BROCHURE STORY LINES

**STORY LINE 1 “From primeval land to human hand”**

The Scheldt estuary is a landscape full of contrasts. It was formed from the interplay between soil, wind, water and tides. Several thousand years ago, humans also began to make their mark on the estuary. This created a multifaceted area full of transitions — transitions between water and land, low and high, clay and sand, and salt and fresh.

Some 30 million years ago, what we now know as the Scheldt estuary was a shallow, tropical sea. Shark teeth from that time still wash up onto the beaches of Nieuwvliet-Bad, Ritthem and Kaloot. During the ice ages, the sea water became trapped in the ice caps and the sea level dropped. In fact, the North Sea even dried up completely.

During the peat bog phase, the Scheldt transformed into a relatively narrow river. From about 300 A.D. onwards, the intrusions of the rising seas resulted in its widening considerably — and an estuary was created. Presumably not before the eighth century, the Honte became connected with these break-in channels from the North Sea, and the forerunner of today's Western Scheldt came into being. From the fifteenth/sixteenth century onward, this became the main course of the Scheldt. Due to this new, shorter connection to the North Sea, the effects of the tides could be felt further upstream in the river. Rising sea levels and land reclamation later reinforced this process. Today, the tidal effect can still be felt up to about 160 kilometres upstream from Vlissingen.

At the beginning of the 12th century, the construction of large-scale embankments was started in Zeeland and to the north of Flanders. During later land reclamation efforts, mudflats and salt marshes were usually embanked against existing polders (accretions) or tidal flats (washes). This is how separate islands in Zeeland became connected to one another.

**STORY LINE 2 "Living with the water"**

Fighting against or flowing with — throughout the centuries, living with the water required great vigour and an enterprising spirit. Although the inhabitants of the Scheldt estuary were themselves sometimes the cause of disasters.

Between the 11th and 16th centuries, Zeeland and Flanders were hit by countless storm surges. Any land lost was re-embanked, if possible, only to once again be swallowed up by the sea soon after. As a result of a storm surge in 1375, the Zuidzee or Dullaert, later called the Braakman, came into being. This event was a major impetus for the formation of what later became the Western Scheldt.

In 1530, the unprecedented disaster known as the Sint-Felix flood occurred and was soon followed by a second flood in 1532. Part of the Zeeland islands and polders along the Brabantse Wal were submerged. The floods heralded the end of the prosperous town of Reimerswaal and the surrounding area with numerous villages. The Drowned Land of Zuid-Beveland (Het Verdronken land van Zuid-Beveland in Dutch) came into being, while other polders and islands were reclaimed. The All Saints' Flood (1570) created the Drowned Land of the Markiezaat (now part of the Markiezaatsmeer), and the islands of Wulpen and Koezand disappeared into the estuary of the Western Scheldt. Throughout the centuries, a total of about 250 villages and hamlets were drowned.

A more recent catastrophe was the flood of 1953, when large parts of Zeeland were flooded. Polders along the Brabantse Wal and villages along the Scheldt were also affected. More than 1800 people lost their lives.

The Scheldt estuary is constantly changing. In this day and age, global warming and rising sea levels call for new solutions. Lessons from the past and natural processes can help us find these solutions.

**STORY LINE 3: “Living and working”**

The inhabitants of the area carved out their existence on the fertile clay and poorer sandy soils. In the new Stone Age, people began to settle permanently in certain locations, often along watercourses and on higher ground, and they made use of the land for cattle breeding and arable farming.

When, from the eleventh century onwards, polders were reclaimed on a large scale in Zeeland, opportunities arose for arable farming there, too. In the Waasland region, farmers dug up calcareous and loamy soil from deeper layers. This nutrient-rich soil was applied to the middle of the fields, creating the characteristic convex fields, which also improved water management.

Wood from the coniferous forests was used in the coal mines. Even on the wasteland of the Brabantse Wal, forests were planted. They provided income from logging and helped prevent sand drift. The Wouwsche Plantage was established in 1504 and is one of the oldest forests in the Netherlands.

In the lowlands of Zeeland, the salty peat under the clay was excavated for peat and salt production. Poor levelling and soil subsidence left behind an extremely uneven landscape.

The soil also provided the raw materials for crafts and industry. Clay was mined along the Scheldt, Rupel and Durme Rivers. This mining was even done by the Romans, who introduced the firing of roof tiles to the area. Starting in the eighteenth century, the brick industry flourished along the Rupel between Hemiksem and Rumst. The raw material used here was the heavy clay from Boom that rises to the surface.

The higher or open parts of the landscape provided suitable locations for windmills, and the water of the Scheldt was used as a source of energy for tidal mills. In these wind and tidal mills, grain was milled, bark was processed and linseed oil was pressed.

**STORY LINE 4: “Gateway to the world”**

For centuries, water transport was the most efficient, safest and fastest mode of transportation. The Scheldt was already an important transport route in Roman times. In the late Middle Ages, port towns such as Bruges, Ghent, Middelburg, Zierikzee, Veere and Hulst developed into flourishing trading settlements, and outports were developed along wide tidal channels.

These large cities acted as magnets for migrants, (religious) refugees and people looking for work. In addition to merchants, a variety of craftsmen, artists and scholars also settled in these towns. That is how book printing and cartography developed in Antwerp. After the Fall of Antwerp in 1585, many Protestants fled to the north, to Middelburg, among other places, where they stood at the cradle of a cultural and intellectual golden age.

Antwerp, already important as a port and trading city as early as the thirteenth century, started to flourish three centuries later when the Western Scheldt became the most important waterway, while Bruges declined due to the silting up of the Zwin. Antwerp would develop into a metropolis on the Scheldt.

Far-reaching interventions were necessary to keep the Scheldt and its tributaries navigable. In the early twentieth century, the Scheldt was straightened for purposes of shipping. There were already problems in the Durme, which silted up after the construction of the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal. Even to this day, keeping the Western Scheldt navigable to ensure the accessibility of the Port of Antwerp is a sensitive and challenging issue.

**STORY LINE 5: “Contested land”**

The strategic location of the Scheldt estuary has left its mark: The area has often been the scene of heavy battles, and the soil and landscape, and what they had to offer, were used strategically for its defence. Remnants of forts, battle lines, inundation creeks and other military works often follow the geological gradients in the area.

In the Middle Ages, wooden defence towers, called motte castles, were built on steep earthen hills. Several hundred of these fortifications have stood in Zeeland, where they are often erroneously called ‘vliedbergen’. Mottes can also still be found in Flanders.

After that, stone castles replaced these wooden towers. They were erected at strategic locations: close to the Scheldt but on higher ground. Even in the Middle Ages, there were at least six castles along the Brabantse Wal, which, at that height, must have been clearly visible from afar.

To defend the Western Scheldt, by then the main navigation route to Antwerp, Fort Rammekens was constructed on the sea in the mid-16th century.

The polders in the Scheldt estuary lent themselves perfectly to the purposes of defence. By digging a hole in the dykes, areas beyond were flooded, making them virtually inaccessible to the enemy. This defensive tactic was used for centuries, from the Eighty Years' War through the Second World War. Many creeks in Zeelandic Flanders (Zeeuws-Vlaanderen in Dutch) are the result of military inundations dating from the end of the 16th century. And land was also flooded for strategic purposes in later centuries.

The Scheldt gave its name to one of the fiercest battles of the Second World War. The Battle of the Scheldt marked the end of this war for the Netherlands. The operation was intended to clear access for the Allies to the Port of Antwerp via the Western Scheldt.