



E.J. BRUINEKOOL FOTOGRAFIE

Holland's Botters

*Distinctive and able shoal-draft boats
for an inland sea*

by Jack van Ommen

With low freeboard aft, upswept sheerlines and full sections forward, curved and short main-sail gaffs, and large leeboards, botters are among Holland's most distinctive historic watercraft. They were well suited to fishing the shoal waters of the Zuiderzee, and at the beginning of the 20th century more than a thousand of them fished out of Dutch seaports. On the weekends, when the fishermen came home to get scrubbed clean by their wives or mothers for church on Sunday, every harbor was transformed into a forest of masts, with sails and nets hung to dry.

An ambitious plan to build a dike permanently closing off the Zuiderzee's connection to the open ocean, which had been contemplated for decades, was finally completed in 1932. This began the shallow bay's slow conversion into the freshwater lake, called IJsselmeer, that we know today. The dike opened up

land for reclamation, but its construction was a death sentence for the botter fleet. As soon as the dike plan was announced, new botter construction went into an abrupt decline. In 1933, the last new fishing botter was built by the Janus Kok boatyard in Huizen. In 1900, 171 botters sailed out of the conjoined ports of Spakenburg and Bunschoten, and by 1953 the number declined to 100. The disruptions of World War II, together with its aftermath of slow economic recovery, gave commercial sail only a brief reprieve. By 1968, there were only four botters left in Spakenburg/Bunschoten.

But just as the type appeared to be nearing extinction, a few nostalgic souls began to restore old botters for pleasure sailing. The trend developed slowly at first. In the beginning, boats that were considered derelict dinosaurs could be had for a song. When the boom years came to Western Europe in the last half of the

Above—Botters are distinguished by their broad and commodious hulls, fitted with leeboards for the shoal waters of Holland's inland sea, where they were originally used for fishing.



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Above—Botter gatherings, like the Jan Haring Race in Monnickendam each July, celebrate the heritage of the fleet. **Left**—At Spakenburg, races held each May bring a fleet of leeboarders to the harbor where the Nieuwboer Shipyard has been operating since 1829. **Below left**—The Nieuwboer Shipyard makes all of its own blocks.

20th century, new and more prosperous owners were eager to restore classic wooden boats, including botters. Before long, properly restored botters were turning out to be good investments, and likely candidates for restoration were in limited supply.

These new owners needed boatyards where the boats could be restored and maintained, and one of the yards they looked to was the Nieuwboer Botter Yard in Spakenburg. The yard, which is the oldest continuously operated shipyard surviving from the days of the old Zuiderzee, is dedicated to building and maintaining wooden botters. The earliest record of boatbuilding in Spakenburg dates back to 1583, and the site of the Nieuwboer yard itself is known to have had a marine ways since 1696.

The first member of the Nieuwboer family to own and operate the yard was Willem Nieuwboer, starting in 1829. However, it was his son, Hendrik Willem Nieuwboer (1820–1908), who perfected the botter design. Like all botter builders, he never worked from lines plans as we know them today. Instead, individual builders relied on patterns and skills passed down from one generation to the next. Nevertheless, the younger Nieuwboer's improvements became the standard throughout the Zuiderzee. Other yards were known to have offered free haulouts to lure any fishermen with



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A part of Dutch life for 250 years

My earliest memories of bidders go back to my childhood in Holland, in the mid-1940s. My grandfather had a mast- and block-making business, and bidder fishermen were his mainstay until he moved the business from de Lemmer on the Zuiderzee to Amsterdam in 1928, just before the Zuiderzee was closed off. He met his wife on the island of Urk, where he traveled frequently to collect payment for the masts he made for bidders. As children, we played in piles of wood shavings and filled gunny sacks with pitch pine shavings that bakers used to start their ovens. The first wooden boat my twin brother and I ever owned was a bidder model built by one of my grandfather's workmen. My uncle, Siebold de Vries, also followed the trade, and he made the mast, blocks, and rigging for the famous bidder yacht GROOTE BEER.

The name bidder was first used in 1760. Like the earlier waterschip type, bidders had live-wells built into their hulls to keep the catch fresh. Among fishermen, bidders became especially popular because the high sheer forward made them seaworthy in rough seas, yet the low stern facilitated net-hauling, and ample sail area gave them the power they needed to drag nets. Shoal draft allowed them to work in the Zuiderzee, which was 10' at the deepest, and in the Waddenzee, the shallow coastline extending from Den Helder along the Frisian and German coastlines as far as Denmark.

Built to be equal in size and speed so they could fish in tandem, bidders dragged a net between two boats, usually working upwind. For this purpose, they were built left- and right-handed, the principal difference being that the companionway entrances were on opposite sides to clear the way for working the nets.

The innovator Hendrik Willem Nieuwboer built boats for specific ports such as Spakenburg/Bunschoten, Huizen, and Nijkerk of the Zuidwal, or "south shore." Lacking harbors in their fishing grounds, these boats needed full entries and high bows so they could ride comfortably at anchor. The Westwal, or "west shore," bidders found havens in Monnickendam, Marken, and Hoorn.

Oostwal bidders from the eastern harbors of Elburg, Harderwijk, Kampen, and Vollenhove were nearly identical to the Zuidwal design but with less draft because they worked in even shallower waters. Volendammers fished with kwaks, which at 54' were 9' longer than standard bidders. Fishermen of the island of Urk ventured farther into the North Sea and had sturdier bidders.

Bidders are 43'6" to 44'3" LOA, usually with a beam of 13'9" and a draft of 3'. The kwak is 52'6" x 16'3" x 3'4". Variations called Wieringeraak and Lemsteraak types were around 52' long. The standard bidder's 41'-tall mast is stepped on the keel, and although it has a solid iron forestay, it has no shrouds. The sail area of the main and jib totaled 750 sq ft for a bidder and just over 1,000 sq ft for a kwak.

Right—"Prinsenwerk" colors of red, white, and blue are typically painted on a bidder's companionway. This text reads, "And thou shalt keep an eye on my sails."
Below—At the Nieuwboer Shipyard in Spakenburg in about 1935, a woman in traditional costume cleans a bidder's bottom.



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PERMISSION ARIE TER BEEK

Construction was almost entirely of white oak, with pine sometimes substituted for the house and decks. The spars were of pine or larch, and blocks were of ash.

The cabin layout is the same on all bidders. You stoop to enter through a narrow Dutch door, which is usually decorated with a short message painted in old-style longhand script, often with a religious meaning. A low, flat-topped iron stove was used for heat and cooking. There are no portholes, so it is dark. Both sides are lined with bunks. Every bidder is decorated with Prinsenwerk, a painted red, white, and blue checkerboard on the rudderhead, in the stern, and over the companionway, a custom dating back to the times when fishermen pledged their allegiance to the Prince of Orange, who helped drive the Spanish conquistadores out of the Lowlands in the 16th century.

With no antifouling paint, hulls needed to be scraped each spring. The boats would line up by the hundreds for the work, which was always done by women. Skippers would try to bribe yard bosses to advance in line so they wouldn't be the last to the fishing grounds. Herring and anchovy were the primary catch before the Zuiderzee closed, after which the fishermen turned to eels.

For a time, the mid-June to mid-July anchovy run was a lucrative fishery. Although the trade had its fat and lean years since the dawn of the 20th century, after an exceptionally good season in the early times, many a fisherman could afford to trade in his bidder for a

The Nieuwboer Shipyard today is remarkably unchanged, though now a public-private partnership set up to preserve the historic yard and its service to the equally botter fleet.

new one and purchase a new home as well. A good season also brought money into the fishing ports, supporting processors, traders, and smokehouses—including work for girls and young women, whose nimble fingers made them desirable for gutting the small anchovies on a piecework basis. Most of the catch was traded to Germany, and by 1930, 1 kilogram (2.2 lbs) of salted anchovies brought 30 cents. However, the next year the price plummeted to 5 cents when the new Nazi government banned fish imports.

Besides the usual rivalry among fishermen, bottermen were always ready for an informal white-knuckles race to the fishing grounds and back. Communities, which were isolated until deep into the 20th century, had their own distinctive dialects and traditional dress. Volendam, with the largest fishing fleet, remained Catholic while the rest of the ports embraced Calvinism during the Reformation of the 16th century.



Often, full-scale battles broke out on the fishing grounds, with net-cutting, kerosene bombs, even hand-to-hand combat.

A botter crew usually consisted of a skipper, one or two deckhands, and a “sea mouse,” a boy apprentice usually between 10 and 14 years old. Zeeger Nieuwboer told me that the boy was usually the skipper’s son or nephew. In the final days of the last year of grade school, boys would be taken out of school to join the crew, instantly becoming the envy of their classmates. A memorial at the Urk lighthouse listing the names and ages of lost fishermen includes a number of these boys, one of them an eight-year-old who perished in 1830. —JVO



Botters are built using patterns handed down through generations, like this Nieuwboer rudder pattern, held by Nieuwboer manager Henk van Halteren. This pattern has been in use since 1842.

Nieuwboer-built botters to their ways so they could take measurements and use them to alter their own construction patterns.

Hendrik Willem’s son, Willem Nieuwboer (1850–1913), ran the yard during the heyday of botter construction, launching 85 of them during his career. At that time, three men could build a botter, on average, in 12 weeks. In the best years, the yard employed up to 17 boatbuilders. With plans in the wind to close off the Zuiderzee, fishermen were reluctant to order new boats, and the yard’s last new fishing botter was launched in 1905. One botter from Willem Nieuwboer’s times—BU-5, the letters of which refer to her port of Bunschoten—has been converted to pleasure use and still sails today out of Spakenburg harbor.

Maintenance and repair kept the yard working. During lean years, the yard managed to hang on to its key boatbuilders by having them make woodstoves in the blacksmith shop and by putting them to work on the family farm on the outskirts of town. By mid-century, the professional fishing fleet was practically gone, and the number of surviving botters dwindled. Zeeger Nieuwboer, who was born in 1932 and took the yard into its fifth generation of family ownership, ran the yard all by himself for a number of years. By the 1980s, he was facing hard decisions.

With the prospect of a resurgence of interest in botter restorations, however, Zeeger’s son-in-law, Henk van Halteren, began to take an interest in managing the yard—but what did the future

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have to offer a young couple? The buildings desperately needed repairs. From a business standpoint, he would have been better off moving the yard away from the town center to someplace with less expensive real estate and lower taxes.

Temporary help came in 1986, when city of Spakenburg/Bunschoten hired the Nieuwboer yard to build a brand-new traditional fishing botter as a community flagship, part of a larger project to pay homage to the area's maritime history. As part of the project, which was supported by private donations and city and provincial government grants, Nieuwboer brought in unemployed local youths to learn new skills through wooden boat building.

Van Halteren literally brushed the thick layers of dust off Hendrik Willem Nieuwboer's historic patterns, which dated back to 1840 and were still stored at the yard. With these patterns, he could apply the boatbuilding skills he had acquired during the yard's restoration and maintenance projects to a new construction, the yard's first since 1905. The new botter, launched as BU-219, is operated today by the municipal government, and part of its maintenance expenses are covered by income from sailing charters.

More change came to the Nieuwboer yard in 1992, when Zeeger Nieuwboer sold the yard to the municipality of Spakenburg/Bunschoten under a trust agreement in which the city gave the yard tax breaks and subsidies in recognition of its importance as a historical monument. The yard's work, meanwhile, would continue as it did before, only now under van Halteren's management. This arrangement not only ensures the integrity of the historic Spakenburg fishing port but also allows the yard to continue in operation, at its original location, doing the restoration and maintenance work that have made the yard vital to the surviving bidders of the historic fleet.

"It works very well," van Halteren said. "I pay rent to them, and I have complete freedom to run the yard business as I wish. The only restrictions are that

A horse-powered capstan, out of use since 1912, was brought back into service at Nieuwboer Shipyard to demonstrate how boats were hauled out in earlier times.

Botters have spartan accommodations, but each one is fitted with a particular kind of woodstove.

we continue to work as we always have, repairing and building traditional wooden boats."

Van Halteren's wife, Marrie, is the daughter of Zeeger Nieuwboer, making their family the sixth generation of Nieuwboers to run the yard. Their three daughters, however, haven't shown any inclination toward boatbuilding or yard management. "There are no other Nieuwboer descendants to take over," said van Halteren, who is now 55. "We are now in the process of preparing the succession of the Nieuwboer wooden boatbuilding tradition by one of our longtime yard workers. This means that the skills passed down to me from Zeeger Nieuwboer will be preserved under the next owner. We are fortunate that our workforce ages run from early 20s to the late 50s and assure a continuous succession of the skills."

The physical layout of the yard and its boatbuilding methods have changed little in the past hundred years. The yard is on a pie-shaped lot on the cramped harbor with ways for five boats, a boat shed that just barely accommodates the standard 44' LOA botter, a workshop, a blacksmith shop, and the yard owner's home and office. Willem Nieuwboer added the blacksmith shop in about 1900, giving the yard its own facility for fabricating not only hardware but also metal hull sheathing, which could be used to add perhaps 30 years to the working life of an aging oak workboat hull.

Nieuwboer has always had a greater reputation for self-reliance than other botter yards. For instance, they make their own traditional ash blocks, finish masts from rough or partially sawn spar stock, and fabricate their own hardware.





During the 1960s, a revival of interest in historic botters developed, and today they are treasured by their owners, with annual regattas and gatherings making them an essential sight on the inland sea known as the IJsselmeer.

A few modern conveniences have been adopted alongside the traditional working methods. For example, instead of bending heavy oak planks by heating them over burning bunches of reeds, the boatbuilders now use propane torches. Epoxy is used instead of older types of adhesives, and stainless-steel fastenings are used in place of iron spikes and bolts. The horse-drawn capstan that was used for generations to haul botters up the ways was abandoned in 1912 in favor of one powered by a gasoline engine, but to accentuate the site's historical interpretation, a draft horse has made a return.

The yard crew now consists of van Halteren with three or four boat carpenters and an occasional helper. Zeeger Nieuwboer, who lives with his wife in the home on the yard's premises, still spends about four hours each day helping out in the yard. He will turn 80 this year.

For more than a century, botters intended for use as yachts have been built to the same design as commercial fishing boats, with the same powerful sail plan. The qualities that made botters successful in the fisheries—flat bottoms and the use of leeboards for sailing in shoal waters—also made sense for pleasure sailing on the IJsselmeer. One of the most notable botter yachts was GROOTE BEER, which translates to “Great Bear,” a reference to the constellation Ursa Major, also known as the Big Dipper. Janus Kok started building the boat at his yard in Huizen during World War II, supposedly for Nazi officer Hermann Goering but actually for a German pharmaceutical manufacturer. Her

keel was laid in 1941, but Kok, after learning she was destined for the enemy, deliberately slowed down her construction. She was not finished until well after the war's end, in 1948, and the original client never got the boat (see *Currents*, WB No. 175).

GROOTE BEER has the exact proportions of a traditional fishing botter, but at 52' she is nearly 10' longer. She cut an impressive wake in the United States from her arrival in Connecticut in 1953 until her return to Holland in 2001. The first American owner sold her to a buyer on the U.S. West Coast, where he and seven subsequent owners sailed her from California to Alaska. The step-grandson of the first Dutch owner tracked her down in Warrenton, Oregon, bought her, and had her shipped as deck cargo on a bulk carrier back to Antwerp. For restoration to her former glory, she was taken to the Nieuwboer yard.

All of her oak planking, many of her frames, and part of her keel needed replacement. After a half-century in salt water, the iron fastenings had deteriorated, in turn causing “nail sickness” in her oak. Fortunately, the exquisite teak carvings and her above-the-waterline woodwork were brought back to their original luster. The vintage botter was not only restored, but also given the latest in mechanical winches and updated navigation and propulsion systems, together with a new galley, to bring her into the 21st century. Relunched in July 2003, her homeport is now Volendam. Sadly, in May 2011 she suffered severe damage, including a broken keel, when she was dropped by a boatyard crane. The owner hopes to return her to Nieuwboer for yet another restoration.

If you go...

MUSEUMS

ZUIDERZEE MUSEUM, ENKHUIZEN. This particular museum is a must for anyone wanting to learn the maritime history of the former Zuiderzee. Besides the museum, located in one of the oldest buildings in the Enkhuizen harbor, complete with full-sized restored fishing boats and yachts of the 18th and 19th century, it also has an outdoor park where you are warped back into the 19th century. After the dike transformed the Zuiderzee into a freshwater lake, fishing ports became ghost towns. Abandoned homes and shops were dismantled and reconstructed at the museum stone by stone, complete with interiors, bedsteads, outhouses, and gardens. Old crafts like blacksmithing, boatbuilding, and net-mending are demonstrated. Enkhuizen's quaint harbor also has one of the biggest charter fleets of traditional "brown fleet" sailboats (see below). Enkhuizen is about 40 miles north of Amsterdam. The museum is a short ferry ride from the harbor. Indoor exhibits are open year-round; outdoor exhibits are open April 1 to November 1.

FRIES SCHEEPVAARTMUSEUM, SNEEK, FRIESLAND. This museum, in the most northern provinces of Holland, specializes in maritime history of an area with a long tradition of shipbuilding, merchant shipping, and fishing. With its large lakes, connecting by rivers and canals to the Zuiderzee and the North Sea, Friesland has a history of both offshore and inland maritime history. Sneek is about 80 miles northeast of Amsterdam. See www.friesscheepvaartmuseum.nl.

More recently, Nieuwboer restored the 58' BRONTOLIET, a 1901 botter yacht built in Belgium. This two-and-a-half-year project had a price tag of over \$2 million. And as of this writing in April 2010, the Nieuwboer crew was building ROSALIE, a replica of a 56' working fishing botter, in an old Belgian boatyard at Baesrode on the River Scheldt (see www.botter-rosalie.be). The Baesrode yard built bidders until the early 20th century, but is relying now on the skills that have been preserved in the Spakenburg yard to re-create the boat.

In modern times, nostalgia and Holland's booming economy created a new set of owners who treasure the botter fleet and have created a steady demand for boatbuilding skills and facilities. Trades that are vital to traditional wooden boat builders in Holland were given a lifeline as restorations brought many of the old hulls, including original sailing barges, back into the "brown fleet," as the historic wooden boats are called here. This meant new business not only for the yards but also for traditional trades like sparbuilders, blockmakers, and sailmakers.

GROOTE BEER, a luxurious botter-yacht launched in 1948 that spent many years in the United States, was extensively restored in 2003 at Nieuwboer Shipyard.



HOUTZAAGMOLEN DE RAT. The wind-powered sawmill (see photo above) where some of the Nieuwboer Shipyard's timbers are milled is itself a museum in IJlst, Friesland, not far from the maritime museum in Sneek. Originally constructed in 1683, the mill was dismantled and rebuilt in IJlst in 1829 to supply the town's eight shipyards. Threatened with demolition by the 1950s, the historic mill was saved by the city government in 1967 and restored to wind power. Open Wednesdays through Saturdays May through September and Saturdays in the off-season. See www.houtzaagmolenderat.nl (Dutch only).

BOTTER YARD ELBURG MUSEUM. At this museum yard on the eastern shore of the former Zuiderzee, you can observe demonstrations of botter construction and view exhibits of the history of this town's maritime past. The museum also offers the opportunity to go for a short ride on their restored botter. Elburg is about 60 miles east of Amsterdam. See www.botterselburg.nl.

HET SCHEEPVAARTMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM. Located in a 1658 building at the former Dutch naval storehouses,

When van Halteren needed to purchase oak crooks and a mast timber for GROOTE BEER, for example, I joined him for the drive up to Harlingen in Friesland, and found myself amazed by the stock this lumberyard keeps just for this purpose. There were plenty of long oak logs with ample sweep, from which one-piece sheerstrakes 55' long could be sawn for the GROOTE BEER



JACK VAN OMMEN

this maritime museum was reopened in 2011 after a four-year facelift and modernization. The museum is about a 15-minute walk from Amsterdam's central railroad station. The Scheepvaartmuseum, Kattenburgerplein 1, 1001 MK Amsterdam; www.hetscheepvaartmuseum.nl.

CHARTERS

Several restored *botters* owned and sponsored by the former Zuiderzee fishing ports are available for day charters. The following website lists some of them, with prices ranging from €50 to €100 per person per day: www.enjoy.nl/botter/?gclid=CNO6wsP3lq8CFY8PFAodpi7IkA.

You might do as well or better by inquiring at town tourist information kiosks in ports such as Spakenburg/Bunschoten, Huizen, Elburg, Harderwijk, Urk, de Lemmer, Enkhuizen, Hoorn, Volendam, and Monnickendam.

There are also many choices for daysails or longer charters on privately owned traditional boats. Most of the websites are in Dutch and German, but this one, listing many boats, is in English: www.bootnodig.nl/sailing_area_ijsselmeer.html.

Traditional *botters* are a lot of fun to sail on a day with a fair breeze, if you don't mind roughing it because of the limited shelter. Otherwise, a sail on a two-masted clipper or *tjalk*, particularly for overnight trips, would be a better choice.

TRADITIONAL SAILING EVENTS

You can watch *botters* and their cousins in the picturesque harbors on Friday evenings before regattas or from shore on the day of the race. Among the largest events are the Pieper Race in Volendam in April, the Zuidwal *botter* races in Spakenburg in May, races in Den Helder in June, the Jan Haring Race in Monnickendam in July, and

a *botter* gathering in Elburg in September. For a current schedule, see www.fonv.nl/vbb, the website of the organization dedicated to preserving traditional Zuiderzee boats. It's in Dutch, but click on "Evenementen" to find a list you will probably be able to decipher. —JVO



restoration. The yard custom-saws logs on a large band-saw to the required thickness. For the mast, van Halteren picked out a nice Russian larch. The lumberyard also had a pile of oak crooks of various sizes for use as knees. Most of these oddly shaped oak logs come from a plantation in Denmark that was started in the 17th century as a renewable resource for that country's shipbuilding needs. Incidentally, the maintenance and restoration of historic Dutch windmills requires oak and pine timbers very similar to those used by traditional shipbuilders.

Other former Zuiderzee fishing ports have also adopted variations of the Bunschoten/Spakenburg model for preserving maritime traditions and reviving local shipyards. Among these are Huizen, Harderwijk, Elburg, Kampen, and Urk. "But most of these yards had been closed at one time, and then, with the help of the city or provincial government, were resurrected," van Halteren said. "Nieuwboer here is the only yard that has been in continuous operation. The first Nieuwboer took it over in 1829. The other yards have had to reinvent the skills that were passed down to us. Once in a while, we observe the results from the compromises that are made when these skills and tricks have been lost. Most of these skills have never

been written down but just passed down from father to son."

In all, about 65 *botters* and 35 of their close relatives currently sail in Holland. They are organized in an association called Vereniging voor Botterbehoud (Association for the Preservation of *Botters*; see www.fonv.nl/vbb). *Botters* and traditional leeboard sailing freight barges congregate at annual regattas and informal meets around the old Zuiderzee ports for class and handicap races. They are joined by similar steel-hulled yachts, 52-footers called Lemsteraaks, one of which, GROENE DRAECK (GREEN DRAGON), was given by the Dutch people to then-Princess Beatrix in 1957 for her 18th birthday. Today, Queen Beatrix is an avid traditional sailing enthusiast and can often be seen at the helm of her Lemsteraak on the IJsselmeer.

On these occasions, once again the old sleepy seaports of the Zuiderzee come to life, and sailors sing their sea chanteys as the harbors are filled with a forest of masts. ▲

A native of Holland, Jack van Ommen now lives in Gig Harbor, Washington. He is currently in the middle of a singlehanded circumnavigation in his home-built plywood kit sloop FLEETWOOD, a Naja 30 launched in 1980. So far, the voyage has logged 34,000 miles and 43 countries. See his blog at www.cometosea.us.