

## Around Witteveen

The booklet 'Rondom Witteveen' tells the story of the village of Witteveen. It contains a map of a hiking trail of 4,5 kilometres which brings you to all the places of interest in and around Witteveen. The letters of the paragraphs correspond with the letters in the map.

The map at the back of the front page is from around 1900. On it you can see that in 1900 the village of Witteveen did not exist yet. The landscape was characterised by peat bog and moorland. The wet areas were drained as good as possible by ditches to make small scale farming of buckwheat and the digging of peat possible. All the roads were unpaved. Characteristic of those times is that Drenthe was bare with only very few forests. One was actually able to see the bell tower of the village 20 kilometres away. On the left of the map the farmers villages of Mantinge, Garminge and Balinge are shown. On these higher and dryer grounds it had been possible to make farming possible on a larger scale since the time the first hunter gatherers settled down and found villages. The old arable fields called "essen" are shown in white on the map.

### A. The history of Witteveen

#### An new village was found

So Witteveen is not a regular Dutch village? No, in fact it is the youngest village of the province of Drenthe. And it is not organically grown. The village of Witteveen is designed at the drawing table and founded in 1926. To begin with about 50 cottages were build. As you can still see today these cottages for the working class are all identical. Some years later, in 1928 and 1929, a school, a village hall, a bakery and a Dutch reformed church were build. And even a green pleasure ground with trees for recreational purposes. Because, as you can see on the map from the 1900's, the landscape was open and bare in 1626. The first inhabitants of Witteveen started to dig peat and irrigate the land to make arable farming possible. Soon the first farms could be build.

#### Peat workers

But why did the Dutch government build a complete new village? At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century peat was the most important fuel in the Netherlands, because of the stagnation of the importation of German, English and American coal due to the First World War. Large moors were found in the east of the Province of Drenthe near the city of Emmen. So unemployed people from all over the country proofed their luck and moved to Emmen to find a job in cutting and harvesting peat. Soon the municipality of Emmen became overcrowded. Newcomers were forced to build temporary 'houses' from mainly peat blocks with sometimes some wood and roof tiles. The so-called "plaggenhutten" – huts of turf or sods. Then, in 1918 the transport of coal started going again. The demand of peat dropped and with that also did the wages. Most people got unemployed.

As a solution the government gave families with young children financial support. Secondly employment was created: projects like the digging of canals were developed in Emmen. The digging of the canals was all done by hand, not that there were no machines available, but just because in this way as many men as possible could be set to work. The third solution was to stimulate people to move away from Emmen ("*to get rid of the excess of people*" as was stated in the reports of the municipality). Between 1924 and 1936 many people were helped to move to the textile industry of Twente (7906 people), the mines in Limburg (2803 people) or to the factories of Philips in Eindhoven (2198 people). And 331 people went to the new-to-build village of Witteveen.

1. Start at the sign on the parking lot. With the sign on your left-hand, walk to the end of the parking lot.

2. At the end of the parking lot turn left onto the tarmac road. The tarmac road turns into an unpaved road in a few metres.

NB: for a shorter hike (2 km) turn right from the parking lot onto the tarmac road an cross the road. From here you can go to point 18.

### **B. At the playing fields**

From 1926 onwards the population of Witteveen grew very fast. The families who settled in the village were large and every family was imposed to provide accommodation for up to four labourers. To make sure people had something to do in their spare time; many associations for recreational purposes were found. Today Witteveen has about 600 inhabitants and still the community stands out for their large number of associations. Thanks to the headmaster of the school in 1928 a rich tradition in playing soccer was founded. The scale of the sports accommodation today with its playing fields shows that Witteveen has become a regional sports centre. In 1998 a new canteen was build, thanks to the work of many volunteers.

3. At the end of this path turn right. Follow the path through the small stretch of trees.
4. In the forest you will get at a three-forked-road; turn right. At the next three-forked-road turn left.
5. At the crossroads straight on.
6. At the next three-forked-road turn left towards the forest lake.

### **C. Forestry and the forest lake**

Remember that, when Witteveen was build, the landscape around you was just peat bog and moorland. On the lower, wetter parts grew large fields of cotton grass (*Eriophorum angustifolium*) which gave Witteveen its name: Witte=white and veen=peat or turf.

Almost everywhere the peat bog and moorland was reclaimed for agriculture. Where the soil was not suitable for growing crops, forest was planted. The straight and strong stems of deciduous coniferous trees like larix were highly asked for to use in the mines of Limburg. Birch, oak and mountain ash were planted in between the larix trees, to 'force' them to grow up to the light en become long and straight. During a severe storm in 1972 a large area of the planting from the 1930's was destroyed.

Today only little wood is felled for economic reasons. Maintenance is based on nature preservation standards and the forest is mainly used for recreational purposes.

The lake you will find in the forest is an artificial lake. It was dug to gain sand for the building of the highway just north from here. Yet, interesting flora and fauna has developed in and surrounding the lake thanks to a layer of calcareous boulder clay that has come to the surface due to the groundwork.

7. At the crossroads (in front of the forest lake) turn right, along a deep ditch.
8. At the first forest path turn left.
9. At the first crossroads straight on and at the second crossroads turn right.

### **D. Earth's magnetic field station**

In 1938 the Royal Netherlands Metrological Institute (KNMI) decided to replace their earth's magnetic field research station from De Bilt near Utrecht in the centre of the Netherlands to Witteveen. The sensitive equipment which is used to measure the earth' magnetic field and gauge compasses needed a place where it would not be disturbed by heavy traffic, railways and power lines like in the centre of the Netherlands. Today the field station is used for seismological research and environmental research on quality of the air. Also the lichens on the tree stems around you show that the air quality in the Province of Drenthe is quite good.

In autumn the forest turns yellow, red and orange. Many different species of fungi appear on the forest floor.

10. At the three-forked-road turn right.
11. Cross the tarmac road and take the forest path on the other side; straight on. You pass the cemetery, which is worth a visit.

**E. Cemetery**

The cemetery dates from 1937. The gravestones from these early days are recognised by a Weeping Willow; the symbol for death and mourning. The small building was used to keep the deceased. It was and is obligatory to keep the body above the ground for at least 36 hours to make sure no mistakes are made. Through the large doors the hearse could enter the building.

Since 2005 it is possible to get a natural burial on the cemetery of Witteveen. In this case no headstones are used and the burial monuments are part of the natural environment. Nature is undisturbed.

Sir Relus ter Beek, commissioner of the Queen of the Province of Drenthe is buried in the natural cemetery of Witteveen on his special request, because he was very charmed by this concept and the beauty of Witteveen's natural cemetery.

12. At the three-forked-road turn right until you pass a deep ditch.

13. At the deep ditch turn left, following the small path along the ditch. At the high seat turn right along the field until you reach the main tarmac road (Kerkweg).

14. At the tarmac road (Kerkweg) turn right.

**F. Farms**

The farm "De Hendrikahoeve" dates from 1927. Its architecture is characteristic for the farms build by the architects of the Dutch government during the early 1900's. The premises for the family are in the same building as the barn or build in front of the barn (head – body architecture). The barn itself is large because it had to have enough space to keep the harvest. The beautiful example of a farm in Witteveen on the picture on page 13 shows large barn doors in the front and the back of the building. The harvest was brought in by the back doors. Without needing to turn the horse and wagon and later the tractor, the farmer could drive straight out through the doors in front of the building.

15. First road right (Ir. E. Biewingaweg)

16. End of the road turn left (W. Slotweg)

17. End of the road turn left (Mej. A. Talmaweg)

**G. Facilities**

In the centre of the village you will find next to each other; the school annex village hall, the former Dutch reformed church and rectory and café-restaurant and halls 'Onder de Hoge Dennen'. On the spot of this café-restaurant in 1932 a large village hall was build to facilitate the many inhabitants and workers in Witteveen. For example, the workers who stayed only temporary in Witteveen could come to the village hall to get assistance in writing letters to their family. Once a month everybody came to watch a movie and many parties were given in this building. Sadly a huge fire burned the wooden building to the ground in 1969. A new café-restaurant, the one you see today, was build. The village hall is now in the same building as the former school building. Due to demographic changes (the number of students was about to drop under the minimum of 23 children), the school is not in use anymore since 2012 and the children of Witteveen go to the nearby schools of Balinge or Westerbork. The inhabitants of Witteveen now deliberate with the local government about what to do with the empty school building.

18. At the crossroad (Mej. A. Talmaweg and Kerkweg) turn left. Almost immediately turn right and take the small path through the pleasure ground. Keep right until you reach a paved path, turn right.

19. Immediately turn left until you reach the tarmac road at the other side of the pleasure ground. At the tarmac road (J.B. Kanweg) turn left.

20. After 100 metres (at house number 65) turn on to the path at you right.

## **I. De Sigaar and the former harbour**

Now we arrive in the centre of the village of Witteveen with its beautiful cylindrical shaped green pleasure ground. Thanks to its shape everybody calls it 'De Sigaar'. Villages this size normally do not have a park like this around here. The large boulder is placed in remembrance of the 50<sup>th</sup> jubilee of the village of Witteveen in 1976. These stones come from Scandinavia and were transported by moving land ice during the second to last ice age. The ice tongue from the north stopped moving in the north of the Netherlands and that's where these boulders can be found in the ground.

South-west of De Sigaar we see a canal coming to a death end. This used to be a little harbour. Ships came in to bring artificial fertilizer and organic waste from the cities to fertilize the poor sandy soil. With the organic waste from the cities sometimes little treasures like lost buttons, pipes, coins or jewellery were brought on to the land. Today, still samples are found especially by people with metal detectors. We know most of the stuff must have come in by ship from the west of the Netherlands because around here people were far too poor to have these kind of possessions.

On their way back the ships were loaded with the arable produce of the farms of Witteveen.

21. After about 80 metres you will see the canal. Follow the path next to the canal.

## **J. Along the canal**

This bridge is custom made for this hiking trail around Witteveen. It is built after original design. After the 1950's more and more products were transported by road. The canals ran out of use and many bridges were replaced by dams because they are far less expensive in maintenance. From recreational and historic point of view today some bridges are restored.

## **K. Hotel 'Het Witte Veen' and agriculture**

About 200 metres south of the new bridge lies hotel 'Het Witte Veen'. This hotel is established in a farm of the 'head-body' architecture type. Agriculture was practiced here until the beginning of the 1970's. Most of the other farms found along this road are still in practice so the hotel is surrounded by agricultural landscape.

Since 1950 mainly potatoes, sugar beet and grain are grown. Almost all produce goes to the processing industries. During harvest season you can see large piles of beets or potatoes along the fields waiting to be transported. When temperatures drop, the piles are protected for the cold by a thick layer of straw.

22. After the bridge turn right along the canal. At the crossroad straight on – keep following the canal.

23. At the end of this path when you reach the highway turn right. Follow the path with the small stretch of trees at your left-hand.

24. At the corner of the forest – take the path leading into the forest.

## **L. Alder forest**

During the construction of the highway north of the village this alder forest was planted. Old maps show that this part was very wet by its many trenches and ditches. It was difficult to make the land suitable for agriculture. When it was taken out of production the wet and humus rich soil was very suitable to grow alder trees (*Alnus glutinosa*). Today alder forests have become very rare in the province of Drenthe, due to drainage and agriculture. During a grey winter's day the forest is a bit gloomy but the wood of the alder tree is of a beautiful red-brown. The wood is quite soft and does not splinter and that's why it was often used to make clogs in the older days. The forest also contains sycamore, bramble, raspberry and black elderberry, a feast for birds and people!

25. Follow the forest path, at the T-crossing turn right.

26. At the end of the forest path turn left. Cross the tarmac road and you are back at the starting point of this hiking trail.

### Acknowledgements

Bulte, Marcel, 'Emmenaren op drift', Groningen, 2008.

Ginkel, van, Jan & Werkgroep Ommetje Witteveen van Plaatselijk Belang Witteveen, 'Rondom Witteveen'.