

Brielle 2013

300 years of completed fortifications

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Photo: John de Pater 2010

The Lord of Voorne granted Brielle a charter in 1330. Eight years later, in 1338, Brielle was given the right to fortify the town with walls and defences. Documents that have been passed down show that in 1342 there was a moat around Brielle, and that there was a town wall in 1350. The map of Brielle produced by cartographer Jacob van Deventer shows that Brielle had four town gates in 1558. The capture of Brielle by the Sea Beggars on 1 April 1572 by ramming the Noordpoort gate (and through the open Zuidpoort gate) greatly worried the town council. Brielle's fortifications needed to be strengthened. To this end, bastions were constructed after the model of Italian fortresses. The positioning of the bastions was determined by the cannons' field of fire. The inspection of the fortifications was the stadholder's responsibility. William of Orange therefore visited Brielle in June 1573 in order to assess whether the weak spots in the defences had been improved in accordance with his instructions. Important improvements were made in Brielle until the mid-17th century. The town was expanded on the eastern side (from 1587). Instead of the mediaeval brick town wall, earth bulwarks and bastions were constructed, characteristic of the Old Dutch fortification system. Other characteristics of this system were broad moats and the construction of special planting in order to hide the artillery from view and secure the soil. Simon Stevin and Adriaen Anthonisz. were important proponents of this system.

The map by J. Blaeu shows that in 1648 Brielle's defences were too vulnerable on the western and southern side. In order to improve that, Brielle either had to expand in the west or shrink in the south. The expensive proposal to cut off the town in the south was submitted by engineer Isaac van Commersteyn as early as 1618, but was not implemented. The first war between France and the Republic between 1672 and 1678 revealed that fortresses of strategic importance needed to be modernised, better maintained and better defended. The fortifications of towns such as Naarden were rebuilt between 1676 and 1688. In many cases the earth bulwarks and walls were faced with stone. This was an expensive solution, which meant that improvements could only be made for a limited number of strongholds.

During this period there was a debate about how best to construct and attack fortified positions. The dispute was between the soldier and fortress builder Menno van Coehoorn (1641-1704, see picture, inv. no. 5701) and Captain of Engineers Louis Paen, also a soldier. It was about ensuring that the defences of the town were always protected from hostile fire while simultaneously exposing the attacker to the defenders' weapons. Van Coehoorn won the argument, and published his ideas in 1685 in the book "Nieuwe Vestingbouw, Op een natte of lage Horizont..." ("New Fortress Construction, On a wet or low Horizon..."), which became a standard work internationally. His ideas would lead to what was called the New Dutch Fortification System, which was applied in the Republic from the 18th century. Van Coehoorn thought in 'lines'. The basic idea of his theory is that it must be made impossible for the enemy to fire directly onto the brick stone base of the main bulwark. The defensive works located in front of it would first have to be captured in order to then damage the main bulwark and bastions from there with cannon fire. From the defenders' side the field of fire had to be completely clear, and the higher defensive lines could offer covering fire to the troops deployed lower down.

After the war between the Republic and France between 1688 and 1695 Van Coehoorn was promoted to lieutenant-general of infantry and engineer-general of fortifications for the Republic of the United Netherlands by stadholder William III, also King of England. He was charged with substantially improving the Netherlands' defences. Van Coehoorn gave advice to his principal, the Raad van State (Council of State). After its approval, whereby the stadholder participated in the decision-making, the plans were implemented.

The Republic was anticipating a rapid resumption of the war with France. The Spanish King Charles II (1661-1700) did not have long to live, and had no heirs. Louis XIV would claim the Spanish throne - an undesirable situation for stadholder William III and the Republic.

Van Coehoorn had as many fortresses (re)built as possible. Generally the choice was made to incorporate the existing fortifications and to construct bulwarks and walls out of earth first. If there was still money left over, they could be faced with stone. In addition to the programme that Van Coehoorn submitted to the Raad van State, the individual States (the 'provinces') were also encouraged to modernise their fortifications. Although they employed their own controllers-general (inspectors) they did ask van Coehoorn for advice. One of the towns about which Williem Paen, the Inspector-General of Fortifications in the province of Holland, asked Van Coehoorn for advice was a town strategically located at the mouth of the Maas: Brielle.

In Brielle in the 17th century they were concerned about another surprise attack from the sea followed by the rapid capture of the town, as had happened in 1572. For that reason the coastal batteries on the Oosterlandse dyke, near the Stenen Baak, and the Zwartewaalse dyke were reinforced after war broke out in 1672. Brielle town council and the Gecommitteerde Raden (the Executive Council of the province) continued to discuss strengthening the town. Various designs were produced, but were rejected because they did not offer a solution in military terms. Meanwhile Brielle remained hard to defend, whilst the naval port of Hellevoetsluis had already started renovating its fortifications in 1695. Brielle town council started a campaign to persuade the provincial council to implement the cutting off of part of the town as previously proposed by Isaac Commersteijn. Brielle asked the States of Holland both to fund the expansion of the fortifications and to compensate the citizens for the demolition of the 's Heer Daniëlsambacht district to the south. This was a substantial area that ran to roughly the location of the current Groene Kruisweg, nowadays a green neighbourhood which contains a Chinese restaurant and Jan Matthijsenlaan, amongst other things. The controller-general of fortifications for the States of Holland, Willem Paen, also applied pressure on the province. Brielle was one of the large fortifications that came under his responsibility and that he inspected annually.

The oldest surviving drawing by Paen relating to Brielle dates from 1698 and contains a proposal for improving the fortifications. In this drawing the southern part of the town has been demolished, the moat has been drawn in and the fortress has the shape of a regular star with nine bastions. Paen submitted a variation of this plan to the Gecommitteerde Raden in 1699. They did not approve it immediately. In 1700 Paen decided to seek advice from Van Coehoorn, who travelled to Brielle for a day. Paen incorporated Van Coehoorn's advice in a subsequent design. The plan retained the cutting off of the town to the south. Brielle town council then had to give its approval. But the council had comments and objections relating to Paen and Van Coehoorn's design. Hence the Sint Catharinagasthuis (St Catharine Hospital) would disappear completely under Paen's plan. The town council wanted either to retain the hospital or to be paid compensation in order to rebuild the hospital elsewhere in the town. The council also turned to Van Coehoorn and in 1702 asked him for advice about the buildings that would have to be demolished and for which the owners wanted compensation so they could move elsewhere. The town council also wanted to retain the Kaaipoort gate and insert a small sally port or 'sortie' there. The town council was also unwilling to move the Langepoort gate, and at the Zuidpoort gate they wanted two exits instead of one. Paen only agreed to the wish for a sally port at the Kaaipoort. In the end Paen supplemented his design with those town council wishes that he had approved. That resulted in a final design drawing in 1703 which is in Brielle Historical Museum's collection (inv. no. 0384, see picture on p. 4). The drawing shows that the proposed fortification boundary has shifted a bit, as a result of which the Sint Catharinagasthuis did not need to be demolished.

The modification of the town fortifications was carried out in phases. The demolition of the 's Heer Daniëlsambacht district started in 1703. The construction of the new Langepoort gate commenced in 1704, the construction of the Zuidpoort gate in 1705, and the construction of the sally port at the Kaaipoort in 1709. In 1712 and 1713 the Zwartewaalse dyke was moved and three ravelins were constructed together with an 'envelope' (an extra defensive line on Van Coehoorn's recommendation) to aid the defence of Brielle's harbour.

The Brielle fortifications were completed in 1713, the same year in which the War of the Spanish Succession came to an end. Three hundred years later, in 2013, Brielle celebrated the completion of the Brielle fortifications.

Sources

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P. Don, *Voorne-Putten*, Zwolle/Zeist 1992; M. van Hattem, *Menno van Coehoorn en de vesting Brielle*, The Hague 2001; S. Schuijtvlot in *De Mare* October 2011; www.vestingsteden.nl

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