

9.4. Wetland reclamation in Early Modern Europe

Panel organiser: Van Cruyningen, Piet, Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands

From the late Middle Ages, wetland reclamation schemes more and more became large-scale capitalist enterprises, dominated by urban investors and often actively promoted by state officials. All over Europe, thousands of hectares of wetlands were drained and embanked, implying a huge investment of capital, often gathered on a national or even international level. This led to significant changes in the landscape, in society and economy and in power relations in wetland areas and it required the development of new organizational and financial methods. The session aims at analyzing the causes and consequences of such large-scale wetland reclamations. Several issues can be raised: Who were the investors and what were their reasons for investing? Speculation or long-term investment? Can we call the investment of urban capital in land reclamation *trahison de la bourgeoisie* or was it simply a matter of having a diversified investment portfolio? What about the church, gentry and the aristocracy, could they still play a role in land reclamation? Another issue concerns the way capital was raised and the reclamation scheme was organized. In the Low Countries companies were formed in which investors could buy shares. Did this happen elsewhere too? Did the investors only use their own capital or was money also borrowed? Drainage and embankment projects could yield high profits, but also implied high risks. Why were some projects financially rewarding, and why did others turn into bankruptcy? What were the consequences of reclamation for the economy and society of the reclaimed area? Did reclamation lead to more inequality because of the destruction of wetland resources that before were available to the poor? Wetland reclamation also often had unintended consequences for the landscape, both within and outside the reclaimed area. Reclamation could lead to shrinking of the soil, to changes in the outfall of rivers or higher floods that could threaten the reclaimed land and adjacent areas. How did people cope with these problems?

Chair: Hoyle, Richard W., University of Reading, UK

Wednesday, 21 August 2013 // 1400 – 1600 // Session 9 – Room A 201

9.4.1. Managing the risks of drainage. A micro-perspective on risk assessment in early modern Flemish drainage projects

Soens, Tim, University of Antwerp, Belgium

De Graef, Pieter, University of Antwerp, Belgium

Early Modern drainage projects were both highly capital intensive and risky enterprises. Besides the environmental risk of flooding, early modern drainage consortia also faced a range of other risks, most notably financial ones, like shortage of capital or free-riding of participants postponing financial contributions to the project. Furthermore, local resistance to drainage was often very high, because of the highly contested redistribution of property rights involved in every drainage project. Finally, the actual pay-off for the drainers primarily depended on the agricultural output, which was uncertain itself. Based on the financial records of a mid-17th century drainage project in Early Modern Flanders – the Kallo-Polder near Antwerp – this paper argues that risk assessment in early modern reclamation projects was based on a clever combination of speculation on the one hand and risk limitation on the other hand. The latter was obtained through the permanent effort by leading investors to transform an inherently speculative undertaking into a (more) secure one based on their profound acquaintance with financial markets and state-of-the-art financial techniques. Furthermore, they also managed to externalise part of the risk to the local community, the general public and less well-to-do investors. As such the financial history of drainage projects can never be written without taken into account their social history.

9.4.2. Dutch investors and the drainage of Hatfield Chase, 1626-1656

van Cruyningen, Piet, Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands, The Hague, Netherlands

The drainage of Hatfield Chase, starting in 1626, by Cornelius Vermuyden and a group of Dutch investors, has always been considered a conspicuous financial failure because of high costs caused by litigation and commoner riots. Documents preserved in archives of some of the investors, however, show that this was not the only cause of the failure. The Dutch were unable or unwilling to export institutions they had developed in their home country for the smooth implementation of drainage schemes. This caused confusion and conflicts among Vermuyden and the participants, which added to the financial problems of the enterprise. The paper aims at explaining why exportation of efficient institutions failed. Finally the question is raised whether the drainage of Hatfield Chase really was such a financial debacle by comparing it with similar Dutch projects.

9.4.3. Draining the coastal marshes of North West Norfolk. The Le Stranges of Hunstanton, 1604-1724

Griffiths, Elizabeth, University of Exeter, UK

Wetland reclamation in seventeenth century Norfolk is invariably associated with the schemes initiated by the Crown to drain the Fenlands when syndicates of great landowners ventured their capital in risky projects. This paper focuses on the much neglected coastal marshes of north Norfolk where gentry landowners continued to carry out piecemeal schemes. The subject is the Le Strange family and their marshes at Hunstanton, Holme and Heacham. Sir Hamon Le Strange, who inherited his estate in 1604, was an 'Adventurer' and lost £500 on the drainage of Boston Fen. His son, Sir Nicholas was more circumspect and concentrated on the local scene, starting work on the drainage of Hunstanton Marsh in 1633; he carefully recorded the entire process in a series of farming notebooks, four of which survive. These books provide technical detail, explain the organisation and purpose of the venture, and include complex tables of his financial management. The overall context and the profitability of the enterprise can be assessed through the meticulous accounts of his mother, Lady Alice Le Strange. A particular feature of the books is that they were devised as manuals to instruct and guide future generations. Like his mother, Sir Nicholas understood the need to create and hand down knowledge to ensure their projects were protected and sustained. Records from the 1680s to the 1720s indicate the success of this strategy showing descendants using the information.



Participants

De Graef, Pieter

I am currently working on a PhD dissertation at the University of Antwerp. This project deals with the importance and social distribution of urban organic waste and industrial residual products as fertiliser in the core region of the Flemish husbandry (Inland Flanders) in the 17th and 18th centuries. For my master thesis, I studied risk-taking and market-oriented farm strategies of pioneer farmers in the newly embanked polder of Kallo (2nd half of the 17th century), thereby nuancing the differences between tenant farmers and owner-occupiers and arguing that the specific context of the new polder has explanatory value.

Griffiths, Elizabeth

Elizabeth Griffiths is an honorary research fellow at the University of Exeter.

Hoyle, Richard W.

Richard Hoyle is professor of Rural History at the University of Reading, UK, and is editor of *Agricultural History Review*. Currently he also serves as President of EURHO. His research interests lie mainly in the early modern period, but he enjoys trespassing on other people's territory too.

Soens, Tim

Tim Soens is Associate Professor of Medieval and Environmental History at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). He obtained his PhD at the University of Ghent in 2006, investigating water management and the interaction of man and nature in coastal Flanders in the medieval and early modern period. Within the Antwerp Department of History, he has developed a new research line 'Environment and Power', concentrating on the historical relationship between human societies and the natural environment, and the way this interaction was steered by evolving power constellations and formal and informal institutions.

van Cruyningen, Piet

Piet van Cruyningen is researcher at Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands and senior researcher at Wageningen University, Rural and Environmental History Group. He has published on Dutch rural history and is currently involved in research on water authorities in the early modern period.