

PLEIN AIR

Cyclists and ramblers looking for a pavement cafe are a common sight in Vlassenbroek during the tourist season. But, suddenly, in 2014 and 2015, many people armed with sketchpads descended on the Schelde. Amateurs and professionals, young and old – you ran into them in groups, or alone, perched on a camping stool, deep in thought, contemplating a view or grappling with the central perspective. They ventured out in all weathers. But artistic interest was not exactly new to Vlassenbroek, for it was here that the Dendermonde school found inspiration at the end of the nineteenth century.

The recent *en plein air* project was prompted by the events of 1 February 1953 – the day the dyke collapsed, leaving the whole of Vlassenbroek and Broekkant underwater.

Rosa Vermeir and her family were lodging with her parents. As the floodwater rose, they took refuge on the first floor. Luckily, her father managed to arrange a boat. He mounted a horse, which swam to Mechelsesteenweg where he raised the alarm. They were rescued through a window.

Later, everything was covered in mud. That was a setback. But all the cows survived, except one.

The plans to control the river tides had to be brought forward in the last decade to keep pace with climate change. Soon some of the land along the Schelde will become a flood plain again. The surroundings are changing dramatically. That calls for a response that incorporates vision and imagination. Everyone is joining in; the civil engineer, the landscape architect, the artist, and even the angler is taking notes. Artists and dabblers were challenged by the project *Drawing in Vlassenbroek* to return to the dyke and take a fresh look at the polder. The specially organised drop-in drawing classes in Baasrode Maritime Museum and the scouts' hut were popular.

Anglers are well-practised in sitting motionless, so it was only to be expected that they would be asked to pose for a drawing. The Orcas' angling club was happy to sit for a sketch artist. This drawing will be a welcome memory as their pond and clubhouse will have to relocate.

When the drawings are finished everyone comes to the conservatory at the cafe where I am waiting with an A3 scanner. We drink Belgian beer and eat toasted sandwiches while the scanner whirs. Scanning takes a long time. The resolution is 600 DPI because we want top-quality graphics in the book we plan to publish. The constantly changing landscape is an important theme. New observations appear at every scanning session. Dreams of the future are shared, interspersed with discussions on global issues. Not everyone can draw, so sixteen drawings have been made at the request of local residents with a good story. These have been framed and the museum index number glued to the back. Together they form a collection entitled *Drawing in Vlassenbroek*, which is the property of the city of Dendermonde. They now hang on people's walls as loaned exhibits.

The ring dyke stands on the plot of agricultural land that Lucia inherited from her grandfather. The happy childhood memories, including the family picnics, are a subject for a commissioned pen-and-ink drawing. We scan handwritten poetry about a view. The artist makes a drawing from the place where the compartment dyke and the river dyke meet, which offers an excellent view of the church in the village of Kastel on the opposite bank. Beaver tracks are followed and replicas of old ships appear to be patient models.

The drawing sessions end in the spring of 2015 and I compile a visual narrative from the hundreds of drawings scanned in the past year. The ground rules dictate that everyone who participated must feature in the book with at least one drawing.

The story told by the drawings ends with a tropical beach on the Schelde. The owner of 'Artists Studio', a local pub, says that a tropical climate is inevitable in this age of global warming. He is looking forward to welcoming sun-seekers.