

THE NETHERLANDS

Ellen L. van Olst

Building traditions in the Netherlands

The Netherlands, though a small country in actual size and extremely urbanised, still retain an amazing wealth of vernacular architecture in the shape of their historic farms. The country has over 30 different farm types, belonging to a few basically different northwest-European building traditions that meet – and merge – in the Low Countries. The two main groups are the Frisian house group (the building tradition of the northern coastal area) and the so-called hall farm group, which occupies the entire eastern and central inland region of the country. Within these two main house groups a large number of variations has developed over the centuries, through adaptation to local circumstances and economic conditions. Together these two building traditions cover most of the country except the extreme south and south-west.

In spite of the differences between both building traditions and the large number of variations within each group, all these farms share a number of distinctive features that might be regarded as characteristic of Dutch farms as a whole.

Multi-functionality: all these farms combine dwelling quarters, animal housing, crop storage room and working space within the same building and often even under the same roof.

Timber framing: As the Netherlands have no stone, wood was the only local building material in the past that was strong enough to support the load of the roof. All traditional Dutch farms therefore have a timber-frame structure consisting of a number of box-frames, coupled by plates.

Aisled buildings with low side walls: the free-standing timber-frame structure divides the building internally into three zones: a wide central nave and two narrow aisles. The roof projects on both sides far over the arcade plates and the side walls are low.

Within this system of timber-framed, aisled, multi-functional buildings, there are large differences between the different building traditions. The distinctive features of the two main house groups or building traditions are not in the shape of the building, but in their historical development, interior arrangement and structure.

The Frisian house group

The present farmsteads of the northern coastal area are large aisled buildings, with huge sloping roofs and extremely low side walls. These buildings did not come into being until the second half of the 16th century. Until then, this coastal area was longhouse territory with low, narrow buildings containing only a dwelling and cowshed. Crop storage was in separate small barns or haystacks. Now all longhouses have disappeared. The huge barns, as built from the late 16th century onwards, have a pine timber-frame structure of extremely high box-frames with a super-imposed tie beam, and no attic floor. The cattle stalls in this area differ basically from the stalls in all the rest of the country. On these 'Frisian' raised stalls with deep manure channels, the

cows stand paired between wooden partitions, heads facing the exterior wall. The cowshed as a whole is situated in one of the aisles. Crops are stored on ground-floor level in large storage bays in the nave. In Frisian farms the working floor is situated in one of the aisles, which means that the double doors are always to one side of the façade.

The hall-farm group

The hall farm was developed during the Middle Ages. Of their predecessors little is known, though it is generally assumed that these were in their turn derived from the prehistoric longhouse. The buildings of the hall-farm group share a box-frame structure (in the past generally of oak) of the anchor-beam type. The lowered position of the tie beam creates a large attic space for storing crops. Cattle stalls in the sandy regions used to be sunken stalls, dug out to the depth of one metre. In these pits the cattle stood on their own excrement to which large measures of dry organic material were added to ensure a great quantity of manure. When artificial fertiliser came on the market, the sunken stalls were all converted into ground-floor level stalls with manure channels. The stalls are situated in both aisles, with the animals facing inwards towards the nave. Crops were stored in the attic above the nave, on a floor of sapling poles placed on top of the (lowered) tie beam. In hall farms the wide central nave of the working area of the building is open and houses the threshing floor.

Building materials

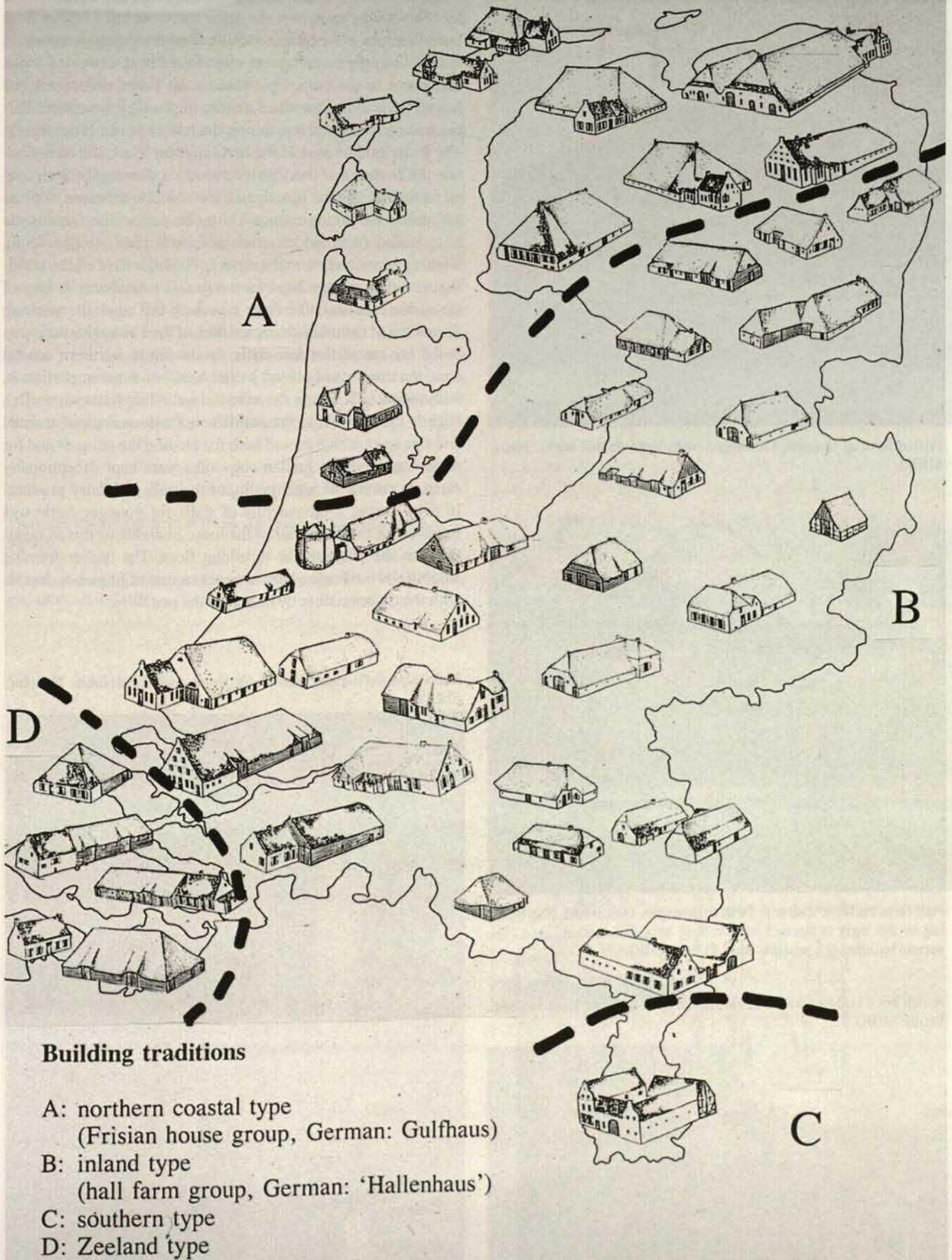
As the Netherlands have no local stone, all traditional buildings used to be constructed from perishable materials such as wood, mud, wattle and daub, straw, reed, heather etc. From the 15th century, brick became available as a building material for vernacular buildings. The introduction of brick was a slow process, which started in the western parts of the country around the medieval cities, in the central river area, and in the northern provinces, where clay was easily available. In the sandy eastern regions fully timber-framed buildings with walls of wattle and daub could still be found around the beginning of the 20th century. In the course of time, clay pantiles replaced thatch as a less perishable roofing material.

Frisian 'kophalsromp' farm

Perhaps the most typical of Frisian farms is the 'kophalsromp' (literally: head-neck-body) type, named after the silhouette of the farm in the landscape, when seen from afar.

The head is the house, extending from the large barn. This contains one or more rooms, often with a large cellar under-

Building traditions of The Netherlands around 1900



Overview of farm types and main building traditions in the Netherlands. Plan: SHBO, The Netherlands.

neath. The cellar was used for the dairy production. Here the milk was set to rise for 24 to 36 hours, after which the cream was skimmed off and made into butter by the use of a horse-drawn churning mill. The skimmed milk was made into low-fat cheese.



Frisian farm at Usquert, Groningen, with large double barns. Photo: SHBO.



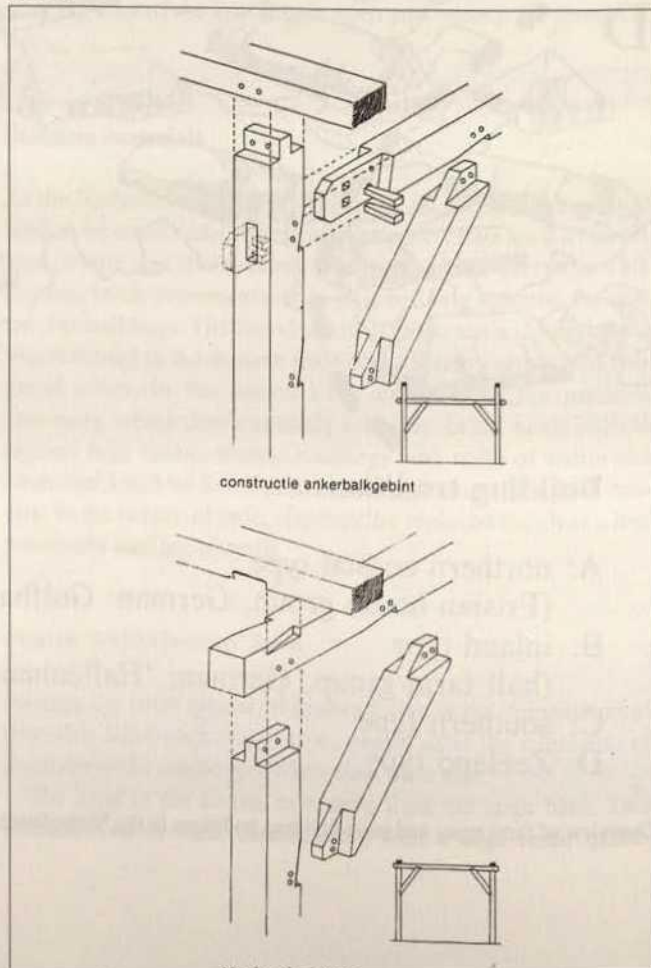
Hall farm building tradition: farm at Eibergen, Gelderland. The building to the right contains both dwelling area and working part. The second building is a separate barn. Photo: SHBO.

A rich brick building tradition, farmstead at Hoogmade, Zuid-Holland. Photo: SHBO.



With the large dairy herds of farms in this area, the cellars had to be large to contain the entire day's produce. Because of the high groundwater level, cellars could not be built entirely underground. The cellar is usually set half below ground level and half above. The room over the cellar therefore has a higher floor level than the other rooms and is called a mezzanine room. In older buildings, the cellar was often found in an extension to the kitchen or in the barn. By situating the cellar underneath the house, the building assumed a more imposing appearance. This became common practice during the late 18th and 19th century. The lower middle part of the building (the 'neck') used to contain the kitchen and dairy production area. During the 20th century other residential functions were added to this area, such as bedrooms and sitting-rooms. The main part of the farm is the huge aisled barn, which contained both crop storage room, working space and animal quarters. The high nave of the building served as storage bays for the grain or hay harvest. One of the aisles contained the large cowshed, the other the working floor. One of the main characteristics of the Frisian house group is the lay-out of the cow-stalls. In the entire northern coastal area, the cows were placed paired between wooden partitions, with their heads facing the exterior wall. The stalls were often slightly raised. Behind the animals was a deep manure channel and a passage which served both for feeding the animals and for removing the dung. Frisian cow-stalls were kept exceptionally clean, to ensure the high quality of the milk and dairy produce. In dairy farms, a second row of stalls for younger cattle was found along the back wall of the barn. In arable or mixed farms this was the place of the threshing floor. The timber framing structure of the Frisian barn always consists of huge box-frames with the tie beam directly on top of the posts.

Main types of timber framing in Dutch aisled buildings. Drawing: SHBO.



Drenthe hall farm with lateral threshing floor

The farm (which is a listed monument) is a rare example of a historically valuable monumental building that is still fully used as a working farm. The farm largely dates from 1786, as stated in the ornamental wall clamps of the façade. The original interior of the dwelling part is almost entirely intact, with its huge living room with highly decorated tiled walls, fireplace, and panelled wall containing a row of box beds and cupboards. Next to the living room is a cellar and mezzanine room, which serves as bedroom. The cellar, which served for the storage of dairy produce and provisions, is accessible from the kitchen. The extremely wide nave in the working part of the farm contains the threshing floor, with cow-stalls on either side in the aisles. The high double doors are situated in the centre of the rear façade. Because of the low height of the exterior walls, the doors had to be placed in a recess. The attic over the threshing floor was used for crop storage. The area next to the kitchen still houses the original pump. Here the milking pails and other dairy implements were rinsed. This area also used to contain the horse-drawn churning mill. The walls of the washing area traditionally have a tarred plinth, with whitewash above. The original oak anchor-beam framework is still intact.

Measured drawing of farm at Broek. Drawing: K. Uilkema, 1926, Coll. SHBO.

Measured drawing of farm at Ruinerwold, Drenthe. Drawing: K. Uilkema, 1926, Coll. SHBO.

Detail of anchor beam framework of hall farm group. Photo: SHBO.

