

## A Secret Uninhabited Corner of the Netherlands

Rottumerplaat and Rottumeroog

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[ MICHEL BAKKER ]



North-Groningen  
with Rottumerplaat and  
Rottumeroog in the  
Wadden Sea.

The battle against the water runs in the blood of the Dutch. And nowhere is that more true than on the Netherlands' northern coast. There has however been a subtle change, from the traditional 'fighting against the sea' to the broader notion of 'fighting with the sea'. Last year the Wadden Sea, the narrow intertidal strip that runs along the northern coast of the Netherlands and continues along the North Sea coasts of Germany and Denmark, was placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In all the area covers almost 10,000 square kilometres. The string of islands and sandbanks off the Dutch coast which marks the northern boundary of the Wadden Sea begins in the west with the Razende Bol sandbank, just off the island of Texel, and ends in the eastern Wadden Sea with the islands of Rottumerplaat and Rottumeroog, two jewels in this island necklace which lie uninhabited on the edge of one of the most densely populated regions in the world.

What follows is a story about history, culture and the last undiscovered natural treasures of the Netherlands. But it is also about an Irish earl and his women, about messages in bottles and left shoes.

The tiny islands of Rottumerplaat and Rottumeroog have for centuries formed part of the string of islands marking the northern edge of the Dutch Wadden Sea. As long ago as the Middle Ages, Rottumerplaat appeared on maps as 'Bosch'. Always more of a sandbank than an island, Rottumerplaat has never been inhabited. Its contours have been subject to continual change, although its location has remained more or less constant. Over the last thirty years, management of the island has resulted in the construction of a large



North-Groningen with Rottumerplaat and Rottumeroog in the Wadden Sea seen from the air.

drift dyke. Rottumeroog was much bigger in the past than it is today, and was in fact inhabited for hundreds of years. Its constant shrinking caused the higher central zone to shift east-south-eastwards. The dunes along the north-west coast were increasingly eroded by storm surges, while on the eastern side, partly under the influence of the wind, the landmass grew through a continual (if modest) process of accretion. One consequence of the movement of the island was that the home of the 'Warden' had to be relocated several times to a safer site further east. The way in which the dune formation 'walks' is nothing short of spectacular. At one point, very old - and very welcome - bottles of wine appeared on the western tip of the island; at some point in the past they must have washed up on the eastern shore and been buried by the shifting sands.

Cast-iron beacon on  
Rottumeroog.



## A mad Irish earl

Maps from the 14th century name a further three small Wadden islands in addition to Rottumeroog: Bosch, Heffesant and Coornsant. It is likely that all three islands were used to graze cattle; Bosch may also have been inhabited. The only island about which much is really known is Rottumeroog. The island was formerly owned by two monasteries, a Benedictine monastery in Rottum, a village to the south of Usquert in the province of Groningen, and the Premonstratensian monastery in the municipality of De Marne, also in Groningen. A declaration by the pastors of the villages of Uithuizen and Uithuizermeeden in 1354 states that 'the people of Uithuizen may graze their cattle on Rottumeroog in return for payment and may also cut the marram grass on the island, but may not pull it up'. So there must already have been a sizeable area of meadowland at that time, though there were evidently fears of possible damage to the marram. In the late Middle Ages the island became a trading centre; the story goes that in 1483 goods on the island were stolen by raiders from Hamburg, who also set fire to the warehouses. In later years Rottumeroog became a safe haven for pirates. At the start of the Eighty Years War, the struggle for Dutch independence which began in 1568, the rebel *Watergeuzen* or Sea Beggars had a base there. In 1596 ownership of the island passed to the *Stad en Lande* (the city and province of Groningen), after which the ownership, leasehold rights and the right to flotsam and jetsam were traded many times over.

From 1707 the island was owned for some time by an Irish exile, Donogh MacCarthy, fourth Earl of Clancarty. Many stories are told about this 'Mad Earl' ('Malle Graaf'). In the late 17th century he was a supporter of the last Catholic



king of England, James II. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which James was deposed and succeeded by the Protestant William III of Orange and his wife Mary, Donough MacCarthy was first imprisoned in the Tower of London before being sent into exile in 1698 after the signing of the Treaty of Limerick.

Until his death in 1734 MacCarthy and his wife Elisabeth Spencer lived in the coastal area of the Northern Netherlands and North Germany, from Oudwoude in Friesland to Altona near Hamburg. In 1707 he purchased the island of Rottumeroog for 3,000 Dutch guilders; the price included a house, a horse and cart and the right to all articles found on the beach. The island of Bosch, which has since disappeared beneath the waves, also came into MacCarthy's possession. He finally settled in Praalshof, near Altona, where he died on 1 October 1734. Shortly before his death his title was restored

This wandering Irish earl was probably regarded as a strange creature in his own day, as is borne out by his enduring nickname of 'the Mad Earl' and also by the many wild and sometimes legendary stories of smuggling and piracy, seal-catchers and serving wenches, barkeepers, adultery and debauchery. After his wife's death, he was said to have had three women around him: one with red hair, one with black and one with blonde. And the stories also say that the Mad Earl happened to be responsible for the start of the tradition of *wadlopen*, walking across the Wadden Sea at low tide. One of his servants on Rottumeroog was to be punished for misbehaviour. The Earl announced that he would be hanged next morning. The servant doubted whether his master really meant it, but had no desire to take his last look at his home village of Warffum dangling from the end of a rope. So early in the morning, at low water, he set off to walk across the Wadden Sea. To everyone's amazement, he arrived safe and sound in Warffum.

Planting brushwood on the West Side of Rottumeroog. Brushwood screens enhance dune formation.

In 1738 the island again came into the hands of the province of Groningen, and in 1798 it became 'national property'. In 1876 the management and maintenance of the island passed permanently to the state under the aegis of the Ministry of Water Management.

## Wardens and beacons

In 1637 a new post was created, that of Warden of Rottum. Between 1637 and 1965 the Wardens lived permanently - summer and winter - on Rottumeroog. The task of the Warden was to manage the island on behalf of the owner by maintaining and looking after it; he was also receiver of wrecks, with responsibility for goods washed up on the shore and had the right to collect gulls' eggs. When we bear in mind that the Warden also managed to run a farm, generally with a team of horses, cows, sheep, small livestock and pets, he clearly had to be a skilled and versatile worker.

The Warden was assisted in all this by his family and a number of male and female servants. In the eighteenth century a small contingent of soldiers temporarily swelled the population of the island. The Warden also had to protect stranded ships and cargoes and try to rescue victims of shipwrecks.

From 1743 to the present day, there have been a total of six Warden's houses on the island. The first was located on the eastern tip of Rottumerplaat, more than two kilometres as the crow flies from the present site. The last Warden, Jan Toxopeus, retired in 1965.

Since then Rottumeroog has remained uninhabited, though the Warden's house is still maintained. The new bungalow has since been upgraded and is still used during the summer months as a residence for the maintenance team which cares for the island.

And then there are the beacons, built as prominent landmarks to guide passing ships. There were originally two beacons on the island, serving shipping travelling up the Eems estuary. Until 1883 these cast-iron beacons had been preceded by wooden structures which had to be repaired and relocated every twenty to thirty years.

Because of the 'walking' of the island the western beacon eventually became separated from the land; it was demolished in 1931. By that time, advances in navigation technology meant that one beacon was sufficient. Today the remaining beacon, known as the *Ender kaap*, is still visible from afar, standing proud at 21.5 metres high; in 1999, though, it was moved to a new site 400 metres away. From 1910 to 1930 a lifeboat operated by the Noord- en Zuid-Hollandsche Redding Maatschappij, predecessor of the present-day Royal Netherlands Sea Rescue Institution, was also stationed on Rottumeroog.

## Buildings on an uninhabited island

Until around 1920 Rottumerplaat was small (about 100 ha). It appeared at a spot which 300 years before had been approximately the centre of Rottumeroog. Between 1900 and 1940 the Boschplaat sandbank, originally to the west of Rottumerplaat, moved eastwards as a result of the encroaching Lauwers inlet. After 1940 it shrank rapidly and eventually merged with Rottumerplaat. Partly



because of this, and partly because another large sandbank to the north-west also attached itself to Rottumerplaat, by around 1950 Rottumerplaat had grown considerably. Between 1952 and 1980 a man-made drift dyke was created by extending an existing dune in the south-east of the island.

Installing sand stabiliser screens and planting marram and lyme-grass enabled this drift dyke to develop into a chain of dunes. The protection offered by this has enabled a rich area of salt marsh to develop in its lee. Spontaneous dune formation takes place in the western section of Rottumerplaat, but the island's present character is due in large part to the man-made drift dyke; if this were no longer maintained, Rottumerplaat would cease to be an island and revert to being a sandbank. Following the flood disaster in the south-western province of Zeeland in 1953, the Executive Agency of Transport and Water Management (*Rijkswaterstaat*) also took on the maintenance of Rottumerplaat.

Rottumerplaat boasts a large and fairly luxurious dwelling-house. After the Second World War successive governments stressed the importance of agriculture in the Netherlands, and the prevailing opinion was that the country had to be able to produce some of its own food. A logical consequence of this was an increase in the area of land devoted to farming. The Mansholt Plan of 1968

The last Warden's house but one on Rottumeroog with belvedere. The last Warden Jan Toxopeues lived here with his family till 1957.



Sandbank with seals on Rottumerplaat.

(named after the then European Commissioner for Agriculture, Sicco Mansholt, a native of Groningen) initially envisaged reclaiming the entire Wadden Sea for use as farmland. Later this was restricted to the eastern half, from the rudimentary dam which still exists to the island of Ameland up to and including Rottumeroog, roughly speaking that part of the Wadden Sea to the north of Groningen. A start was made by upgrading the Rottumerplaat sandbank into an island with a line of dunes along its northern edge.

Given the plans to reclaim the whole of the Wadden Sea, it made sense to have or create support stations at strategic points to act as links and as bases for workers. Rottumerplaat was regarded as a suitable site. Moreover, creating a drift dyke was a fairly cheap way of laying the basis for a dyke that would act as a defence against the sea. An important secondary-effect was the protection this was expected to provide for the mainland coast during storms, at least for so long as the Wadden Sea had not been reclaimed, protection that would of course become permanent thereafter. The thinking was that the new coastline would absorb the power of the North Sea, while in the lee of the island only wind-driven waves would be able to form, greatly reducing the impact on the mainland dykes.

There was already a small old dune in the south-eastern part of Rottumerplaat. This would now serve as an operating base and a site for the service buildings. In 1950/51 a hut known as 'De Pionier' was constructed; it was little more than a shed with room for a maximum of eleven people. It was small and very primitive; drinking water had to be brought in in milk churns and the only lighting was by gas. In around 1958 a second hut was built, large enough to sleep twenty people, along with a shed to house machinery and tools.

In 1965 a brand new accommodation block was opened; the building and its facilities are still in use today. A new wing was added in 1979, used exclusively as a dormitory. The original dormitory is now a recreation room, and improvements have been made to the furnishings, power supply, and so on.



## Message in a bottle

Rottumerplaat.

Twice a year a small group of volunteers goes to live and work on Rottumerplaat and Rottumeroog. Among other things, they help to collect the rubbish that has washed up on the beaches. Each year around 20 million kilos of waste ends up in the North Sea, and recently global attention has focused on the vast amounts of plastic drifting around in the world's oceans. Three million kilos of waste wash up on the Dutch North Sea coast, mainly on the Wadden islands and the tip of the province of North Holland. This litter consists of everything from gloves, fish crates, light bulbs and rope to refrigerators and crates 'with contents'. While it is not uncommon to find messages in bottles, it always gives rise to mild celebration. These messages are often 'posted' from a German island, but there was also one from a Scottish vicar, trying a novel means of raising money for a new church organ.

One permanent component of this flotsam is shoes. For many years it has been claimed that more left shoes than right are washed up. In the case of shellfish such as the black clam this is a proven phenomenon: it is a demonstrable fact that more left than right shell-sections are washed up.

It is not all one-way traffic, however: post has also been sent from the island, though admittedly it was 'post by radio'. At the invitation of the Dutch broadcasting organisation VARA, the writers Godfried Bomans and Jan Wolkers each spent a week on Rottumerplaat in 1971. During their sojourn there, in total isolation, each of them kept a diary. From Hotel de Breedenburg in Warffum the radio presenter Willem Ruis kept in touch with them, and their conversations were broadcast to the nation.

'It would have been impossible to imagine two greater contrasts, and there was something nice about that', Bomans wrote later after the final broadcast in which the two writers featured together. Bomans did not feel at ease on Rottumerplaat. He was frightened at night (imagining that



the sounds made by the seagulls were the mumbling voices of men) and quickly fell ill. He described himself as 'a man wearing a suit on the beach', and readily admitted that he would rather be back home in Haarlem. He appreciated the nature all round him, but did not really feel part of it. Wolkers, by contrast, was all energy: he went for long walks around the island, went swimming at night, lived largely from what nature provided, built an entrance gate, took an interest in the flora and fauna. His diary and radio fragments about the sick and dead seals that he found stick in the memory. A notable fact is that the tent where they both stayed was right in among the birds; Bomans even talks about a nest just five metres away.

## **A wayside restaurant**

The islands Rottumerplaat and Rottumeroog are of great value in themselves. They help enclose the Wadden Sea and provide a degree of protection against the North Sea, while islands and Wadden Sea together protect the mainland from the full force of the sea's attack.

But there is more. The Wadden Sea has been described as the central wayside restaurant on the migration route between breeding grounds and winter quarters. Birds find an abundance of food there and on the exposed mudflats they can put on weight ready for the long flight ahead. It also offers them a safe resting place until they are ready to leave. And rare bird species breed there, such as the little tern and snowy plover.

The islands have their own value as nature reserves: the beaches, the tidal marshes and the dunes are each valuable in their own right, and there is a great diversity of flora and fauna. And they are not only a muddy Eldorado for wading birds, but also a haven for seals.

And both - now uninhabited - islands also bear the physical traces of particular histories which have become part of Dutch culture.

The islands having been placed under the protection of the Nature Conservancy Act in 1980, in the 1990s it was decided to leave them henceforth entirely to nature, given that the Act states that no work may be carried out in nature conservancy areas. This government policy came to the attention of Hendrik Toxopeus, the son of the last Warden, and he and his wife Jannie decided to occupy Rottumeroog. The occupation lasted two weeks and attracted the hoped-for publicity, extending as far as Parliament. The Friends of Rottumeroog and Rottumerplaat Foundation (Stichting Vrienden van Rottumeroog en Rottumerplaat) was founded in May 1991 with the aim of preserving these two important natural and cultural assets in the Wadden Sea. It works with volunteers to carry out maintenance, encourages research into protection techniques and works to increase awareness of the islands among the general public. The Foundation works closely with the statutory administrators of Rottumeroog and Rottumerplaat: the Water Management Agency, Forestry Commission, the Province of Groningen and the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovation.

To secure the future of the islands, with their natural and cultural treasures, reviving the post of Receiver of Wrecks would be an attractive option. Like his predecessors, this official could also monitor both islands as they migrate naturally towards the south-east.

The turbulent history of these two 'uninhabited islands' means they have come to feel very important to the Dutch. They appeal to the imagination, have a place in many people's dreams and are a source of inspiration for the visual arts, music and literature alike. Apart from the simple fact of their existence, their appeal lies in their inaccessibility. They are rightly and justifiably thought of as Wadden jewels. ■

[www.rottumeroog.org](http://www.rottumeroog.org)

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