



Schokland and Surroundings (Municipality of Noordoostpolder, Flevoland)

As an archaeological monument, the World Heritage Site ‘Schokland and Surroundings’ symbolises the never-ending struggle between the man and the sea. ‘Schokland and Surroundings’ was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1995.

The narrow, elongated former island of Schokland has nine listed buildings. Five are archaeological sites, three are structural monuments and one is a combined archaeological and structural monument (‘mixed site’), resulting in ten entries in the register. Four of the sites designated as archaeological listed buildings comprise ‘woonterpen’ (dwelling mounds) dating back to historical times. The fifth contains remnants of several prehistoric settlements. Some hundreds of archaeologically valuable mounds, dykes, dyke systems and other relics have also been discovered on and around the former island. The structural listed buildings include a church building, a parsonage, foundations of a church building (the ‘mixed site’) and the house of the lighthouse keeper.

Since the early 1940s Schokland has been made part of the Noordoostpolder (North East Polder), an area of reclaimed land in the IJsselmeer (formerly the Zuyder Zee). The original contours of the former island can still clearly be seen in aerial photographs, outlined by its trees and vegetation in shrill contrast to the orderly parcelisation of the Noordoostpolder.

Schokland, a brief history

Until the early Middle Ages, Schokland, like Urk, was part of a large peat area that had been exposed to the encroaching sea for centuries. Beneath the peat is a solid layer of boulder clay, dating from the last ice age – more than 12,000 years ago. From around 800 AD, the land suffered constant erosion, mainly from the west. The peat area probably disintegrated by the year 1200, turning Schokland into a peninsula. Eventually, habitation was only possible in places where firm boulder clay resisted the expanding Zuyder Zee. Ultimately only one area on the east side of Schokland was still connected to the mainland. Around 1450 the peninsula of Schokland broke away from the mainland to become an island.

Many traces of habitation from some 10,000 years ago have been found in and around present-day Schokland. Since then, evidence of human cultures has been found in this area in several phases, mainly around 4000 BC and from 2800 to 2000 BC. Among the most remarkable finds are approximately 4500-year-old footprints! In later centuries the area was flooded as a result of the perpetually rising sea level, but silt and peat formation eventually pushed the sea back and the area was inhabitable again during the Roman Era. Around that time, what was later to become the Zuyder Zee was still a relatively large lake called Mare Flevum (Flevomeer, or Lake Flevo). Later, about 800 AD, the name was changed to Almere. A sea gate connected Almere directly to the North Sea.

From the 11th or 12th century the inhabitants of Schokland again tried to defend themselves from the intruding sea by building small dykes – but to no avail. It has been suggested that the dykes formed connected systems and that in those days the island was a constantly shrinking polder with natural drainage via small sluices, but this is not certain. Such systems were certainly already in use in other places at that time.



The inhabitants lived mainly on separate dwelling mounds. Because of the increasing number of floods and subsequent damage, dozens of these mounds were abandoned in the 17th and 18th centuries; the inhabitants turned to fewer but larger mounds where they grouped their dwellings together.

The surface area of Schokland in 1800 was less than 10% of what it had been around 800 AD. Only palings and one dyke were in place to protect the island in the 18th century, but nothing helped and flooding continued to occur with increasing frequency at high tides. So more and more land was lost and Schokland eventually shrunk into a unique narrow strip of land stretching four kilometres from north to south. By the first half of the 19th century, only a few houses remained on three or four mounds. They formed small neighbourhoods called (Oud) Emmeloord (also called Noorderbuurt), Middelbuurt (or Molenbuurt) and Zuidert (Zuiderbuurt or Oudekerk). The latter two together are also known as Ens. Schokland thus declined into one of the last remnants of the former man-made landscape in the Zuyder Zee. Large parts of the island flooded with each high tide, forcing its occupants to retreat to these mounds taking their cattle and possessions with them. The many traces of dykes and the larger mounds, as well as the more than 165 abandoned dwelling mounds, make Schokland a unique archaeological monument that reflects the struggle against the sea.

The situation eventually became untenable, especially after several people drowned and considerable material damage was suffered during the storm tides of 1824, 1825 and 1836. In 1859, King William III ordered the island evacuated for safety reasons. This meant that approximately 635 'Schokkers' (as the inhabitants of Schokland were called) had to move to the mainland. Only a lighthouse keeper, his family and a few others remained behind. Most of the predominantly wooden houses were demolished, as was the Catholic Church of Emmeloord that dated from 1842 (the church was later rebuilt in Ommen). The Reformed Church and attached parsonage in Ens/Middelbuurt (1834) as well as a few houses in Emmeloord were left standing, as was the house of the lighthouse keeper (1806/1822) and a newly installed beacon (1856) at the southern tip. The beacon was demolished in 1944.

The government did not leave the island at the mercy of nature between its evacuation and the impoldering in the 1940s. As the small harbour of Emmeloord was kept intact, fishermen and fishmongers could continue to use it for decades. Among the last inhabitants were a market superintendent who ran a fish auction in Emmeloord and a few dyke workers. Schokland was also visited by day-trippers and beachcombers, and captains who sailed the Zuyder Zee sought shelter behind this 'breakwater' in stormy weather.

Many archaeological studies were conducted after the island, which had not shrunk any further, became part of the Noordoostpolder (reclaimed land). An important part of (pre)history was uncovered, including facets of its dyke history, the evolution of the mounds and some of Schokland's development history. Through graves, artefacts (man-made objects) and other traces from earlier periods a large part of the history of Schokland's habitation was unearthed. For instance, the dyke history, and how the population retreated, could be deduced and derived from the micro-relief in the new soil around the island and from palings and pile remnants. Test trenches in the mounds also produced data pertaining to growth, size and dating of the mounds, as well as information on the materials used. Traces of over 165 mediaeval and more recent dwelling mounds have also been found since then. The development history came to light by exposing foundations and other traces of floor plans of houses and other structures, and of a church in Ens dating from around 1300. A visible remnant is the foundation of the 19th-century beacon which was demolished in 1944 and now is superfluous.



It was a beacon to warn captains and as such a symbol of the struggle between man and the sea. Numerous graves containing human remains were examined in several former cemeteries and many discoveries were made dating back to various periods of the Neolithic or New Stone Age, and from the Middle Ages to well into the 19th century. The finds dating from the Neolithic period go back about 10,000 years and therefore date from relatively soon after the last ice age. So archaeology abounds in the soil of 'Schokland and Surroundings'. This archaeological treasure was the main reason for placing the area on the World Heritage List. Neolithic man's population of an area that was engulfed by the sea in later millennia and then colonised again after the sea had been driven out by the formation of silt and peat, is in itself quite rare. But that the struggle against the sea continued on at the same location for at least another two thousand years, is virtually unique, especially now that the Noordoostpolder and the Zuyder Zee Project have become icons of the Netherlands' battle against the sea.

Schokland today

Throughout the centuries Schokland mainly lost land on its western coast. After being researched and examined, some dyke remnants were absorbed in farmland. In addition to the larger mounds that were inhabited until 1859 and are now classified as listed buildings, Schokland features a particularly high number of archaeologically interesting shapes and structures, such as dykes and mound complexes. In Middelbuurt, close to the few buildings left standing, the original houses that were built almost entirely of wood were reconstructed with brick and wood.

Schokland has literally been preserved because its existence as an island was abolished. Instead, it became a sort of island on dry land. Yet, since it was incorporated into the Noordoostpolder in 1942, the ground level of Schokland has dropped about 1.5 metres – approximately 1 metre more than the surrounding polder. So for the first time ever, the former island is almost entirely below NAP (the Normal Amsterdam Water Level)! It is therefore significant that the drop in the level of the peat and clay soil caused by ongoing drainage and dehydration has been brought to a halt by the implementation of the so-called Schokland polder level. A ring of drainage ditches (a hydrological zone) around Schokland keeps its groundwater level up, preventing further oxidation and settling of the soil. Schokland is thus a polder within a polder. The soil archives (including the rich archaeological values) as well as the original natural relief and the man-made relief benefit from this. So to this day, Schokland has remained a symbol of man's eternal battle against the sea.

Because of the attention paid to the Schokland World Heritage site, the former island will be preserved as an excellent example of an island that was largely engulfed by the sea, but that ultimately perpetuated as a man-made landscape with outstanding archaeological and cultural-historical qualities. This attention results primarily from the Dutch government's duty to maintain the site ensuing from its inscription on the World Heritage List.



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