

Society

Land, Wind and Water

Eighty Years of the IJsselmeer Dam

This is a causeway that is visible from kilometres away. It shows up as just a strip on satellite photos. In reality this strip is more than thirty kilometres long and ninety metres wide. It is the *IJsselmeer Dam* between the *Waddenzee* and the *IJsselmeer*, the dam that separates the salt water from the fresh water. The road that connects the northern provinces of North Holland and Friesland. There is a pedestrian bridge over the road, so that people can cross from the *IJsselmeer* to the *Waddenzee*. Below, cars can now drive at a maximum of 130 kilometres per hour. The road along the *IJsselmeer Dam* was one of the first to have its speed limit raised by the cabinet under Mark Rutte, the Dutch Prime Minister, apparently so that the 32-kilometre stretch could be covered as quickly as possible. It's a dyke that is actually a dam. In fact a dyke is supposed to

protect the land from the sea. But there is water on both sides, so it is more appropriate to call it the *IJsselmeer Dam*.

Plans to build the dam were already in existence at the end of the nineteenth century. At that time the *IJsselmeer* was called the *Zuiderzee* and it was often rough, so the dam was intended to offer greater safety. In 1916 there were serious floods, again caused by a storm. The idea was to prevent the same thing happening in the future. The Netherlands was also in urgent need of agricultural land, which could be acquired by impoldering part of the *Zuiderzee*. The engineer Cornelis Lely devised the plan. In 1927 work began on impoldering and then on building the dam. On 28 May 1932 the last gap was sealed up and the *Zuiderzee* was closed off from the *Waddenzee*. The *IJsselmeer Dam* was ready for use, and the *IJsselmeer* was born.

Impoldering continued. The Urk fishing area was first to be drained. This gave rise to the



North-East Polder, which was followed by East and South Flevoland. Plans to build more polders were put on hold. The town of Lelystad was named after the man who conceived the plan, and hundreds of thousands of people now live on this polder land, where the old and savage sea once raged.

The *Zuiderzee* has been tamed and agricultural land has appeared in its place. But after eighty years the *IJsselmeer Dam* is in need of repair. Studies show that the dam no longer conforms to the required safety standards. Officially it should be able to withstand storms that only occur on average once every ten thousand years. The changing climate means that because of rising sea levels this will no longer be the case. On the *Waddenzee* side, the water level is continually rising, which is why more and more water is flowing into the *IJsselmeer*. However, safety is not so serious a problem that millions need to be invested in the dam right away.

In the summer of 2011 a commission presented four different plans for making the *IJsselmeer Dam* safer. The government is now looking to see which is the most realistic. There is a fair chance that the dam will be raised using asphalt, and grass will be able to grow on top of it. The advantage of this new construction is that it can be implemented in two phases. If it appears to be safe enough after the first phase, the second phase can be cancelled. Security is precious in the Netherlands, but so apparently is finance.

The *IJsselmeer Dam* is clearly visible from the air, but is fairly discrete from the ground. Somehow it never really became a great tourist attraction. The Delta Works in Zeeland, built after the floods of 1953, attract hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. There is even a dedicated museum there called *Deltapark Neeltje Jans*, while at the *IJsselmeer Dam* there is only a look-out post and a small restaurant. But there are plans afoot to make the place more interesting for tourists. When the time comes to invest millions in making sure the dam complies with the required safety standards, it will also be time to look at

how that money can be clawed back. The Dutch state is willing to contribute 600 million euro to the renovation of the *IJsselmeer Dam*, but the total costs are likely to exceed that by 300 to 400 million euro.

The dam also continues to have extraordinary potential for power generation. There is fresh water on one side and salt water on the other. Energy can be generated from the transition from salt to fresh water. Discussions have been going on for years about this and there are concrete plans, but the power plant has still not been built. There have also been years of discussion about constructing a gigantic wind farm on the *IJsselmeer Dam*. Because it's extremely windy there.

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Translated by Gregory Ball