

Behind me you see slides of Dutch country houses. The selection gives an impression of the richness and the idiom of our Dutch castles, country houses and rural estates. Remarkable stories can be told about all of these places, which are often surrounded by beautifully landscaped parks and gardens.

I myself live in the Huis te Manpad, which was bought and renovated by Jan Visser, the former Dutch ambassador to Sweden who also commissioned the renovation of the Stockholm mansion of the seventeenth-century industrialist Louis de Geer. After De Geer's death in 1652, Countess Ebba Brahe lived in the mansion. For many years now it has housed the Dutch embassy.

The Huis te Manpad, which was built in 1632, is situated in grounds covering nineteen hectares. Its present form dates from 1721. This estate is the reason for my interest in the subject of Dutch country houses. Located twenty kilometres from Amsterdam, Huis te Manpad has been the scene of important events, such as the historic decision taken there around 1850 to provide Amsterdam with potable tap water.

For my Swedish hosts I've naturally brought along slides of the country house known as De Hartekamp in Heemstede, where the great Linnaeus lived and worked for George Clifford in the years he spent in the Netherlands. A bust of Linnaeus can be found in the garden; it was here that he wrote his world-renowned 'Hortus Cliffortianus'.

You probably won't be able to imagine this, but the average Dutchman knows next to nothing about his own national heritage. Many people do not even know what a country estate is, let alone anything about the origins of the thousands of country houses in the Netherlands. What this means for the preservation of our patrimony is one of the subjects of my talk. After a short introduction to the situation in the Netherlands, I'll tell you about the new initiatives that have been launched to deal with the difficult problems of preserving and administering such a patrimony. Please bear in mind that time constraints force me to use rather black-and-white terms to tell a story that is actually quite colourful.

As far as the governance of the country is concerned, the Netherlands has a history that is unique within Europe. Since the sixteenth century it has been the burghers, rather than the nobility, who have dominated our originally federal government. In 1568 the Northern Netherlands rid itself of Spanish rule and thus of a government dominated by the nobility.

This resulted in the Eighty Years' War. There were nobles in the Dutch Republic too, of course, but they usually remained at their castles and rural estates in the east of the country, from which position they maintained their power, land and standing, and looked with disdain at the rich merchants in the west. In any case, their noble privileges and interests had gradually been eroded in many western cities in the Late Middle Ages. By virtue of its favourable location on the North Sea, its many navigable waterways and the activities of shrewd, money-hungry merchants, the Dutch Republic – in particular the province of Holland – developed into a leading trading nation of Europe. It prided itself, above all, on the commerce referred to as 'the mother of all trade', meaning the trade with Sweden. The money poured in, and merchants who were becoming wealthier by the day formed collectives and held important positions in both local and national government. This development was particularly evident in Amsterdam.

These merchants of Amsterdam sought local investment opportunities for their newly amassed fortunes, and as a result they began to manifest themselves as large landowners from 1610 onwards. Previously, land ownership had mainly been the privilege of the nobility, but in the Dutch Republic merchants eagerly began to acquire land, or pooled their resources to reclaim land by draining lakes in the vicinity of Amsterdam and transforming marshland and heaths into fertile agricultural land. An important factor in this process was the expropriation in the sixteenth century of extensive tracts of land that had belonged to the Catholic Church. So there was no shortage of land for sale. In the course of the seventeenth century and certainly in the eighteenth century, the yearning for nature and the attractions of country life became an even stronger incentive to acquire a country house than a desire to invest. Those who could afford it sought a way to escape from the polluted and foul-smelling cities. It became fashionable for the rich to have country houses built to designs that were influenced first by the classical principles of Italian garden and architectural design and later by the French idiom. Amsterdam builders and artists constructed country houses and laid out gardens all over the country. Between them the merchants of Amsterdam created a veritable Arcadia. There arose on the outskirts of the city and in the surrounding countryside thousands of estates, to which the owners and their families withdrew in the summer months to enjoy the countryside and escape the heat and stench of the city.

In the Netherlands, a country house that has survived more or less intact is called a 'historic country house complex'. This term is used to describe a monumental house which, together with its service buildings and a formal garden, park and/or woods, forms a

harmonious and inseparable whole. Many country houses were built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though industrialists were still building them in later centuries. As early as the seventeenth century, country houses were constructed on newly reclaimed land, but large numbers of them were also built behind the dunes and along navigable waterways. There are important differences between country houses and rural estates. In the latter case, agrarian activities are of vital importance. The revenues from tenant farming, cattle breeding, agriculture and forestry were (and still are) essential to the preservation of a rural estate, whereas such activities were less important to the country house, which was maintained with money earned from trade. Sometimes it did have a farm, but frequently its produce supplied only the owner's kitchen. Another major difference is that country houses are based on an artistic design, whereas a rural estate is formed primarily of natural components (arable land, forest and so on), although sometimes they have landscaped gardens and parks as well. The dividing line is not always clear. Some country houses grew into rural estates, but the opposite also occurred: some rural estates came to be used 'merely' as country houses. Unfortunately, these concepts can be confusing, and the origins of such estates are often difficult to unravel.

A number of factors have contributed to the disappearance of many country estates and their replacement by housing developments, industrial estates, cemeteries, roads, city parks and railways. The Netherlands still has 552 historic country houses – recognized as such by the state – which cover altogether several hundred thousand hectares of land. In addition to these country houses, there are more than 125 castles or castle ruins, as well as hundreds of historic rural estates. I believe that our country has over 1,000 castles, country houses and old rural estates; no one seems to know their exact number. Most of them are situated in the still-green provinces of Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel.

Like all previous crises, the current economic crisis has immense consequences for the preservation of our national heritage. A dangerous combination of circumstances threatens the preservation and management of these unique leafy places of cultural and architectural interest. I intend to outline this situation, and also to tell you about a few national initiatives aimed at the necessary cooperation, expansion and collaboration.

The current economic crisis has caused a lot of turmoil in the cultural sector. In the Netherlands, cultural policies are devised by economists, which means that the government is under pressure to cut the budget for castles, historic country houses and rural estates. Government policies increasingly stress the importance of self-support and cultural enterprise, but by no means is everyone capable of this. The economic tide turned several years ago, and

this became painfully apparent to a foundation comprising 300 private owners of historic country houses. Since 1973 the foundation had received an annual subsidy of 2.5 million euros for the upkeep of the grounds of country estates. Sharing the hours and at a reduced rate, fifty landscape gardeners carried out work at castles and country houses owned by members of the foundation throughout the Netherlands. This system functioned reasonably well. Now, however, the loss of this assistance means that some owners are finding it difficult to maintain their grounds.

In the Netherlands, 250 country estates are in the hands of institutional owners such as Natuurmonumenten (the society for the preservation of nature monuments), Staatsbosbeheer (the state forestry commission) and provincial land management organizations, or they function as convents, nursing homes, town halls or offices. Until 2010 land management agencies received sufficient funds for maintenance and running costs, but recently these funds have been drastically reduced. The state forestry commission, for example, is now faced with substantial cutbacks. There have always been strained relations between private and institutional owners in the Netherlands, because the private owners feel discriminated against by the authorities. Such counter-productive feelings have effectively prevented these parties from working together. Recently, however, some initiatives have been put forward. The differences in experience, vision and approach between these groups is aggravated by the fact that many private owners find it difficult to put their possessions on public display and do not know how to handle the public. They expect government support, but at the same time emphasize their private ownership and autonomy. It is understandable that the public objects to this attitude.

In the Netherlands, only a few fiscal schemes provide tax relief to the owners of castles, country houses and rural estates. And the money available for each individual owner decreases as more and more parties claim a share of it. The most important scheme for the owners of rural estates is the Natuurschoonwet (nature conservation act), which dates from 1928 but is now being reassessed by parliament. The law grants some fiscal concessions to the heirs of rural estates – with regard to the conveyance of ownership – and allows tax exemptions in exchange for opening up one's estate to the public. The law was created to prevent the disappearance of even more rural estates owing to increased urbanization. It is aimed not so much at monument preservation as at nature conservation. In addition, there are subsidies for the preservation of monuments and for the maintenance of castles and country houses. The last law replaced the 2.5-million-euro subsidy for the private owners of country

estates, but it is not enough. What is more, there is a general lack of understanding for the European agreement which stipulates that Unesco World Heritage Sites take precedence when it comes to the allocation of subsidies.

Among the scholars who study this patrimony and the scientists responsible for its conservation, little attention is paid to interdisciplinary or comparative research. The study of Dutch castles, country houses and rural estates lacks the synthesizing element needed to interrelate these studies, most of which treat individual objects. No well-researched introductory piece of writing on this Dutch patrimony has ever been published in English, German or French, which explains why no one else in Europe is aware of our national heritage and most tourists see only the tulip fields, the mills and the centre of Amsterdam.

In this context it must be mentioned that any discussion of this subject is hampered by the inadequate formulation of the main concepts in Dutch. Country houses originated in different ways and for different purposes, but both the authorities and the owners use terms that are inadequate and confusing. This is evident in local politics, for example, where a lack of knowledge clearly hinders discussion and policy-making.

Several years ago the Dutch government decided to decentralize authority, and many powers were delegated to the twelve provinces. The provinces are now nearly autonomous in their decision-making with regard to historic country houses in landscaped grounds. Every province determines its own policy and there is practically no coordination between them, which means that one province might give priority to the preservation of castles and rural estates while a neighbouring province is indifferent to this issue. A serious matter is the fact that until recently there was not a single workable initiative at the national level that was committed to the preservation of castles, country houses and rural estates. No one provided information to the public or established contacts with interested parties abroad.

Finally, a crucial aspect of this problem is the average Dutch person's complete ignorance of the history attached to the nation's country houses and castles. Their indifference proves the truth of the saying 'unknown, unloved'. And unloved objects can easily disappear. The lack of broad public support means that politicians are not under pressure to take measures to preserve the national heritage. For years, however, the Dutch have been examining the success of Britain's National Trust and organizing trips to England to study this phenomenon at close quarters, but this has not brought about any real change. Added to

this is the current problem that many objects of the Dutch national heritage – centuries-old buildings that once belonged to the Church – now lie vacant.

After this rather gloomy sketch of the situation in the Netherlands I have some more positive things to report. In 2012 the ‘Theme Year for Historic Country Houses’, of which I was the initiator, was held in the Netherlands. The foundation established for this purpose aimed to increase the general public’s knowledge of the history of country houses. It concentrated on targets of national interest in an effort to create a lot of positive publicity for this part of our patrimony. In 2012 we organized eight larger events, each one in a different province. We also published a book on the significance of this patrimony for the development of the Dutch landscape, and we made a documentary that illuminates various aspects of country houses. Moreover, there was a great deal of newspaper and television coverage of this subject, including interviews with many of the parties concerned.

After the official launch of the ‘Theme Year’ in March 2012, our initiative was immediately picked up throughout the country by provincial governments, private owners, museums, publishers, filmmakers, journalists, historical societies, nature organizations and many institutions and other interested parties. Outside our foundation, interested parties all over the country organized and financed their own exhibitions, publications and events. This provided the impetus for activities tied to our Theme Year, which took place throughout the year and throughout the Netherlands – and at little cost to our foundation. There were several big successes. Early in the year, a nationally popular magazine published a special issue on Dutch country estates. The Dutch postal service issued a series of fifty stamps depicting Dutch country houses. The year 2012 also saw the publication of the first national guide to all the historic country estates in the Netherlands, and another positive development was the national monument weekend’s focus on historic country houses and their grounds. More than 300 country houses and castles were opened to the public during ‘monument weekend’ – something that had never happened before. That weekend the national news also spotlighted a visit to a country house by a member of our royal family. The Theme Year set many plans in motion among local politicians and provincial governments. Six provinces made financial contributions to our regional meetings, which we hosted together with the province in question, although the organization of the event was entirely in our hands. In addition, four provinces made the preservation of country houses a spearhead of their cultural and landscape policies. Moreover, many local politicians, mayors and aldermen promoted the interests of

country houses and castles at the local level. The Theme Year had an annual turnover of €850,000, a sum the foundation raised without any subsidies whatsoever. This professional organization was sustained by experts who graciously donated their time and energy to the Theme Year. The website and the monthly online newsletter were produced by an editorial staff of experienced volunteers. Various businesses and funds participated in the Theme Year or acted as sponsors.

Reports were kept of all the meetings of experts, authorities and other concerned parties, so that a final report could be published at the end of the year that would include our most important recommendations. The complaint most often heard in 2012 was the Netherlands' lack of a national point of reference for this part of our patrimony, and the fact that the Internet offers meagre and fragmented information on these historic objects. All over the country, people are making similar plans or implementing similar measures. More cooperation would save a lot of time and money.

All of the above led to my initiative in February 2014 to set up a foundation called, in translation, the 'digital portal for Dutch castles, historic country houses and rural estates'. The sKBL – the acronym of its Dutch name – was a direct result of the recommendations made at the end of the 2012 Theme Year. The remaining capital of the old foundation – approximately €50,000 – was donated to the new foundation as start-up capital. I became the foundation's director.

The sKBL aims to contribute in various ways to the preservation of castles, historic country houses and rural estates in the Netherlands. To this end, it has set up an online platform where the relevant knowledge, expertise, contacts, new initiatives and insights can be collected and made accessible to members of the general public – both in the Netherlands and abroad – who are interested in the Dutch national heritage. The foundation strives to reduce the fragmentary nature of the available information about castles, country houses and rural estates by creating a website for all those objects that are always, sometimes or only occasionally open to the public, thus making this information accessible to a national and international public. Our partners in this process are patrimony professionals, researchers and other experts, as well as those directly involved, including the owners, occupants, administrators and trustees. In particular, the sKBL seeks contact with the provinces that are committed to the preservation of their castles and country houses. At the provincial level, too, initiatives are taking shape that the sKBL would like to draw to the attention of other provinces, country house owners and interested parties.

Furthermore, the sKBL actively encourages the media to spotlight more often – and in a positive way – these objects of our national heritage. The foundation stimulates event managers and travel organizations to include in their programmes the nation's country houses and surrounding parks, and tries to think up ways to improve the utilization and development of these culturally important sites. The sKBL therefore acts as a mediator between potential buyers and sellers of castles and country houses. The foundation acts independently, focuses on the general interests of the Dutch national heritage, and does not represent any other institutions or interest groups.

The first results are encouraging. A few weeks ago we launched our website, which provides information on visits to a large number of castles, country houses and rural estates. The donations and pledges received in 2014 amount to approximately €120,000. Part of that amount was donated by a private individual who has earmarked it for a prize and a grant for interdisciplinary and synthesizing scientific research into this patrimony or for media productions that bring these historic houses to the attention of a broad public. Twenty parties have already registered as donors and fifty correspondents from various backgrounds and fields of expertise have become involved in the publication of the online newsletter. A number of provinces have expressed a desire to make a financial contribution to this national initiative, which does not focus on ownership but on the preservation of our national heritage.

Recommendations:

- a. Convey to others your belief in the historical value and beauty of castles, country houses and rural estates. Your audience can tell whether or not you're sincere. Prove to them that monument preservation is not a boring subject.
- b. Catalogue and analyse the most important problems concerning the preservation and management of country estates and their landscaped grounds in your own country, state, province or region. Specify the issues and bring them out into the open. Involve all parties in this discussion.
- c. Make an inventory of the possibilities (and impossibilities) of the monuments accessible to the public. Broaden the choices and point out similarities, so that those with an interest in one aspect of a national heritage site will become aware of other nearby sites that might also appeal to them.
- d. Take up the issue of the preservation of your national patrimony with the local and regional press. Make the problems known to a broad public by taking them to the regional or national level. Take full advantage of social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.
- e. Create a national or at least a regional platform that is easily accessible. List all the houses and their individual possibilities. Tell the public what is on offer at these houses. In other words, inventory the public accessibility of these objects of national heritage and make this information readily available to a broad national and international public.
- f. Do not make the mistake of giving your attention only to those who donate money.
- g. Give the problems a human aspect and fight the social prejudices against castles, country houses and rural estates. These objects were once the property of the elite few, but now they bear witness to our national heritage.

- h. Offer assistance to those owners who express a desire for help in dealing with volunteers, and help them to realize their goals at both the local and regional level. Respect private property but teach owners to share, certainly if the preservation of their property is being financed by the state.
- i. Within this national heritage, look for parties whose backgrounds make them natural allies. This might be similar catering facilities, a comparable museum function, gardens and kitchen gardens that are open to the public, and perhaps similar types of houses. Establish as many ties as possible.
- j. Events and cultural tourism can provide a financial boost, but this is not enough, because these are not, generally speaking, year-round activities. Nor does it work in regions in which large numbers of castles and country estates compete for attention. Strive for an equal division of income between tourist agencies and catering services. Get tour operators and other organizations involved in this.
- k. Organize educational sessions for members of the press and tour operators, who are often completely unaware of how rewarding a visit to a castle or country estate can be.
- l. Think about establishing regional funds in which the incoming tourist tax is divided equally among parties who ensure that such tax is forthcoming. Many owners of country estates are annoyed by the fact that their efforts line the pockets of others and they themselves realize little or no profit.
- m. Bear in mind that you will encounter incomprehension and resistance from some owners. Try to deal with their expectations in a realistic way. Take to heart the problems of owners, many of whom are advanced in years.
- n. Be visionary and bold in shaping policies for the future.
- o. Consider how competition can be avoided. Take a look at the increasingly commercial activities of museums, for example. In the Netherlands there is a danger that castles will be forced to compete with museums as event venues.

- p. Share your concerns with local and regional politicians. Seek contact with various political parties.
- q. Use your charm. Invite people to these national heritage sites and show them what you're talking about. Make them care about this patrimony by explaining its importance and impressing upon them the difficulties of preserving it.
- r. Ensure that volunteers become involved in and committed to sites in need of maintenance.
- s. Stimulate research and get young people involved with this patrimony on their own terms. Think in general about the target groups and how to reach them.
- t. Establish ties to the city, where potential visitors to national heritage sites can be found among tourists as well as young families. Children are always fascinated by castles.
- u. Above all, respect the limitations of the objects in question. Their age and the sometimes rare flora and fauna to be found on their grounds often make these places fragile and delicate. The Dutch poet and painter Lucebert wrote: 'Everything of value is defenceless.' It goes without saying that this applies to the splendid old houses, gardens and parks whose beauty has moved me for as long as I can remember.

I thank you for your attention.