

Polder board flags: requiem for a dream

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Abstract

Alongside provinces and municipalities the Netherlands has a third type of local authority that is older than both: the polder board, which is tasked with the water management of a catchment area or drainage basin, the maintenance of dikes and the provision of pure water. In 1850 there were about 3,500 polder boards, but nowadays, after a flood of amalgamations since the 1960s, only 22 are left. They are still granted official coats of arms by Royal Decree, but only one uses an official flag; the others use a logo-on-bedsheet type of flag. Alas, since the start of this century, a great tradition of official and well-designed polder board flags has been lost with the final amalgamations and commercialisation of these democratic institutions. There were certainly some 85 of these flags and may have been many more. And now they are no longer adopted at all. They have disappeared from the Dutch flagscape. To preserve the memory of this squandered heritage of often attractive and expressive flags, this paper discusses the history, origins and traditions of polder board flags. And common motifs are also analysed: from imperial eagles to noble devices, from wavy patterns to waterworks, and from wildlife to agriculture.

Introduction

Most of the west and the north of the Netherlands is situated below sea level. To keep the water out and to manage water levels, a special type of local authority has functioned in the Netherlands from medieval times: the *waterschap*, in English usually translated as polder board, which predates the other two local authorities, the provinces and the municipalities. A polder is a low-lying area with its own artificial draining system. The superfluous water is collected by means of ditches and canals and pumped out to a river, bigger canal or lake. The pumping used to be done by windmills on an embankment. In the nineteenth century, this was replaced by steam power and nowadays diesel and electrical engines are used. The water from the polders is collected in bigger canals and rivers in larger catchment areas and eventually pumped out into the sea.

From the Middle Ages, the people living in these low-lying areas, especially farmers, started to cooperate to keep their lands dry or provide them with water when needed. They formed the first democratic institutions in the Netherlands, which obtained privileges from local rulers like the counts of Holland. In the west, these were called *hoogheemraadschappen*: at their head was a *dijkgraaf* (dike count), assisted by *ingezworenen* (oath-takers) or *heemraden* (home councillors), chosen by the local landowners or *ingelanden*, who had to pay taxes to the polder board. This system is still in use, with all inhabitants of a polder board nowadays called *ingelanden*. In the north, the polder board went by different names, such as *zijlvest*. In later centuries, their number grew as more and more polders were established, land was reclaimed from lakes in the polder way, and larger overlapping entities with more

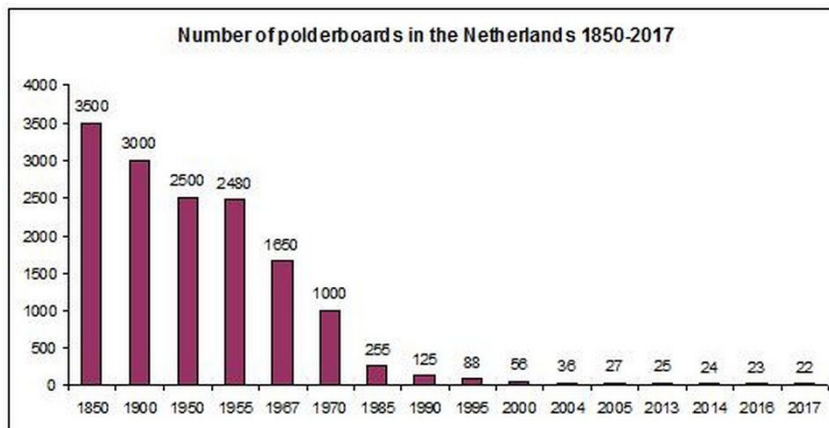
extensive water management tasks, such as the building and maintenance of sea dikes, came into being. From the nineteenth century onwards polder boards were also established in the higher areas in the east and south, with names like *dijkstoel*, *polderdistrict* and *veendistrict*. Polder districts had to deal with flood management of the rivers that flow down from here. In *veendistricten* peat was extracted from peat bogs after which they were turned into arable lands.

Together all these institutions, from the very small to the large, with different types of name and specialisation, have been called *waterschappen* since the establishment of the Kingdom. Around 1850 there were 3,500 of these, far more than the number of municipalities. Quite a few, especially the larger ones, adopted their own symbols, most in the form of coats of arms. From the nineteenth century, some of them also started to use flags. The number of polder board flags grew slightly in the 1950s and 1960s. The high point of flag adoption was in the 1980s and 1990s. All of these flags are gone now, never to be seen flying in the wind again. They disappeared for two reasons: by 2017 the pace of amalgamations since the 1960s left only 22 boards in place, and those few remaining boards no longer not adopt flags in the normal sense.

To keep their memory alive, this is the story of these flags.

From many to few

In 1850 approximately 3,500 polder boards were active, many consisting only of one small polder with a council of a few land-owning farmers. Also they could differ in the kind of tasks they had to carry out, among them water-level control and quantity; building and maintenance of dikes, dams and canals; and later also water treatment and ecological quality.



Polder boards in the Netherlands, 1850-2017

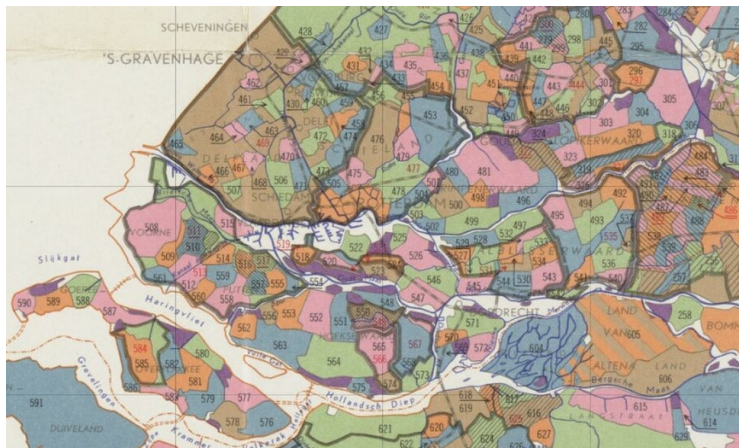
The growth of efficiency in water management because of new technology, better communications and economies of scale led to a decrease in the number of polder boards from 3,500 to 2,500 in the 1950s.

The map of the polder boards in 1967 gives an impression of the old situation, when 1,650 polder boards were still in existence.



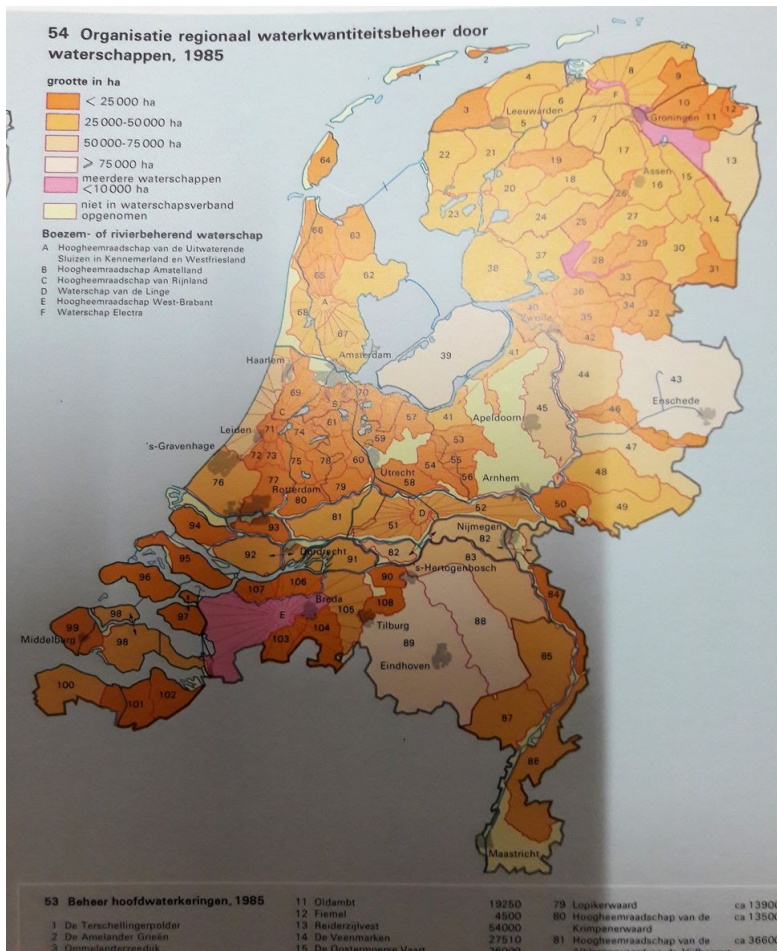
Polder boards in the Netherlands, 1967

To appreciate the sheer number at that time, the next map shows the polder boards in the west of the country in detail.



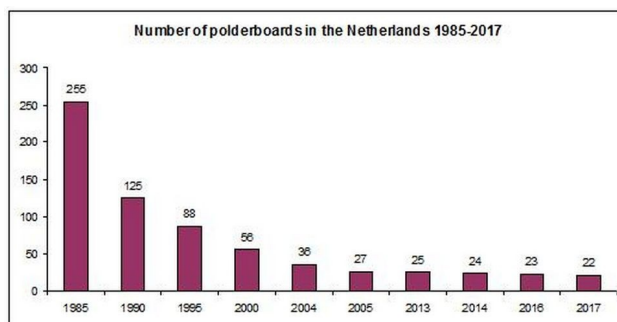
Polder boards in the western Netherlands, 1967

In the 1960s, the numbers reduced rapidly to reach 1,000 by 1970. At that time, some 250 polder boards had a coat of arms and just 29 of them used flags. In the 1970s the pace of amalgamations increased again until by the mid 1980s there were only 255 polder boards left. At that time, most boards had a coat of arms and some 40 used flags. The situation in 1985 is shown in the next map.



Polder boards in the Netherlands, 1985

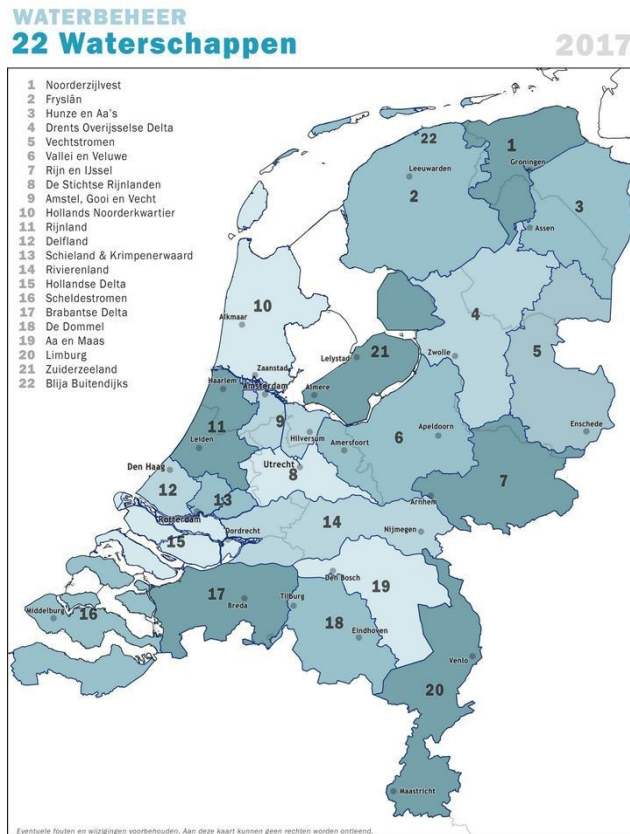
From 1985 to 2005 the number of polder boards fell sharply to c.25. In 2017, 22 remain, from those covering whole provinces, like Wetterskip Fryslân (No. 2 on the 2017 map) to tiny Blija Buitendijks in northern Friesland (No. 22), which has so far resisted all attempts at annexation.



Number of polder boards in the Netherlands, 1985-2017

Each of the current large polder boards performs all the tasks connected to

water management, briefly: embankment management, i.e. constructing and/or maintaining, dikes, dams and dunes; water quantity management and water quality management.



Polder boards in the Netherlands, 2017

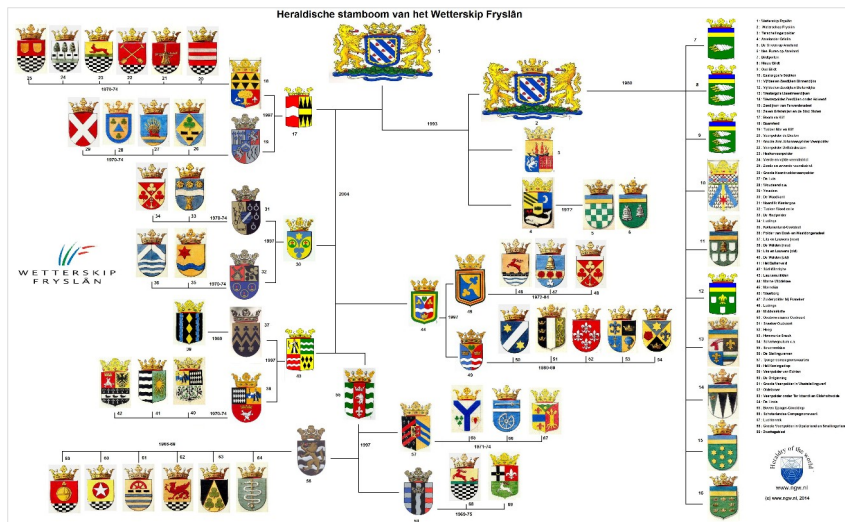
Coats of arms

From the sixteenth century onwards, many of the larger polder boards adopted their own symbols, in most cases in the form of a coat of arms. The polder boards adopted them because they needed them to seal documents or to mark property, boundaries, jurisdiction and possessions by placing them on their buildings, bridges, sluices and pumping stations. They also had a function in radiating prestige.

At the establishment of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, all polder boards which used a coat of arms were ordered by Royal Decree to have it registered with the *Hoge Raad van Adel* (High Council of Nobility). Most of them did so. In the nineteenth century, some new coats of arms were adopted, but adoption of arms really took off in the 1930s. From 1955 many new arms were adopted because of the many amalgamations. In 1985, the majority of the 255 polder boards was armigerous. The many subsequent amalgamations have resulted in many arms disappearing, but also in new adoptions by the larger entities. In total from 1815 until the present day some 350 coats of arms have been confirmed or granted by Royal Decree. The recently formed polder boards still apply for a coat of arms to be granted. Of the 22 current polder boards, 15

are armigerous. The remaining seven only use a logo. They are not expected to proceed to acquire a coat of arms.

As an example of the many amalgamations and their consequences for the disappearance of much interesting heraldry, the chart shows the coats of arms of the many polder boards that in different stages were amalgamated into the *Wetterskip Fryslân*.



Wetterskip Fryslân, the coats of arms of all its predecessors

The rise and fall of polder board flags

Compared to heraldry, flag tradition was not very strong with polder boards before 1945. They used to fly the national flag at special occasions. In the nineteenth century, a few started to use a flag of their own, for instance on the boats with which they regularly inspected their waterways and dikes. The number of polder board flags grew slightly in the 1950s and 1960s, a development that paralleled that of municipal flags. They could be seen flying more and more in front of their buildings, like the headquarters and pumping stations. But there were never many: in 1970, only some 30 out of 1,000 polder boards (3 per cent) flew a flag. The high point of flag adoption was in the 1980s and 1990s. Because of the many amalgamations, polder boards became fewer and larger and sought to fly a special flag, usually designed by the *Hoge Raad van Adel* or the *Fryske Rie foar Heraldyk* (Frisian Council for Heraldry), or by specialists like vexillologists Klaes Sierksma, Gerlof Auke Bontekoe and Hans van Heyningen. In most cases they used the coat of arms as a basis for their designs. This led to simple, recognisable, attractive, meaningful and unique flags that were vexillologically sound. They were officially adopted by their councils and registered by the *Hoge Raad van Adel* in The Hague.

By 1985, around 40 out of 255 polder boards (16 per cent) flew a flag. In the period 1985 to 2005 some 40 extra flags were adopted, so that the proportion of flag-flying polder boards rose to 50 per cent and more. But after 2000 a counter-development occurred: the new polder boards did not adopt or use well-designed flags anymore, but more often than not used their logos on a

white background, the so-called 'logo-on-bedsheet' or 'LOB'. This became especially poignant at an outdoor display at the Rotterdam *Vlaggenparade* (Flag Parade) in 2006, when the flags of all 26 polder boards flew for a few weeks from the same number of masts along the Maas quay. Nearly all polder boards turned out to use LOBs with their names in full, even some that had officially adopted a 'normal' flag before. Only three turned out to use a 'good' flag: Amstel, Gooi en Vecht, Regge en Dinkel and Delfland.



Polder board flags line the Vlaggenparade, Rotterdam, April 2006



Amstel, Gooi en Vecht



Regge en Dinkel

The LOB revolution of the 2000s looks to be both profound and irreversible. It shows the image by which modern local authorities like to portray themselves: corporate and businesslike. Even though they are democratically chosen local authorities, nowadays the public relations of polder boards in particular are like that of companies. This is reflected in the flags they use today, which have become part of their modern house style.

Flag themes

With the disappearance of so many polder boards and the popularity of the logo flag in recent years, a unique collection of some 85 often attractive and expressive flags has also ceased to be. The particular character of the authorities they represented was often reflected in their designs. In the next paragraph this is shown by means of a review of the most common themes found in the flags.

Of eagles and lions: the old hoogheemraadschappen

A particular phenomenon was the presence of the imperial eagle in combination with the red lion of Holland in the coats of arms and flags of the Dutch *hoogheemraadschappen*, the large polder boards in Holland, in the west

of the country, which were already active in the Middle Ages.

The combination of eagle and lion can be seen on seals of the counts of Holland from around 1200, and they acquired additional meaning when Count Willem II of Holland was elected King of the Romans in 1248. In the coats of arms adopted by the *hoogheemraadschappen* in the sixteenth century, the combination referred to the original founders, the medieval counts of Holland, and to the bestower of privileges at that time, the Holy Roman Emperor. The flags of the *hoogheemraadschappen* Rijnland, Uitwaterende Sluizen van Kennemerland en West-Friesland and Schieland all showed this eagle-lion combination, while that of Amstelland only contained the eagle.



*Uitwaterende Sluizen van
Kennemerland en West-Friesland*



Schieland



Amstelland

The flag of the *Hoogheemraadschap* Rijnland showed exactly the same image as the coat of arms, which probably refers directly to King of the Romans Willem II, Count of Holland, who bestowed the first privileges on the *hoogheemraadschap* in 1255.



Rijnland

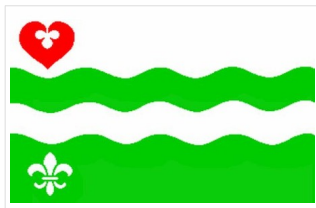
In the coat of arms of the *Hoogheemraadschap* Delfland, the shield of the counts of Holland of the house of Bavaria is placed on a supporting imperial eagle. Until 1890 it was used in the centre of a flag making multiple use of the Dutch tricolour. In 1893, a simple white and blue flag in the Bavarian colours was adopted. From 1980, Delfland uses a flag based on the logo of the *Unie van Waterschappen* with the old coat of arms placed in the centre again.



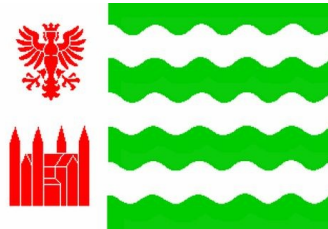
*Delfland: above left, pre-1893;
above, 1893-1980; left, post-1980*

Wavy patterns

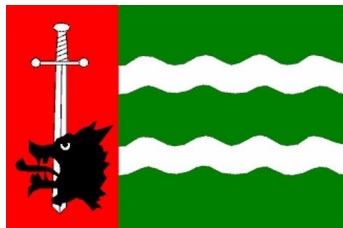
The use of wavy lines to denote water was a frequent device in polder board flags. In most cases horizontal wavy stripes were used, as in the flags of Noorderzijvest, Emszijvest, Westerkwartier, Schouwen-Duiveland and Noordoostpolder shown here. Of a more frivolous nature was the staggered wavy pattern in the flag of Lauwerswâlden.



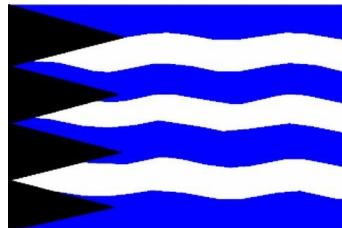
Noorderzijvest



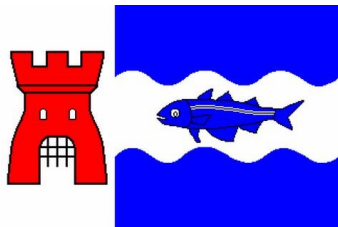
Emszijvest



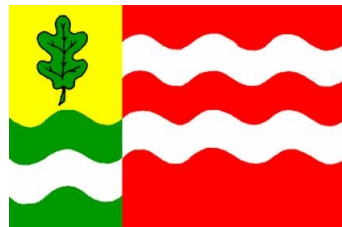
Westerkwartier



Schouwen-Duiveland

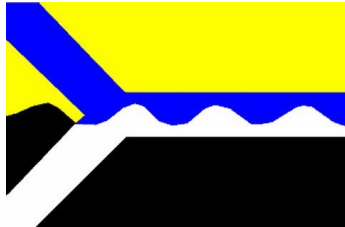


Noordoostpolder

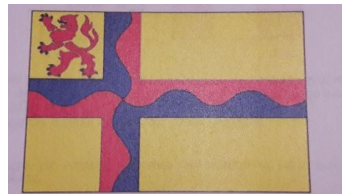


Lauwerswâlden

It becomes interesting when designers get creative with wavy lines. In the flag of Het Maasterras, the wavy line that divided the pale signified the joining rivers, but in the hoist triangle it stood for groundwater dividing the sandy and peaty soils. In the flag of De Gouwelanden, the wavy quartering of the cross can be called unique.

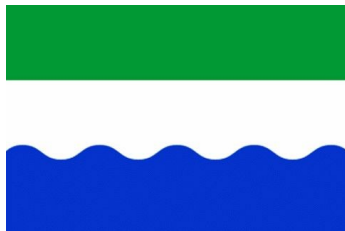


Het Maasterras



De Gouwelanden

A special case is the simple flag of Hollandse Delta, a polder board formed by recent amalgamations. It is the only current polder board which uses an official 'real' flag, a design by Theun Okkerse. It depicts the general situation of a polder board: a white dike protects the green land from the blue water. It could therefore just as well be the flag of the *Unie van Waterschappen*, in which the polder boards are united.



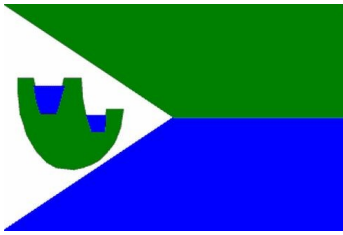
Hollandse Delta

Waterworks

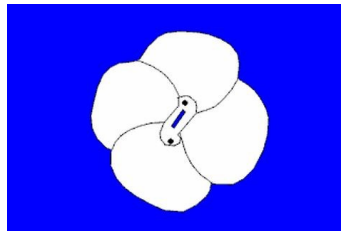
Contrary to expectations, there are not that many polder board flags with references to waterworks.

In the flag of Het Lange Rond, a cross section of the polder situation could be seen: a low-lying canal from which water has to be pumped over a dike into a higher canal. In the flag of De Linge the pump screw from the coat of arms was given prominence. In the flag of De Schipbeek the chevrons on the diagonal depicted the sluices in the canal, which runs through the provinces of Overijssel (red-yellow-blue) and Gelderland (blue-yellow-black).

The flag of Tusken Waed en Ie was like a map: the situation of cultivated fields between the straight embanked coast of the Wadden Sea and the wavy course of the river Ee (Ie in Frisian). The windmill, the only example in a polder board flag, did not stand for land reclamation by wind power but was the mark of the local potato industry.



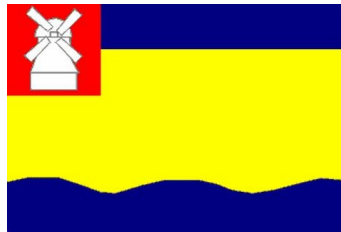
Het Lange Rond



De Linge

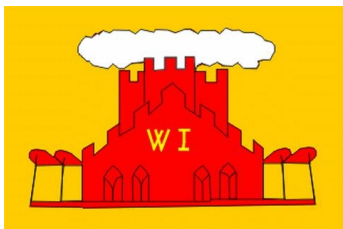


De Schipbeek



Tusken Waed en le

In the nineteenth century, steam engines replaced windmills for land reclamation. The largest lake in the Netherlands, the Haarlemmermeer, was finally pumped dry around 1850 by three of these *stoomgemalen*. In the flag of the Haarlemmermeerpolder a steam pumping station in full action was depicted. The picture was based on the appearance of the two existing *stoomgemalen* in Cruquius and Lijnden, which have been preserved because they form an important part of Dutch water management heritage and are attractive buildings in their own right. The coat of arms on the flag of the successor Groot-Haarlemmermeer retained this symbolism.



Haarlemmermeerpolder



Groot-Haarlemmermeer



Stoomgemaal Cruquius

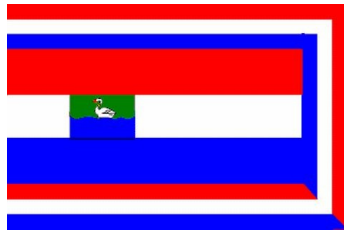


Stoomgemaal Lijnden

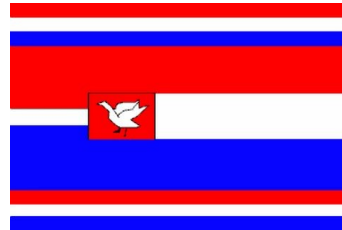
Animals

Many coats of arms of polder boards contain animals that have also found their way into some flags.

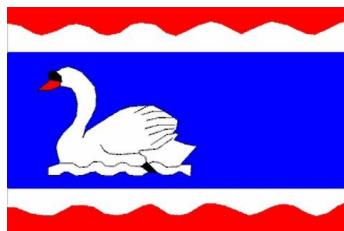
The ancient flag of the Dijkbestuur Waterland had the typical Waterland swan, a waterbird par excellence, on a Dutch tricolour pattern. Its successor, De Waterlanden, retained this symbolism. Also De Proosdijlanden used this typical waterbird on Dutch colours. In the flag of Noord-Veluwe the peacock together with the medlar flower are two typical Gelderland symbols.



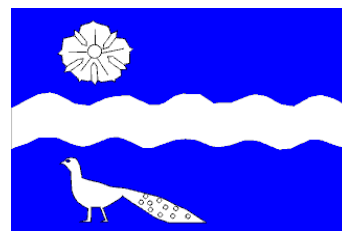
Waterland



De Waterlanden



De Proosdijlanden



Noord-Veluwe

The whale on the coat of arms in the flag of Walcheren is a canting symbol. In the case of Amelander Grieën, the whale against the background of Ameland colours referred to the many whalers that used to live on this Wadden island.

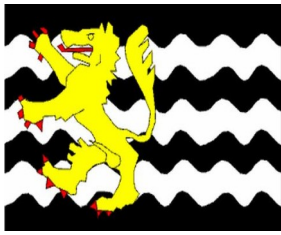


Walcheren

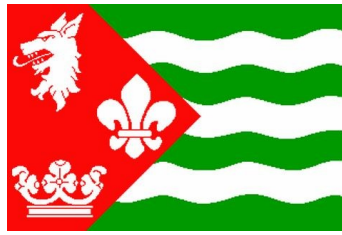


De Amelander Grieën

The head office of De Stellingwerven was in Wolvega, which makes the wolf in its flag canting, against a black and white background typical for a peat region. Its successor, Sevenwolden, only used the wolf's head to symbolise that De Stellingwerven is one of three polder boards that merged.



De Stellingwerven



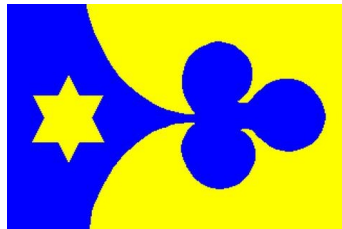
Sevenwolden

Agriculture

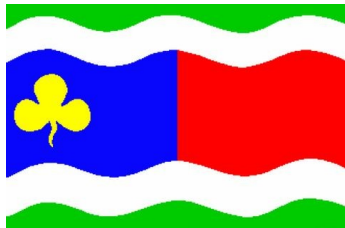
The plough in the flag of Hulster Ambacht stood for the agricultural richness of this polder board. In the flag of Tholen, the cow's head depicted dairy farming and the potato plant the main local crop. In Friesland the clover is a typical symbol for dairy farming, as it is a favourite with cows. De Waadkant and Marne-Middelsee were typical dairy farming areas, which explains the presence of clover leaves in their flags.



Hulster Ambacht



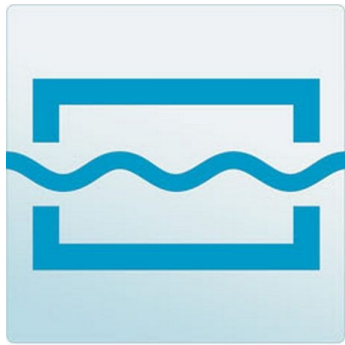
De Waadkant



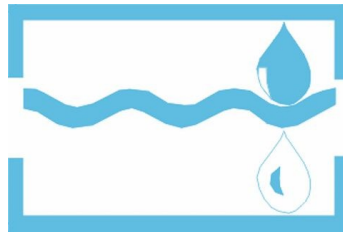
Marne-Middelsee

Unie van Waterschappen logo

All polder boards are members of the *Unie van Waterschappen* (UvW), the United Polder Boards. Its logo is simple: a blue wavy line going through a blue rectangle. This logo formed the background of four polder board flags. The Zuiveringschap Amstel en Gooiland was one of eight polder boards that only had water quality tasks. It used the UvW logo and two drops that symbolised water purification. Delfland nowadays uses its ancient full coat of arms against the UvW-background. Tholen put two characteristic symbols from its coat of arms, the cow's head and the potato plant, on the UvW-background. In the flag of Groot Maas en Waal only a detailed examination will reveal that its design was inspired by the UvW logo.



Logo of the Unie van Waterschappen



Zuiveringschap Amstel en Gooiland



Delfland



Tholen

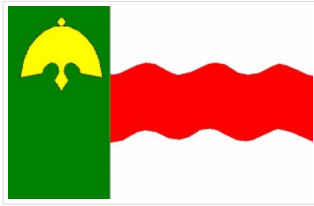


Groot Maas en Waal

History

Many polder boards have deep historical roots. It is therefore not surprising that their coats of arms are full of references to feudal lords and bishops, old jurisdictions and powerful cities. Sometimes historical events are also rendered in coats of arms. Polder board flags were often derived from their coats of arms, usually by using the main colours and one or two symbols.

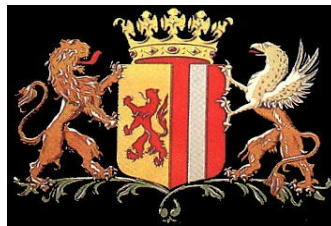
The flag of Leidse Rijn contained an artefact that goes back to the earliest history of the Netherlands: a Roman helmet found near the remains of the *limes*, the Roman border fortifications along the Rhine, west of Utrecht. In the flag of Goeree-Overflakkee the two towers from its coat of arms, silver on red for Goeree and red on silver for Overflakkee, were ingeniously merged into one tower. The flag of IJsselmonde was a banner-of-arms with the red Holland lion and the pale of the city of Dordrecht. Het Vrije van Sluis had in its flag the blue bend pattern of the ancient Flemish castellany of the Vrije van Brugge (the Franc of Bruges, in Belgium) of which it formed part.



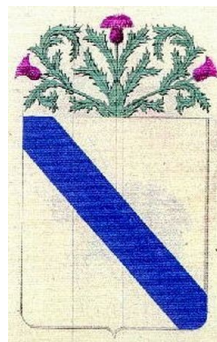
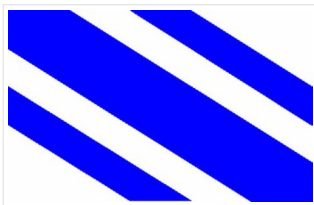
Leidse Rijn: flag and arms



Goeree-Overflakkee: flag and arms



IJsselmonde: flag and arms



Het Vrije van Sluis: flag and arms

The flag of *Hoogheemraadschap Krimpenerwaard* serves as a good example of how a complicated coat of arms could be translated into a simple flag. The arms

had four quarters with the red lion of Holland and the coats of arms of the influential cities bordering its area: Dordrecht, Schoonhoven and Gouda. All four colours from the arms were used in the flag. The triangle was an abstraction of the general geographical shape and situation of the polder between the merging rivers Hollandse IJssel to the north and the Lek to the south, symbolised by the chevron. The black fimbriations stood for the embankments along both rivers. As an extra, a capital K could be discerned in the general design of the flag.



Krimpenerwaard: flag and arms

Conclusion

With one or two exceptions, the current polder boards – even those which have an official flag – only use logo flags nowadays. These logo flags can be compared to company flags: often commonplace logos on a white sheet, with non-specific general symbolism and lettering. The field of polder board flags can therefore be considered lost to vexillology. With this development and with the many amalgamations, many unique, attractive and expressive flags of vexillological interest have passed into oblivion. Perhaps some are still languishing in boxes in the back of some polder board archives, but they will never be seen flying again, as there is nobody left who would identify with them. Also, they were never really people's flags, as they represented a civic body as a whole.

Luckily images of and information about them can still be found on the Flags of the World website. It is hoped that in a way this rich field of Dutch flag heritage will also be preserved with this paper.

Acknowledgement

Regarding polder board flags, one person must be mentioned in particular here. Dutch vexillologist Jarig Bakker (1942-2011) was for many years one of the editors of the Flags of the World website. In addition to all the Dutch municipal flags, he also uploaded to FOTW virtually every polder board flag that ever existed, with an image, description and explanation for each, so keeping them 'alive' in a way and available for us all to see and study.

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Author biography



Marcel van Westerhoven was born in Haarlem, The Netherlands, in 1966. After his university education in chemistry and further education in environmental science, he has always worked as a consultant in sustainable development, currently as senior consultant specialising in waste and resource management.

He is president and secretary of the *Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vlaggenkunde* (NVvV), the Netherlands vexillological association. He was also a member of the foundation responsible for organising the 25th International Congress of Vexillology (ICV25) in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, in 2013. A member of the NVvV since 1990, he was editor of *Vexilla Nostra*, the periodical of the NVvV, from 1995 to 2008. For its successor, *Vlag!* magazine, he is the editor responsible for vexillological content. He has contributed many articles on Dutch municipal flags, his field of expertise, to both *Vexilla Nostra* and *Vlag!*.