



THE USEFUL AND THE AGREEABLE COUNTRY HOUSES AS INVESTMENT?

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Estates are often presented as luxurious country houses, built from the 17th century onwards by the elites as an escape from the filthy and overcrowded cities. However various other motives have been put forward for the construction of country houses: they are fashionable status symbols that could also function as economic assets. New studies by Brusse and Mijnhardt (Towards a new Template) and Piketty (Capitalism in the 21st Century) give reason to shine a new light on these economic motivations.

ENJOYMENT OR INVESTMENT?

R. van Luttervelt, who was among the first to study country houses scientifically, gives several reasons for the construction of these luxurious retreats.¹ Besides the love of nature he also clearly emphasises economic motives. The flourishing commerce and shipping industry of the 17th century brought in large amounts of wealth, triggering a diligent search for investment opportunities for the profits. Farms and agricultural land became sought-after objects for investment, but castles and country houses also served as investment opportunities. In his book, *De Nederlandse buitenplaatsen. Aspecten van ontwikkeling, bescherming en herstel*, (The Dutch country house: Aspects of development, conservation and restoration) jhr. H.W.M. van de Wijck observes that for the wealthy from Amsterdam an important motive behind the construction of a country house was investment opportunity.²

The historians Paul Brusse and Wijnand Mijnhardt have recently launched a new 'template' for the Dutch history.

1) R. van Luttervelt, *De buitenplaatsen aan de Vecht* (Lochem 1948)

2) Jhr. H.W.M. van der Wijck, *De Nederlandse buitenplaats. Aspecten van ontwikkeling, bescherming en herstel* (Alphen aan de Rijn 1982)

3) P. Brusse en W.W. Mijnhardt, *Towards a new template for Dutch history. De-urbanization and the balance between city and countryside* [z.p. z.].

> DE BUITENPLAATS MET AGRARISCH BEDRIJF MEERZICHT BIJ ZOETERMEER.
FOTO ALBERT SPEELMAN

After years of historical research into the Zeeland past they arrived at the conclusion that the common division of Dutch history in the periods Revolt, Bataafse Period and Kingdom, determined by political make-up, should make way for a new paradigm in which the (more social and economical) relationship between city and countryside is the main reference point. This paradigm should also hold true outside of Zeeland, allowing more room for regional differences while decreasing the heavy emphasis that is always placed on developments in Holland.³ They divide the history of the early modern times into 3 periods: till 1650, in which there was an increase in the price of agricultural land and simultaneously in the growth of cities; the century roughly between 1650 and 1750 during which the agrarian prices fell, cities lost part of their population and the exact opposite trend was visible in the countryside in the north and east of the country; and the period after 1750 when the

agricultural economy recovered to such an extent that a change of power from city to countryside took place. Yme Kuiper and Vincent Sleebe, who study the history of the Dutch nobility use this paradigm among other things to provide a frame of reference for the, mainly in the 19th century, changing role of the nobility. However, for the development of estates after 1800 they question the efficacy of this new approach.⁴

How can we apply this paradigm to the history of country estates before 1650? Brusse and Mijnhardt claim that in the 17th century the Dutch country estates fundamentally differed from country estates elsewhere in Europe: 'country estates – for the first time in history – were pleasure resorts and nothing else'.⁵ This demands further inquiry. Which motives surrounding the construction of country houses can be uncovered and to which extent does Brusse and Mijnhardt's thesis prove useful in this regard?

COUNTRY ESTATES AND LANDOWNERSHIP

Around 1600 wealthy citizens of Amsterdam started purchasing land in several locations. One of the most popular locations was the Vecht in Utrecht. The Gouden Hoeff is often put forward as a prime example. This farm and its accompanying lands were bought in 1608 by Amsterdam leather merchant Jan Jacobs Bal, who named himself Huydecoper. Upon his death the typical regent/merchant Bal left behind a sum of 170.000 guilders (40 million euro in present day money). It was remarkable that a lot of money had been invested in land surrounding Maarssen and that the homestead of Gouden Hoeff included a brickyard. This makes it difficult to decide whether Bal had procured a pleasure resort or used Gouden Hoeff as an economic investment. However, Gouden Hoeff was transformed into a typical county estate by his son Johan Huydecoper.⁶ The uncertainty surrounding Bal's motives increases in view of his other acquisitions in the Maarssen. A few years prior to the purchase of the Gouden Hoeff Bal acquired the brickyard Cromwijk on the Vecht. It took many years before a country house was built here. It appears a multitude of examples of Amsterdam merchants who purchased lands (and farms and brickyards) without turning them into country estates can be found. Examples such as Dirck van Zinnick, a cousin of Bal, who likewise purchased real estate

in Maarssen and ship-owner and merchant Pieter Jansz Reael who in 1633 bought the Nes, a cut-off bend off the Vecht which would later become known as Reaelenland. It was not until 1687 that a house was placed here by Pieter's grandson.⁷ Around the late 16th and throughout the 17th century in the surrounding areas of Baambrugge and Abcoude Amsterdam merchants also purchased lands and farms where country estates would often be erected only decennia later.⁸ The same goes for the region around Breukelen. An example of this is the Catholic merchant Willem Blaeu, a fellow townsman of Reael who possessed an estate on the Angstel named Meebaal.⁹ His homestead had been bought by his first wife's family in 1637 and would be reconstructed into a country house in 1680. The fact that some families purchased lands and farms in far off locations, like the Valkenaars who owned property in Vleuten, Haarzuilens and Woudenberg, further questions whether their use was solely for enjoyment.

WHAT IS A COUNTRY ESTATE?

In opposition to this it could be argued that the acquisition of a farm is an economic act with which the construction of a country estate has nothing to do. So, is it fair to speak of the purchase or construction of country estates in the examples mentioned above? Most important here is a clear definition. Brusse and Mijnhardt have launched their 'template' in English and use the terms 'country house' or 'country estate'. This is a much broader term than the Dutch 'buitenplaats'. In previous articles I have touched upon the issues surrounding the definition of these terms.¹⁰ R.C. Dessing and J. Holwerda use the term 'complex historische buitenplaats' (complex historical country estate), which is defined as a monumental house often including several outbuildings which together form a harmonious and inseparable entity with a surrounding garden, park or forest. They assume a unity intended by the designer. They also draw chronological boundaries, namely between 1600 and 1900.

> HET HUIS CROMWIJK MET STEENBAKKERIJ AAN DE VECHT
DOOR P.J. LUTGERS, MIDDEN NEGENTIENDE EEUW. WATERVERF.
COLLECTIE HET UTRECHTS ARCHIEF

4) Y. Kuiper en V. Sleebe, 'Naar nieuwe wegen voor elite- en adelsonderzoek in Nederland', in: *Virtus. Jaarboek voor adelsgeschiedenis* 19 (2012), p. 147-159.

5) Brusse en Mijnhardt, p. 76-77, zie ook p. 44.

6) Elias, p. 92-93; E.A.J. Van der Wal, 'Johan Huydecoper (1600-1661) regent en bouwheer', in: A.A. Van Baal-de Vries e.a., red., *De Vechtstreek. Levensbeschrijvingen van bekende en onbekende mensen uit de Vechtstreek* (Utrecht 1997), p. 73-77; het tekort aan bronnen om de levensstijl van zeventiende-eeuwse regenten te reconstrueren wordt ook elders betreurd, zie bijvoorbeeld H. Bonke en K. Bossaers, *Heren investeren. De bewindhebbers van de West-Friese Kamers van de VOC* (Haarlem 2002), p. 101.

7) J. Boerstra, 'Verdwenen buitenplaatsen in Vreeland', in *Jaarboekje Niftarlake* 1989, p. 23-37.

8) D.L.H. Sleebos, 'Drie verdwenen buitenplaatsen aan de Angstel te Baambrugge. De bewoners en hun burenen', in: *Jaarboekje Niftarlake* 1998, p. 49-, aldaar 67.

9) D.L.H. Sleebos, 'Meer Baambrugse buitenplaatsen', *Jaarboekje Niftarlake* 2003, p. 66-100, aldaar 67-73.

10) F. Vogelzang, 'Buitenplaatsen als exportproduct', *Kasteel & Buitenplaats* 16 (2014), nr. 47, p. 5-8.





> HET HUIS OLDENGAARDE BIJ DWINGELOO. COLLECTIE NKS



> HET HUIS TE LINSCHOTEN, EEN KASTEELACHTIGE BUITENPLAATS DIE DE FAMILIE STRICK TOEGANG MOEST VERSCHAFFEN TOT DE UTRECHTSE ELITE. FOTO HASSELEIJ KIRCHNER, 1891, COLLECTIE NKS

The function is limited to a summer-residence of rich city-dwellers, a pleasure resort to enjoy nature.¹¹ This definition forces economical motives out of the picture: creating a circular argument considering the 'template'. Because country estates can only be named as such if they are pleasure resorts therefore their construction can not have anything to do with economics. But does this do justice to the early 17th century reality? On the contrary M. Lameris and R. van Norel assume a starting point based in the morphology. They conclude that the need for a definition is mainly caused by current policy guidelines. There are diverse legal arrangements allowing owners of country estates access to subsidies. A clear legal description of country estates is necessary in order to establish who is entitled to such an arrangement. They go by function: a country estate is a second home in the countryside, without

distinction whether or not the house originated from a farm, a castle or was purposely built as a country house.¹² A second home in the countryside can have a economical function: the purchase of the brick-yard by Huydecoper that includes a house is a clear example of this. In practice authors often run into definitions that conflict the reality.

In *Historische buitenplaatsen in particulier bezit* from 1991 by H. Tromp for instance uses the description of a unity of a historical country house with outbuildings, water features, garden and park but continues to stretch this definition to include Medieval buildings without notable gardens, and farms set up as summer-residences. Besides this definition he engages with the motives, among which investment in lands, residing close to relatives and expressing status.

11) R.C. Dessing en J. Holwerda, *Nationale gids historische buitenplaatsen* (Wormer 2012).

12) M. Lameris en R. van Norel. *De buitenplaats en het Nederlandse landschap* (Zwolle 2012).





PIKETTY AND COUNTRY ESTATES

The cliché image of the 18th century, as personified in Jan Salie by E.J. Potgieter, is that of the spineless fellow in contrast to the 17th century Hollander.¹³ During the Golden Age Dutch merchants and traders conquered the globe. Amsterdam became the stacking market for all the world's inhabitants and the riches from around the world amassed in Holland. The initiative merchants were a prime example of the Dutch folk spirit. How large the contrast with their descendants: decadent rentiers, who bathing in luxury, spent their fortune on estates, lavishly decorated city houses, expansive carriages and fashionable garments. They caused a national downfall, all the signs of which Potgieter still saw around him. This image has obviously been nuanced before,¹⁴ but the study of the French economist Thomas Piketty delivered the fatal blow to this image. He collected economic data over a very long period and concluded that the profits derived from capital (assigned r) over time are always higher than those from wages or labour (assigned g). Put into a simple formula: $r > g$.

That Piketty's thesis surprises has two reasons. The first being that many common economic theories have been written based on the numbers from the 20th century, a century in which invasive government policy temporarily concealed this natural law. Secondly, because of the political uneasiness of this formula for our contemporary society. The ruling neoliberal school of thought assumes that the free market eventually leads to larger economical equality. The natural law of Piketty fundamentally undermines this conviction and thereby a considerable portion of the reason for existence of the neoliberal agenda.

Applied to the Golden Age $r > g$ puts the economic actions of the Dutch merchants in a completely different light. Their massive profits from labour, the work of the merchant, ship-owner and trader brings in less over time (and is simultaneously a less secure source of income) than investing in capital. This capital initially consisted of lands and houses but due to the developing of the economy shares, new financial products and public loans were added. The so-called 'Jan Salie spirit' turned out to be a clever

However, difficulty arises with these definitions from a modern perspective that aims to capture a historical occurrence that at the time was not clearly defined and still evolving. The term country estate is relatively new: contemporaries spoke of homestead or in Dutch also 'huysinge' without always making it clear how the object looked or was used. Some researchers therefore assume the building itself. For instance, a summer-residence is recognisable by the lack of heating and its orientation toward the south for the living quarters to have a maximal amount of sun exposure. This approach is certainly not fool proof for what about the outhouses that often held completely different functions? And for example, how is determined what an owner did with a luxury room in a farm? Was it suited for one-day stays in the countryside or perhaps mainly the possibility to manage from there the agricultural lands in the vicinity? With this early form of agricultural recreation there was barely any lay out of gardens or pleasure resort to speak of. It was not until the middle of the 17th century that the interest in gardens and parks started to grow and many owners of gentleman's rooms decided to replace their accommodation for a genuine country house, complete with extensive garden lay out. This house is then often built in a 'urban' style. The first height of these 'huisse' is around the mid 17th century, but newer estates also appear in the 18th century while in the 19th century again a revival of the amount of country houses takes place. This type of construction adheres more to Brusse and Mijnhardt's description of a luxury retreat but mainly concerns a later period.

13) E.J. Potgieter, Jan, *Jannetje en hun jongste kind*, 1841 (geraadpleegd januari 2015 via www.dbnl.nl)

14) Zie bijvoorbeeld Jan de Vries en Ad van der Woude, *Nederland 1500-1815. De eerste ronde van moderne economische groei* (Amsterdam 1995), p. 169 ev.



> DE ACHTERZIJDE VAN HET HUIS GOUDESTEIN, DOOR JOHANNES LEUPENIUS, TWEEDE HELFT ZEVENTIENDE EEUW. COLLECTIE RIJKSMUSEUM

economic choice, besides the risk being spread and the profit being far above the average economic growth.¹⁵ The rich became (over night) even richer!

The behaviour of the Bals and Reaals was economically clever, certainly because from the 15th century onward the prices in the Netherlands increased. Especially those of agricultural products – admittedly with fluctuations in the short term – went up.¹⁶ Even though the buying power would not always grow proportionally, food is a quite inelastic economic resource which meant guaranteed sales. After 1580 the economic activity in the Netherlands increased again and early capitalist forms of production were introduced. For people with favourable capital circumstances to invest. Peter Burke shows this in his study of the Amsterdam upper-class. Almost a third of the Amsterdam elite possessed land at the start of the 17th century, with an average 3% profit per year. Over the course of the century capital moved into bonds, loans and shares in trade ventures and ships who brought in more profits.¹⁷ In addition to this from 1650 onward the agricultural prices would continue to fall for another century.¹⁸

Renteniers en buitenplaatsen¹⁹

Periode	renteniers in stadselite (%)	met country house (%)
1618-50	33	10
1650-72	66	41
1672-02	55	30
1702-48	73	81

In the schedule a clear general growth of the number of 'renteniers' and country estates can be seen, only interrupted by the period after the French invasion of 1672 when a lot of country houses were destroyed during the war. In the first half of the 17th century especially a lot of (relatively cheap) land entered the market. The vast properties of the church had been confiscated by the States of the various districts and to pay off their war debts much of the lands were put up for sale. The reclaimed lakes are another sign that show the

popularity of investing in land, although land-reclaim projects were not always successful. Sometimes the ground turned out to not be very fertile, and sometimes natural disasters would destroy the polder and everything would be flooded again. After 1650 the consequences of the agrarian downfall became noticeable. Investing in land generated less profit and owners were often forced to sell off their lands due to lower turnover. This meant that those of independent means had the perfect opportunity to expand their areal for a fraction of the price.²⁰ For them the construction of a vast country estate was now much more affordable: circumstances under which we can genuinely speak of 'country estates' as pleasure resorts. Therefore, the paradigm of Brusse and Mijnhardt mainly befits the period after 1650.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The paradigm of Brusse and Mijnhardt also tries to allow room for regional differences. How does their country estate theory fare in other provinces?

In Utrecht the inclination of many citizens to buy farming fields from the former church possessions and consequently establish country houses there is easily demonstrated. The road to Amersfoort was in fact established as a large-scale development project. However, the barrenness of the land prevented that more than a few country estates appeared here. This is contrary evidence that a country estate is not just a pleasure resort: if the lands did not bring in enough profits the investors would divert to more fertile regions to set up a country estate. Examples a plenty, like by the road from De Bilt via Zeist to Rhenen or by the Baartse Rijn to the south. Here we also see, just as by the Vecht, a lot of combinations of country houses and brickyards. Where Utrecht clearly differs from Holland, is the tendency of the bourgeoisie to, especially in the first decennia after 1600, give their country house the architectural shape of a 'ridderhofstad'. For some this was part of their desire to rise in social rank and join the nobility.²¹ Considerations of status thus played an important role, but seldom a house was bought without purchasing lands and farms in the vicinity. The importance of regional differences can be shown by a brief exploration of the country estates in Drenthe.

15) Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge London 2014).

16) L. Noordergraaf, *Hollands welvaren? Levensstandaard in Holland 1450-1650* (Amsterdam 1985), p. 16.

17) Peter Burke, *Venice and Amsterdam. A Study of Seventeenth-Century Elites* (Cambridge 1994), p. 64.

18) Brusse en Mijnhardt, p. 19, 30-32.

19) Burke, p. 132.

20) De Vries en Van der Woude, p. 258-263.

In this province only a few country estates can be found that could compete with the proud compounds by the Vecht or the Amstel. An example is Oldegaerde near Dwingeloo, which would not have seemed out of place along the Herengracht. It was built by the son of an originally from Brabant bailiff in Zwolle, whom held many executive functions as Baron in Drenthe. The nearby house Westrup was probably also reconstructed and expanded by him. These two houses have been labelled pleasure resorts, but it seems that next owner of Westrup primarily focussed on the purchase of agricultural lands surrounding his country house. The other large 'herenhuizen' in Drenthe seem to have had a strong agricultural function, have been the official residence of the local bailiff or the property of project developers who reclaimed the vast peatland of Drenthe and used their country house as business premises and residence. As a rule, the luxurious appearance often does not appear until the 17th century and after.²² So there are barely 'pure' pleasure resorts before 1700. This trend is also visible in the Groninger homesteads around Hoogezand and Sappemeer. The few large 17th century houses all existed of or near a farm, while the peat extraction was an important source of income. Only the houses built after 1700 are aimed more toward luxury, although even to those an agricultural enterprise was attached.²³

CONCLUSION

Due to a lack of (research into) contemporary sources it remains difficult to ascertain the motives for the construction of country estates before 1650. The by Brusse and Mijnhardt introduced thesis, that the Dutch country estate would service mainly as a pleasure resort, does not seem to apply. The by them mentioned 'hofdichten', in which the country estate is praised as Arcadic oasis, originate largely from a later period and considering the economic constellation their thesis fits better before this time.



> DE KLEINE BUITENPLAATS WESTRUP, IETS TEN NOORDEN VAN DWINGELOO. FOTO AUTEUR

For the first part of the 17th century the construction of a country estate is driven by a combination of motives, in which the possibility to invest capital plays a main role. The thesis by Brusse and Mijnhardt dares to look at the past from a fresh perspective. Interesting for instance, would be to investigate to what extent the possession of a country estate influenced the self-image of the city elites and how the nobility, originally wealthy due to lands, handled their property in a world in which the relationship between and the image of the city and countryside seem to have reversed. ■

21) F. Vogelzang, 'De buitenplaats Rijnwijk als uitdrukking van sociale mobiliteit', *Tijdschrift Oud-Utrecht* 87 (oktober 2014), p. 152-157.

22) Zie diverse lemmata in: J. Bos, F.J. Hulst en P. Brood (red.), *Huizen van stand. Geschiedenis van de Drentse havezaten en andere herenhuizen en hun bewoners* (Meppel/Amsterdam 1989).

23) *Borgen & hofsteden in en om Hoogezand-Sappemeer* (Hoogezand-Sappemeer 1996), zie diverse lemmata.

> HET HUIS OOSTERMEER AAN DE AMSTEL, EEN TYPISCH BUITEN VAN EEN RIJKE AMSTERDAMSE KOOPMAN. FOTO HANS HAGEMAN 1991, COLLECTIE NKS

