

RFS TRIP TO THE NETHERLANDS

In September 2001 twenty six intrepid members of this Society set out under the guidance of Willem Irik for a week's tour of the Netherlands. Dutch by birth, Australian by nature and English by residence, Willem is a bit of a curate's egg. But he had planned for us the sort of trip most of us would be unlikely to accomplish without some local knowledge and the ability to speak Dutch. To find regional furniture in the Netherlands we were taken on a circular route around what used to be known as the Zuiderzee, now called the IJsselmeer. This once provided the sea route to Amsterdam in the great days of the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, but it was always too shallow and when it had eventually silted up by the middle of the 20th century, a causeway and dam were built across its northern entrance to the sea. It's now a freshwater lake and the only maritime activity is recreational. But dotted around its shores is a string of ports which were once the smaller operators in the V.O.C., their former pride and prosperity was very much in evidence in the local architecture and in the material culture displayed in their museums.

Our tour began in Apeldoorn with a private visit to Het Loo, the hunting lodge which was modelled on Versailles and built for William and Mary, followed by an afternoon at the Netherlands Open Air Museum near Arnhem. This was our orientation day, a crash course in Dutch culture, from the high baroque style of the House of Orange in its heyday, to the windmills, farmsteads and cottages of the rural northern Netherlands. An evening lecture by furniture restorer, Hans Piena, on painted furniture, gave us a taste of what was to come.

From there we travelled north into Friesland, where the farmland, rather alarmingly, is two meters below sea level, protected by enormous banks and drained by a network of canals, dykes and sluices. In thick fog we reached the extraordinary little town of Hindeloopen, where all the regional furniture and most of the interiors and local costumes were traditionally decorated in floral designs, painted, glazed and stitched onto every available surface; then to Popta Slot, a 'castle' in romantic style with mainly 18th-century furniture and interiors; the furthest north we reached was the town of Leeuwarden, where we were guided around the excellent Friesian Museum before returning to the IJsselmeer and the delightful port of Harlingen, its former harbour and quays lined with old warehouses once filled with spices, silks and porcelain from the East Indies.

We then crossed the causeway at the top of the IJsselmeer and turned south to Enkhuizen, where we visited the Zuiderzee Museum store, impressive both for its collections (we really only saw their furniture, but adjoining rooms were tantalisingly full of ceramics, costume, etc.) and for its organisation. In the afternoon

we went to Twisk, a tiny, well-preserved village with a church containing unusually fine woodwork and furniture. Its restoration had been directed by Mr Jaap Schipper, who was there to guide us, and indeed had given Willem a great deal of help in organising the trip. A short journey from there brought us to Hoorn, another former VOC port, with a wonderful museum full of curiosities, local furniture and a collection of Indonesian furniture.

The next day took us to Edam, a beautiful town of quiet canals and shady gardens, where the museum is a furnished 16th-century merchant's house of great charm and character. From Volendam, we took a ferry to the island of Marken, where time seemed to have stood still for this isolated maritime community for the last two hundred years. For our final evening, a celebratory fish supper in the Hotel Spaander in Volendam, with votes of thanks to Willem Irik for a marvellously informative and enjoyable tour and to Polly Legg for making it all run so smoothly.

David Dewing