

# The eternal quest for a farmstead:

Farmers behind the Northern  
Dutch dikes 16th – 20th century

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Paper workshop Sarospatak, may 2008: “Inheritance practices, marriage strategies and household formation in European rural societies”

# General research questions

- What legal practices were used in transferring farmsteads to the next generation?
- Was there a preference for the succession of sons?
- What was the relation between marriage date and the taking-over of a farm?
- What was the turnover of the control of farms?
- Where there differences between large and small farms?
- What were the changes over time?

# The ordinary picture:

- Prime goal is keeping the farm in the family, with a strong preference for sons
- Couples waited with marrying until they could take over a farm
- Result: great continuity in farm occupants, also over generations
- Farmers are nowadays still seen as relatively 'conservative' parts of the society

# The Northern Dutch coastal area from 16th century onwards:

- Most wealthy country of the world until start of the 19th century
- Farms are strongly market oriented (money economy)
- Strong specialisation of tasks in the countryside with numerous artisans, merchants and landless labourers: Farmers formed considerably less than half of the rural households
- Rural population growth till about 1650, decrease 1650-1750, increase 1750-1880. Stagnation from 1880 onwards in the not suburbanizing parts
- Equal (gender) and impartible (farmstead) inheritance
- Property rights are well protected



Eastern  
Marne  
part of the  
wealthy  
Dutch  
coastal area  
(Zeeland,  
Holland,  
Friesland  
and  
Groningen)

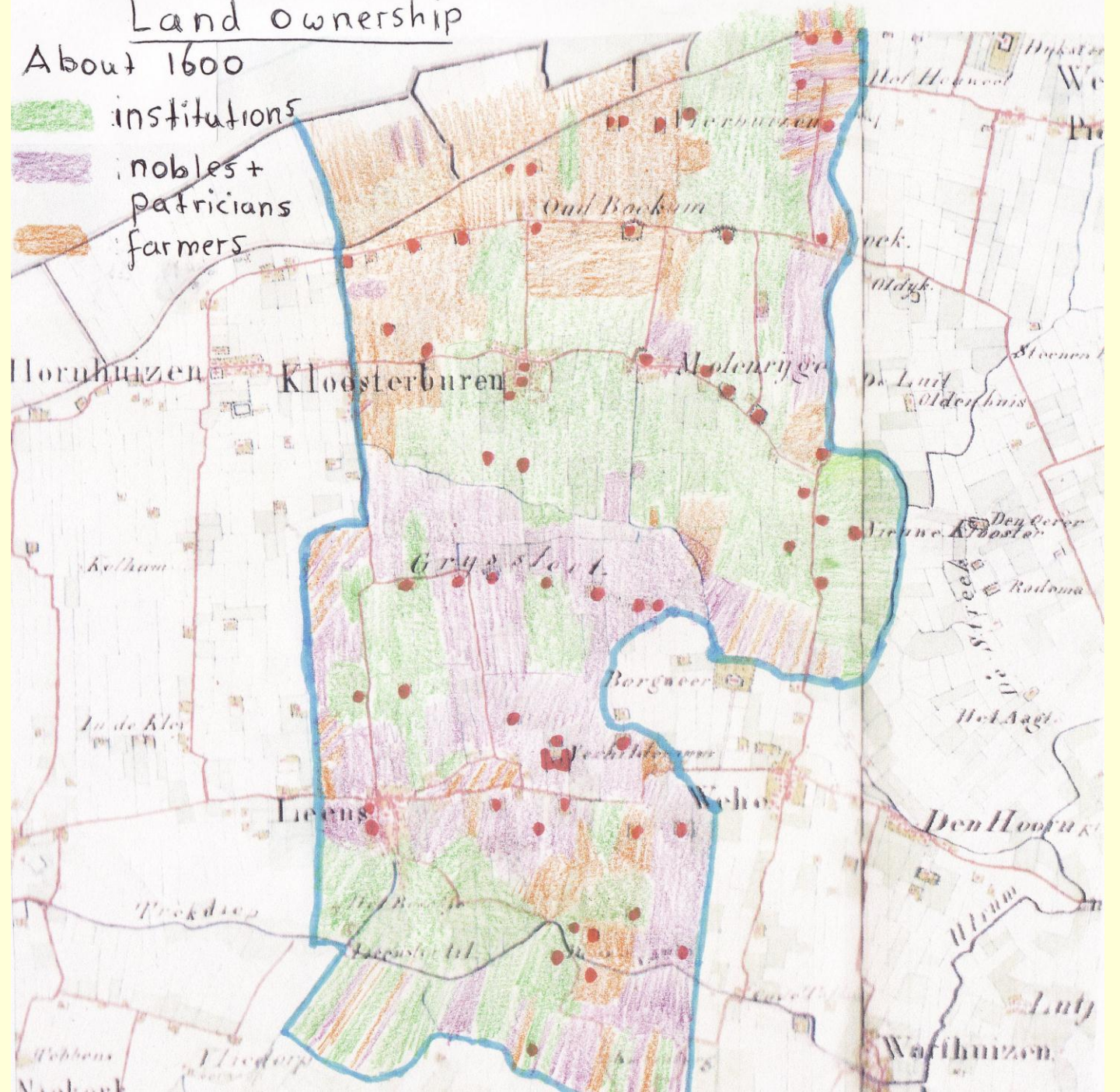
# **Specific circumstances Groningen (Eastern Marne):**

- Tenants had usually some rights to continue the use of the land from 16th century onwards. Freeholding was diminishing around 1600.

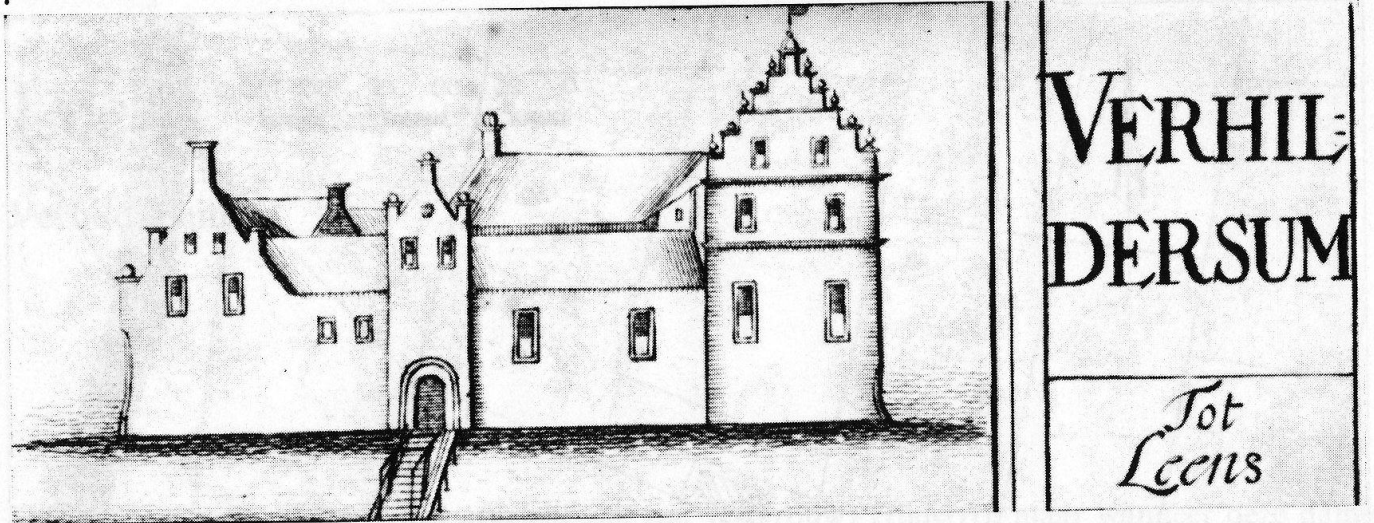
# Land ownership

About 1600

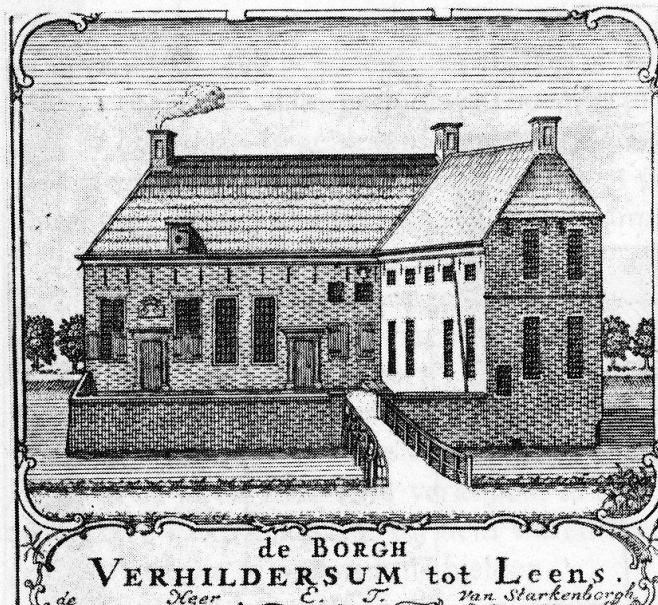
-  institutions
-  nobles + patricians
-  farmers



# Castle ('borg') Verhildersum (Leens)



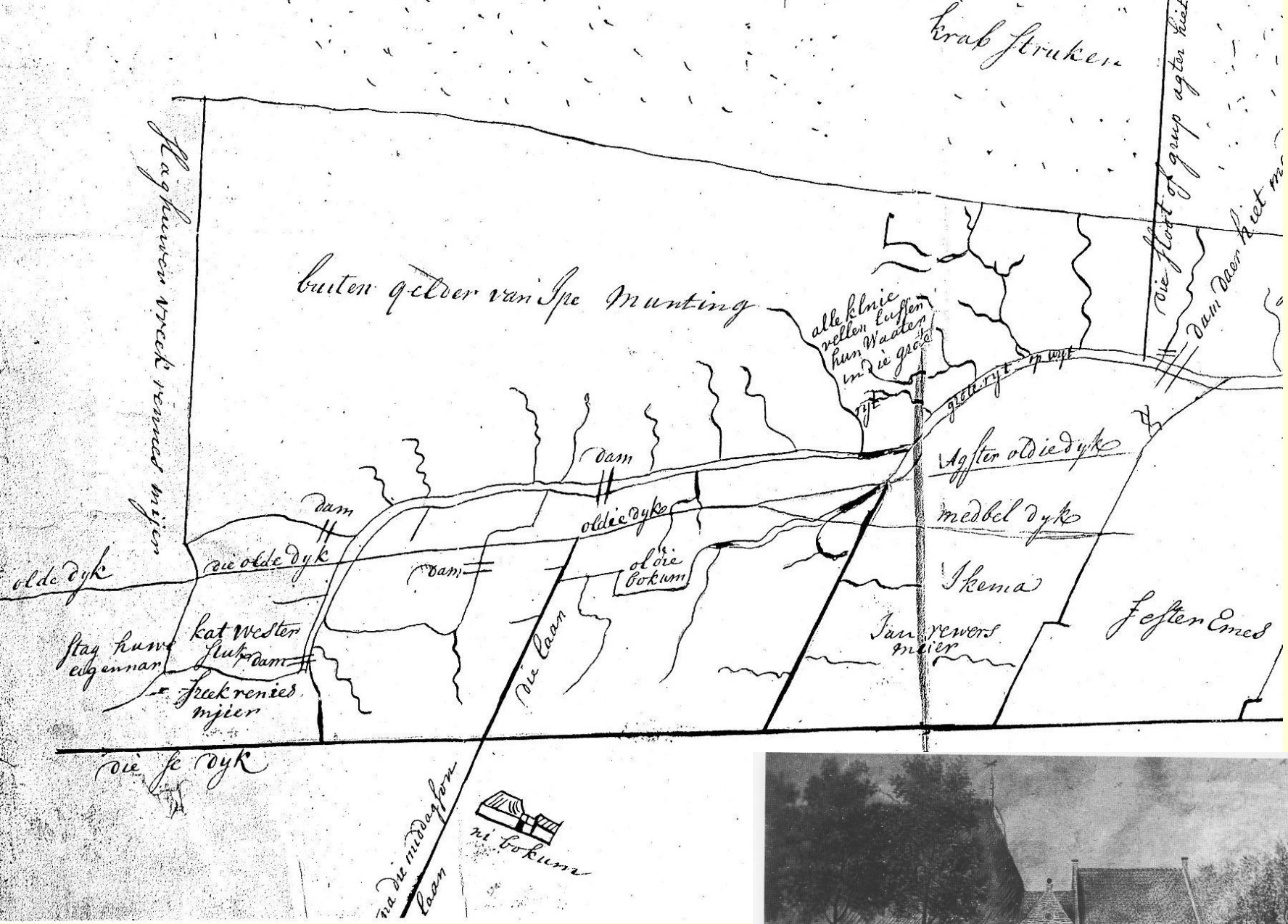
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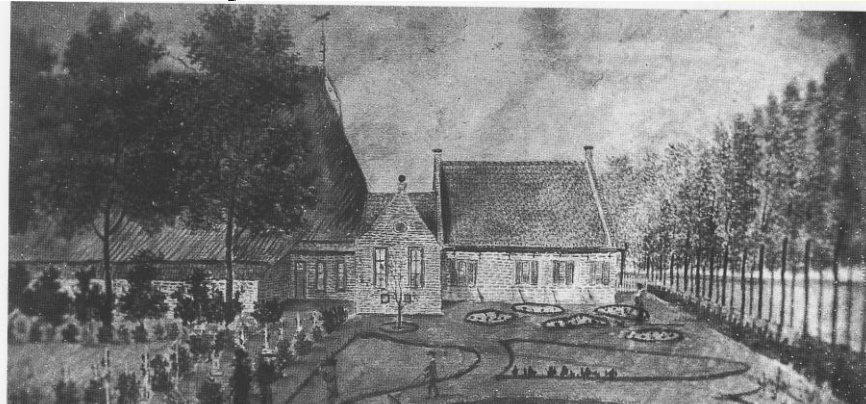
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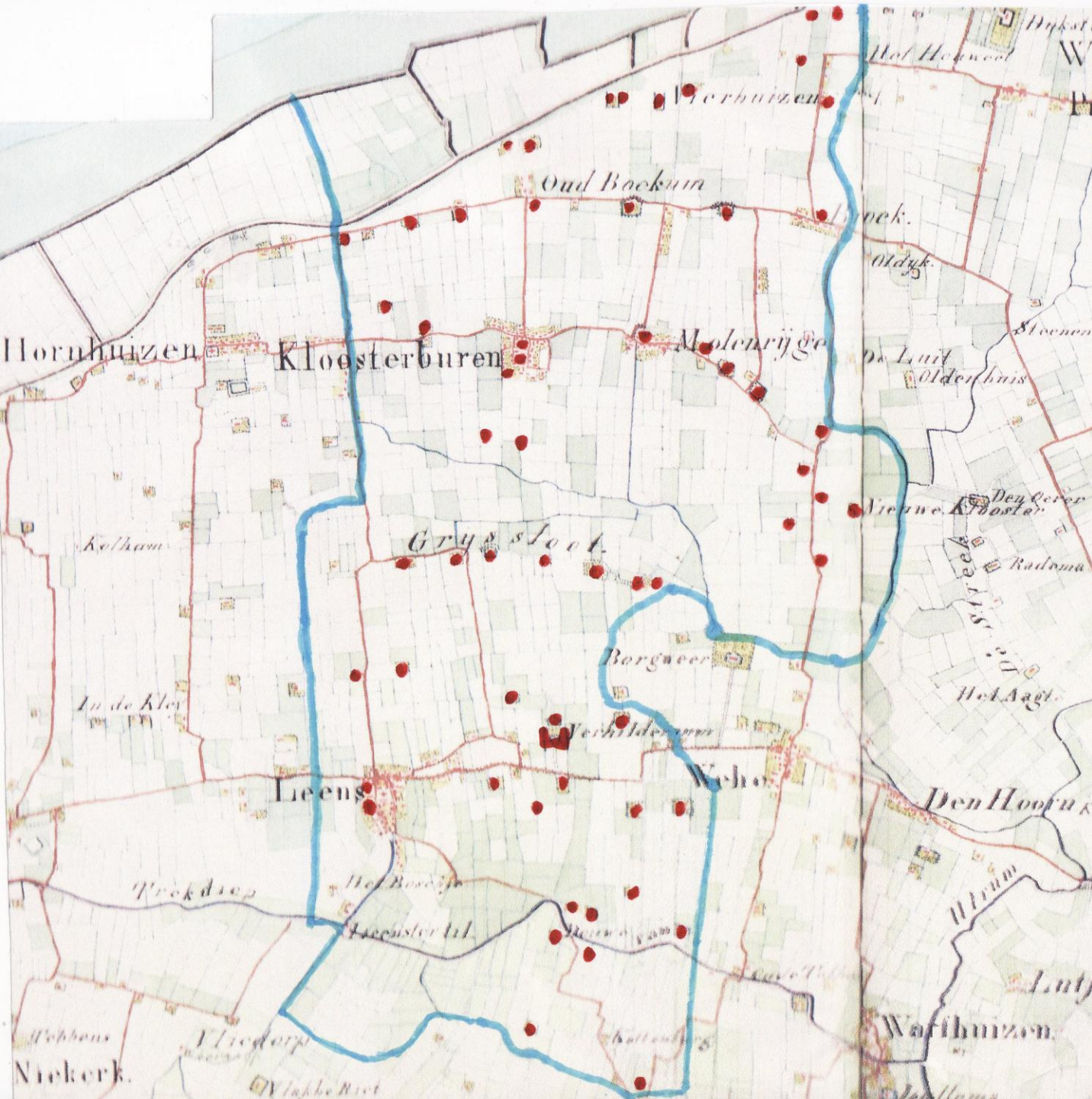
- Tenants had usually some rights to continue the use of the land from 16th century onwards. Freeholding was diminishing around 1600.
- Rents became fixed in the 18th century, resulting in most farmers becoming the actual owners of the land by 1800. Afterwards a new group of less well protected tenants developed.
- Medieval law giving privileges to succeeding sons, was overruled by most couples giving their children equal rights already in the 17th century using marriage contracts and wills
- All land was cultivated. Until the about 1750 loss of land to the sea, afterwards strong land reclamation along the coast.



Dikes 1750

1820





Farms  
in  
Klooster-  
buren,  
Wier-  
huizen  
and  
Leens  
around  
1820

**Table 1. Farms and farm-size in Kloosterburen, Wierhuizen and Leens, 1630-1991.**

	5-15 ha	15-30 ha	30-50 ha	50 + ha	Total	Hectares
1630	35%	27%	32%	5%	74	1,970
1806	31%	27%	29%	13%	70	1,970
1991	6%	12%	48%	31%	52	2,454

NB: In 1630 and 1806 a few non-farms included in the group 5-15 hectare. In 1991 there was also one large pig farm. 1630: taxable ground only.

**Farm in Leens (Grijssloot) in 1991**



**Table 2. Division of transfers of farms in the Eastern Marne, 1591-1991 (percentages)**

	<b>1591-1699</b>	<b>1700-1799</b>	<b>1800-1899</b>	<b>1900-1991</b>
<b>Son (married)</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Daughter (married)</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Unmarried child or children</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Other near relatives</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Total relatives</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>55%</b>
<b>Widow remarrying</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>Widower remarrying</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Total remarriages</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Unrelated new farmers (sold)</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>17%</b>
<b>Unrelated farmers (rented out)</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Empty / labourers / disappear.</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Non-family</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>42%</b>
<b>Unknown (not a son)</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>247</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>194</b>

**Table 3: Rough estimates of ways for (married) people to obtain a farm (all transfers) in the Eastern Marne**

	1591-1699	1700-1799	1800-1899	1900-1991
<b>Family succession</b>	<b>(21%)</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Marriage to a successor</b>	<b>(21%)</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Marriage to a widow / widower</b>	<b>(19%)</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Buying/renting from strangers</b>	<b>(40%)</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>26%</b>

**Table 5. Share of married children becoming a farmer in the Groningen clay area.**

	<b>Roman Catholics born 1721-1800</b>		<b>Sample of all inhabitants born 1830, 1850, 1870</b>	
	<b>Number of farmers</b>	<b>Percentage of all children</b>	<b>Number of farmers</b>	<b>Percentage of all children</b>
<b>Farmer Sons</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>67%</b>
<b>Farmer daughters</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>50%</b>
<b>Non-farmer sons</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Non-farmer daughters</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>6%</b>

Source: Database Roman-Catholics in the Groningen Ommelanden;  
Cohortanalysis Integral History Project Groningen.



Farmer family Feddema and personnel living in Feddemahuis, Kloosterburen (1910)



**Table 6: Difference between last marriage date and moment of becoming in charge of a farm (transfers) of children succeeding their parents or receiving a farm of them to use in the Eastern Marne, 1680-1969 (percentages).**

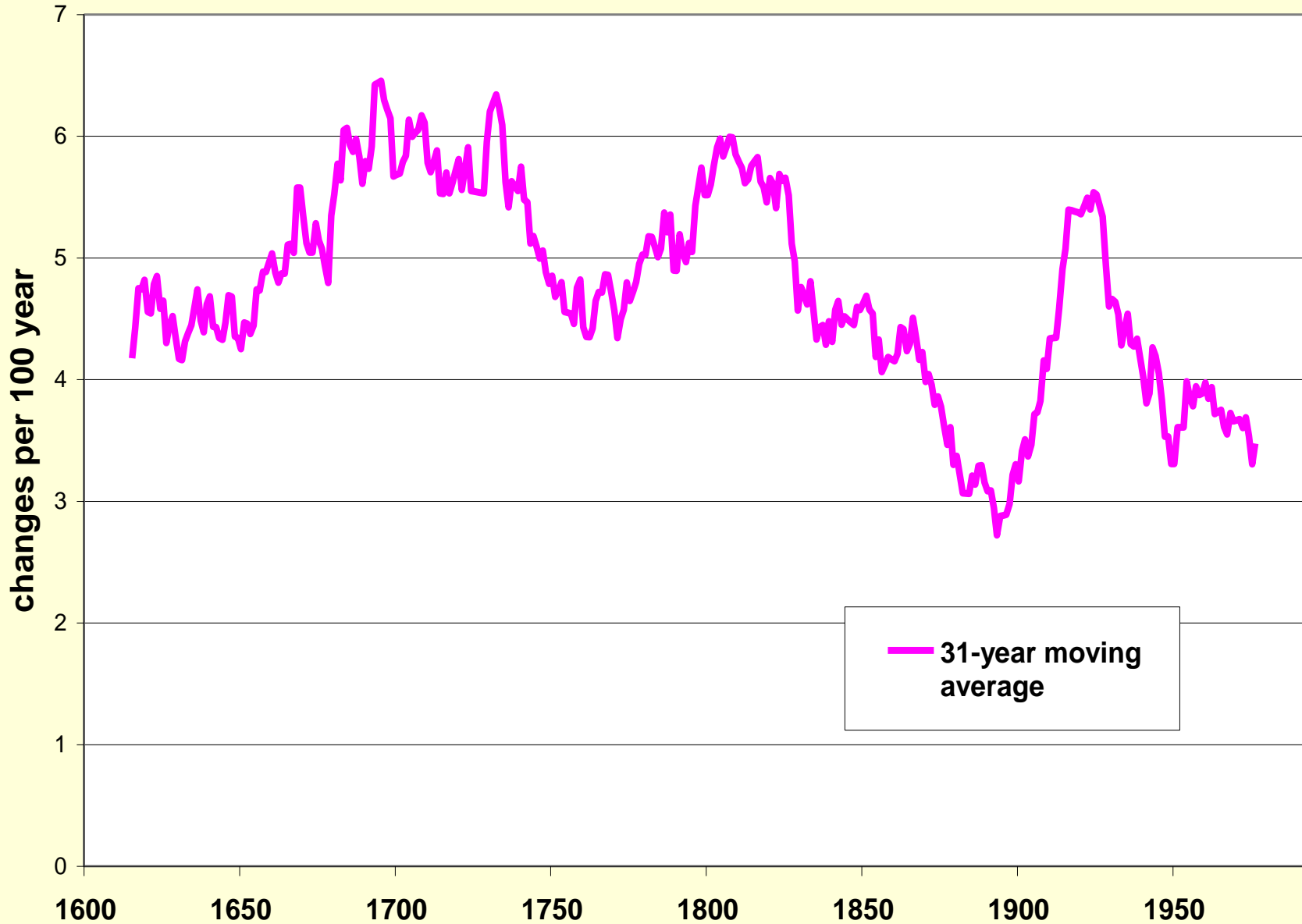
	<b>Marriage 1 or more years later</b>	<b>The same or next year</b>	<b>2-9 years after marriage</b>	<b>10 years ore more</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>1680-1799</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>1800-1879</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>1880-1969</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>57</b>

***Table 7: Difference between last marriage date and moment of becoming in charge of a farm (all transfers) of people succeeding non-relatives in the Eastern Marne, 1680-1969 (percentages).***

	<b>Marriage 1 or more years later</b>	<b>The same or next year</b>	<b>2-9 years after marriage</b>	<b>10 years ore more</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>1680-1799</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>1800-1879</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>1880-1969</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>21</b>

NB: remarrying widows and widowers were not taken into account.

# Average number of changes of male farmers in Eastern Marne per 100 year, 1600-1991





Heemsterheerd in  
Kloosterburen with  
17th century middle  
house

Map of the land (54 ha.)  
in 1730

**Table 8: Division of transfer of farms in the Eastern Marne, 1591-1991 (percentages).**

	<b>5-15</b>	<b>15-30</b>	<b>30-50</b>	<b>50+</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Son (married)</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Daughter (married)</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>
<b>Unmarried child or children</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Other near relatives</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Total relatives</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>Widow remarrying</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Widower remarrying</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Total remarriages</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>Unrelated new farmers (sold)</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>29%</b>
<b>Unrelated farmers (rented out)</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Empty / labourers / disappear.</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Non-family</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>Unknown (not a son)</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>N</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>913</b>

# Conclusions

- Dependence of farms on the market economy stimulated non-family transfers, because of the necessity of certain (financial) capabilities.
- Succession of children usually did not fit well into the family lifecycle (taking into account a preference for neolocality). Half of the would-be farmers had to buy a farm after marriage and needed financial credibility
- Farmer families presumably already had some preference for the succession of children (sons) in the 17th and 18th century, however, this goal was often not attainable, even more so for smaller farmers
- The rising welfare from 1850 onwards made retirement possible and stimulated family succession
- Mechanisation and the rise of the male cost-winner model resulted in a decrease in females tasks. Daughters and wives became alienated from the farm, which stimulated succession by sons from the end of the 19th century onwards
- Adult unmarried children running the farm for a long period was a recent phenomenon, possibly stimulated by the usually large Dutch families in the period 1900-1970, an increasing difficulty for one child to obtain a farm, and a deteriorating position of farmers on the wedding-market