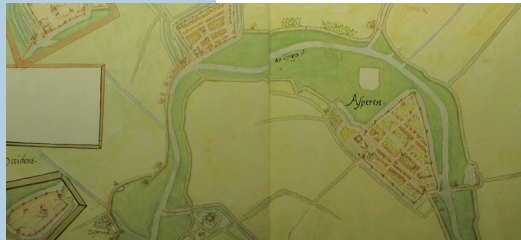
in view will have to fit the identity of the area around Fort Asperen. This raises some questions like: "What is the identity of Asperen?" and "By whom is this decided?" Are these tangible physical matters like the history of the development, the geology, the condition of the soil or the values of nature? Or are there also cultural and social aspects that play a role? To gain a better picture of all this Titus Weijsschedé and John Mulder have interviewed several inhabitants, former soldiers, farmers and administrators. It is especially the inhabitants with their knowledge of the area, their stories and anecdotes that give a good insight of how the area has functioned until so far. After that this knowledge can give direction to sustainable developments in the Lingekwartier.

Description of the Area and Method

The area around Asperen was given the name Lingekwartier as part of the area development project. It is situated in the Province of Gelderland and spread out over two municipalities: Geldermalsen and Lingewaal. The small Linge cuts through it from

east to west. On the elevated former river beds lie the medieval settlements of Rhenoy, Acquoy and Asperen on the north bank, Rumpt and Gellicum on the south bank. Asperen was first mentioned in 893 and was granted privileges of a town in 1313. Parts of the moat are still existing. The main dikes mark the narrow forelands of the Linge, and function as nature reserve. Fort Asperen, Fort Nieuwe Steeg, a lock with fan-shaped gates in the river Linge and the Nieuwe Zuider Lingedijk were constructed in the beginning of the 19th century as part of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie. The Nieuwe Zuider Lingedijk protected Asperen and Heukelum against floodwater from the east.

On the elevated former river beds we find an irregular, block shaped allotment pattern, with arable, grassland and fruit farming. In the basins exists strip allotment with mainly grassland farming. To the west of the monumental town of Asperen a small new housing development was built in the nineties of the last century; to the north between the Oude Zuider Lingedijk and the River Linge is an industrial estate.



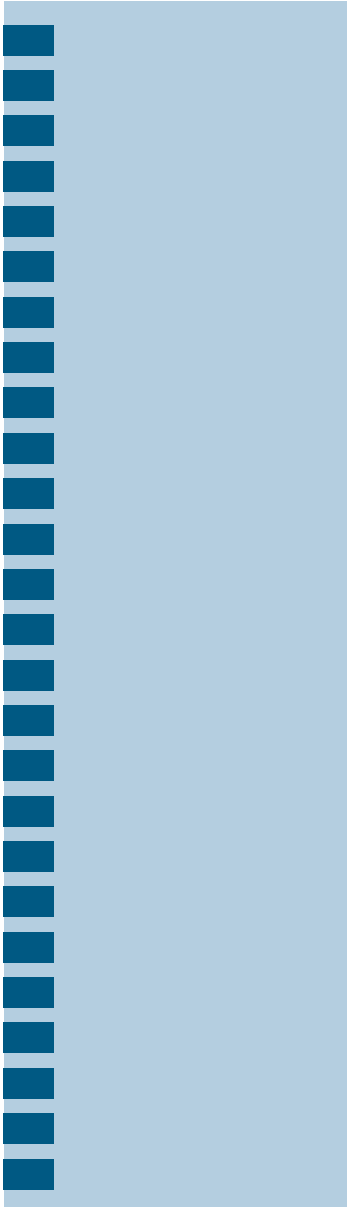
Asperen around 1570 (Van Deventer)



Asperen around 1850



Asperen in 2004



The area is located at the crossroads of two different cultural-historical unities: the east-west direction of the Linge and the north-south direction of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie. The river basin of the Linge, and with it the Lingekwartier, forms a big recreational attraction for walkers and cyclists, and for water sports and other activities.

Method

The interviews took place between May and September 2006. Because Stichting Fort Asperen had already been doing the "exploitation" of Fort Asperen, we interviewed the project co-ordinator, Loes Hartzema, first. She gave us ideas of people who qualified for an interview. The original idea was to interview people from different fields of knowledge: farmers, administrators, inhabitants and managers. In the end we have interviewed fourteen people, who have or had something to do with the area around Asperen in one way or another, namely:

- two farmers: Eef Story and Henk Klijn;
- two inhabitants of Asperen: Trudy Zwart and Ton Kleijn;
- two staff members of the Fort Asperen Foundation: Loes Hartzema en Joke Schuller;
- two soldiers that were quartered in Asperen in 1939: Gerard Soeters and Mrs Guda Berghuijs (widow of General Berghuijs);
- two managers: Ruud Boltong and Bart Bennis;
- two representatives of an historical society: Dick van Weenen and Jos den Hartog;
- two aldermen: Griedo Bel (municipality of Lingewaal) and Chris van Doorn (municipality of Geldermalsen).

Most interviews took place at the house of the interviewees (with or without a voice recorder). Both aldermen and the staff members of Stichting Fort Asperen were interviewed at the town halls of Lingewaal and Geldermalsen, respectively.

Interviews

Guda Berghuijs



The interview with Mrs Berghuijs has the character of a posthumous conversation. Her husband, General Berghuijs, who died April 19 2003, was quartered at Fort Asperen during the mobilization and at the outbreak of World War II. At the time he was lieutenant and commander with the grenadier regiment. After his retirement he has given a few speeches on his experiences during that period. He has put this speech in writing. Apart from that, Mrs Berghuijs was in the possession of old pictures, postcards and letters from that period. Mrs Berghuijs granted us permission to integrally include the speech and the accompanying slides in this publication. (See the enclosed CD.) Below we quote some of the passages of the speech.

'It is an honour for me to tell you about my experiences from the period 1939/'40. It cannot however possibly be more than a few personal memories, supplemented and somewhat put in the frame of general information. One should bear in mind that empathizing with that time with completely different circumstances and standards is not easy. If one wants to pass judgement, one should think in terms of the standards and views of that time.'

'I myself was transferred from my garrison at Amersfoort to The Hague on July 15 1939, and placed with the grenadier regiment at camp Waalsdorp. It was called an honourable placement, but in practice it turned out disappointing.'

'I was given the chance to plan exercises of more than one day and by that escape from camp Waalsdorp. In this way I had planned a two-day march exercise of 30 km a day in the polder landscape of South Holland

on August 22. It was beautiful summer weather but almost too warm to march with the heavy kit. Hence my decision to set out early on the second day, August 23 to return to camp Waalsdorp before the hot afternoon. About half past ten we had already covered more than half the distance, when the motorcycle orderly found us and told me to immediately return home via the shortest way, because once again telegram 'A' (warning for complete mobilization') had been sent out.'

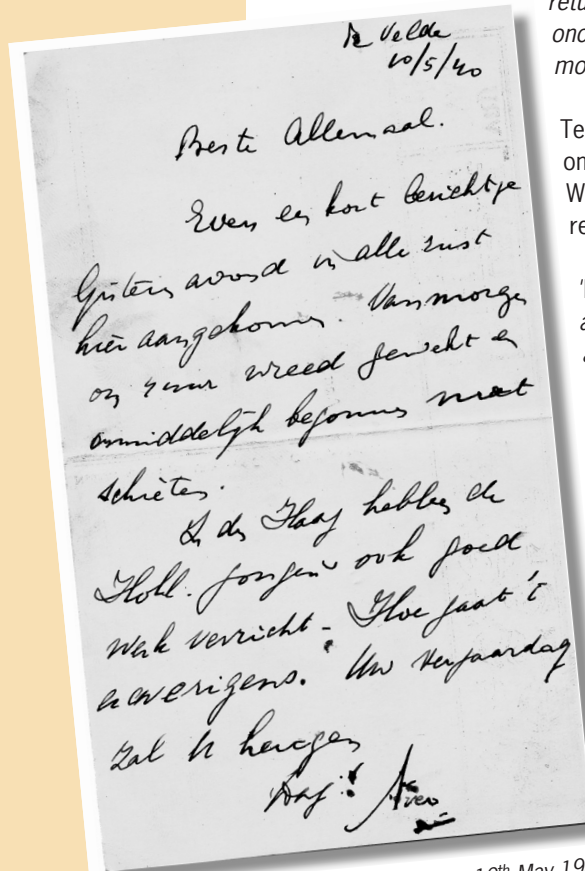
Telegram 'B' ('call-up for complete mobilization') showed that Berghuijs had to leave for Woudrichem to mobilize the 23rd infantry regiment.

'When the call-up telegram arrived in the afternoon, calling up batches 1923 up to and including 1939, all preparations had been done and we were able to receive all arriving soldiers and accommodate them across the region and the materiel of the mobile depots could be taken to the units the next day.'

'Soon after the call-up had been completed telegram 'C' arrived, after which concentration of war-deployment took place. For our battalion this meant taking up the position in section Leerdam of the eastern front garrison Holland. My infantry company ended up at Fort Asperen.'

'For the III battalion of the 23rd infantry regiment this meant, one had to march from Oudendijk/Woudrichem to Asperen/Leerdam. This was not

an easy task. One had to deal with untrained men of around 30 years of age pulled straight out of their civilian lives, often dressed in too



Postcard from Berghuijs to his parents on 10th May 1940,
day of the German Invasion

E. Veldele B. in slag, M. in

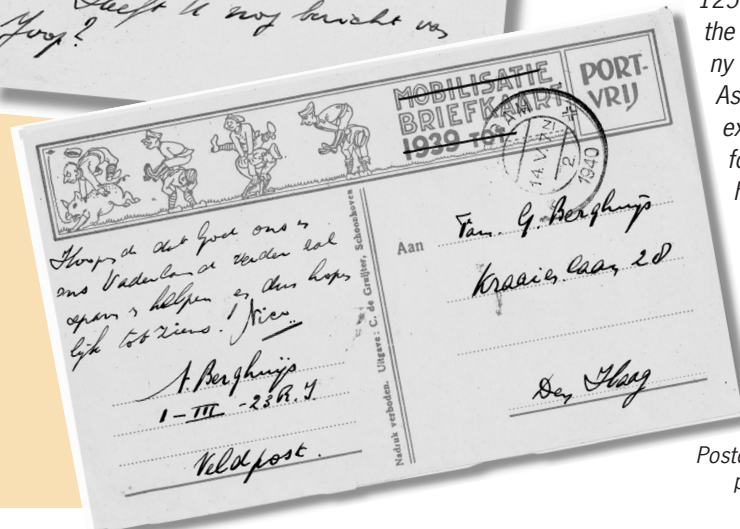
lieve allemaal,

Waar even bericht. Alles
is hier nog rustig. Dit nog steeds
op m'n oude plaats.

Alles is hier een fel
bij-lijpen weinig slaap, maar
hebben er nog geen, last van.

Het hier is prettig, communicatie
en myn huilt, hoopers, dat er
steeds hier ges, verspreid geplaatst
wordt. Enfin, en sommige
avontuur en fant deuren.

Heeft u nog bericht van
Jong?



tight uniforms with a high collar and made of an unusual thick black material, and all this at temperatures between 25-30° Celsius!

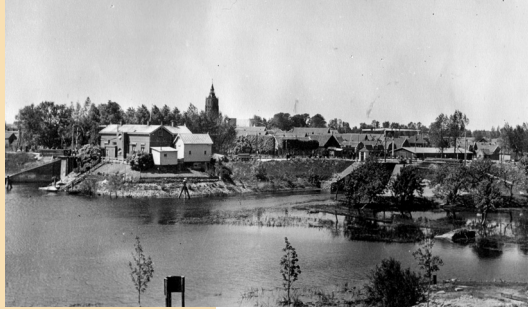
Personally it would not have mattered to me that much, well trained as I was. Except that I was not allowed to walk, but as the only professional officer (apart from the professional commander) I was added to the battalion as a jack-of-all-trades for the gentlemen quartermasters. It turned also out to be the job of the sitting target. Everything that went wrong or had been organised wrongly was scattered over my head in, sometimes, rude language. For example quarters had been reserved for one of the companies at a kindergarten long before the mobilization, which was still full of little kindergarten benches. It is quite a task to billet

125 soldiers there! Late in the afternoon my company arrived at Fort

Asperen, all sweaty and exhausted. The straw for the encampment had indeed arrived, but what do you think? The whole fort, except for the corridors, was full of artillery

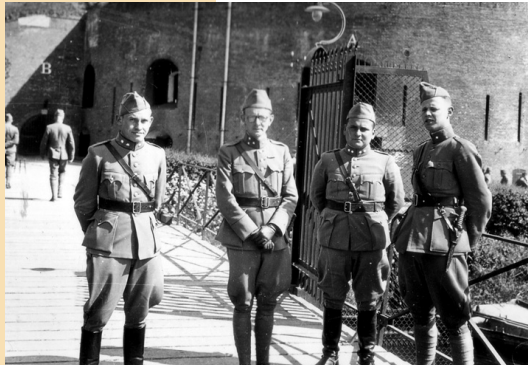
Postcard from Berghuijs to his parents on 14th May 1940

ammunition! And the lighting had to be done with candles. Quarters in Asperen was not allowed as it was the territory of the neighbouring battalion and was not to be used by us. Almost the whole company had to spend the night outside because of the danger of explosion.'



Asperen in 1939

'When I wanted to ask the chief quartermaster for further instructions concerning the several arising difficulties at around seven that afternoon, there was no sign of him anywhere until I finally found some uniforms at "Lucullus" in Leerdam. They had settled well and were having unalloyed drinks. Then for the first time during my career did I express myself and behave in an undisciplined way.'



Mobilization 1939. Lieutenant Berghuijs is on the right

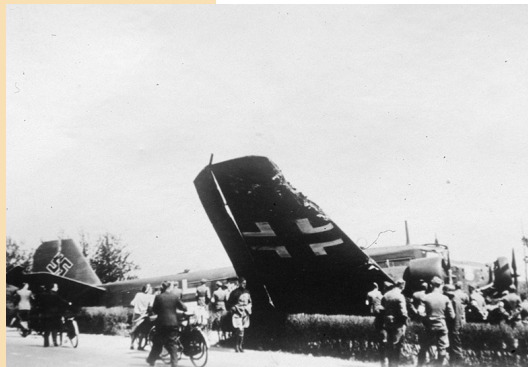
'It constantly was the main concern of captain Van Deth to keep the men at work, that is to say busy. This was also a result of his experience during the mobilization in 1914/'18. Then there was dissatisfaction leading to small revolts due to the lack of activities for the soldiers. That's why Van Deth made up all sorts of tasks and small activities (for example marching to the bathing establishment frequently) to keep the men busy and he let the work on the war deployment be, in order to have that in reserve once there was nothing else to do anymore. He was namely convinced that there would be no war at all and it would be exactly as with the last mobilization.'

'I jumped out of bed and indeed saw a large fleet of low-flying aircraft coming over. It was immediately clear to me that these were intended for the Netherlands. I quickly put on my uniform over my pyjamas, grabbed my bicycle and raced to the fort. Upon arrival I sounded the alarm with

the fort bell and ordered the deployment of the Schwarzlose heavy machine gun on the carriage at the fort. I went up myself also and, as soon as the machine gun was in position, opened fire on the very low-flying Junker troop carriers.'



Inspection of ships on the Linge

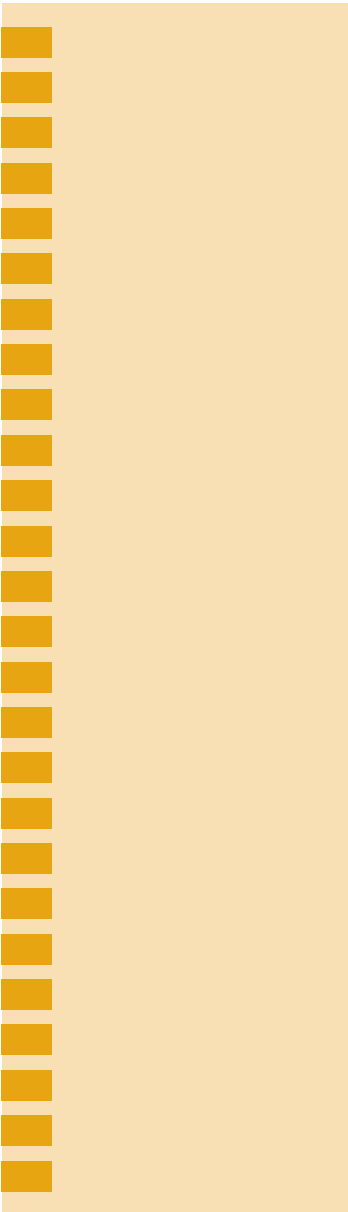


Shot-down German aircraft

'The 12th of May anti-aircraft guns were placed on the dike between Leerdam and Asperen. In my position area a battery of anti-aircraft machine guns were placed as well. I believe of the brand Spandau. "Berlin 1916" was written on them. Apparently these machine guns originated from the disarmed German troops in the Netherlands in 1918. Now they could prove their use against the Jerries.'

'Apart from that it was waiting for the things to come. The radio message of the Dutch capitulation came as an enormous and indescribable shock. For me and my men it was something that we could hardly deal with. At the beginning of the war orders were given not to believe any radio messages about capitulation. For it could be that party followers (fifth columnists) had taken control of the radio stations. So to me, as long as there came no confirmation over the command line, this radio message was not true. The commander of the anti-aircraft machine guns that had been in my position area since the 12th of May on the dike to Leerdam wanted to take his machine guns from the position. His sol-

diers didn't much like that idea and informed me about their dissatisfaction. I became angry with the commander in question (in my opinion an unstable lieutenant) and then took over the command of the battery myself. Of course to the satisfaction of the anti-aircraft gunners. One hour



later a German fighter came skimming over. On my command it was opened fire on with the result that it dived into the inundation. Late that evening of the 14th of May finally came the message of the capitulation via the command line with the command to concede.'

Gerard Soeters



Gerard Soeters, born in 1915, grew up in Hoorn, Vlissingen, Bovenkarspel and Gouda where he attended the HBS/B school. Between his final written and oral exams his father died completely unexpectedly.

His mother was left behind without a pension with four children, of whom the eldest was studying in Amsterdam. She had already had a room furnished in the big house in Gouda for a couple of years to sell the works of artists, that were going through difficult times during the recession. She turned it into a gallery, one of the first in the Netherlands.

On his mother's side, men usually became doctor or vicar and Gerard was going to be a doctor. But for that the means were lacking. His mother's business acquaintances tried to help by letting him work as representative of art and applied art to make some money. For that he turned out to be, partly because he suffered from initial hesitation, completely unsuitable.

He then joined the Army early. In Kampen he attended the military academy for officers at the division heavy machine guns. After that his mother sent him to the psychotechnical laboratory at the University of Utrecht. The professor came to the conclusion that he should study medicine. He hired him as a research assistant, by which he was exempted from tuition fees. In this position he put himself at the disposal to participate in psychological and psychotechnical research.

The Mobilization

In 1939, his second university year, he was mobilized and quartered in barracks just outside Leerdam. He had been promoted to lieutenant in the meantime with the grenadier regiment. His superior officer was quartered in Asperen. The forts in that part of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie were only garrisoned on the day the Germans invaded our country. Soeters

ended up at fort Nieuwe Steeg that was situated in the inundated land on the river Linge. He requisitioned a motorboat so that the fort would remain accessible. From the fort you had a beautiful view over the inundated land.



Anti-aircraft gun in action

The War

Soeters found that our army was badly prepared for waging war. During retraining exercises we hardly ever fired a shot for reasons of economy. Even during the mobilization we didn't use live ammunition.

"Therefore we were badly prepared for the German invasion and thrown in at the deep end."

"In my group were several men from Amsterdam. They had difficulty with going along with the military discipline. Often they returned late from furlough or not at all. But after the outbreak of the war they turned out to be fantastic men. We fired with

our heavy machine guns at the German aircraft but that was for the first for us because we had never seen the special gun carriages before, let alone used them."

"We may have hit a German fighter by accident. It broke away from the formation and went into a nose dive towards us, firing. And by amazing good fortune without hitting one of us. The soil was spurting everywhere around us. Our gunner exclaimed in amazement: "Gosh, he's shooting back!" A better sign of our being completely unprepared for waging war is inconceivable."

"I think it is a good thing to maintain the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie in its entirety. If only with a view to impart things about the war to future generations. The Waterlinie tells the story of how their forefathers thought they could protect themselves against the enemy forays. Forts could also be equipped as museums or conference centres."

Ton Kleijn



Ton Kleijn was born in Asperen in 1941. He attended primary education there too. He attended the HBS school in Gorinchem. His father ran a garage on the Voorstraat in Asperen. The garage was first demanded by the Dutch troops (that decently paid for it) and later on by the German troops (that didn't pay for it). During the period that fort Asperen was garrisoned, only one third of the troops stayed at the fort; two thirds stayed elsewhere, because of the high humidity. Part of the men stayed at his father's garage. After the passing away of his father Kleijn took over the garage in 1966. Due to growth he moved the company to Vuren. It has grown into an authoritative truck company. Since 1990 he has slowly been stepping back in favour of a successor, via a management buyout. Momentarily he lives on the Waterpoort in the old café. Captains and their crews used to come here for drinks. The mobilized soldiers from the fort also knew where to find the café.

His father had been alderman before the war and didn't trust the Germans at all during the war. During the mobilization he had a good relationships with our soldiers. In 1939 St Nicholas was celebrated at Fort Asperen, of which Kleijn shows a photograph. It shows, among others, then professional lieutenant and future General Berghuijs, as well as lieutenant Soeters, who was subject to compulsory military service (see the interview with Soeters). 'During the mobilization there were two movements: one of the people that did not see the seriousness of the situation and they kept believing in the neutrality of the Netherlands and the other of the people that took the threat very seriously. For example commander Berghuijs found that the construction of the group shelters (bunkers) was too slow, because the Germans had already invaded Poland. This was not everyone's opinion in the army, as a result of which, when the Germans invaded in 1940, many works had not been finished.'



Fort Asperen

During his youth he used to play a lot around Fort Asperen. 'You couldn't possibly get on the fort, but it was very suspense.' For example he rowed a lot with friends on the river Linge nearby the fort. They swam in it and dived off the fort sluice. They were chased away by the fort guard, as if it were a country policeman that was chasing mischievous boys. After the war the fort was used as ammunition depot. The ammunition chests and the loose grenades were transferred on the shore right outside the café. There were rumours that even nuclear weapons were stored at the fort.

After the storing of ammunition had stopped, the fort got a new purpose. It became a practice place for the Bescherming Burgerbevolking¹ (B.B.). The B.B. took shape during the cold war: the protection and education of the population in case of an attack with nuclear or biological weapons. 'In spite of all good intentions: apart from the educational purpose there has never been question of using the fort as a shelter for the people of Asperen in case of a nuclear attack.'

After the B.B. had left the fort, Piet Cleveringa (see the interview with Dirk van Weenen) and Mr Stakenburg organised a few cultural events at the fort, like open-air theatrical performances on summer evenings. They were imports (newcomers). 'The fort had been used for cultural events with the permission of the local people. In winter nothing happened, because bats hibernated there. Even back then they bore this in mind. It must have been in the beginning of the eighties.' Later on Cleveringa saw to it that artists could exhibit some of their works in the vicinity of the fort. 'Some children put their own objects between these works of art just for a laugh. The visitors however looked at both the works of art and the children's objects in the same fascinated way!' This demonstrated to Kleijn that the definition of art is very broad. Later again art exhibitions were organised at the fort.

The Future

There are still art exhibitions held at the fort nowadays. The infrastructure is not suited for this kind of events at all. There is absolutely not enough parking space. For the future he would plead for the conservation and the restoration of the fort. It is in bad shape. At the same time the peace and

quiet and space should remain as it is now. He is not opposed to new developments, but they have to fit in with the small-scaled character and the peace and quiet of this unique place. He states that the infrastructure should be guiding for the developments that can take place in the area. The plans should be tuned to the logistic possibilities. He also finds that you cannot use tourism to finance the cost of the restoration of the fort. That namely would demand a too intensive recreational use.



*Garage Kleijn on the Voorstraat in 1956
(Picture: collection Historical Association
Old-Asperen)*



The old café, now the Kleijn family's home



*St Nicholas during the mobilization
(Picture: collection Mrs Berghuijs)*



For instance Kleijn finds the current activities at the Tavern too large-scaled. Especially now as it is developing into a location where parties can be held. This sort of large-scale activities mainly give a lot of noise nuisance. He is very clear about new activities at Fort Asperen, Fort Nieuwe Steeg, but also at Fort Vuren: large-scale activities are not suited for this area. However, due to a good road system and parking facilities, Fort Vuren seems to be most suited for the possibilities of development.

Kleijn is one of the founders of the Vereniging Behoud Lingelandchap². He has filed a complaint in the name of this society against the plans to build a large marina on the Linge, because he didn't find it suitable for the small-scaled character of the landscape: 'There would be tailbacks on the river Linge. There is simply not enough water. If the Friesian lakes had been behind the place, it would have been a different matter.' The same accounted for the construction of a golf course in the forelands of the Linge. This plan came to grief and has been relocated in the direction of Gorinchem. He compares these ideas to the new plans that are being made for the area around Fort Asperen: a footbridge over the Linge and a big terrace. He finds this too large-scaled and not suitable for the scale of the current landscape around the Linge. Kleijn continues with melancholy: 'General Berghuijs would abhor this plan, especially because there would be intensive catering at the exact place where once the trenches used to be.'

Jos den Hartog



Jos den Hartog was born and bred in Asperen. He is manager of the archaeological museum in Asperen, which is located in an old building on the Achterstraat. The collection is mainly material that was typical for daily life during the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Den Hartog used to have a good relationship with fort guard adjutant Van Ooijen and therefore was permitted entrance to Fort Asperen during his youth. He used to play there often: 'Very suspense to wander around and play there.'

Apart from that the museum owns a couple of old footage that has been put on videotape, which Den Hartog shows us with enthusiasm. One of the tapes is about the mobilization of '39, and it shows among other things soldiers ice-skating and performing all sorts of games of skill on the ice. Den Hartog told us that the farmers were not happy at all with the inundation. Only after they were given compensation, did they concede. During the war the Germans did not compensate for the damage caused by the inundation anymore.

Den Hartog finds the art exhibitions at the fort no problem at all and is very enthusiastic about the tavern, except when he cannot sleep because of the loud music deep into the night, which happened a few times last year. He pities the fact that youngsters create havoc when returning home from the fort at night. 'I understand the fact that the manager of the tavern has to take things upon himself to keep his head above water.' Den Hartog does not have a solution at hand. 'The duty of community centre is in any case not an option, because we already have one in Asperen.' The difficult thing is that he lives in the municipality of Lingewaal and they have no authority there. 'The municipality of Geldermalsen does not pay any attention to it, 'because it is too far away to be of any concern to them.' He enjoys the many walkers and cyclists that visit the area. Those are the

types that visit the area during the day and leave before 7 pm. In that way the peace and quiet around Asperen remains intact.



*Lift bridge at the lock at Asperen
(Picture: collection D. van Weenen)*



*Winter in Asperen in 1939
(Picture: collection Mrs Berghuijs)*



*Tower mill of Asperen around 1900
(Picture: collection Historical Association
Old-Asperen)*

Dirk van Weenen



Dirk van Weenen (66 years of age) was born in Acquoy. He is married and has one daughter. He himself is from a large family. His father was coachman. Van Weenen told us that he was born in the house of Cornelis Jansenius¹ (born: Acquoy 1585 - died: Leuven 1638), theologian and after that bishop of Leper, Belgium. Van Weenen attended agricultural college after primary school and then became truck driver with a haulage firm. After that he worked for a company that manufactured baking machines in Asperen. He is a member of the historical association of Acquoy and has collected old footage and postcards from the region. Some of these have been used for this publication.

Changes in the Landscape

Van Weenen opens a photo album and starts talking about the landscape in years past. In those days there were a lot more osier-banks and duck decoys in the basin areas. Fruit farming was a lot less dominant, which has to do with, according to him, the fragmented use of the land back then. Despite the presence of standard orchards you still had a sufficient view. There were mainly mixed businesses in the area. Every farmer had a few cows, a horse and a piece of land. They mostly had some arable land, on which mangel-wurzels and potatoes were cultivated. He remembers there was an orchard on the Kerkweg. As a boy he used the orchard with his friends as a base of operation to get to Henk Klijn's bunker.

After the land consolidation farmers started specializing. Large, unbroken orchards came into being (of the rachis type), and as a result one cannot look as far as one used to. De Achterweg, on which Van Weenen has lived all his life, is called the Beatrixlaan now. He is however proud of that fact, because one of the Queens titles is "Baroness of Acquoy". The Toepad ran from the environs to the centre of the village. This track does not

¹) Jansenism is a sub-movement of Calvinism

exist anymore. While telling us all this Van Weenen turns page after page of his album. Old farms like the Kleine Engel and the Klomp pass in review, as well as the village church.



View of Acquoy

Every small farmer of the village had various sidelines like coalman or shopkeeper. He knew someone for example who had a small store in the attic. 'If you wanted to buy something there, you were allowed a seat at the kitchen table. Then you told him what you wanted and he would go up to fetch it.'

Fort Asperen

He can still remember Fort Asperen well as it used to be. There used to be many more trees around it. 'To make the fort less noticeable', is what he thinks. As a small boy he often went to the fort on the sly. The back namely was not closed and you could get onto the terrain from the Kerkweg. Signs on concrete poles told you that the fort belonged to the "Domeinen"². 'There was not much to do at the fort, as far as I can remember. It was mainly used as ammunition depot.' When Van Weenen was young it was clear to him that Fort Asperen was part of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie. He still remembers that the area was inundated during World War II, sometime between 1943 and 1944. 'Water ran from the back of Fort Asperen through a sluice onto the land.'

He has not had much to do with Fort Nieuwe Steeg. That was on the other side of the Linge and he hardly ever went there. There was not much contact with the people from the other side anyway. That only improved after the connecting road at Renoij had been completed.

Art and the Fort

Van Weenen tells us about Piet Cleveringa's old cottage in Acquoy. He lived in The Hague and became chairman of the Haagse Kunstkring³ in 1958. Cleveringa had a barn full of art to view in Acquoy. 'He has done a lot for the neighbourhood.' He was the main driving force behind the art

²) Domains

³) Hague Art Society

exhibitions at Fort Asperen. "Beelden aan de Linge"⁴ has become famous by now. Apart from that he made a big contribution to the restoration of the old town hall (see photo).



Old town hall before the restoration



The town hall after the restoration

The Future

Van Weenen has no difficulty with the fact that the fort is being used for exhibitions. He does however have difficulty with the inconvenience caused by the feasts and parties at the tavern, which go on until the small hours. The noise carries a long way over the water and can even be heard in Acquoy. He can imagine that this causes a lot of nuisance for the people living in the neighbourhood.

The exhibitions, the activities at the tavern, but also the Linge area attract a lot of tourists, that park their cars on both sides of the Lingedijk, even as far as the centre of Acquoy. Sometimes they are even parked on the slopes of the dike. To continue with the activities at and around the fort in future, parking should be better organised, according to Van Weenen. He does not experience any inconvenience from the walkers and the cyclists.

He regards the new environmental developments as a positive thing. His opinion is that there should be more new houses in the small centres like that of Acquoy. There are only houses being built in Beesd and Geldermalsen. He thinks that the municipality of Geldermalsen has no feeling for the smaller towns. They just happen to be there. For example they remove the small flags in Acquoy at 3.30 pm on the Queen's Birthday: 'Is it only her birthday in the morning, or what?' Also has the maintenance of public parks and gardens deteriorated since they have been added to the municipality of Geldermalsen.

⁴) Statues on the Linge



View of Acquoy and the Linge



Farm on a terp near Acquoy

Henk Klijn



Henk Klijn is 46 years of age, he is a fruit farmer, lives on the Langendijk 50 and is the neighbour of Fort Asperen. His father used to have an agricultural business. He has two children (21 and 18), but they are not going to take over the business. He has various plots around Acquoy, that are mainly being used for fruit farming. His outer dike plots along the river Linge are close to Leerdam and they are flooded at times of high water. Klijn grows apples, pears and prunes. Apart from that he has a small plot with Christmas trees. Until recently he grew potatoes as well, but that didn't bring in enough anymore. He stopped doing that.

Identity and Changes

Over the years he has learnt and told quite a bit about the history of the area, for example that the lowest point of the Lingedijk was in Acquoy. At high levels of the river water flowed over the dike there and functioned as a sort of overflow. The dike is owned by Staatsbosbeheer¹, knows Klijn. He has never had to maintain the dike, because he is not an owner. In former days every inhabitant of the village had to maintain a part of the dike. Such a dike was "hoof-beaten". That's what they called it. It could be a section of the dike that was not adjacent to your own house. He went to school in Asperen and to church. There were shops there too. 'If we went shopping, it would be Acquoy. We went to church in Asperen.' That one was more strict than the one in Acquoy. 'I did not have a head for study', says Klijn. 'After primary school I went to agricultural college in Geldermalsen.'

'Some old farms were on a higher level, a house terp like Huis Acquoy, the oldest house in this area. Apart from that there are two outer dike houses on a terp. In one of them my uncle used to live. The house burnt down in 1947. The church with its characteristic leaning steeple is on the dike. In the churchyard the wife of a former vicar is buried, Mrs Pisa!'

¹) Dutch Forestry Commission



*"The Tower of Pisa" in Acquoy
(Picture: collection D. van Weenen)*



Osier-beds in the foreland of the Linge

Klijn tells about the changes of the agricultural landscape. 'Before there were mainly mixed farms. The farmers didn't often have more than six cows and about three hectares of land with some arable and fruit farming. If you had twelve cows you were quite a big farmer and here there were not very many of them. In former times there was more arable farming on the elevated former river beds, but that has changed due to the land consolidation. Because of the land consolidation the backlands were drained in a better way. That's why a number of colleagues moved from the village to the backland. A big farmer now has 120 cows or more. Many small farmers have made way for a few big ones. 'Because of this there is less day-to-day contact with each other than before.'

'The meadowlands and pastures and the osier-beds were in the lower parts of the region, in the basins and the forelands. The standard tree orchards were on the higher elevated former river beds, but also on the local forelands. When the river Linge came up half a meter, they were flooded. Since the sixties many standard tree orchards have disappeared from the landscape

because of the lucrative "uproot premium". Before the land consolidation people sailed across, because some farmers owned land in Gellicum on the other side of the Linge, but they exchanged it later on.' He does not have a lot of contact with the inhabitants of Gellicum on the other side. Also because of the sale of Christmas trees he has a lot of contact with the inhabitants of Asperen.



Fort Asperen

As a child - on his way to school - he used to pass by Fort Asperen. The lift bridge had already disappeared. He used to fish a lot in the moat, because there were big carps in it. 'In the past you knew that the fort and the bunkers were part of the Waterlinie. You didn't learn this in the history lessons in school, but you heard it through the grapevine. There used to be more trees on and around the fort. They have dug up all the trees, because they were afraid the roots would wreck the fort. At the time they put soil on top of the fort. This soil came from the foreland on the opposite side of him. This is still noticeable from the relief of the foreland.'

'The fort was always locked', Klijn remembers. In the eighties art exhibitions were held there. 'There have been many strange things like pieces of art along the dike, on the opportunity of which a book was published with pictures of all the pieces of art.' It's in his bookcase as well the book about the flooding in 1995. He takes the latter out of the bookcase and shows it to us. They were evacuated themselves as well. It was a tough job, because the cattle had to be transported in big trailers along narrow dikes. He himself did not have a lot of cattle, but his cousin did. His cows were transported to Friesland, among which 180 fattening calves.

The Tavern

The shed that houses the tavern now, was formerly used as a store house. The first managers of the tavern was a couple from ARB catering. They ran a restaurant there. It used to be very busy then. 'Now you can only get a cup of coffee there. Once a year a music show is held there: all sorts of groups making noise to present themselves. Fortunately it ends at 23 hrs. The music is rubbish, but it's not really a nuisance to me.'

'On a big day many walkers and cyclists walk along the dike past our house. When the trees are in bloom, about 10,000 people pass by on a Sunday. 'They don't really bother me, except on big days, because it's hard for me to get off my premises because of the amount of traffic.'

The Future

Klijn expects there will be no hothouses in the area in the future. For a while it looked like there would be, but it doesn't fit into the landscape of

the area. He does expect an increase in the number of walkers and cyclists. Meanwhile many routes have been signposted. In spring for example the 'bloom ride' organised by the Red Cross attracts about 27,000 people. Lately water sports and other activities have increased on the river Linge, especially in Leerdam. Klijn has contact with Hartzema every now and then, the project coordinator of Stichting Fort Asperen. Before an event he puts with his fork-lift truck the cashier's office outside Fort Asperen for her.



The cash register at the entrance of Fort Asperen

Klijn is not opposed to increasing the tourist activities in the future. He does fear the heavier load for the road however, which might not be prepared for it. The little bridge at Asperen was restored recently, but the girders have not been replaced. The consequence is that heavy vehicles are still not allowed to pass over it.

Joke Schuller



Joke Schuller has lived in Asperen on the Waterpoort for fifteen years. Before this she lived in The Hague and Groningen. Her husband died of a wasting disease a few years ago. He used to work for Rijkswaterstaat and was transferred to The Hague. Joke became curator at the anatomy museum of the University of Utrecht. For years they had had no intention to live in this area, but she fell in love with the house on the Waterpoort, which was up for sale at the time. She has a beautiful view over the Linge and very much admires the small-scale landscape of this little river. But she also likes the dynamics of the Waal River with its wide forelands and its busy shipping: 'It's never the same there.'

It was only after a few years that she discovered Fort Asperen, because of a statue exhibition, organised by Piet Cleveringa. She had the feeling that there was a separation between what happened at the fort and the community of Asperen. This was maybe caused by the fact that the "foreign elements" had relatively little contact with the locals.

Changes

'In the past fifteen years quite a few things have changed. In the centre of Asperen the little properties have disappeared, because of the building on open spaces within the built-up area.' She finds that a pity, because the town loses its character because of this. Apart from that she finds that the little industrial estate is in the wrong place. The Fort has become more accessible and it attracts more attention than before. Moreover is the terrain cleaner than before and has tourism increased enormously. That is also being stimulated. 'The "NS-walk¹" and the 'bloom-rides' have become well-known with many participants, while the Linge has become a busy route, not only for kayaks, but also for pleasure boats. There are some problems with noise nuisance and parking.' Apart from that she is afraid of the big events: 'These could cause a lot of nuisance.'

¹) NS (Nederlandse Spoorwegen) - Dutch Railways



Pleasure cruising in the Linge on a spring day near Fort Asperen

The volunteers of Stichting Fort Asperen do not always agree with each other about the current and the future management of the fort. 'On the one side there are the people, that have a big knowledge of the military history of the fort. They find that the historical aspects of the fort should be taken into consideration for the future of Fort Asperen. On the other side there are the art lovers, that see the fort as a good opportunity for events.'

Schuller finds that in future the area should have a more modest character, with the preservation of natural elements such as the birds and the orchards. She doesn't want any new house-building. Apart from that she finds that it is not so important which developments are going to take place in the area. 'The most important thing is that the inhabitants are proud of it. Only then are new developments a success.'

Trudy Zwart



Trudy Zwart was born in Gorinchem. She went to school there and moved to Asperen after her marriage. Her father-in-law used to be the lockkeeper at Asperen. The accompanying house was built by Rijkswaterstaat¹ and served as place from which the operation and maintenance of the bridges and locks were organized. Nowadays the locks in Asperen are only used in case of extreme high water, like in 1995. They are put on edge to serve as summer dike in case of a breach in a dike. The locks are the property of Waterschap Rivierenland² in Tiel. After the lockkeeper's house was demolished in 1964, the house in which Trudy and her family live now was built at the same spot in 1965. She does not know Fort Asperen from her youth. She only became familiar with it when she moved to Asperen in 1988.

Splendid Landscape

To her the fort is a place that arouses curiosity. There is something mystical about it. She has entered it on the sly once. To her the fort remains at its most beautiful when nothing happens to it. She is in love with the location of her house: beautiful surroundings, peace and quiet. It seems as if she finds herself in the middle of nature. She takes us along to the porch at the back of her house and we look out over the beautiful river Linge with Fort Asperen and the dike houses in the background. Some pleasure boats lie peacefully alongside the shore. Someone has thrown out his fishing rod from his boat. A coot is swimming around vehemently on the motionless water. 'The quiet', muses Trudy, 'that's what it's all about for us and we grant everyone the pleasure of it! What a wonderful place..., don't you think?'

Annoyances

The pressure on the area is gradually increasing. 'Navigation on the river Linge that passes through our locks consists mainly of pleasure boats.

¹⁾ Department of Waterways and Public Works

²⁾ district water board Rivierenland



*The old lockhouse in 1902
(picture: collection Historical Association Old-Asperen)*

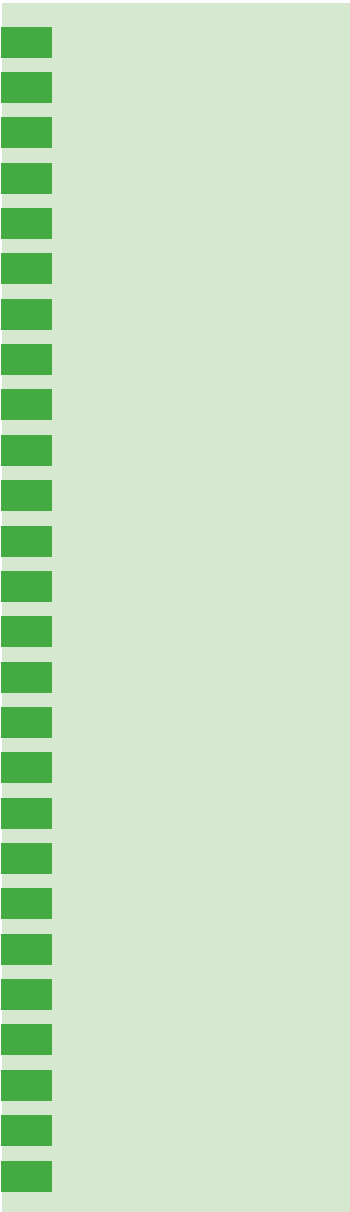


The new home of the Zwart family

The number of boats on the river Linge has gone past bearing. Professional shipping is mainly limited to ships that carry steel to and from Geldermalsen and sand for the glass industry in Leerdam. The dikes buzz with day trippers during summer days: walkers, cyclists, cars and motorbikes. Of course people are welcome in the area, but the infrastructure is not suitable for it.'

She is annoyed by the noise caused by the feasts and parties at the tavern. In theory she does not have difficulty with the parties. 'Only the bands that play until the early hours' are a nuisance. 'The partygoers don't have a clue of how far the noise carries over the water.' Zwart would like to see that in future the exploitation of the fort and the tavern would fit in with the atmosphere of the beautiful surroundings. In other words, see to a function that fits in well with the peaceful and green surroundings. Rather an exclusive restaurant than a place where feasts and parties are held. The Stichting Fort Asperen should have a more leading role in this matter according to her: 'Indicate what is and what is not allowed.'

Together with a couple of inhabitants of Asperen, Trudy has written a letter to the local council at Geldermalsen in order to throw some light on the function and the status of the tavern. 'And that according to her is precisely the problem: Fort Asperen and the tavern are in the municipality of Geldermalsen, whereas the neighbours suffering from the nuisance live in Asperen, which falls under the municipality of Lingewaal.' It is also about an emotional matter. 'The inhabitants of Asperen have the feeling that Fort Asperen belongs to them; the municipality of Geldermalsen has no feeling for the fort.' It is of course in the remotest corner of that muni-



city. 'It is no fun to protest time and again and always get the blame.' Both municipalities should assume their responsibility.

The Future

Regarding the plans for the future she must admit that there is some suspicion about the current, exploratory plans, as made by Bureau SLA. They do not fit in with the small-scaled and peaceful landscape around the river Linge. 'There is not enough feeling with what the area already has to offer, and really not enough historical understanding either.' She is however in favour of new developments, there should be no doubt about that. But they have to fit in with the scale of the landscape. Furthermore she finds that Fort Asperen should be restored. At this moment the fort is very damp, which doesn't help its life span. She does understand that the costs of it would have to be recovered. Another suggestion for the future is to handle the parking problems in a more serious way. Because of the increasing number of day trippers, and also because of the art exhibitions at the fort, this causes quite some inconvenience.



Water colour of Asperen by soldier Husstege

Aan
 het Gemeentebestuur
 van
 A S P E R E N .

 Hooggeacht College,

 Gedurende het eerste mobilisatiejaar voerde ik het
 commando over het WERK bij ASPEREN.
 In dien tijd -waaraan ik altijd de interessantste
 herinnering zal behouden- mocht ik steeds de meest
 welwillende medewerking van Uwe zijde ontvangen.
 Een der tot de Fordbezetting behoorende soldaten
 de Heer Husstege, heeft toen ter tijd de attentie
 gehad, om tijdens een korte afwezigheid van mij
 bijgevoegde Aquarel te vervaardigen, welke een beeld
 geeft van het uitzicht uit mijn kamer op Uwe Gemeente.
 Ik hoop, dat U zoo vriendelijk wilt zijn, die Aquarel
 wel van mij te willen aanvaarden als eene herinnering
 aan die bewogen tijden.

 Hoogachtend en dienstwillig,
 A.J.E. Lucardie.
 Reserve Luitenant Kolonel.

 (get.) L U C A R D I E .

Letter by Lieutenant Colonel Lugardie

Ruud Boltong



Ruud Boltong has been living in Leerdam for twelve years now. He originally comes from Limburg, where he acquired his love for food and drinks. Before he came to Leerdam, he didn't know Fort Asperen. He is the owner of a restaurant in Dordrecht and runs a catering company too.

Boltong finds the area very beautiful: the Linge, the orchards and the small dike roads. Indirectly he got in touch with employees of Stichting Fort Asperen. 'They asked me to run the tavern and I said "yes". It is a very beautiful location to attract customers. We made a deal that part of the proceeds would go to the foundation. They use this money for the restoration.'

In future he would like to open a restaurant there, according to the principle: good food for little money, and he wants to do more feasts and parties at the tavern. This brings in more money than just pouring a cup of coffee. He has to do this kind of activities to keep his head above water. 'The tavern can not survive from the proceeds of the blossoming season only. The season is too short for that', says Boltong.

Boltong does not have a lot of contact with the inhabitants of Asperen. His feeling tells him that there are not many complaints against these activities of his tavern. He realises that the neighbours could suffer from the noise and that's why he makes sure that the music stops at midnight. He is considering some structural alterations, among which sound insulation and putting in central heating. 'In this way I can reduce the noise pollution for the neighbours and can organise more activities in winter at the same time. Apart from that I would like to enlarge the kitchen. It is too small especially when it's really busy.' Boltong also wants to increase the number of lavatories. To organise more activities in cooperation with Fort Asperen in future, it will have to be restored.



The Tavern



Interior of the Tavern



On the terrace of Fort Asperen

Loes Hartzema



Loes has been the project coordinator of Stichting Fort Asperen¹ since 2003 and she is responsible for the concrete realization of different tasks regarding the art events. She originally comes from Goeree-Overflakkee (Zeeland) and has been living in Asperen since 1973. She immediately fell in love with the lovely, small-scaled landscape of the river Linge, with its dikes, dike houses and beautiful panoramic views. 'Compared with the solid seawalls on Goeree, these meandering little dikes along the river Linge fit beautifully in this small-scale landscape. The dikes on the river Linge seem to have less of the function of stemming the flow of water.' Her feeling tells her that this has been like this for decades. It gives her a warm feeling that you can hear people say, that 'the farmers are working the land.' To her this comes across as something from the Middle Ages. She noticed that the indigenous inhabitants take the landscape for granted. They are used to the landscape. It is mainly the new inhabitants that consciously appreciate the beautiful landscape around the river Linge.

Developments around Fort Asperen

'Fort Asperen has been totally incorporated in the area', she says. 'The first times we came here since we have lived here, and walked along the dike, the fort was hidden behind bushes and trees, and was barely visible. The fort and the surroundings had something mystical.' When she visited the art event at Fort Asperen for the first time, a number of things struck her. Firstly the simple organizational structure. The volunteers worked at the fort under frugal circumstances. There was a minimum of infrastructure: few parking spaces and poor accessibility. 'Nevertheless the quality of the exhibition was very good', says Hartzema.

¹) Fort Asperen Foundation

She notices that people slow down when visiting Fort Asperen and the art exhibitions at and around the fort. Upon entering the beautiful surroundings of the fort, straight from their hectic world, they begin to calm down, so that they are ready to visit the exhibition when they arrive at the fort. Hartzema compares the situation of the fort with the one Berlage described about the design of the municipal museum in The Hague: 'Shake off your daily life, before you arrive at the museum. In order to make this sure, we needed a relatively long route to the museum, so you could get rid of your daily worries.'

Changes

Since 1973, when Hartzema moved here, many things have changed in the area. 'Villages suffer from "furuncles". But if there are no new developments in the area, she is afraid it will start deteriorating soon. The fort would be neglected and it would be a missed opportunity to preserve and develop national heritage.'



Loes Hartzema on the Linge

For the exploitation of Fort Asperen there is however a dilemma: how far can you take it? The fort is run for visitors from outside the region. It does have an impact on the surroundings and only a few managers from the area benefit from it. On the other hand the art exhibitions at the fort are of value for the region and the river area. At this moment there is little parking space and the (noise) nuisance of the tavern and the fort is a constant concern for the neighbours. She does not want the surroundings of the fort to be exploited like it is done at the Veluwe, with all sorts of cafeterias and pancake restaurants. In the

area we should have more permanent developments: 'Enough to turn it into a beautiful area and preserving it for the future at the same time. We shouldn't be focused on short-term profits, but invest in durable, long term projects.'

In future the Stichting Fort Asperen² would really like to realize an art island and a park showing the cultural history (Perspective 2004), which would be part of the Lingekwartier. This would have to focus on the durability of the fort. 'We have to think about the state of the fort and its surroundings in 20 years time. The developments in the area have mainly been due to economic (arable and fruit farming) processes. Cultural heritage did not play its part in this. The partners of the Lingekwartier would like cultural heritage to play a part in future developments.' At the moment they are working hard to realize this. In future she would like to see that:

- the fort will be restored;
- the tavern will be open all year round;
- realization of a park showing the cultural history.

'A pitfall for the future is that it will be made too beautiful and too big. The mysterious character of the forts should not disappear. Management and exploitation should be simple and with a touch of quality and style.' Fort Asperen as an art island, situated in a cultural park with a lot of charisma because of art, culture and nature. And all this on a small scale, that is her dream.



The "Arc" on top of Fort Asperen as part of the art exhibition "Flood Warning" by Peter Greenaway



*Impressions of the art exhibition "Flood Warning"
by Peter Greenaway at Fort Asperen*

Everardus Wilhelmus 'Eef' Story



Eef Story was born in Rhenoy in 1947. The name Story originated in England, according to him. His ancestors were said to be pirates. Story attended primary school in Rhenoy. After that he went to the agricultural college in Zaltbommel, which he did not finish. His father needed him on the farm. Apart from that, they ran a livestock transport company, which involved a lot of work. About 50 years ago, after the war, his father started grazing bulls on the terrain of Fort Nieuwe Steeg. If there was something wrong with the cattle the fort guard would warn Eef's father, so that he could come into action. That's why Eef was at the fort quite often. Because the bulls trampled on the turfs, they started grazing sheep instead. Which they still do today.

Lease

Story has a signed lease with the owner of Fort Nieuwe Steeg, Staatsbosbeheer. 'The sheep function as mowing machines and are cheap. There have been talks of having the grass at the fort mown twice a year, but this turned out to be too expensive because of the difference in height and because of the steep slopes.' The maintenance of the trees is also taken up in the lease. This is done by the leaseholder and this brought in some money before, for example by polling the willows. 'Nowadays that doesn't bring a penny anymore.'

Memories

He has many good memories of Fort Nieuwe Steeg from his youth. 'There was never anyone there, it was a deserted place. We were not allowed to fish there, because the fort guard had farmed the fishing.' After the war the grounds came into the possession of Domeinen. 'After that labour inspectors were there for a while. They did all sorts of tests with gas and oxygen cylinders by putting them under pressure. That was quite dangerous. After the labour inspection there was a gun producer at the fort,

Mr. Derksen. He produced mainly hunting rifles, but the municipality threw a spanner in the works by not granting him a licence. He did not stay there for long. He left about five years ago.'

Activities

Art exhibitions are not his cup of tea, but they don't bother him. 'I know both forts like the back of my hand, I don't have to visit them anymore.' He has not visited the tavern yet.. all the activities do not bother him. Story does not like the wilderness at Fort Asperen. Staatsbosbeheer just lets it be. He finds that people should be able to walk around at such a fort. Now that's impossible. He has no difficulty with Bart Bennis' plans for selling old maps and the information centre. He hopes he can keep his sheep as part of the future plans for the fort.



Lambs at Fort Nieuwe Steeg



Bart Bennis



Bart Bennis was publisher of cartographic products at the ANWB¹ until September 2005 and now he is an independent businessman. Together with his partner Willemijn Simon van Leeuwen he developed a plan to run Fort Nieuwe Steeg: a "Geofort". Giving geo-information will be the basis of the various activities. They are thinking of educational attractions, excursions, a centre of information, a cartography museum and catering. They also want to open a shop that sells all sorts of geo-products. This shop will have to grow into a selling point that is well-known all over the country. He wants to sell, among other things, old and new maps, atlases and GPS-equipment. 'Maybe we can become importer for GPS-equipment. In this way we can become well-known. It would be good if people from all over the country get to know us as the source for GPS-equipment', Bennis mimes.

They came up with this plan because Staatsbosbeheer, as the owner, was looking for a manager and held a competition. After a selection procedure their plan was chosen and approved in the spring of 2006. They have one year to work out the plan and to show that it is financially viable. The first priority is the search for business connections, that can help them arrange the finance. He is thinking of cooperating with Universities and other educational institutes, for example the University of Delft or the University of Wageningen can organise practicals at or around the fort. 'This area could be an excellent environment for educating students of land surveying, soil science or geo-information. Now we have to make sure that we make the different educational institutes enthusiastic about our plan', says Bennis.

When he came to the area for the first time, what struck him most was the immense peace and quiet that the area radiates. He realises that many people want to keep that peace and quiet and that new develop-

¹) Algemene Nederlandse Wielrijdersbond - Dutch AA

*Fort Nieuwe Steeg**Panoramic view from Fort Nieuwe Steeg*

ments could disturb it. That's why he wants to be careful with developing the "Geofort". The idea for a "Geofort" will have to be developed with the cooperation of the neighbourhood. Apart from that they have become involved with the plans of the Lingekwartier and have established contact with Stichting Fort Asperen. Together they are thinking of new possibilities to connect the two forts. 'They are both still isolated from each other. In future we have to establish a good connection', Bennis says. As Fort Nieuwe Steeg is within easy reach, he thinks it could very well be a stop-over for a tourist walking or cycling tour, and it could very well be part of one or more tourist deals. Apart from that they want to talk with inhabitants of the area around Fort Nieuwe Steeg, establishing contact with the neighbourhood is of vital importance, because he realises that the people in the neighbourhood can make his "Geofort" project a big success. They soon want to move into the fort to live and work there. This has the advantage that there is a manager at the fort at all times. And their children can go to school in Asperen. 'In this way we hope to settle down quickly, so that we can enjoy working on a new future for the forts and for ourselves.' For more information look at: www.geofort.nl.

Griedo Bel



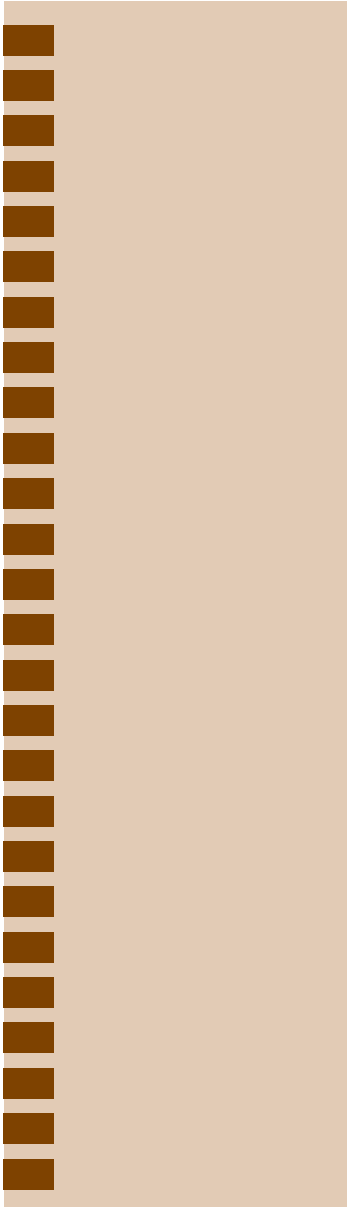
Griedo Bel (53 years of age) was born in Oudendijk in North Holland. His father was farm labourer there. They lived in a small house with a big family; many children in a small bedroom. When he was eight years old, 45 years ago, his family moved to Heukelum. His father was given the job of farm manager on a farm that belonged to the baron. Bel went through secondary education in Gorinchem and after that attended the technical college in Dordrecht. He has been local councillor for the PvdA¹ in the municipality Lingewaal for the past four years. Since last spring he has been alderman with many responsibilities, among which city planning, the conservation of historic monuments and buildings, public parks and gardens and public housing.

Changes

Bel always took his bicycle or his moped to school in Gorinchem and sees many changes between the landscapes of now and then. The A15 motorway used to be a single lane road back then and when it was broadened the Lingebos² came into being. The backlands were open without habitation worthy of mention. 'Because of the land consolidation many things have changed in the landscape. When you drove over the Spijkse Kweldijk, you saw hardly any houses.' Over the years a couple of farms have been built on the side of the polder. Another farm had to be replaced recently because of the construction of a golf course. He pities this kind of development, as it is a grassland bird habitat. 'Try to keep it clear of housing.' This is at odds with the provincial policy, that is making out a case for the construction of new country estates. He notices that people pay a lot of attention to the design of a building, but they hardly look at the history of the area. 'If you really want a country estate, look at the shape of old farms first and try to put some of those elements in your estate', says Bel.

¹) Partij van de Arbeid - Dutch Labour Party

²) Lingebos - Linge forest



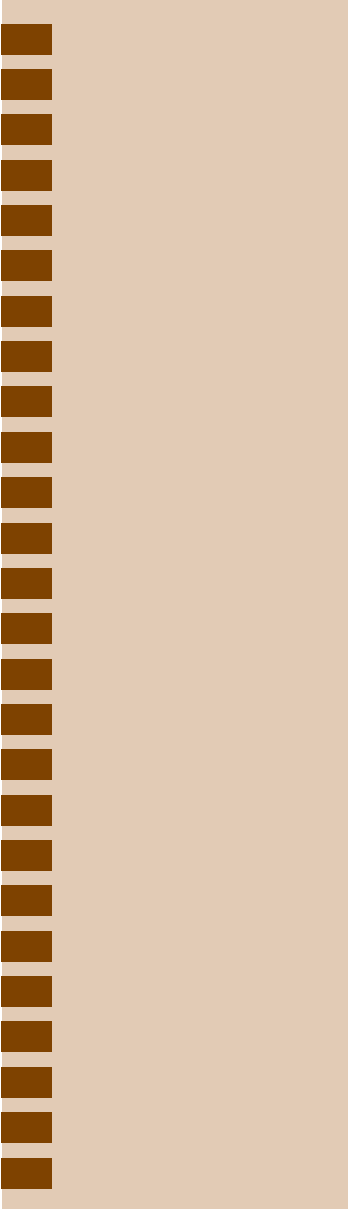
Mysticism

He used to come to the polder regularly and experienced Fort Asperen and Fort Nieuwe Steeg as something mystical. They were not open to the public in those days. That was a pity. As a ten to twelve year old boy you showed respect to the sign "No Trespassing". 'A gate and a moat made sure that you could not get in.' That of course was very suspense and it aroused your curiosity. There were all sorts of stories about guns that were stored at Fort Asperen and Fort Nieuwe Steeg. Also around the bunkers there was a mysterious atmosphere and as a little boy I was strongly advised not to enter them, because there could be dead soldiers lying about... It is the same sort of mysticism, that Heukelum Castle was surrounded with. My father used to work for the baron and sometimes I was allowed to visit the castle. I was in awe of the big rooms, and especially the suit of armour in the hall by the entrance.'

Problems

Fort Nieuwe Steeg was only opened up after it came into the possession of Staatsbosbeheer³. It is situated in the municipality of Lingewaal. Fort Asperen is in the municipality of Geldermalsen. 'There is quite some confusion about that every now and then, because the municipal boundary runs over the river Linge. Apart from that there are some problems, when complaints come in. These are mostly filed at the municipality of Lingewaal, whereas they should be filed at the municipality of Geldermalsen. Most complaints are about parking problems around Fort Asperen and about noise pollution from the tavern on weekends. Various people ventilated their concerns about the activities Bart Bennis wants to develop at Fort Nieuwe Steeg. The Lingekwartier and the north bank are already tourist attractions. With further recreational developments of Fort Nieuwe Steeg and its surroundings a number of inhabitants are concerned about further disturbance of the peace and quiet.'

A contradiction in the area is perhaps the structure of the inhabitants. He splits them in two for the sake of convenience: the people that want to preserve the peace and quiet, especially on Sundays. 'That is mainly the indigenous people (farmers). They have a slight aversion to 'new people' in the area. The other group of people says: we have a beautiful area with many things to see and beautiful details, show this to the public and bene-



fit from the tourism and the recreation.' Although he was raised with the Christian doctrine, but not practising anymore, he is inclined towards the opinion of the latter group. 'We don't need 100,000 people every weekend, but there should be more than there are now. If you want more visitors as a municipality, you must construct the facilities for it. If you don't do that, visitors will perhaps choose for the Veluwe, where there are all sorts of facilities like big parking lots.'

New Developments

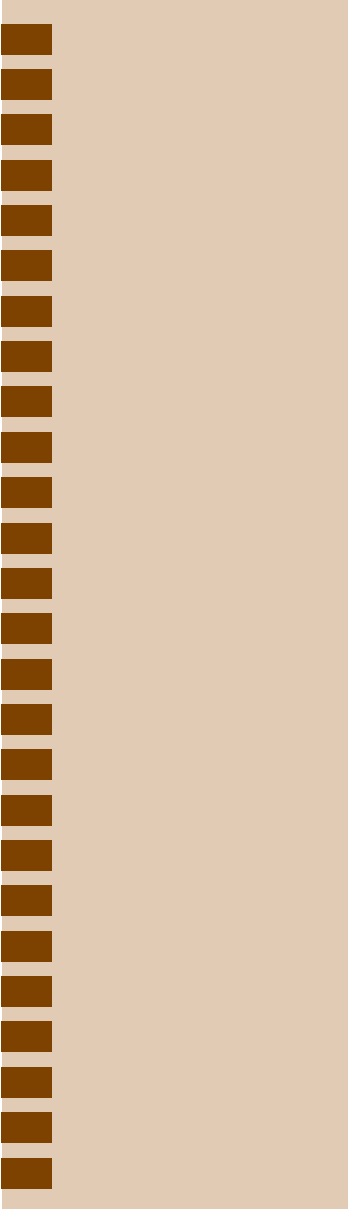
'The agricultural sector is declining, so we are going to have a different use of the land, like keeping horses as a leisure activity or the private purchase of land to keep, for example, sheep there. Also the shaping of new country estates and houses are developments that the environment is faced with. There are some voices that say that these sort of initiatives should be linked with nature and landscape.'

The pressure of tourism has grown strongly during the past years. 'Het Lange Afstand Wandelpad'⁴ (LAW) and the trail of the 'Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie'. Because the water quality has improved a lot, there is more swimming in and kayaking on the river Linge. There are also some round-trip boats in the area and pleasure cruising has increased too.'

The municipality of Lingewaal has joined the Lingekwartier. 'It's a multi-staged story, with different, new developments like Panorama Kraijenhoff and the Loevensteijn Pact, that was also signed by the municipality of Lingewaal. Every municipality has to put in an effort. Now the question is which elements we can realize. Considering the things the municipality is already doing at the moment, some of these could already be combined', says Bel. 'Staatsbosbeheer has made the change for example, they do cooperate with other public organizations again. They play a role in the water storage together with the district water board. We shall see if the osier-grounds can be used for it.'

The municipality of Lingewaal is trying to prevent that Fort Nieuwe Steeg is going to be let to a company that they don't want to have anything to do with. 'By participating in the Lingekwartier the municipality has a first row-seat', Bel tells us enthusiastically. 'The municipality of Lingewaal is going through a phase where decisions have to be made. Bart Bennis is

⁴) Long Distance Walking Trail



sticking his neck out to develop the "Geofort" and it fits into our policy to support such an initiative, Fort Nieuwe Steeg should become part of a (walking) route, so that there will be people passing by regularly. People would be walking with their backpack through an area with new ponds, starting from the Town Hall, with places to rest with something to eat or drink. That is where the municipality can play a role.'

'There will be no construction of houses in Asperen on the side of the Lingekwartier, except possible new country estates. There will be new housing on the northern side of Asperen.'

The municipality of Asperen does have plans to build on the side of Acquoy, but that falls outside the influence of the municipality of Lingewaal. Bel points out, that from the point of view of the landscape he wants to keep an open space between the river Linge and Acquoy. 'Regarding space for the river, the Diefdijk and the Nieuwe Zuider Lingedijk will have to keep their function, by which the area (East Gorinchem) will function as the 'little drain of the bathtub (the Betuwe).'

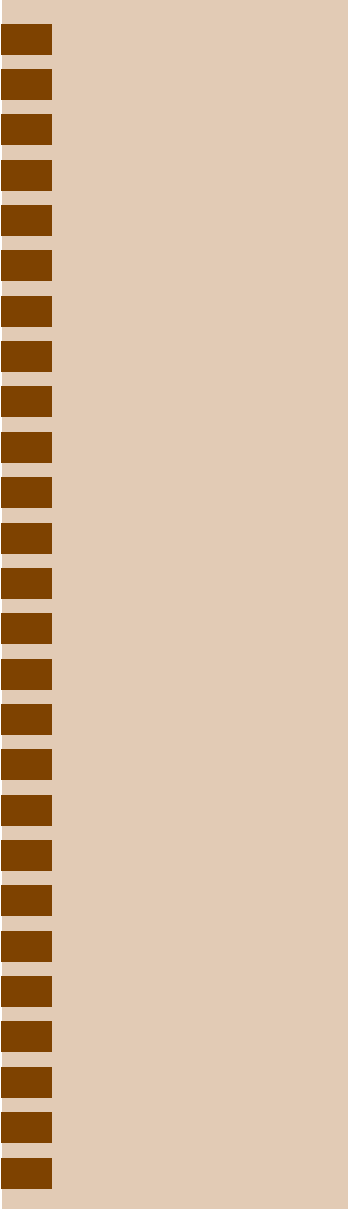
Cooperation

'The cooperation between the municipality of Geldermalsen and our municipality is going well', according to Bel. 'For instance, the Mayor of Geldermalsen is chairman of the project group. Member of the Provincial Executive Theo Peters represents the province of Gelderland and I represent the municipality of Lingewaal in the project group. So it is a solid administration.'

For inspiration the project group Lingekwartier has paid Insel Hombroich (Hombroich Island, Germany) a visit. 'Very interesting, but the big difference is that everything there is financed by one investor. They did use the history and architecture of the region for it.'

Belvedere

Lingekwartier is now in a phase where the plans have to be presented to the different boards. 'Until now we haven't talked about financing yet, first we see what everybody wants, then we will see what possibilities there are. The municipal councillors are very sceptic, they want to know exactly



what they will be investing money in. The advantages are mainly the fact that it could be a possible solution for the crumbling agricultural sector.' There are plots up for sale regularly. 'We have to look into the fact whether these can be used for water storage. The association of private landowners is wearing out our doorstep to sell us land. Also the agricultural houses that become vacant could fit in with new estate developments, for example. We don't want caravans or building companies. It's quite a task from the point of view of planning to use these vacant plots for country estates.'

The Future

Bel does have clear ideas about the future. 'Make sure that Fort Nieuwe Steeg and Fort Asperen become real landmarks in the Lingekwartier. Apart from that walking and cycling have to be developed more. With the development of new tourist possibilities, one should think of tourist deals, where people can spend several days in the area and spend the night at local Bed & Breakfasts or hotels. Fort Vuren on the Waal River has to be involved as well. At Fort Vuren there is the possibility to spend the night now.'

The forts will have to make their exploitation profitable. Fort Asperen has difficulty with keeping its head above water. 'Bearing this in mind, Lingekwartier started its job. With the development of plans, the problem is always: red is the financial support, so if you have building blocks to offer, you have to provide something in exchange, in order to reach your environmental and ecological goals. But, if they are going to be built anyhow, it must be of exceptional architectural quality to catch the eye and to stand out.'

Arie van Doorn



Arie van Doorn (51 years of age) was born in this region and has been involved with local politics in Geldermalsen for twenty years. He used to be local councillor for the SGP¹, but since 1998 he has been alderman and has among others the following tasks: city planning, public housing, environment, water management and he is first deputy mayor.

He runs a fruit growing company in Meteren. His father farmed orchards around Fort Asperen. In those days the fort was not accessible, but the bunkers were. Van Doorn used to play with friends in the direct vicinity of the fort very often. During the sixties there was hardly any military traffic in this region. The forts did not have a function during the cold war.

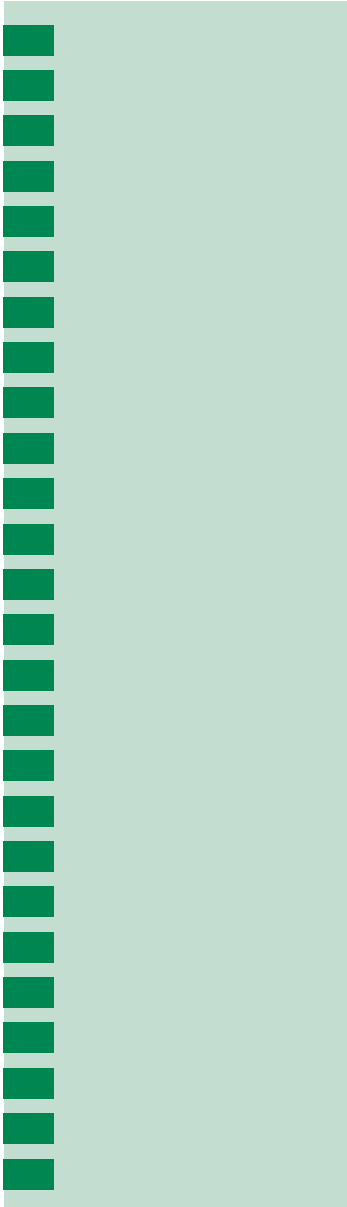
'The only military activity during those days were the military aircraft that used the Bommelse bridge as practice target', Van Doorn remembers.

Changes

The most striking change in the landscape was caused by the land consolidation. The accessibility of the area was quite bad. After that new developments came quickly. 'The area had a strong bond with its genesis. The economic developments were on the river banks. You couldn't do anything in the backlands at all, because during winter the area was flooded. Because of the land consolidation the economic activities were moved from the river banks to the backlands. Another, radical change in the landscape was the transformation from standard tree orchards to half-standard tree orchards (rachis). This was a company engineering adjustment.'

There were many contacts between the villages. Fruit farming provided for mutual trade like public fruit auctions. They took place in a café under the supervision of a notary. 'Of all things, these fruit auctions were meeting

¹) *Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij - Reformed (Presbyterian) Political Party*



places for traders, fruit farmers and normal farmers. One used to look beyond municipal and provincial borders. This is all history now.

Lingekwartier

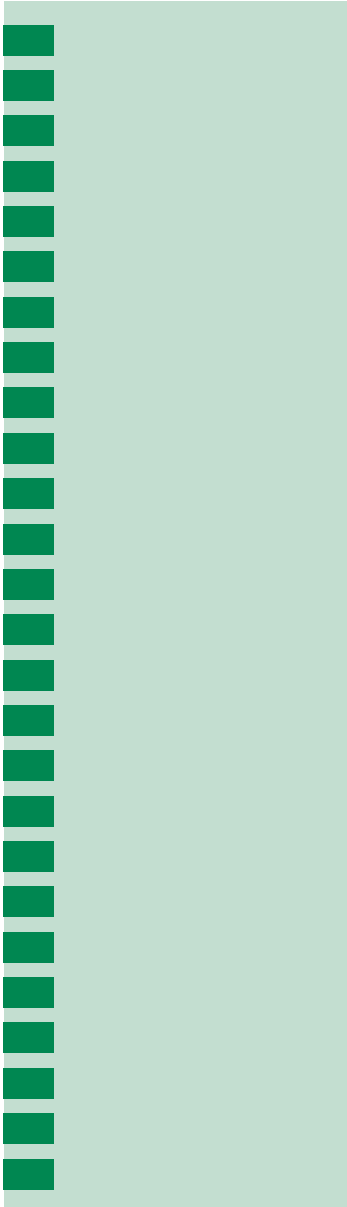
Van Doorn proves to be well-informed about the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie. 'All military objects were separate elements, but together they formed one whole that had to protect us against intruders. The NHW is worth preserving for the future. In order to do that new economic supports have to be found. For example the waterworks and the Lingekwartier are worth a visit, but they are liable to deterioration. The development opportunities of the forts are limited. It is the coherence of the area that counts. That's why, as the municipality Geldermalsen, we are pleased with the establishment of the Lingekwartier. Our mayor is chairman and I am in it as alderman for city planning and water management. The cultural history is interwoven with this portfolio.'

New economic supports will have to be found that fit the identity of the region. These will have to fit in with the other values that are present in the region as well, like nature and the landscape. You should not only develop the fort but also the surroundings: for example cycling tourism. Maybe you can have people spend the night here. The proceeds of tourism cannot directly be used to maintain Fort Asperen. You have to look for constructions like the one with the tavern. Part of the proceeds of the tavern go to Fort Asperen, another part goes to the manager. Further you have to look for other things that the area has to offer, for example agricultural tourism', says Van Doorn.

Pro-active policies

The municipality of Geldermalsen used to have regulating policies regarding tourism: only moderate developments were possible. Nowadays they are more pro-active: the development of tourism is allowed, as long as it's well-considered. 'We want to establish a network of facilities.'

With the opening-up of the area after the land consideration the inflow of people from outside has increased. 'Due to the restructuring of the agricultural sector the number of agricultural professionals has decreased: a social divide. The government and the province are steering towards an



open area, one with extensive establishments of businesses. Practice however shows that there are many economic activities going on here, with the consequence that there is pressure on the environment because new businesses. The river area is attractive for people from the Randstad because of the rural character and the central location.' There are many small villages with local objectives. 'Why wouldn't it be possible to build on the river banks, with a pattern connected to the history of civilization?' Van Doorn asks himself. 'Not on a big scale, but for example some office premises, like a lawyer's office in line with the ribbon development of the town on the river banks. You don't have to be historicizing with this, but it has to fit in with the historical places.' Apart from that he does not exclude architectural and modern buildings, but they have to be well-considered.

To our question whether the municipality of Lingewaal should participate in the restoration of the locks with fan-shaped doors, Van Doorn replies, that this should be looked into at project level. 'The ideas that are made up in the Lingekwartier have to be recognizable for its surroundings. The plans have to be susceptible to public support. Bureau SLA² is now making concepts and we have to decide whether these are will get the support of the public.'

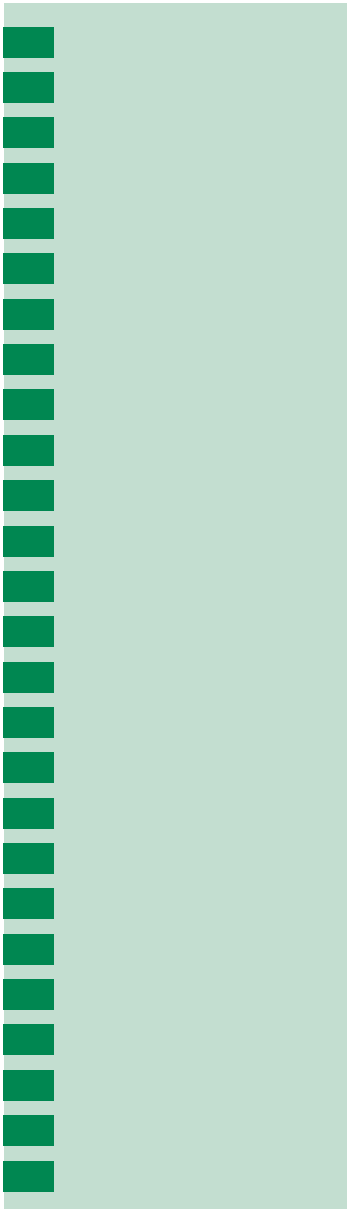
Quiet Place

"Deze omgeving leent zich niet voor het intensief exploiteren van allerlei activiteiten", vindt Van Doorn. "We moeten het hebben van mensen die rust zoeken. In de Taveerne kan echt wel wat, maar hij mag niet concurreren met het dorpshuis in Asperen. Het moet een gelegenheid zijn voor een goede opvang van toeristen, passend in de rust van de omgeving. Geofort op Fort Nieuwe Steeg past hier prima binnen. Vroeger keek men hier negatief tegen Randstedelingen en toeristen aan. Daardoor hebben weinig ondernemers geïnvesteerd in de toeristensector. Dit begint nu te veranderen. Het landgoed Mariënweerd te Beesd laat goed zien wat mogelijk is. Er komen steeds meer gelegenheden tot overnachting in ons gebied. Dat is een goede zaak."

The Future

'The future potential for the agricultural sector lies in broadening their scale. In future there will be urbanization in the river area sooner or later.

²) Bureau SLA (Stedenbouw Landschap Architectuur) - Urban Development Landscape Architecture



To protect the base quality the municipality has to assume responsibility.' In the agricultural sector broadening of scale is already taking place. The alderman observes two trends: specialization and scaling-up and apart from that broadening of scale (in relation with tourism, small-scale investments). He sees possibilities for both of these in this part of the river area. 'Apart from that the forts should remain recognizable and their identity should be preserved, but apart from the forts, we should also pay attention to the waterworks of the NHW.' He suggests organizing different themes around the different forts. In short, Van Doorn is looking forward to new developments in the area, but these have to be in harmony with the landscape.

Summary and Conclusions

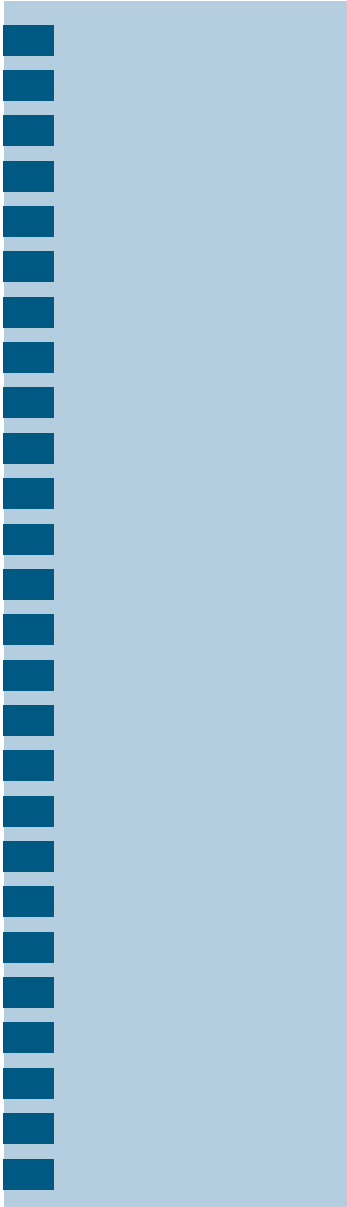
During the various interviews we looked for the cultural identity of the area around Fort Asperen. The first thing that became clear to us from the talks with Van Doorn, Story, Klijn, Kleijn and Van Weenen is that, despite the many changes, the framework of the medieval man-made landscape of the Linge has virtually stayed intact.

For example the elevated former river beds, the basins, the dikes, the allotment pattern, the settlements and the farms are still there. The most drastic changes in the landscape took place at the beginning of the 19th century and during the second half of the 20th century with the construction of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie and the arrival of the land consolidation. The above mentioned persons have been witness to this land consolidation.

Regarding the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie, not only the construction of Fort Asperen, Fort Nieuwe Steeg, the lock with fan-shaped gates and the Nieuwe Zuider Lingedijk as new eye-catching elements have influenced the area, also the soldiers that were quartered there. This had its peak during the mobilization in 1939 and the very beginning of World War II. The NHW actually functioned as such and troops were quartered in and around Asperen.

General Berghuijs' speech, the interviews with Soeters, Kleijn and Den Hartog (old film images) show that the government at that time was badly organized. The speed at which the various defences were built up was simply very slow. Apart from that the defensive strength of the Waterlinie was overestimated: the functioning of the inundated areas turned out to be useless. Soldiers Soeters and Berghuijs are left with good memories of the peace and quiet and the vastness of the landscape.


During the sixties of the last century the government offered a so called uproot premium to replace the old standard tree orchards with ones with



the lower rachis-type trees. A lot of people in the area around Asperen made use of this offer, which had a lot of consequences for the openness of the countryside. Apart from that big changes were caused by the land consolidation. Until that time the cultural heritage in the area was mainly preserved by the predominantly Protestant farming population with their old traditions and customs. It hardly offered room for newcomers with other ideas. After the lower, open and wet backlands were drained, and many farms were moved there and the infrastructure was improved, the area attracted a lot of commuters like Cleveringa, Hartzema and Schuller. They searched for the peace and quiet of the countryside and the accompanying characteristic landscape. They took possession of the old houses in the town and of the farms on the elevated former river beds. They turned them into converted farmhouses. Professional navigation on the Linge has been replaced by pleasure cruising. The dikes along the Linge have become the domain of innumerable walkers and cyclists, especially in summer.

The newcomers have given the area new inspiration. For example Cleveringa was dedicated to the preservation of the old town hall in Acquoy, but he has also brought art to Asperen. The exhibition "Statues Along the Linge" was the prelude for recurring art exhibitions at Fort Asperen. This biennial event has made Asperen even more well-known. At first the original inhabitants were sceptic of these new ideas. Now they feel a bond with this "fort of art", because its activities still fit in with the small scale of the landscape.

It is expected that this "fort of art" together with the flourishing tourism during the blossoming season will attract more and more tourists. Managers like Boltong and Bennis try to anticipate what is coming and explore the opportunities that the surroundings of Asperen have to offer. The current inhabitants such as Zwart, Van Weenen and Kleijn are not opposed to this sort of activities, if the peace and quiet and the small scale of this man-made landscape are not disturbed and if the parking problems are solved. Regarding the development of the Lingekwartier there is some scepticism and reserve among the inhabitants. This mainly has to do with the fact that so far there has not been any openness towards the inhabitants. The new plans will have to contain openness as



well as a feel for the small scale of the area. The aldermen Van Doorn and Bel subscribe to this viewpoint and are of the opinion that the identity of the region has to be taken into consideration. Cultural history is something they feel very strongly about, but they also find that innovation should be allowed in a changing environment. This demands a good cooperation between inhabitants and administrators.

Final Conclusion

The landscape of the Lingekwartier is on the crossroads of a medieval framework of open backlands and small-scale riverbanks and on top of that the forts and waterworks of the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie. Despite the land consolidation, this physical identity of the region has remained intact. Regarding social and cultural structures we can see that there has been a shift. For example the way the inhabitants look at the forts has changed a lot since World War II. At first they were mystical, distant and inaccessible terrains. One could only fantasize about what was going on inside of them. This view has changed, partly because of the arrival of people from the Randstad. For example Fort Asperen has become more accessible and through the art exhibitions the inhabitants of Asperen have taken possession of it. They feel a sense of pride when they talk about "their" fort. The population experiences the abundance of cultural history. This also accounts for the many tourists that visit the area.

At the moment there are ideas for the further development of the area: recreational connections between Fort Asperen and Fort Nieuwe Steeg, development of nature, water storage, changing agriculture and maybe some small-scale housing. The stories in this booklet may help design these new developments in line with the current identity of the Lingekwartier.

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