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All Hans on deck as farmers separate the ship from the goats

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LELYSTAD, NETHERLANDS

Managing a farm in Europe these days is no easy task, what with mad cow disease and severe flooding.

Farmers in central Holland, though, face a rather more unusual hazard. Ancient ships keep popping up in the middle of their crops.

Roelof Wester, who owns a farm in Emmeloord, not far from Amsterdam, was ploughing his onion fields last year when his tractor struck something hard.

"I thought it was the deep roots of a tree," he recalled. "But when I started digging I found that it covered a big area, and I began to see planks. To my surprise, I realised I had found a complete ship."

The 16th-century boat was one of 435 shipwrecks to be discovered on land in recent years. The plough has become an unlikely archaeological tool. Other hulks have emerged on building sites.

The finds have become more frequent with increased rainfall and heavy flooding.

"This is a uniquely Dutch phenomenon," said Aryan Klein, project director of the Batavia Yard, in Lelystad, home to a museum set up two years ago. "But if you think about it, it is not so strange, because where we are standing was the seabed until the 1960s. Maritime history is literally underneath our feet."

Since the 1930s the Dutch have reclaimed large tracts of sea. Whole new provinces have been created by building dykes. Roads have been built and new towns and farmland created. In some parts this has resulted in ancient fishing villages being stranded amid cornfields, far from the new coastline.

The province of Flevoland, where more than 400 wrecks have been found, was part of the Zuider Zee, a large inland sea in the centre of the Netherlands. The provincial capital, Lelystad, lies above what was known as the Eastern Passage, which used to be the main channel for ships from Amsterdam.

The combination of heavy traffic and fierce gales has left the area a nautical graveyard.

There are now so many wrecks popping up that a special hotline has been set up. By law, farmers must report finding a ship within three days, then allow access to officials from the Netherlands Institute of Ship Archaeology, and stop farming that area. In return, they are paid compensation. Farmers are not always happy about this, particularly as researchers are often so hard-pressed that the wrecks are simply re-covered with soil and plastic sheeting and left for future excavation. Flevoland's flat landscape is dotted with what look like burial mounds.

The wrecks range from a 7000-year-old canoe built of an elm log, to large merchant ships used at the height of the Dutch golden age of exploration and trading.

"It's a cross-section of centuries and centuries of seafaring," said Thijs Maareleveld, deputy director of the institute.

The wrecks have proved an invaluable source for tracking the development of shipbuilding from the 13th century.

The silt has acted as such an efficient preservative that many of the ships still contain their cargoes as well as the personal possessions of the crew, such as spoons, goblets and sets of dominoes.

On one ferry that sank in a storm in the 1440s, archaeologists were astonished to open a chest to find hundreds of eggs, their shells still perfectly intact.

The hold also contained barrels of broken pewter candelabras, plates and goblets.

On the same boat a skeleton was found, the bones scarred in such a way that scientists believe they are those of a leper - nearby was a wooden rattle that lepers were obliged to carry to warn of their approach.

With five or six big new finds each year, Dr Maareleveld admits the institute has so many shipwrecks that it cannot cope.

"We have an embarrassment of riches," he said. "We are finding so many ships that we have become arrogant. If a ship is not completely intact, then we don't care and just leave it."

In perhaps the strangest episode, archaeologists were pumping out the keel of a 19th-century cargo vessel when the surrounding trench they had dug became so full of water that the ship suddenly refloated.

"For a moment it was as if it had never been wrecked at all," said Dr Maareleveld.

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