

Pear tree lane

In 2018 residents of Wijk en Aalburg in the Netherlands marked the twentieth anniversary of the first planting in the restoration of an important landscape feature. **CAROLINE BOISSET** visited the lane and writes about the history and motivation behind this community project.

72

The Veldstraat (Field Lane) in the municipality of Wijk en Aalburg, which is situated along a sandy ridge, has been in existence since the Roman period; adjacent to it are several medieval buildings which are testament to its importance in the locality. Lining the lane, on what is considered to be common land, are a number of beautiful, tall, century-old pear trees. Not only could the people pick the pears in the season, as tradition allowed, but the robust character of pears made them ideal candidates to withstand the road-side conditions, wind and cold of the Dutch landscape. Stewed pears (Stoofperen) are an intrinsic part of Dutch cuisine, either as a side dish to roast meats or desserts indicating that this landscape feature was probably prevalent in the Netherlands. It is interesting to note that stewed pear tart is also a very local and seasonal speciality of the area just south of Dieppe in France.

In late spring 1998 Dr Joseph Ruprecht a long-time member of the IDS, inspired by Jelena de Belder, a fellow Slovenian and past President of the IDS, who had been brought up in Slovenia where the sculptural winter silhouette of pear trees (*Pyrus communis*) is a familiar sight, realised that the preservation of these old pear trees lay in the re-creation of the classical pear tree lane. Together with his neighbour Mrs Renny Wink, Joseph canvassed other residents of the Veldstraat who embraced the idea and all signed a petition to the municipality to have the 2.5 km lane restored; donations were also forthcoming. An article was published in the *Brabant Daily* and the municipality, in recognition of the



The Veldstraat in October 2019 with two veteran trees on the left and either side of the lane are the young trees that were planted 20 years ago.

public appeal, agreed to replant the lane as long as enough funds could be found to initiate the project. And so the Foundation for the Restoration of the Pear Tree Lane was established.

Joseph set about raising funds using his many worldwide contacts to generate support. In addition to contributions from the many Dutch supporters, donations came from Germany, Italy, England, USA, Belgium and Slovenia.

In November 1998 the first trees were planted by the Burgomaster, F. Mostert and Joseph Ruprecht. Also present at the ceremony were President Emeritus of the IDS, Dick van Hoey Smith and his wife Riet, Jelena de Belder, the director of RABO Bank who had given considerable support to the project, and many other dignitaries and members of the public. That year 42 trees were planted; in 1999 another 170 were added to the lane and in 2000, an additional 250 trees brought the total up to 462. Nearly 1,000 trees were planted in the end. It was decided to space the trees 9 m apart as every veteran tree had been in the past. This gives them sufficient space to develop into big trees that make a significant impact on the landscape without looking too sparse.

One of the aims of the foundation was to ensure the long term establishment of the lane. Part of the funds were allocated to the maintenance of the trees which have been weeded, watered and appropriately pruned in the early years. Now after 20 years they are making a positive impact on the landscape. The project has also included the involvement of young members

of the community who have been encouraged to take on the ownership of the lane and continue the tradition of caring for the trees. It was also hoped that other countries would follow the example of the Pear Tree Lane Foundation in raising funds for similar public planting projects in other countries. Road-side pear tree lanes were once ubiquitous in pre-modern Europe.

It was decided early on in the scheme to choose nine different old Dutch pear cultivars to serve several purposes. This would ensure not only the conservation of historic varieties but extend the flowering season and improve pollination. All are of the fairly small hard fleshed type which are mostly ready for picking between September and October and will keep for several months, as some of the names imply, and all, when cooked, have a strong aromatic quintessentially pear-drops flavour. By cooking them with some sugar, lemon rind, cloves and cinnamon in a little water or red wine on a very low heat for at least four hours they turn from inedible bullets to a culinary delight!

The cultivars are 'Winter John' and 'Winter Riet', the latter having fruit that will keep until Easter; 'Kruidenierspeer' ("Grocer's pear"), is an early twentieth century cultivar that owes its name to the Kruidenier family who ran fruit farms in south Holland; 'Kleipeer' ("Clay pear") a much older self-pollinating variety with yellowish-white fine flesh; 'Jut' ("Giant"), dark green turning rusty brown when ripe, with sweet, juicy flesh; 'Zoete Brederode' ("Sweet poet"), perhaps one of the most well-known varieties dating from the early nineteenth century which blooms early and is pollinated by 'Kleipeer'; 'Dierks Peer'; 'Gieser Wildeman' another self-fertile variety but good pollinator, bred in the nineteenth century, it has small brownish-yellow fruit; and 'Avezaath Kapel' which comes from a village just 36 km north-east of Wijk en Aalburg, has yellow-green fruit.

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In spring the pear trees along the lane are covered in white blossom.