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# ‘Vloethemveld is a part of your life’:

A case study in balancing natural and cultural heritage at  
Vloethemveld (Zedelgem)

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## Abstract

In 1995 the area of Vloethemveld in Zedelgem (Belgium) became a protected landscape, marking the beginning of nature management campaigns under the ownership of the *Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos* (Agency of Nature and Forest, ANB). Despite being a nature reserve, the area also has a long history beginning from Roman times to a military school being stated at the site until the 1980s. The most impactful and still visible of these historic events, are the physical remains of the Prisoner of War (PoW) camp that was stationed at Vloethemveld between February 1945 and July 1946. The presence of these PoW camp remnants causes discussions between the organisations of the Vloethemveld partnership. The natural and cultural heritage elements of the site are in constant imbalance with one another, resulting in a hesitant treatment of the cultural heritage aspects. This case study of Vloethemveld uncovered the values involved at and local residents attach to contemporary heritage sites with natural and cultural heritage elements. The research was carried out through semi-structured interviews with respondents working with the Vloethemveld partnership or living in the near area.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Visual material</b> .....	<b>6</b>
Images. ....	6
Maps.....	6
Graphs .....	7
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
1.1 Status Quaestionis.....	9
1.1.1 Dark heritage literature .....	9
1.1.2 Literature on heritagisation of former POW camps.....	13
1.2 Sources and methodology.....	17
1.2.1 Critical acknowledgements on interview methodology.....	17
1.2.2 Memory and forgetting .....	19
<b>2 Historical context</b> .....	<b>21</b>
2.1 Growth under Bruges' Old Saint John's hospital (c. 1300 – 1715).....	21
2.2 Forest exploitation (1715-1914).....	23
2.3 First changes into military grounds (1914-1940) .....	24
2.4 Second World War and a Prisoner-of-War camp (1940-1946) .....	26
2.5 Military school and training grounds and ASP (1946-1995).....	34
2.6 Nature reserve and heritage site (1995-currently) .....	35
2.7 Current events: in the eye of the storm .....	40
<b>3 Emerging themes</b> .....	<b>45</b>
3.1 List of interviewees.....	45
3.2 Ambiguity towards the function of the site .....	45
3.3 Influence of recent events: Covid-19 .....	49
3.4 Influence of recent events: Ukraine crisis .....	50
3.5 Natural and/or cultural heritage conservation .....	52
3.6 Which (hi)story to tell.....	56
3.7 Communication .....	59
3.8 The Latvian beehive controversy .....	61
<b>4 Discussion</b> .....	<b>64</b>
4.1 Natural and cultural heritage at Vloethemveld .....	64
4.1.1 Synergetic natural and cultural heritage .....	64
4.1.2 Synergetic heritage elements at Vloethemveld .....	66
4.2 Vloethemveld as a (provoking) dark heritage site .....	68
4.2.1 To forget a dark memory.....	68
4.2.2 To provoke interest and educate .....	70

4.3	Community cohesion through IAP2 public participation .....	72
4.4	What the future will bring: some critical reflections .....	77
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>83</b>
6.1	Archival sources.....	83
6.2	Articles and books .....	83
6.3	Websites.....	89
6.4	Videos.....	92
<b>7</b>	<b>Annexes.....</b>	<b>94</b>
7.1	Examples of interview questions.....	94
7.2	Photo archive of PoW camp .....	95

## Preface

After having written a dissertation in my first Master of History, most of my friends called me crazy when I stated to them that I was going to write another one since I had decided to do another Masters. As most dissertations are often dreaded and even despised by Master students, I have to admit that I seem to enjoy to completely engulf myself in a certain topic for a year. Extending my university education with a Masters in Heritage Studies complemented perfectly what I was missing in my History courses: public interaction. Whereas in history you study interactions in the past, heritage teaches you to interact with people in the present about past happenings and how they want to preserve it for future generations. This research gave me the opportunity to co-interact with a variety of people. I was able to add to their knowledge, but most importantly learned quick a lot from my respondents.

First and foremost I want to thank the people of Vloethemveld who have welcomed me into their world and have always been very good to me. Especially Ludo Meulebrouck and Hannah Vannieuwenhuyze are thanked for their critical, yet necessary feedback throughout the project. I also want to give special thanks to Professor Suzie Thomas. From the very beginning our cooperation has been incredibly pleasant. Professor Thomas made it very clear that she was always available to give advice, support and help at any given moment. From answering e-mails right before boarding a plane to having a nice walking-meeting instead of sitting in her office, Professor Thomas proved to be a devoted professor ready to assist her students in any way possible.

Thirdly I want to thank my family and friends for the help and support throughout these past two years. To my parents, who have always been my greatest supporters and immediately approved my choice to continue to study another Master degree. To my sister who is and remains my most critical reader. Also a sincere thank you to my fellow heritage students, a wonderful group of friends, who are so different and yet so alike. We have dragged each other through every deadline and exam since day one. The magical words of Guido Everaert '*Sapere come usare il sapere*' resonated at every occasion in our heads. Most importantly we had fun with each other and I am grateful to have made such wonderful new friends.

## Visual material

### Images

Image 1: Sketch of Dartmoor Prison, the PoW barracks were placed radially in the northern half of the walled enclosure

Image 2: Example of the structure of a PoW camp during and after the Second World War

Image 3: Belgian guards at Camp 2227

Image 4: Air picture of Camp 2375 and Camp 2229, taken by the American Air Force on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1945

Image 5: Drawings from the Lithuanian PoW newspaper *Musu Viltis* at Camp 2227

Image 6: Water colouring of Vloethemveld PoW camp

Image 7: Water colouring of daily activities at the camp: delousing

Image 8: The statue of the Marianne

Image 9: The statue of George and the dragon

Image 10a-b: Examples of drawings of the barracks

Image 11: Example of one of sculptures

Images 12a-h: Pictures taken at Vloethemveld, showing the unique diversity

Image 13: The Latvian Beehive monument

Image 14: The corresponding information board

Image 15: One of the metal detecting findings at Vloethemveld: *Hautentgiftungsmittel*, a little box in bakelite where a chemical was held that detoxified the skin, dates somewhere between 1942 and 1946

Image 16: One of the metal detecting findings at Vloethemveld: copper coin showing French King Louis XV, dates somewhere between 1715 and 1774

Image 17: One of the two watchtowers at its inauguration in 2014

Image 18: A remaining sign of the time it was a military domain

Image 19: A glimpse into the interior of one of the barracks

Image 20a-b: Current state of *Ferme Bocca*

Image 21: The information board on one of the watchtowers

### Maps

Map 1: Visualisation of the location of Vloethemveld, made by GIS

Map 2: Map of the area of Vloethemveld by land surveyor T.D. Huyseune (1769)

Map 3a: The area of Vloethemveld in March 1773 demarcated on the Ferraris map

Map 3b: The area of Vloethemveld in 1873

Map 4: The location of the shooting range

Map 5: Map of the ASP, beginning of the 1930s

Map 6: Structure of the PoW camp

Map 7: A map of the ASP in 1976

## Graphs

Graph 1: Structure of the partners surrounding Vloethemveld

Graph 2: IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation

Graph 3: Institutional framework of Action Group 10

# 1 Introduction

Vloethemveld is a nature reserve near Zedelgem (West-Flanders) in Belgium that has been recognized as a protected landscape since 1995. The land covers the area between the municipalities of Zedelgem and Jabbeke and the municipal boundary runs through it. The site is owned by the *Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos* (Agency of Nature and Forest, ANB) who run it together with a partnership between representatives of the municipalities of Zedelgem and Jabbeke, partner organisations and local volunteers. The core of the partnership is the Steering Committee (SCV) who guards the phases of the management plan.

The site contains rare vegetation that are found in sandy soils in the area and is excellently maintained by ANB. Besides it being a nature leisure area, Vloethemveld also has a rich history, starting from Roman times to its years of military use between the end of the Second World War (WWII) and the 1980s. In the aftermath of WWII the area was briefly organised as a Prisoner of War (PoW) camp by the British to hold former Nazis and collaborators. Currently Vloethemveld is the only semi-public PoW site from WWII that still has physical remnants of that time like the original barrack, art pieces, wall drawings and sculptures. Because of the PoW past and how that past is reflected upon society, Vloethemveld could be considered to be a dark heritage site. There are a variety of terms linked to dark heritage like dissonant heritage or controversial heritage, but throughout this dissertation the term dark heritage will be used to describe this type of heritage site. The management of Vloethemveld struggles with that dark aspect of the site's past; throughout the years they have been trying to balance out and equally maintain both natural and cultural heritage elements. The precarious future of Vloethemveld is still widely discussed inside the partnership but equally outside of it.

The situation of Vloethemveld poses a lot of questions. Firstly there is the fact that a heritage site with such a dual status of natural and cultural heritage elements, pitches the urgent question of how sustainable the conservation of PoW camps is in relation to climate change, the needs of the flora and fauna of the site and the emotional connection stakeholders have in regard to the cultural heritage elements. Equally wanting to maintain both cultural and natural heritage aspects confronts the site with complex management challenges and needs. There are a variety of members and volunteers at play at the site but all of them have their own set of capacities and objectives. The goals and interests of the Vloethemveld partnership can lead to intense collaborations but it can also occasionally collide with one another, especially between those who prioritize the historical or nature aspect over the other and vice versa.

This dissertation collected the perceptions and opinions of fourteen respondents who work within the partnership of Vloethemveld and/or live in the area. The research centred around the question: **What do the heritage processes that are at play at Vloethemveld reveal about the contemporary values for heritage sites with natural and cultural heritage elements?** Additionally the research contributed to the knowledge of heritage process of former PoW and internment camps. But simultaneously provided insights into the debates on finding balance between natural and cultural heritage elements.

In the following a literature review on dark heritage and the heritagisation processes behind former PoW camps is presented. From there on the dissertation continues into critical acknowledgements on the methodology and the theoretical concepts of memory and forgetting. The second chapter explains how Vloethemveld has grown historically with an emphasis on the evolution of the natural elements and the material culture throughout the centuries. Chapter three talks about

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<sup>1</sup> Image front page: Vloethemveld, 'Deze morgen in Vloethemveld', Facebook, 1st of December 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid02fftZPXeiysglPHGT5Bnqups768Mx5swrnWj8jGHwZggGm7RGSetQMDbzVVCnFWkl>.



the main recurring themes during the conversations with the interviewees. A total of seven topics regularly surfaced when talking to the respondents. These topics consisted of: ambiguity towards the function of the site, influence of recent events: Covid-19 and the Ukraine crisis, discussion on natural and/or cultural heritage conservations, what history should be applied to the site, the communication system and the Latvian beehive controversy. The last chapter discusses the recurring themes and tackles them against a number of contemporary theories in the heritage field like the discussion on the divide of natural and cultural heritage, memorialisation or forgetting of dark heritage and critical thinking on public participation. The chapter concludes with a critical reflection on what these concepts may entail for the future of Vloethemveld.

## 1.1 Status Quaestionis

'Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations'.<sup>2</sup> Heritage is what connects the people of today to previous traditions, monuments, objects, cultures and natural elements of the past. These elements makes a variety of communities reflect on their own stories and how they associate themselves to their environment. It helps to shape and express identity, but also gives agency to all groups in society.

Generally heritage is divided into two categories: cultural and natural heritage. Natural heritage are restrained to natural areas who give an outstanding example of Earth's record of life.<sup>3</sup> Natural heritage has a natural significance due to its existing ecosystems, geodiversity and biodiversity but also because of the connection people have with the place.<sup>4</sup> Cultural heritage is the cultural legacy we receive from the past.<sup>5</sup> It comprises of two subfields of heritage: intangible and tangible heritage. Tangible heritage consists of monument, buildings and collections of objects that tell us a story about the past while intangible heritage expresses our inherited culture from our ancestors. These living expressions can be oral traditions, performing arts, social manners, rituals but also knowledge and practices related to nature, the universe and traditional crafts.<sup>6</sup> While there is this subdivision between tangible and intangible heritage there are numerous subfields within the study of heritage. These subfields focus on certain elements of heritage like memory studies, preventive archaeology, health and wellbeing, nostalgia etc. One of these subfields is the study of dark heritage.

### 1.1.1 Dark heritage literature

Dark heritage is a growing field in both cultural heritage studies and conflict archaeology.<sup>7</sup> Modern conflict archaeology leans closer to cultural anthropology, memory studies, landscape studies and

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<sup>2</sup> 'World Heritage', UNESCO World Heritage Convention, accessed 9th of May 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/>.

<sup>3</sup> 'Natural World Heritage'? UNESCO World Heritage Convention, accessed 9th of May 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/natural-world-heritage/>.

<sup>4</sup> Rodney Harrison and Donal O'Donnell, 'Chapter 3 Natural Heritage', in *Understanding Heritage in Practice*, ed. Susie West (Manchester University Press, 2010), 88.

<sup>5</sup> 'Cultural heritage', UNESCO, accessed 9th of May 2023, <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/cultura/patrimonio>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Cultural heritage', UNESCO, accessed 9th of May 2023, <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/cultura/patrimonio>.

<sup>7</sup> Suzie Thomas, "'Dark' Heritage? Nudging the Discussion', *Heritage & Society* 0, no. 0 (10 October 2022): 1–16; Iain Banks, Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, and Oula Seitsonen, 'Public Engagements with Lapland's Dark Heritage: Community Archaeology in Finnish Lapland', *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* 5, no. 2 (3 April 2018): 128–37.

material culture studies. There is an inherent awareness of the social and cultural value of human remains and things collected during the field research.<sup>8</sup> First described by Tunbridge and Ashworth in 1996 as dissonant heritage, dark heritage has various nuances.<sup>9</sup> Tunbridge and Ashworth argued that heritage is dissonant by its nature due to the fact that there will always be a group that will not identify with certain heritage site or objects while for others it is essential to their identity-building. Both expressions of dark and dissonant heritage would seem to derive from the field of dark tourism or thanatourism.<sup>10</sup> Lennon and Foley interpreted dark tourism as the 'presentation and consumption by visitors of real and commodified death and disaster sites'.<sup>11</sup>

Dark tourism was interpreted as a postmodern phenomenon because of its emphasis on spectacle and reproduction. It also identified the role of the media in raising public awareness leading to dark tourism becoming a type of mass tourism. Thanatourism however was defined as a way to travel to a location motivated by the desire for actual or transcendent encounters with death.<sup>12</sup> These concepts typically focused on objects that introduced feelings of anxiety and doubt on sites that were known to have been places of death, disaster and atrocity. The majority of these sites were primarily battlefields and post-war sites.<sup>13</sup> Despite these conclusions, most scholars throughout the 1990s believed that tourists visited these sites because of a morbid fascination with death and disaster.<sup>14</sup>

The study of dark tourism started out as a marginal and rather off-beat curiosity pursued by a small number of dedicated scholars. By the turn of the century, research on the relationship between tourism and death had become a mainstream research topic. This led to different adjectives being interchangeably used to describe dark tourism like, difficult, contested and negative heritage.<sup>15</sup> Dark heritage first became disengaged from dark tourism through Jeffrey Podoshen's study on the distinction between dark tourism and notions of heritage both in and of itself.<sup>16</sup> Podoshen suggested that the motivations for consuming dark tourism moved beyond the common concept of heritage as people were mainly affected by the affective and psychological elements of sites and objects.

The notion of dark heritage was first actively cited in an article by Wight and Lennon in 2007.<sup>17</sup> In their article, both scholars looked into Lithuania's twentieth century wartime tragedies seeing a connection between dark heritage and a nation's tragic past through the way it is commemorated.

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<sup>8</sup> Dawid Kobiałka, Mikołaj Kostyrko, and Kornelia Kajda, 'The Great War and Its Landscapes Between Memory and Oblivion: The Case of Prisoners of War Camps in Tuchola and Czersk, Poland', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 21, no. 1 (1 March 2017): 136.

<sup>9</sup> J.E. Tunbridge and G.J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> J. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism* (Andover, Hampshire: Cengage Learning, 2010); A.V. Seaton, 'Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2, no. 4 (1 December 1996): 234–44.

<sup>11</sup> Duncan Light, 'Progress in Dark Tourism and Thanatourism Research: An Uneasy Relationship with Heritage Tourism', *Tourism Management* 61 (1 August 2017): 278.

<sup>12</sup> Seaton, 'Guided by the Dark', 240.

<sup>13</sup> Light, 'Progress in Dark Tourism and Thanatourism Research', 278.

<sup>14</sup> G. M. S. Dann, 'Tourism: The Nostalgia Industry of the Future.', *Global Tourism: The next Decade.*, 1995, 55–67; Richard Prentice, *Tourism and Heritage Attractions*, Issues in Tourism Series (London [etc.]: Routledge, 1993); C. Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (Springer, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Suzie Thomas and Iain Banks, 'Asset, Burden, Cultybraggan. Community Site Ownership in a Scottish Village', *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* 6, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 51–68.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey S. Podoshen, 'Dark Tourism Motivations: Simulation, Emotional Contagion and Topographic Comparison', *Tourism Management* 35 (1 April 2013): 265.

<sup>17</sup> A. Craig Wight and J. John Lennon, 'Selective Interpretation and Eclectic Human Heritage in Lithuania', *Tourism Management* 28, no. 2 (1 April 2007): 519–29.

This indicated that the interest in dark heritage surpasses the fascination of death and suffering as previously thought. Despite the scope of studies on dark heritage by the mid-2000s, all scholars had meticulously avoided an attempt to define the content and boundaries of dark heritage. This led to a series of researchers who dedicated their work to trying to capture the essence of dark tourism. As a result, categories of dark tourism and different motives for visiting dark heritage places were constructed.<sup>18</sup>

Philip Stone elaborated on those theories by recognising that dark heritage and dark tourism were part of a spectrum.<sup>19</sup> This spectrum encompassed all various forms of dark heritage ranging from the lightest (a Dracula theme park in Romania) to the darkest sites (Auschwitz concentration camp). All dark heritage objects or sites are multi-layered and will be perceived to be placed variously on the spectrum amongst different groups of people in different parts of the world. These first steps eventually resulted in an universal theoretical conceptualization of dark heritage by Stone and Catherine Roberts in 2014.<sup>20</sup> Stone and Roberts were able to, for the first time, capture the evolution of the concept of dark heritage and make predictions for its future. Laura McAtackney followed this notion and looked for the potential of the site of Long Kesh/Maze Prison in Northern Ireland to be dark heritage.<sup>21</sup> McAtackney's research initiated the possibility of a wider frame of possible dark heritage sites, demonstrating that a place of former internment corresponded to the conditions of a dark heritage site.

However the central question as to how and why people are driven to visit dark heritage sites remained. Joy Sather-Wagstaff revisited this question in her book 'Heritage that Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11' where she explored the role that tourists played in the social, political and emotional impact and the ramification of the 9/11 tragedy. Sather-Wagstaff's conclusion resonated with David Uzzell's work on how affective connections emerge out of heritage itself or by personal interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Similar to Uzzell, Sather-Wagstaff argued that people need to experience the spatial and emotional magnitude of a tragedy in order to construct a wider context for understanding. This enabled them to connect with the death but also with their own lives.<sup>23</sup>

Despite its conceptualization, dark heritage today is a nuanced term that is constantly challenged and revisited in different ways by various researchers.<sup>24</sup> Darko Dimitrovski studied the

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<sup>18</sup> Rachael Raine, 'A Dark Tourist Spectrum', ed. Avital Birna and Kenneth F. Hyde, *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research* 7, no. 3 (1 January 2013): 242–56; Richard Sharpley, 'Travels to the Edge of Darkness: Towards a Typology of "Dark Tourism"', in *Taking Tourism to the Limits: Issues, Concepts and Managerial Perspectives*, 2005, 215–26; Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa, 'Shades of Dark Tourism: Alcatraz and Robben Island', *Annals of Tourism Research* 30, no. 2 (1 April 2003): 386–405.

<sup>19</sup> Philip R. Stone, 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a Typology of Death and Macabre Related Tourist Sites, Attractions and Exhibitions', *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal* 54, no. 2 (8 June 2006): 145–60.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Stone and Catherine Roberts, *Dark Tourism and Dark Heritage: Emergent Themes, Issues and Consequences* (The Boydell Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Laura McAtackney, *An Archaeology of the Troubles: The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison*, First edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> David Uzzell and Roy Ballantyne, *Heritage That Hurts: Interpretation in a Post-Modern World* (The Stationary Office, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> Joy Sather-Wagstaff, *Heritage That Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> Suzie Thomas, Oula Seitsonen, and Vesa-Pekka Herva, 'Nazi Memorabilia, Dark Heritage and Treasure Hunting as "Alternative" Tourism: Understanding the Fascination with the Material Remains of World War II in Northern Finland', *Journal of Field Archaeology* 41, no. 3 (3 May 2016): 331–43.

relationship between notions of dark heritage and dark tourism, criticizing the overuse of the latter.<sup>25</sup> Duncan Light argued that after two decades of research on dark heritage, there are still no significant distinctions between dark tourism and heritage tourism.<sup>26</sup> Suzie Thomas and Iain Banks on the other hand proved the management and scientific benefits an archaeological and/or historical site can have when assigned as dark heritage and that the dark aspect of a site is only one of the possible values ascribed to a site.<sup>27</sup> Oula Seitsonen continued Stone's spectrum theory showing that there is a variance in how 'dark' the heritage object of site appear to different people, based on their degree of inside knowledge, familiarity and intimacy with the object or site.<sup>28</sup> It is important to know that this connection with the object or site arose in the near living memory, meaning it still has a significant impact on current generations.

The field of dark heritage only started to emerge in Belgium in the last five years. Although they did not use the specific terminology, Belgian researchers agreed that there were sites with a certain sensitivity resulting in the subscription of some sites to the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience.<sup>29</sup> As a result of the disputes that arose from the Black Pete debates during the end of 2010s, Albert van der Zeijden of Utrecht University addressed the need to examine controversial heritage in the Netherlands and Flanders.<sup>30</sup> The problem with 'Zwarte Piet' (a servant of Saint Nicholas who gives gifts to the children every year on the 6<sup>th</sup> of December) lies in the different perceptions on the Saint Nicholas feast. As a result van der Zeijden recommended the need for multiperspectivity with respect, empathy and inclusivity as a basis.

By the end of 2019, together with the Antwerp Cultural Heritage Sciences (ARCHES) research group of the University of Antwerp funded by the Flemish Community, a framework to deal with sensitive heritage in institutions of cultural heritage (REGER-kader) was administered.<sup>31</sup> In 2020 the supervision of the project was taken over by Marc Jacobs, head of the department of heritage studies in Antwerp.<sup>32</sup> Partner organisations to the project consist of ADVN, the AfricaMuseum and Kazerne Dossin. This project prompted a thorough literature review in publications on heritage and opened up the concept of *controversieel erfgoed* (controversial heritage) in Flanders. Currently, the term *moeilijk erfgoed* (difficult heritage) is common but other adjectives like *dissonant* (dissonant), *donker* (dark), *pijnlijk* (painful), *beschamend* (shameful), *toxisch* (toxic) and *gecontesteerd* (contested) are used as

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<sup>25</sup> Darko Dimitrovski et al., 'Commemorative Events at Destination Memorials – a Dark (Heritage) Tourism Context', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 8 (14 September 2017): 696.

<sup>26</sup> Light, 'Progress in Dark Tourism and Thanatourism Research', 293–94.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas and Banks, 'Asset, Burden, Cultybraggan. Community Site Ownership in a Scottish Village'.

<sup>28</sup> Oula Seitsonen, *Digging Hitler's Arctic War : Archaeologies and Heritage of the Second World War German Military Presence in Finnish Lapland*, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> 'Our members: Europe', International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, accessed 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2023, <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/membership-category/europe/>.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Van Der Zeijden, 'Zwarte Piet in Meerdere Perspectief: Naar Aanleiding van Enkele Recente Publicaties', *Volkskunde: Tijdschrift over de Cultuur van Het Dagelijks Leven* 120, no. 1 (2019): 57–67.

<sup>31</sup> Marc Jacobs, Héléne Verreyke, and Jiyun Zhang, 'Erfgoed in de Jaren 2020: Adjectieven, Controverses En Strijdwaarde', *Volkskunde: Tijdschrift over de Cultuur van Het Dagelijks Leven* 123, no. 3 (2022): 249–75; 'Welcome to the Antwerp Cultural Heritage Sciences (ARCHES) research group', ARCHES, accessed 26<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/research-groups/arches/>.

<sup>32</sup> 'Controversieel erfgoed. Ontwikkeling en implementatie van een Referentiekader voor het omgaan met Gevoelig Erfgoed in instellingen voor cultureel erfgoed (REGER-kader)', FARO, accessed 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2023, <https://faro.be/project/controversieel-erfgoed-ontwikkeling-en-implementatie-van-een-referentiekader-voor-het>.

well.<sup>33</sup> The REGER project ended on October 2021, final results were to be published mid-2022. Current ARCHES research takes a closer look at new components such as toxic heritage and critical assessment of the field itself.<sup>34</sup>

Dark heritage as such is still a problematic aspect of heritage. It not only lacks a clear definition but also proves its ambiguous position in society as an established heritage site. The valorisation of such types of heritage appeals to some people but they are merely only significant on a very personal basis relating to family histories, reconcile emotionally with past incidents.

### 1.1.2 Literature on heritagisation of former POW camps

The study of dark heritage is a distinctively international field with themes that largely revolve around issues that are characteristic to the modern world. This dissertation specifically will focus on remnants of WWII in a nature reserve and how these two aspects coincide with each other's interests. The European landscape today still shows visual traces of this period of time, but often these traces have been neglected throughout the years. In the recent decade, the research field of sites of wartime internment as a form of dark heritage have been internationally growing.<sup>35</sup> The newest subdivision in this field is the interest in WWII internment camps or PoW camps. The interest in wartime internment wants to look beyond the battlefield, bringing forth new perspectives on the camps and their residents.<sup>36</sup>

In general, internment is defined as happening in a physically bounded space. These spaces are either human-made, with boundaries like barbed wire or walls or natural boundaries such as rivers or deserts.<sup>37</sup> Wartime internment is not to be compared with imprisonment as internment due to war often meets social, political, economic and military ends to a conflict, based on the racial, ethnic, political and social otherness of the PoWs. Formerly, from prehistory to early modern history, PoWs would be enslaved or were accommodated in *ad hoc* arrangements within existing places of incarceration or in buildings that could be easily adapted to this purpose.<sup>38</sup> PoWs in those days were not seen as valuable and had no rights, something that would change with the Geneva Convention in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was through the scale of the Napoleonic conflict that an army was fully confronted with the logistical problems of having PoWs.<sup>39</sup> The Napoleonic army went to great expense to keep captured soldiers from returning to the front, however with the fall of Napoleon's power and the dissolution of his army, no lasting solution was designed.

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<sup>33</sup> Vic Bervoets and Marc Jacobs, 'Erfgoed: Dissonant, Donker, Moeilijk, Pijnlijk, Beschamend, Toxisch, Gecontesteerd, ... Over Problematiserende Adjectieven', *Volkskunde* 123, no. 3 (31 December 2022): 277–96.

<sup>34</sup> Hélène Verreyke, Doris Blancquaert, and Joeri Januarius, 'Doorgeven Aan Toekomstige Generaties? Asbest: Van Magisch Mineraal Tot Toxisch Erfgoed', *Volkskunde: Tijdschrift Voor Nederlandse Folklore* 123, no. 3 (2022): 317–27; Jacobs, Verreyke, and Zhang, 'Erfgoed in de Jaren 2020: Adjectieven, Controverses En Strijdwaarde'.

<sup>35</sup> Jodi A. Barnes, 'Intimate Archaeologies of World War II: An Introduction', *Historical Archaeology* 52, no. 3 (1 September 2018): 540.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriel Moshenska, *The Archaeology of the Second World War: Uncovering Britain's Wartime Heritage* (Pen and Sword, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Gabriel Moshenska and Adrian Myers, 'An Introduction to Archaeologies of Internment', in *Archaeologies of Internment*, ed. Adrian Myers and Gabriel Moshenska, One World Archaeology (New York, NY: Springer, 2011), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Mytum and Gilly Carr, *Prisoners of War: Archaeology, Memory, and Heritage of 19th- and 20th-Century Mass Internment* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012), 4–5.

<sup>39</sup> David Avrom Bell and Sidney and Ruth Lapidus Professor David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

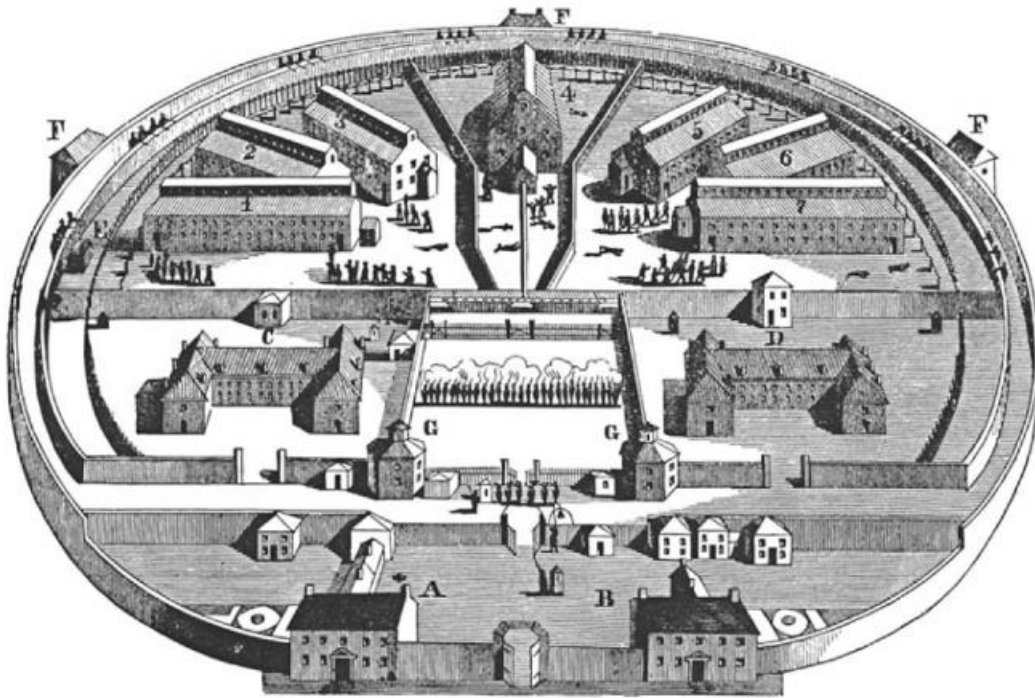


Image 1: Sketch of Dartmoor Prison, the PoW barracks were placed radially in the northern half of the walled enclosure.<sup>40</sup>

The first organised internment camps date from the second half of the nineteenth century and were structured according to the principles of surveillance, discipline and control.<sup>41</sup> These principles fitted into the nineteenth century structure of military buildings, who were built for permanent use (see image 1). With the evolution of the nation state throughout the nineteenth century, military service was implemented. This meant that more attention was given to the common soldiers since it was the country's duty to take care of its soldiers.<sup>42</sup> By the turn of the century and the implication of the First and Second World War the level of incarceration were overwhelmed by the mass imprisonment and exploitation of labour.<sup>43</sup>

This led to the creation of the common design of an army camp, with symmetrical barracks lined up after one another. These camps were envisioned as temporary settlements, to last only the duration of the conflict or at least a few years after its conclusion. These were often hastily constructed camps, characterized by a recurring set of elements like barbed wire, watch towers and cell blocks.<sup>44</sup> This concept of organising internment camps was formalized through the Hague Convention of 1899 and the successive Geneva Conventions of 1906, where it was stated that PoWs must be held under conditions similar to the soldiers of the jailing nation.<sup>45</sup> Monitoring the welfare of all PoWs was

<sup>40</sup> Mytum and Carr, *Prisoners of War*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Eleanor Conlin Casella, *The Archaeology of Institutional Confinement* (University Press of Florida, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Ludo Meulebrouck, Hannah Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Géry Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgen parel* (Oostkamp: Stichting Kunstboek, 2022), 129.

<sup>43</sup> Mytum and Carr, *Prisoners of War*, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Adrian Myers and Gabriel Moshenska, *Archaeologies of Internment* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2011), 4–5.

<sup>45</sup> Myers and Moshenska, 3.

coordinated by the international Red Cross.<sup>46</sup> Internment of this kind are often defended as a means of providing food and shelter, as well as helping to prevent epidemics.<sup>47</sup>



Image 2: Example of the structure of a PoW camp during and after the Second World War.<sup>48</sup>

Though these structures existed only briefly, they can still have a significant contemporary impact even if some of the most notorious camps have virtually disappeared from view.<sup>49</sup> Because of the ethical issues and often complex discussions connected to PoW research, dark heritage is a valid asset to this field of study. PoW heritage is often considered to be painful heritage for the former PoWs, former camp guards and the nearby residents.<sup>50</sup> In recent years many researchers in the Northern Hemisphere have started to investigate the heritagisation process of their countries' former PoW camps. This has led them to discover a more sophisticated understanding of the different meanings and values that communities, groups and individuals (CGIs) attach to such sites.<sup>51</sup> The theoretical framework of CGIs was first constructed after the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and aids in the understanding of intangible cultural elements as part of cultural heritage.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 131.

<sup>47</sup> Casella, *The Archaeology of Institutional Confinement*.

<sup>48</sup> Myers and Moshenska, *Archaeologies of Internment*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Myers and Moshenska, 6–7.

<sup>50</sup> Mytum and Carr, *Prisoners of War*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Marcel Berni and Tamara Cubito, *Captivity in War during the Twentieth Century: The Forgotten Diplomatic Role of Transnational Actors* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021); Myers and Moshenska, *Archaeologies of Internment*.

<sup>52</sup> Marc Jacobs and Jiyun Zhang, 'Immaterieel Controversieel Erfgoed. De Spagaat in Het UNESCO-Dozijn Ethische Principes, Het Nut van Een Instrumentarium En Meer "Tenzij"', *Volkskunde*, 123, no. 3 (2022): 367–90.

Throughout the 2010s, various projects were conducted on dark heritage sites. In the UK there have been studies on Welsh and Scottish sites.<sup>53</sup> Studies in Finland and Germany have intensively focused on public engagement and memory-mapping.<sup>54</sup> In the USA researchers have started to look into the various forms of WWII internment which included not only PoW camps but also internment of particular ethnicities that were considered suspicious by the government, for example Japanese Americans.<sup>55</sup> Something that connects all these cases is that organisations associated with dark heritage uncover their own wartime heritage through positive engagement with locals, survivors, their descendants and current site owners. The goals of these scholars is to raise awareness and shed light on the possibilities and challenges these sites entail, since they have various interpretations by different CGIs in term of the future of these sites.

A handful of researchers on PoW camps are linked with each other on an international scale. They all work within their own domains and countries but most of them have interchangeable worked together with one another. Iain Banks operates from Glasgow University where Suzie Thomas also formerly worked. She worked together with Banks on Cultybraggan, in Scotland. Thomas, coming from an archaeology background is also linked with the work of Gabriel Moshenska, a conflict archaeologist of University College London specialized in WWII heritage and public understanding of the past. Similar studies were carried out by Thomas and her Finnish colleagues Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto of the University of Jyväskylä and Oula Seitsonen and Vesa-Pekka Herva of the University of Oulu. Together with these Finnish colleagues, Thomas researched these Finnish WWII sites according to the similar methodologies used in Scotland.<sup>56</sup>

Belgium, and specifically Flanders, has a particular history towards WWII. Despite Belgium's neutral status since its independence in 1830, the Nazi's invaded the country on May 10<sup>th</sup> in 1940. After only eighteen days the Belgian army surrendered. What followed was an occupation period of four years where the whole country was run by the German military government. The occupation and the socio-economic consequences of it are still palpable for the Belgian civilians.<sup>57</sup> During the occupation in WWI, the Germans favoured the Flemish area in the so-called *Flamenpolitik*, supporting Flemish cultural and political movements. This WWI policy was continued during WWII, causing rifts between the people in Flemish villages and cities as some collaborated with this operation. Belgium was gradually liberated between September 1944 and February 1945, as a consequence of that gradual liberation, several PoW camps spread across the country. The British organized their camps in Flanders while the Americans settled in Wallonia. One of these PoW camps in Flanders was Vloethemveld, situated in Zedelgem. This PoW camp was British-run and held both German and Baltic PoWs. Today

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<sup>53</sup> L. Rees-Hughes et al., 'Multi-Disciplinary Investigations at PoW Camp 198, Bridgend, S. Wales: Site of a Mass Escape in March 1945', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 11, no. 2/3 (2016): 166–91; Thomas and Banks, 'Asset, Burden, Cultybraggan. Community Site Ownership in a Scottish Village'.

<sup>54</sup> Banks, Koskinen-Koivisto, and Seitsonen, 'Public Engagements with Lapland's Dark Heritage'; Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and Suzie Thomas, 'Lapland's Dark Heritage: Responses to the Legacy of World War II', *Heritage in Action: Making the Past in the Present*, 2017, 121–33; Gisela Rothenhäusler and Reinhold Adler, 'A Tale of Two Towns: Heritage and Memory of Civilian Internment in Baden-Württemberg, Germany, 1942–2012', in *Prisoners of War: Archaeology, Memory, and Heritage of 19th- and 20th-Century Mass Internment*, ed. Harold Mytum and Gilly Carr, Contributions To Global Historical Archaeology (New York, NY: Springer, 2013), 205–21; 'Julkaisu/ Publications', Lapland's Dark Heritage, accessed 26th of February 2023, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/lapland-dark-heritage/julkaisu-publications/>.

<sup>55</sup> Stacey Lynn Camp, 'Landscapes of Japanese American Internment', *Historical Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (2016): 169–86.

<sup>56</sup> 'Julkaisu/ Publications', Lapland's Dark Heritage, accessed 26th of February 2023, <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/lapland-dark-heritage/julkaisu-publications/>.

<sup>57</sup> Olivier Luminet et al., 'The Interplay between Collective Memory and the Erosion of Nation States – the Paradigmatic Case of Belgium: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Memory Studies* 5, no. 1 (1 January 2012): 3–15.



Vloethemveld is a site that, due to its contemporary status as a site of natural and cultural heritage, is confronted with complex management challenges and needs.<sup>58</sup> Typical for the organisations of dark heritage sites is that they must balance to what extent they go into the dark aspects of their site.

Due to the paucity in dark heritage studies in Belgium, Vloethemveld has long remained under-researched, this is partly because it was military territory until 2012. WWII in Belgium has mainly been researched from a historical and conflict archaeology point of view, but there is a gap in knowledge for a heritage perspective on WWII. In the last decade Ghent University has specifically focused on conflict archaeology of World War sites, only in recent years shifting their focus from WWI to WWII.<sup>59</sup> Although their research has proven valuable as it has uncovered the material culture of WWII and paid more attention to the excavations of archaeological remnants of that time, they do not provide a way on how to deal with that past and how we should commemorate it.

The leading researchers on this topic consist mainly of international scholars, with the exception of the researchers connected to the conflict archaeology research group in Ghent.<sup>60</sup> Until recently Ghent University had an archaeology research unit that aspired to uncover the affective and emotional effects behind the material culture of WWII.<sup>61</sup>

## 1.2 Sources and methodology

### 1.2.1 Critical acknowledgements on interview methodology

The objective of this dissertation is to understand how the local and nearby community around Vloethemveld feel about the usage of the site and its future. Additionally the project focussed on the perception of the participants towards the heritagisation process of Vloethemveld's cultural and natural heritage. Since its opening to the public as a nature reserve in 2012, the site still faces intense management challenges. On the one hand the structure of the partnership is complex with a lot of stakeholders and volunteers who work within a confusing framework of boards and committees. On the other hand there is the fact that Vloethemveld has a dual status of having both natural and cultural heritage values.

Opinions around this complex management and heritage duality were compiled through semi-structured interviews. This type of interviews unfolds in a conversational manner which offers the participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important.<sup>62</sup> The questions were designed, informed by literature, with different objectives depending on the person that was being interviewed and their relationship towards the site (see Annex 7.1 Examples of interview questions). This meant that certain questions appeared in all the interviews, while other questions led on from avenues of particular interest or relevance to each participant as the conversation progressed. This for example gave way to situations where some of the interviewees started to talk about the removal of the beehive monument (see chapter 2.7) without having the researcher ask about it. Conducting semi-structured

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<sup>58</sup> 'Homepage', Vloethemveld vzw, accessed 21st of February 2023, <https://vloethemveldvzw.be/>.

<sup>59</sup> Jon Price, 'Orphan Heritage: Issues in Managing the Heritage of the Great War in Northern France and Belgium', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology* 1, no. 1 (2005): 181–96; 'WWII conflict archaeology in Flanders', Ghent University Faculty of Arts and Philosophy research portal, accessed 22nd of February 2023, <https://research.flw.ugent.be/en/projects/ww-ii-conflict-archaeology-flanders>.

<sup>60</sup> 'WWII conflict archaeology in Flanders', Ghent University Faculty of Arts and Philosophy research portal, accessed 22nd of February 2023, <https://research.flw.ugent.be/en/projects/ww-ii-conflict-archaeology-flanders>.

<sup>61</sup> Wouter Gheyle et al., 'Onder de radar : een participatieve zoektocht naar sporen en verhalen uit de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Limburg', *Tijd-schrift. Heemkunde en lokaal erfgoedpraktijk in Vlaanderen* 12, no. 1 (2022): 7–23.

<sup>62</sup> Robyn Longhurst, 'Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups', in *Key Methods in Geography*, 2003, 143.

interviews give more nuanced insights into the views, routines and perceived problems of different participants because they emerge from an informal conversation. This type of interviews are a qualitative way to gather information coherently with an emotional response by the interviewee.<sup>63</sup>

A total of fourteen interviews were conducted with two of them being a double interview and one a triple interview. New participants were found following the snowball sampling procedure.<sup>64</sup> The first participants were found due to the network at play within the structure of the partnership at Vloethemveld. According to the snowballing effect, other participants were sources through personal recommendations of previous participants. A recurring criticism on the snowballing technique is that it tends to get respondents in the same networks, not reaching beyond the opinions of these networks. However half of the participants were found through advertising the project through the researcher's own social circle by sending out advertisements on social media. Both techniques provided the necessary gatekeepers who opened up the possibility to talk to new participants who would otherwise not be included in the research.<sup>65</sup>

The selection of participants was made on loose criteria like age, gender, connection to the site, how close they live to the site and so on. These criteria enabled the researcher to get the largest possible impression of the variety of local opinions concerning Vloethemveld. Naturally fourteen interviews do not scale the whole of Zedelgem's and Jabbeke's society but it is a first glimpse into the perceptions of the local community. The interviewing process was continued until the stage of saturation was reached and the interviews did not seem to provide new information.<sup>66</sup> All interviews except for one were conducted face-to-face from early October 2022 to January of 2023 in the respondent's chosen place of convenience and lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. Participants needed to give written consent in order to be recorded. Throughout the dissertation the respondents will be vaguely described to keep them from being identified since this project mainly focusses on people who gave their trust to the researcher. Information gathered at all occasions was entered into NVIVO software in order to facilitate the coding and analysis.

The researcher is aware of the subjectivity the content of these interviews have. Often retrospective interviews are seen as unreliable and cannot constitute as a primary source, especially when it is collected years later than the event or period in question.<sup>67</sup> In addition there is the notion that researchers orient respondents to the answers they seek, especially given the difficulty of following an interview guide in a machine-like way.<sup>68</sup> However, as the semi-structured interviews for this project were mainly led by the personal interest of the participant, each of the interviewees operated within their own reality of truth, speaking from their personal recollections.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Mina Dragouni and Kalliopi Fouseki, 'Drivers of Community Participation in Heritage Tourism Planning: An Empirical Investigation', *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 13 (7 April 2017): 1–20; Zahed Ghaderi et al., 'Community Participation towards Conservation of Touran National Park (TNP): An Application of Reciprocal Altruism Theory', *Journal of Ecotourism* 0, no. 0 (24 October 2021): 1–15.

<sup>64</sup> Chaim Noy, 'Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no. 4 (1 October 2008): 327–44.

<sup>65</sup> Nina C. Müller and Jenny Wiik, 'From Gatekeeper to Gate-Opener: Open-Source Spaces in Investigative Journalism', *Journalism Practice* 17, no. 2 (7 February 2023): 192–93.

<sup>66</sup> Kirsti Malterud, Volkert Dirk Siersma, and Ann Dorrit Guassora, 'Sample Size in Qualitative Interview Studies: Guided by Information Power', *Qualitative Health Research* 26, no. 13 (November 2016): 1753–60.

<sup>67</sup> Ann Langley and Nora Meziani, 'Making Interviews Meaningful', *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 56, no. 3 (1 September 2020): 373.

<sup>68</sup> Christopher J. Lively et al., 'Seeking or Controlling the Truth? An Examination of Courtroom Questioning Practices by Canadian Lawyers', *Psychology, Crime & Law* 26, no. 4 (20 April 2020): 343–46.

<sup>69</sup> Leo Van Audenhove and Karen Donders, 'Talking to People III: Expert Interviews and Elite Interviews', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Methods for Media Policy Research*, ed. Hilde Van den Bulck et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 179–97.

## 1.2.2 Memory and forgetting

An important concept to take into account while conducting this project was the possibility of a structured disposition to Vloethemveld's past, which influences its future projects. As the site is a dark heritage site, it often happens that certain parts of its history have gradually disappeared from the public's collective memory.<sup>70</sup> The degree to which a silencing or forgetting is present at Vloethemveld will be measured on the basis of two concepts: 'silence in a museum' by Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner and the 'seven types of forgetting' by Paul Connerton.<sup>71</sup> Mason and Sayner have researched to which extent museums have made or make use of silence in their wider heritage management to, consciously or unconsciously, justify their own goals.<sup>72</sup> Even though Mason and Sayner constructed their theories for museums, the concepts correspond well to what is happening at heritage sites as well. Mason and Sayner suggested that these practices of silence can occur in eight distinct ways:

- Silences in the historical record as collected by museums
- Museums being silenced by external pressures
- Museums' collusion in society's silences
- Museum using silence obliquely
- Museums thinking they have nothing to say
- Silence by design
- Museum staying respectfully silent
- Communities wishing to remain silent

During the course of this project it was important to keep in mind to what extent the partnership and inhabitants surrounding Vloethemveld had undergone a silencing of certain parts of the site's history and if they were aware of it. Vloethemveld can be valued in the future for what it can teach the public on past wrongdoings. The question is how the partnership of Vloethemveld proceeded in deciding what can and cannot be known about the site. But additionally an organisation is sometimes equally subjected to the past it carries. The legacy of a heritage site already creates a certain atmosphere to which an organisation can only tap into or actively counteract. In the case of Vloethemveld the site already has an interplay of different people, practices, collections and perspectives attached to it, which already made it difficult for the current organisational structure to get a hold on the story they want to tell about Vloethemveld.

"Sometimes 'the museum' is being acted upon by others. Sometimes 'it' is more in control. Sometimes 'the museum' recognises its power and ability to act. Other times 'it' does not because it is effectively blind to its own cultural position. In order to capture this complexity, we insist therefore that it is necessary to think always in terms of all the multiple and diffuse points of intentionality in the messy processes of production and consumption happening within the museum setting, all of which create different possibilities for silence."<sup>73</sup>

(Mason and Sayner, 2019, 16)

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<sup>70</sup> Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner, 'Bringing Museal Silence into Focus: Eight Ways of Thinking about Silence in Museums', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 6.

<sup>71</sup> Paul Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (1 January 2008): 59–71; Mason and Sayner, 'Bringing Museal Silence into Focus'.

<sup>72</sup> Mason and Sayner, 'Bringing Museal Silence into Focus'.

<sup>73</sup> Mason and Sayner, 16.

Vloethemveld is even a more special case because of its status as a nature reserve. Compared to other dark heritage sites the management of Vloethemveld extends further than its heritage objects which inevitably influenced their approach it, causing some kind of silencing.

There are various reasons why a dark heritage site tends to silence or forget elements of its history. It could be because the current history does not fit in the story the site currently wants to tell but also because the owners of a dark heritage might not like the morbid undertones and morality subtexts that are attached to it.<sup>74</sup> Confronted with a taboo, people can fall silent out of terror or panic or because they cannot find the appropriate words.<sup>75</sup> Connerton suggested seven types of forgetting to get insights into the structure behind 'forgotten' heritage objects or sites. Forgetting is often seen as a failure but it might be helpful as it can disentangle different meanings and assist in reflecting on certain matters.<sup>76</sup>

- Repressive erasure
- Prescriptive forgetting
- Forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity
- Structural amnesia
- Forgetting as annulment
- Forgetting as planned obsolescence
- Forgetting as a humiliated silence

Both practices of memory and forgetting occur everywhere in various institutions on all levels. It is important to get a hold of these situations since it tends to hold back institutions from thriving the way they should. Exposing these practices also brings long-term tranquillity within an organisation.

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<sup>74</sup> Sharpley, 'Travels to the Edge of Darkness', 158.

<sup>75</sup> Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', 68.

<sup>76</sup> Connerton, 59.

## 2 Historical context

### 2.1 Growth under Bruges' Old Saint John's hospital (c. 1300 – 1715)

Vloethemveld is situated between the municipalities of Zedelgem and Jabbeke in the northern region of the province of West-Flanders. The area consists of a historic heathland that extends from Hansbeke-Bellem to Wijnendale-Aatrijke and Zedelgem-Loppem.<sup>77</sup> An old Roman road moving towards Diksmuide intersects with the area.<sup>78</sup> The history of Vloethemveld dates back to the to the period of reclamation of the heathland areas around the year 1000. Today the area has one of the most unique heath landscapes in Europe. A heath landscape is typically characterized by small bushes in moist soil.



Map 1: Visualisation of the location of Vloethemveld, made by GIS.<sup>79</sup>

The name Vloethemveld was first mentioned around 1300 by the Count of Flanders Guy of Dampierre, he called the site *des Heerens Veldt* (the meadow of the Lord).<sup>80</sup> Along maternal lines he inherited the county of Flanders from his mother Margaret II of Constantinople in 1278.<sup>81</sup> Under his rule and with his permission, the grounds of Vloethemveld were donated to Bruges' Old St. John's

<sup>77</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>78</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>79</sup> © Sarah Kint

<sup>80</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene pael*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> Michel Nuyttens, *Krijgers voor God: de orde van de tempeliers in de Lage Landen (1120-1312)* (Leuven, Zutphen: Davidsfonds/Leuven ; Walburg Pers, 2007), 175.

hospital in 1296.<sup>82</sup> At the time the hospital was in need of new leasehold lands to support their operations. Even in that time Dampierre specifically characterized the landscape as a unique wild heath land.<sup>83</sup>

To cultivate the field, the hospital built a few farms on the edge of the area: ‘Vloethemveld’, ‘Hildegghemhof’, ‘Noortweghe’.<sup>84</sup> Throughout the coming centuries the territory would serve as an agricultural area with a mixture of wastelands, moors and active reforestation policies. The tenants paid a part of their rent in kind such as cream, sheep, carp and pike. All tenants also had the duty to replace their own straw roofs and pay for a horse and cart themselves.<sup>85</sup> Due to recurring floods a formation of numerous ponds were built by the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century. Furthermore a new pattern of roads was constructed throughout the eighteenth century to facilitate the transport of agricultural and timber production and revenues.<sup>86</sup> During a survey of the area in 1769 by land surveyor David Timotheus Huyseune, fifteen ponds were counted and mapped. The ponds and marshes were filled in and wooded which lead to dead straight avenues that crisscrossed the newly planted forest.<sup>87</sup>



Map 2: Map of the area of Vloethemveld by land surveyor T.D. Huyseune (1769).<sup>88</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Brugge, *Stadsarchief Brugge*, ASIH Inventaris van de Elst, *charter nr.249 (1296)*.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Militair domein en natuurgebied’, Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>85</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 63.

<sup>86</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 67.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Militair domein en natuurgebied’, Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>88</sup> Brugge, *Stadsarchief Brugge*, ASIH leggers buitengoederen aanvullingen, A18.



Map 3a: The area of Vloethemveld in March 1773 demarcated on the Ferraris map.<sup>89</sup>



Map 3b: The area of Vloethemveld in 1873.<sup>90</sup>

## 2.2 Forest exploitation (1715-1914)

The reign of the Habsburg Austrians from 1715 onwards marked the beginning of a period of intense forest exploitation due to an acute timber shortage and an increase in population.<sup>91</sup> To facilitate the planting of new trees, the ponds were drained (see map 3a). In 1791, the decision was made to permanently station a supervisor in the vicinity of the former ponds. His job was to oversee the expansion of agricultural land, improvement of soil quality, managing the woods and planting trees.<sup>92</sup> The supervisor lived on a farm in the middle of the area.

At the turn of the century, the Old St. John's hospital was extremely active on Vloethemveld, as they were intensively engaged in forestry. With the coming of the aftermath of the French Revolution from 1798 until 1799 and the consequent Napoleon times, the leasehold of the Old St. John's hospital came to an end. The regions were annexed to France and all church properties were confiscated by the French revolutionaries. The area became owned by the *Commissie van Burgerlijke Godshuizen* (Civil Committee of Houses of Worship, CBG) who subcontracted various new tenants while also giving them the opportunity to lease their own property.<sup>93</sup> However some of them were unable to pay for the land and were forced to leave the area. During this period of change of ownership, the activities on the site remained the same.<sup>94</sup> The supervisor who lived in farm in the middle of the domains now officially became assigned forester.

Vloethemveld's activities shifted into intense forestation. Only 4.5ha of the current points still held witness to the area's 'watery past'. More ponds disappeared during the course of this period out of demographic and economic necessity. Between 1847 and 1880 the area was plagued by periods of famine. Combined with a growing demand for wood, the newly formed Belgian government forced the area to organise massive deforestation campaigns. This completely changed the layout of the area, with former passages becoming planting areas, leading to a new grid plan (see map 3b). This campaign

<sup>89</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgen parel*, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 36.

<sup>91</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 72.

<sup>93</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 76.

<sup>94</sup> Montanus Brugge, 'De geschiedenis van 2000 jaar Vloethemveld en hoe het Sint-Janshospitaal het gebruikte als wingewest', Youtube, 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om57gB3eiwg>.

was part of a nationally organized deforestation plan to convert forest land to cropland. However many parts of the domain were of poor quality and were actually never cultivated, instead they remained fallow.<sup>95</sup>

The woodland area remained in the ownership of the CBG who kept the tradition of cultivation and maintenance. By the turn of the century a few hectares became an arboretum with over 150 tree species.<sup>96</sup> The arboretum was situated near the estate of the forester at the border of the Vloethemveld territory. It served not only as a plant and tree garden but it also as a means of education to the local people. Further development of the arboretum was halted by the unfolding of WWI in 1914.

### 2.3 First changes into military grounds (1914-1940)

During WWI the area fell into the hands of the Germans; their presence would have a lasting impact on the area. Zedelgem was an important village on the German front line. From there the soldiers left for the Yser front near Diksmuide and Nieuwpoort, or they returned from there before travelling on to Bruges to take their leave in Germany.<sup>97</sup> Throughout the first years of the war the arboretum still seemed to be in use as there are records on new cuttings that were being planted in 1916.<sup>98</sup> However the domain suffered from the wartime occupation. In addition to assisting their war efforts, the Germans cut down branches and trees for use on the Yser front. Several sawmills and charcoal kilns were installed in the territory to aid the accelerated logging of the area. A railroad was also built to transport the timber to the neighbourhood railroad.<sup>99</sup> Because the domain was quickly depleted of resources, the German soldiers decided to use the a small part of the grounds for tactical exercises and a shooting range.<sup>100</sup>



Map 4: The location of the shooting range.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 36.

<sup>96</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 84.

<sup>97</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 89.

<sup>98</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 84.

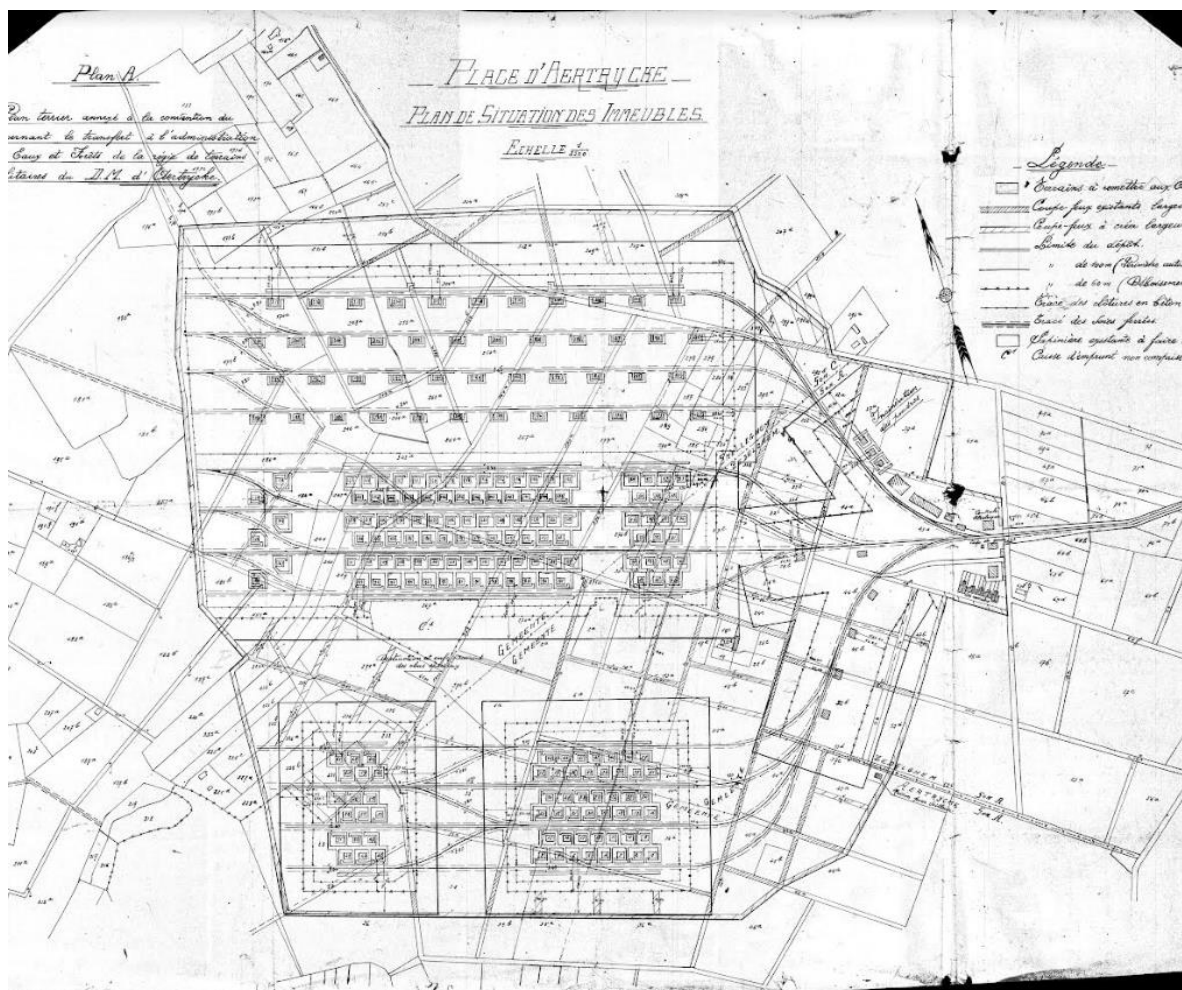
<sup>99</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>100</sup> Bjorn Lauwerijs, 'Documentaire Vloethemveld', Youtube, 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO3VjIDMlxS>.

<sup>101</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 90.



The end of the war meant the end of the German occupation in the region. However after the Armistice of the 11<sup>th</sup> of November in 1918, a large amount of Allied and German ammunition remained on the site. Despite the presence of the ammunition, the CGB immediately began replanting Vloethemveld, the plans however did not include a replantation of the arboretum.<sup>102</sup> The replanting process was numerous times put on hold due to the fact that the owners were not sufficiently aware of the amount of ammunition lying around in the area.<sup>103</sup> There was uncertainty how much was actually buried and scattered around the site. The presence of the existing ammunition, the train infrastructure that the Germans had set up and the fact that Belgium had an abundance of ammunition, caused a point of interest in the Belgian Ministry of National Defence.<sup>104</sup> Two Ministerial orders proceeded to expropriate the territory and make way for a new ammunition supply point (ASP). CBG however, who still owned Vloethemveld and who did not intend to expropriate their tenants, appealed the decision.<sup>105</sup>



Map 5: Map of the ASP, beginning of 1930s.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>102</sup> Montanus Brugge, 'De geschiedenis van 2000 jaar Vloethemveld en hoe het Sint-Janshospitaal het gebruikte als wingewest', Youtube, 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=om57gB3ejwg>.

<sup>103</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 90.

<sup>104</sup> Bjorn Lauwerijs, 'Documentaire Vloethemveld', Youtube, 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO3VjIDMlxs>.

<sup>105</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 94.

<sup>106</sup> Brugge, *Archief CC Infra – Antenne Brugge*.

In 1924 a provisional agreement provided that that CBG sold 127ha of its land to the Belgian government, and quickly after the acquisition, construction began. It is during this time that the farm of the forester would become known as *Ferme Bocca*, because of the supervisor who lived there from 1923-1926. The Belgian soldier Saturnin Bocca was in charge of the construction of the ASP including the railroads and barracks, measuring 15m by 12m. In addition to the construction of an ASP, space also had to be provided for the accommodation of the personnel.<sup>107</sup> The construction phase was finished by the summer of 1925, however due to financial problems and the repercussions of the Great Depression in the USA, the ASP was almost empty.

Not only financial deficits but also insufficient personnel provided difficulties for the management of the site. Despite the fact that the management of the site was operated by the military government, *Het bestuur der Waters en Bossen* (Agency of Waters and Forests, BWB), predecessor of *Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos* (ANB); the Ministry of Agriculture was responsible for the maintenance of the area and surrounding lands. BWB was responsible for plants and trees and the army provided the personnel to plant them and add fertilizers. Vloethemveld had the typical characteristics of an ASP. Barracks and storage areas were built along a network of parallel concrete lanes with fire ponds and protective dams.<sup>108</sup> The roofs of the barracks were painted in the green-greyish colours of the environment as camouflage.<sup>109</sup> Populus trees were planted to prevent direct view from the air. It is also during this time that the *Ferme Bocca* turned into a dining hall for officers and formed the heart of the ASP.<sup>110</sup>

## 2.4 Second World War and a Prisoner-of-War camp (1940-1946)

When the Germans invaded Belgium on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1940, Vloethemveld mainly existed out of veteran soldiers. Another regiment of older soldiers was assigned to strengthen the defence of the ASP. The situation proved unsustainable and eventually the ASP was ordered to send ammunition on ships in the port of Bruges.<sup>111</sup> The German army advanced quickly through Belgium reaching Zedelgem by the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, leaving the Belgian government to give its army the order to leave the ASP. The Germans used the area as an ASP as well but also installed watchtowers, trenches and shelters to fortify the terrain. Similar to the German occupation in WWI, the nature and biodiversity of Vloethemveld was affected.

In the aftermath of WWII the British army installed an internment camp for German PoWs at Vloethemveld.<sup>112</sup> In order to accommodate the many PoWs, a large amount of camps needed to be installed to provide for the PoWs according to the Geneva Convention of 1929. Both the Americans and the British were responsible for PoW camps on Belgian soil. The British took care of eight camps while the American army had two camps with a few smaller labour camps.<sup>113</sup> Because of its capacity, the site was quickly exceeded. In the autumn of 1944, a solution was urgently sought to open new

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<sup>107</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 96.

<sup>108</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>109</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 106.

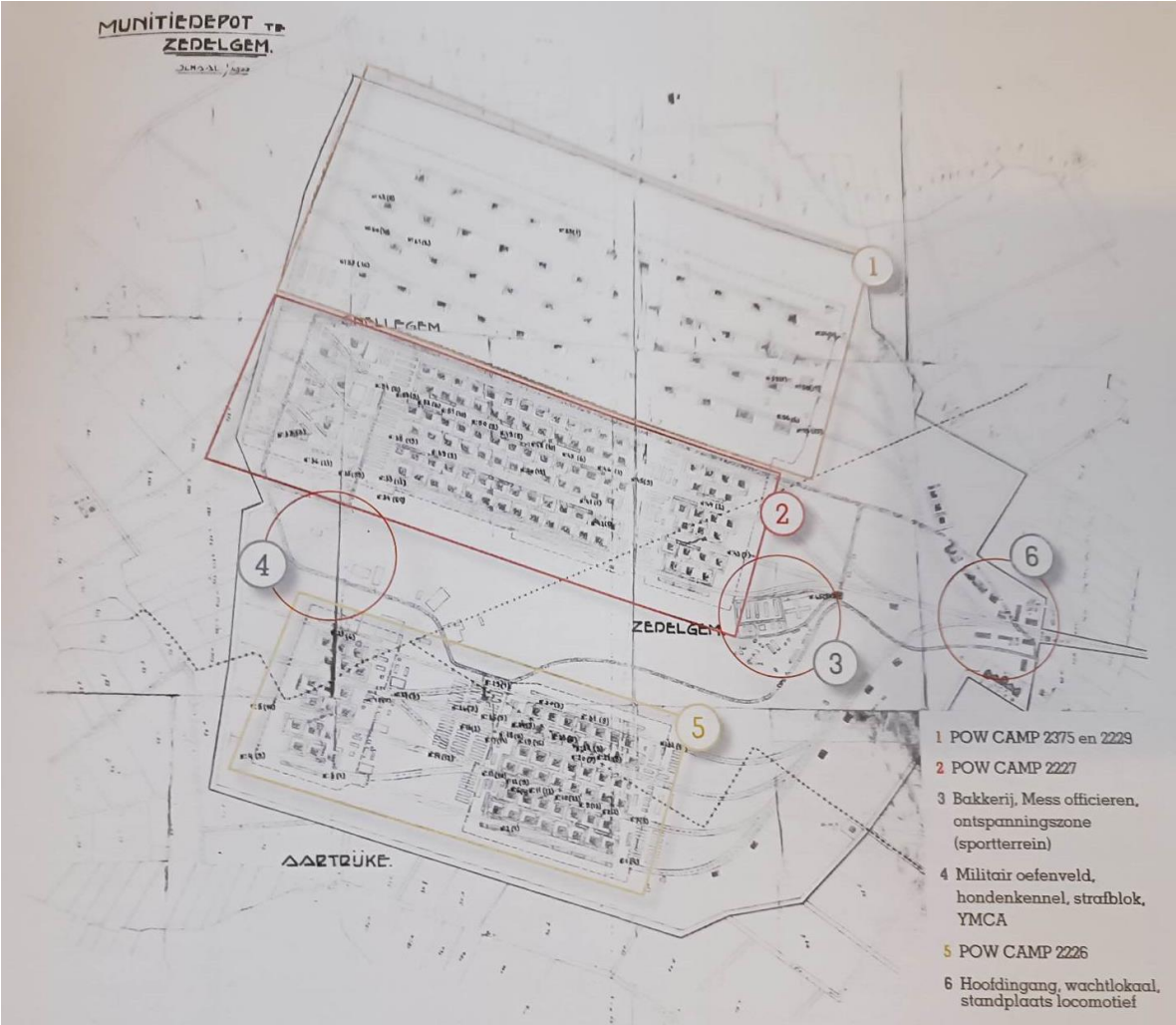
<sup>110</sup> Bjorn Lauwerijs, 'Documentaire Vloethemveld', Youtube, 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO3VjIDMlxs>.

<sup>111</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 107.

<sup>112</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>113</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 135.

PoW camps in the vicinity of the Jabbeke camp.<sup>114</sup> This led the British army to Vloethemveld, a site that could hold a capacity of 20.000 and more if needed.



Map 6: Structure of the PoW camp.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 139.

<sup>115</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 141.



Image 3: Belgian guards at Camp 2227.<sup>116</sup>

#### British Lines of Communication Camps<sup>117</sup>

ANTWERPEN	POW-CAMP nr. 2225
BRASSCHAAT	POW-CAMP nr. 2223
EDINGEN	POW-CAMP nr. 2231 and 2375
JABBEKE	POW-CAMP nr. 2224
KLUISBERGEN/KRAAI	POW-CAMP nr. 2232
TERLANEN/OVERIJSE	POW-CAMP nr. 2228
VILVOORDE	POW-CAMPS nr. 2218, 2221 and 2230
ZEDELGEM	POW-CAMPS nr. 2226, 2227, 2229 and 2375

Vloethemveld was officially opened by February 1945, the first day already 4282 PoWs were brought in spread over three trains. The area of Vloethemveld was divided into three parts encompassing four different PoW camps. The southern areas existed of Camp 2226 and Camp 2227. Both of them were organized in compounds of cages.<sup>118</sup> Each PoW camp counted three cages. Each cage consisted of number of different barracks either in stone, which were barracks of the former ASP, or in wood. Each barrack held up to 150 soldiers. One cage had a length of 850m and a width of 85m, a total of 5.500 PoWs lived in one cage. Each cage was assigned a British officer who was responsible for the cage and a *Lagerführer*, a spokesperson who acted on behalf of the prisoners and spoke both German and English. When an International Red Cross (IRC) delegate would visit the camp, the *Lagerführer* would act as a representative.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>116</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 08\_Fotos\_externen, F008 Foto's André Willaert.

<sup>117</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 134.

<sup>118</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 145.

<sup>119</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 145.



Image 4: Air picture of Camp 2375 and Camp 2229, taken by the American Air Force on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1945.<sup>120</sup>

POW 2226 consisted of 63 stone barracks and 82 wooden ones. POW 2227 had 108 stone and 61 wooden barracks. Camp 2375 and Camp 2229 were two different camps but new compared to the other camps. These camps were temporary tent accommodations of 27 wooden barracks, built to expand the capacity of Vloethemveld.<sup>121</sup> In addition to these parts, there were other buildings such as a kitchen, sanitation rooms, drying rooms and so on. A separate compound stationed in Jabbeke also provided education for young soldiers between the ages of sixteen and eighteen in collaboration with the YMCA, next to the YMCA was an infirmary with 180 beds.

It was important for the British army to determine which prisoners were still faithfully following the Nazi ideology and who had joined the army under pressure to be condemned themselves.<sup>122</sup> SS-soldiers were easy to identify since they typically had their blood type tattooed under their armpit. In the beginning three different colours were used to categorize the extent to which the prisoners were still Nazis. Black was for the outspoken Nazis, grey for the moderates and white for those who were unwillingly forced to join the army. The latter group was eligible at a later stage to be released earlier.<sup>123</sup>

The majority of PoWs who stayed in Zedelgem were Germans, but the German army also comprised several other nationalities who had joined the German cause. These minorities consisted of Latvians (12.000), Estonians (1.700), Lithuanians (1.700), Hungarians, Russians, Norwegians and Danes.

<sup>120</sup> 'Vloethemveld: munitiedepot en krijgsgevangenkamp Zedelgem (Zilleghem) Luchtfoto Wereldoorlog', Trolley Mission, accessed 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2023, <https://www.trolley-mission.de/nl/vloethemveld-munitiedepot-krijgsgevangenkamp-zedelgem-luchtfoto-wereldoorlog>.

<sup>121</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 145.

<sup>122</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, 144.

<sup>123</sup> J. Anthony Hellen, 'Temporary Settlements and Transient Populations the Legacy of Britain's Prisoner of War Camps: 1940–1948 (Temporäre Siedlungen Und Deren Wechselnde Bevölkerung: Geschichte Britischer Kriegsgefangenenlager 1940–1948)', *Erdkunde* 53, no. 3 (1999): 191–219.

The Latvians consisted of the group that overall stayed the longest in Vloethemveld. At the beginning of the war in 1940 Latvia was overrun by the Soviets who intended to install communist states in all of the Baltic states. With the ignition of Operation Barbarossa in June of 1941, the Nazis did not only attack Russia but also the Baltic states.<sup>124</sup> The Nazi invasion was applauded by a part of the Latvian population as they mainly suffered under the Soviet occupation.<sup>125</sup> This would lead to two Latvian SS-divisions who were fully integrated into the German Armed Forces. The regiment of Viktors Arājs, part of which later resided in Vloethemveld, murdered 30.000 Latvian Jews and other political opponents.<sup>126</sup> After the end of the war, the British authorities decided in August of 1945 to transfer all Baltic PoWs from Germany to Vloethemveld to avoid them falling into the hands of the Soviets. None of the Latvian soldiers wished to return to Soviet-occupied Latvia and certainly not those who faced a possible prosecution.

In this context, the Daugavas Vanagi (the eagles of the Vanagi, the river that runs through Riga) was founded. The Daugavas Vanagi was an organization that aimed to create a network of mutual support for all Latvians PoWs who were imprisoned abroad.<sup>127</sup> Over the decades the organization grew to become a proponent of uniting Latvians in order to preserve the unity of the Latvian nation.



Image 5: Drawings from the Lithuanian PoW newspaper *Musu Viltis* at Camp 2227.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>124</sup> Richards Plavnieks, 'Wartime Latvia: Viktors Arājs, Hell's Plowman', in *Nazi Collaborators on Trial during the Cold War: Viktors Arājs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police*, ed. Richards Plavnieks, The Holocaust and Its Contexts (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 14.

<sup>125</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgen parel*, 151.

<sup>126</sup> Plavnieks, 'Wartime Latvia', 43–44.

<sup>127</sup> Valters Nollendorfs, *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvija under Soviet and Nazi Occupations: 1940-1991*, Latvijas Vēsturnieku Komisija (Rīga: Inst. of the History of Latvia, 2005).

<sup>128</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 07\_Objecten\_extern, OBJ003 "Musu Viltis" – Litouws POW krantje verschenen in POW kamp 2227.



Image 6: Water colouring of Vloethemveld PoW camp.<sup>129</sup>

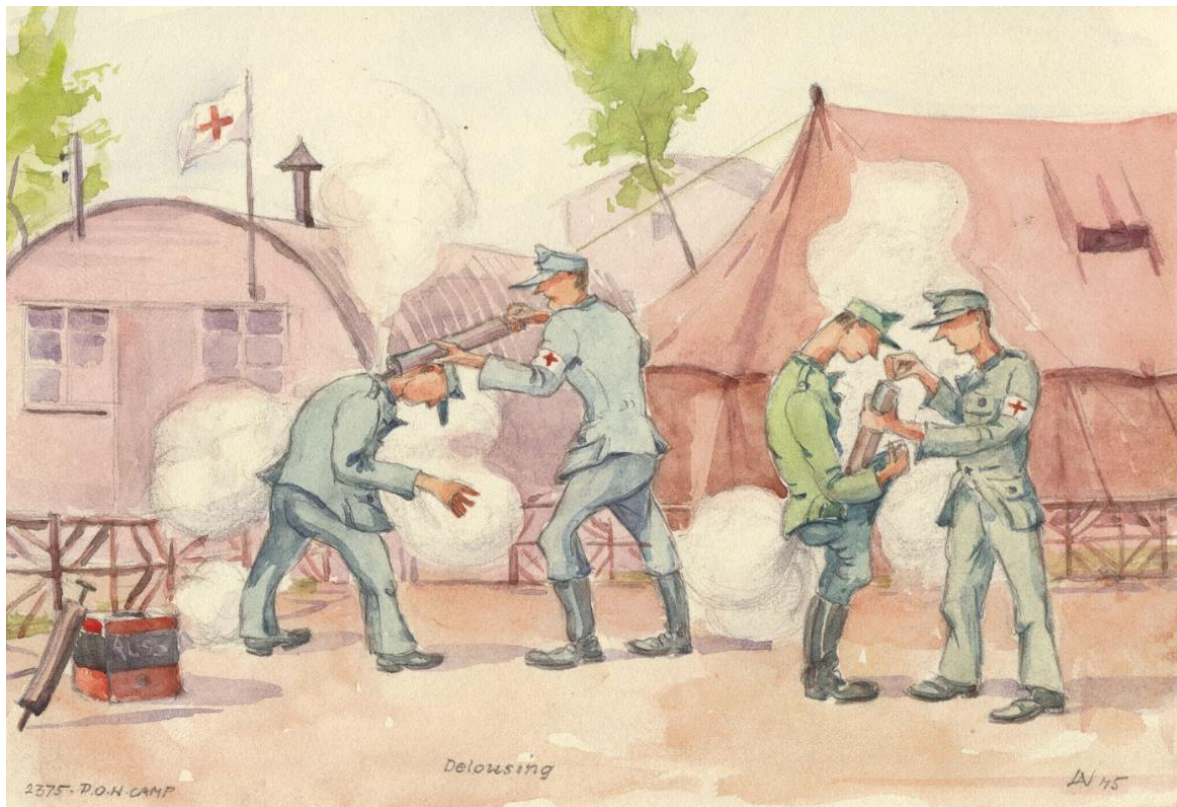


Image 7: Water colouring of daily activities at the camp: delousing.<sup>130</sup>

The PoW camp was disbanded in the summer of 1946, at the time of its closure Vloethemveld had held over 150.000 PoWs in total during the years that the camp was in use.<sup>131</sup> After camp 2224 closed a

<sup>129</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 07\_Objecten\_extern, OBJ006 Schetsboek POW-camp 2375.

<sup>130</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 07\_Objecten\_extern, OBJ006 Schetsboek POW-camp 2375.

<sup>131</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 150.

Démineurs (DE) camp was established. This was a camp where soldiers were held who were tasked with the demining of the region. The remaining PoWs who still resided in Vloethemveld were brought to Britain to be released from their imprisonment only a year or later.<sup>132</sup> Today there are still various physical remnants of the presence of the PoW camp at the site. There are still several barracks present on which there are various inscriptions and drawings that still indicate the presence of the PoWs. One of the exterior walls contains a drawing of a woman standing behind a bar counter where there is a coffee pot with cups, some sandwiches and cheese are lined up, another scenes shows a woman dancing in front of a group of men (see image 10a).<sup>133</sup> In addition to the barracks, there are also two statues, Marianne and George and the Dragon and three sculptures with landscape scenes that are preserved from that period.<sup>134</sup> They were mainly made to keep the PoWs busy in the long, difficult and uncertain times that imprisonment brought them.<sup>135</sup> The name(s) of the artist(s), remain unknown. They mainly made use of the materials that they could scavenge or make themselves. DDT formed the main component to keep the pieces of art together.<sup>136</sup> In addition to the immovable buildings and art pieces, various objects like field bottles, knots and insignias, were found in a metal detecting campaign that was carried out between 2018 and 2020.<sup>137</sup>



Image 8: The statue of the Marianne.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>133</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 157.

<sup>134</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>135</sup> Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum, *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire* (Taylor & Francis, 2012), 186–89.

<sup>136</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 154.

<sup>137</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, 159.

<sup>138</sup> Vloethemveld, 'André was een van de enthousiaste gidsen die gisteren, samen met Wim, groepen geïnteresseerde bezoeker mee op sleeptouw nam', Facebook, 11<sup>nd</sup> of September 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0hiAZsUZugQcZ8M6GThhdwAmk4Q15JAmzNZm3jFcpLv2v6U5TYbwPuSK6iv3UvtGjI>





Image 9: The statue of George and the dragon.<sup>139</sup>



Image 10a-b: Examples of drawings of the barracks.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> © Brigitte Vrielinck

<sup>140</sup> Vloethemveld, 'Conservatie van zes muurschilderingen in Vloethemveld', Facebook, 6th of July 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0on39Dpr41Q37zRwDuai5imLo9JtnnZjbFzJiEhr8AcE7yi8h5R7MmccSwWS4bNgpl>.



Image 11: Example of one of sculptures.<sup>141</sup>

## 2.5 Military school and training grounds and ASP (1946-1995)

After the camp was broken up, the barracks were retained and put back into use by the Belgian Army.<sup>142</sup> Initially, the area was desolate, many barrack needed to be replaced or were in a deplorable state. From 1950 onwards the Ministry of National Defence brought the area of Zedelgem back into use as a ASP and started major restoration works.<sup>143</sup> The protective dams were restored and replantation of the forest was organized. In the early years, the ASP was not of great significance. The site mostly stacked old ammunition instead of modern war ammunition. However the ASP's function improved when NATO troops started to be deployed around Western Europe as a response to the Warsaw Pact of 1955. Available supplies included portable firearms, artillery, mortars, mines, explosives, pyrotechnic ammunition, anti-tank missiles and grenades. Vloethemveld thus became an important centre in the logistical movement of ammunition from the West to the East. In addition, the operational ammunition for a 'quick reaction force' intervention, like in the Congo, was stored in the barracks.

In addition to the foundation of an ASP by the end of WWII, the site also became a school for the education of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) from 1951 onwards. The first year saw 356 students.<sup>144</sup> Gradually Vloethemveld grew to become a fully fletched military site with a school, ASP, sports grounds and training grounds. About 150 staff members, both military and civilian, were employed at the grounds. Good contacts with the municipality of Zedelgem throughout the 1960s even resulted in an intense partnership and collaboration. The military presence through the training grounds and military school remained throughout the 1970s and 1980s. At the beginning of the 1990s

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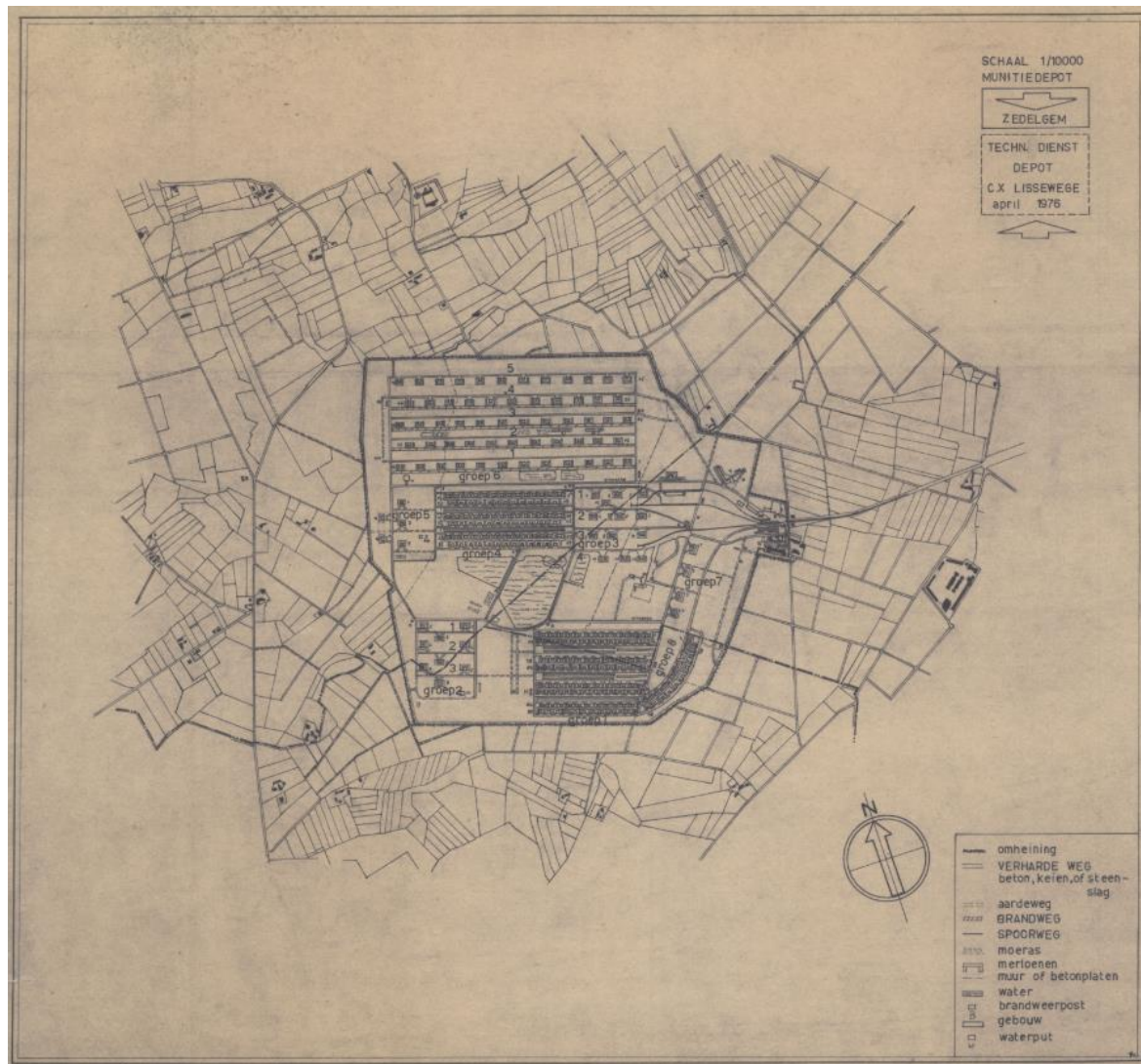
<sup>141</sup> Vloethemveld, 'Het is een feit dat het Vloethemveld ook meer en meer bekendheid krijgt buiten het Brugse Ommeland', Facebook, 9th of May 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0rhy8sBDNZ1ryzRSQjPC67DrdM28WLGtC4yTxd1brUyrukTuZL4w5unxeyjtiNKXvl>.

<sup>142</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgene parel*, 157.

<sup>143</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 109.

<sup>144</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuysse, and Cappon, 116.

the military decided to sell half of their domain to the Flemish government in name of ANB and *Vlaamse Land Maatschappij* (VLM). The area became divided into two parts with the southern part remaining a military training ground and the northern part turned into a nature reserve and put up for sale. The decaying barracks in the north of the area were cleared and the first steps were taken to protect the area. The military abandoned the ASP in 1994, the military school for NCOs would remain until 2007.



Map 7: A map of the ASP in 1976.<sup>145</sup>

## 2.6 Nature reserve and heritage site (1995-currently)

Ever since 1776 the area of Vloethemveld had been under the surveillance and management of an assigned forester. The care for the land throughout the centuries eventually would lead to Vloethemveld being marked as a nature reserve and protected landscape since 1995.<sup>146</sup> The transition from a military ASP to a nature reserve coincided with the increased attention to nature conservation in Europe throughout the 1990s. Vloethemveld became embedded in the Nature Decree of 1997,

<sup>145</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 06\_Kaarten\_plannen, K005 Kaart munitiedepot Zedelgem.

<sup>146</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> of April 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

making it a part of the Natura 2000-program. The Nature 2000-program aims to achieve the European goals by 2050 in a complex work of management, activities, protecting and monitoring nature sites.<sup>147</sup> Sites need to have a management plan that should make clear what measures are needed for the maintenance and how and where they will be implemented.

Joining the story of the Natura 2000-program prompted the Flemish government and the partners of Vloethemveld to commit themselves to the restoration and development of the area. The first years after the ASP was abandoned in 1994 the area suffered under the loss of natura management by the military.<sup>148</sup> Rubus and bushes quickly overgrew the heath in a very short time. It was foreseen that the school for NCOS would eventually leave Vloethemveld, making ANB the sole owner of the area in the long run. Between 2001 and 2007, various departments of the school were systematically closed or relocated to other locations.<sup>149</sup>

As of 2008, restoration of the heathland and protective dams in the northern part of the area began.<sup>150</sup> During the time the Old St. John's hospital owned the area, the area was characterized by its ponds. ANB wanted to restore these Medieval ponds by clearing the water of silt and ammunition. The removal of these sources gave the ponds a strong brown colour, which is typical for the fens of a heathland area. It took ANB five years to complete the nature restoration works. 2008 also marked the year where more attention was being given to the cultural heritage objects since the area was recognized as a protect cultural-historical landscape.<sup>151</sup> In 2009 an advisory committee was set up to assist in the guidance of the Vloethemveld management plan. That committee formed the basis of the current partnerships. As of 2012 the military officially left the area, making way for the nature management plan, as of that year ANB became owner and manager of Vloethemveld.

During the preparation process of the nature management plan in 2008, a first inventory was made of the immovable heritage objects present at the site. Cultural-historic research and structural research were carried out by 2012. These researched objects consisted of exceptional drawings, statues and sculptures coming from the time Vloethemveld was a PoW camp. This led to the incentive to further research these cultural heritage objects. Both the cultural and natural heritage research and maintenance actions created the need to develop a sustainable management structure that could provide for both. This resulted in a partnership between a variety of organisations, currently this partnership knows a complex structure:

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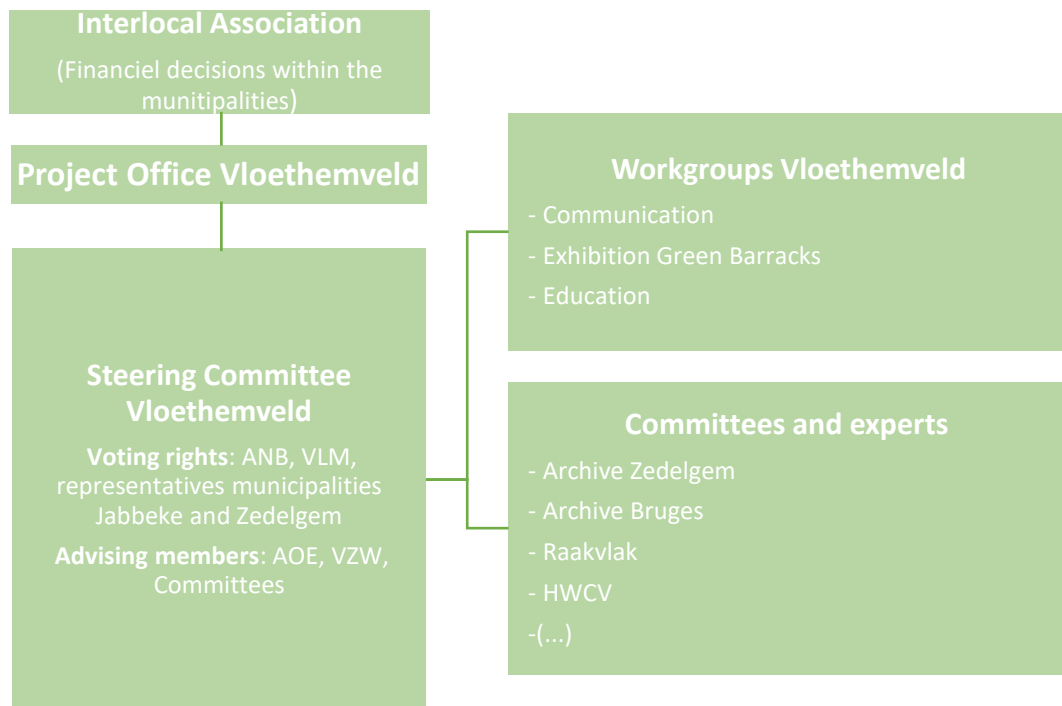
<sup>147</sup> 'Begrippen beginnende met N', Vlaanderen Natura 2000, accessed 13th of April 2023, [https://natura2000.vlaanderen.be/begrippen/letter\\_n#Natura\\_2000](https://natura2000.vlaanderen.be/begrippen/letter_n#Natura_2000).

<sup>148</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, *Vloethemveld. Verborgen parel*, 219.

<sup>149</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, 121.

<sup>150</sup> Meulebrouck, Van Nieuwenhuyse, and Cappon, 221.

<sup>151</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 23rd of May 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.



Graph 1: Structure of the partners surrounding Vloethemveld.<sup>152</sup>

In 2019 an cooperation agreement and investment program was agreed between the various organisations of the Vloethemveld partnership. In that agreement all partners committed themselves to ‘maintain the heritage, nature and public outreach of Vloethemveld’. In the context of the policy and management cycle multiannual budgets, an evaluation of the project is foreseen in 2024. Two different governmental levels of the local authorities and Flemish government are intertwined into the management structure. The core of the partnership centres around the Steering Committee of Vloethemveld (SCV). The SCV is a board of members with a representative of ANB as president; the secretary is the project coordinator of the municipalities of Zedelgem and Jabbeke. The composition of this board is two-folded with a group who has voting rights and another group whose main purpose is to advice the voting members. ANB and representatives of the municipalities of Jabbeke and Zedelgem have voting rights. The advising members consist of representatives of the non-profit organisation *Vloethemveld VZW* (VZW), representatives of VLM, *Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed* (AOE) and chairman of the *Historisch Wetenschappelijk Comité Vloethemveld* (HWCV).

The VZW is represented in the SCV with the president and vice-president. The HWCV is represented with their president. Both the VZW and the HWCV are advisory members in the SCV. The VZW’s tasks comprise of public outreach, reception of visitors and the guides. The HWCV is a group of university professors, museum researchers and local researchers interested in Vloethemveld, some of these members often attend the SCV meetings as experts as well. The archives of Zedelgem and Bruges, and *Raakvlak*, the regional archaeological agency are also integrated in the HWCV. Once a year, a meeting is organised where all items an idea about the history of Vloethemveld are exchanged. If necessary the members of the HWCV are consulted as experts. In general the HWCV is a committee that wants to build a network around heritage management and historical scientific research on the site. One of the recent outputs of the committee is a database that comprises all information about 2000 year history of Vloethemveld. Additional experts of ANB, the municipalities of Jabbeke and Zedelgem, VLM and AOE are welcome to join the meeting of SCV, but have no voting rights.

<sup>152</sup> © Ruth Kindt

Before projects get scheduled to the SCV, the Project Office prepares and elaborates topics which will be brought upon the SCV meetings. The Project Office consists of the coordinator of Zedelgem and Jabbeke and the Project Managers of ANB and VLM. The SCV has the authority to pass policy decisions on changes happening at Vloethemveld. Depending on decisions that need to be made on topics outside the reception of visitors and management plan or external funding, the plans will have to go through the Council of Mayor and Aldermen of both municipalities and through the internal proceedings of the Flemish government in order to get a green light. Most decisions of the SCV are formally approved within the SCV by the representatives of the organisations. Another organ that flows out of the SCV are the workgroups. The implementation of the decisions made in the SCV are executed by the workgroups. These groups consist of representatives of the various partners involved who have a certain knowledge or expertise. Currently, anno 2023, the SCV supervises three working groups: Communication, Exhibition Green Barracks and Education. As the SCV decides on the legislature, the Interlocal Association (IA) watches over the foreseen budgets of the municipalities. Sometimes when there are price adjustments or changes, it has to be formally reviewed by the IA.

The different organisations, gathered in the SCV, together with the other members of the partnership, care deeply about the natural and cultural heritage of Vloethemveld. They want to take care of the area, show it to the public in a sustainable way while maintaining a high level of local commitment.

The nature reserve is wonderfully maintained with a rare collection of plants who typically are found in sandy soils: orchids, sundews, common lousewort, marsh clubmoss and Dutch myrtle.<sup>153</sup> Because Vloethemveld never became agricultural land and due to the subsequent military use, the area had remained undeveloped land throughout the centuries, making way for unique natural heritage elements. Simultaneously Vloethemveld is currently the only semi-public PoW site from WWII in Belgium that still has physical remnants like the original barrack and art pieces. These cultural heritage elements give CGIs the opportunity to build their identity around the site, setting the stage for a heritagisation process.



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<sup>153</sup> Bjorn Lauwerijs, 'Documentaire Vloethemveld', Youtube, 7<sup>th</sup> of September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO3VjIDMlxs>.



Images 12a-h: Pictures taken at Vloethemveld, showing the unique diversity.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>154</sup> Vloethemveld, 'Gezwam uit Doeveren-Vloethemveld-Beisbroek', Facebook, 22nd of November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0LhNsJ4FNCV7DQj5TVZbM9JSzHNSBu1xAKBfg8mpUEBCdWknyirDEN9u6D4Wi4KBl>; Vloethemveld, 'De grijze zandbij is reeds bezig met nestbouw', Facebook, 21st of March 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid02spBaV86gzv6atUtgbRCgArFuCeQgayQXFYbXreSUxPtSCWVBiVP2tHg9kLrkP28Xl>; Vloethemveld, 'Ken je deze paddenstoelen', Facebook, 25th of October 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=189688890289601&set=pb.100077454731026.-2207520000.&type=3>; Vloethemveld, 'Wapendrager in een ex-munitiedepot!', Facebook, 28th of June 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/photos/pb.100077454731026.-2207520000./2241303369379339/?type=3>; Vloethemveld, 'Begrazing gebeurt in Vloethemveld met schapen en in mindere mate ook met geiten', Facebook, 24th of November 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/photos/pb.100077454731026.-2207520000./2053900071453004/?type=3>; Vloethemveld, 'Vanuit de waterhut van Vloethemveld is er momenteel veel vogelgenot te beleven', Facebook, 19th of January 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid02mYx5H3rHF6kC3pZsWMVMYsi4LMmJUCnaivWwVM7y6NaTqfp91wsHUA6RbUWyAsq2l>; Vloethemveld, 'Rondje Vloethemveld', Facebook, 7th of May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0rn1W2g92uGfCWZMsVwHKpv73pttztR2UzJxktc6HEctvnczjXqtoTZW9y6PQp4el>; Vloethemveld, 'Het heidekartelblad op de vochtige zure heischrale graslanden in Vloethemveld', Facebook 3rd of June 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/photos/pb.100077454731026.-2207520000./1934839343359078/?type=3>.

## 2.7 Current events: in the eye of the storm

Despite the peaceful attitude that Vloethemveld wants to propagate, the area has come under scrutiny several times in recent years. This is often linked to the site's PoW past. In January of 2020 the SCV decided to take over a few information boards that were used during an exhibition at the Atlantikwall Raversyde site in Oostende. Those information boards contained pictures of PoWs who resided in Vloethemveld. The SCV felt that these pictures could be a nice addition to the entrance of the PoW camp because it would appeal to arriving and passing by visitors. A local inhabitant however took hold of these pictures and argued that they contained false and incomplete information about the PoWs. The man specifically was worried about the fact that he felt that the Latvian Waffen-SS divisions were being glorified, mentioning that they are convicted war criminals who should not have a place in Vloethemveld. He also threatened to leak the information to the Jewish community and Unia (Centre for equal opportunities and against discrimination), hoping it would spur a public outcry. Eventually the decision was made to remove the information signs until further notice.

In the September of 2018 a monument was erected in Zedelgem to commemorate the 12.000 Latvians who were PoWs in the aftermath of the Second World War. According to the Latvian Museum of Occupation the monument presented a beehive which symbolized 'the PoWs in Zedelgem who, during their captivity, never lost faith in the freedom of the Latvian state.'<sup>155</sup> During the summer of 2021 the monument came into disrepute after questions were raised as to whether the monument did not minimize the Shoah, since some of these PoWs had committed acts of Jewish persecution.<sup>156</sup> The Vloethemveld partners had no involvement in the process of decision-making on the monument. But given the connection the Latvian beehive has to Vloethemveld, it was unavoidable to mention the controversy during the course of this project. In what follows the issues will be explained.

At the moment the monument got erected in 2018 most of the inhabitants of Zedelgem were unaware of what it stood for and why it was there.<sup>157</sup> All respondents during the course of the interviews acknowledged this. During the inauguration of the beehive, the Zedelgem municipal council mentioned that this monument was their '*afspraak met de geschiedenis*' (appointment with history). Initially in the first two years there was some back and forth about the monument but no real uproar. The Facebook page of Vloethemveld even posted a short message on their wall mentioning that a reproduction of the Latvian beehive was stationed in the entrance hall of the Occupation Museum in Riga.<sup>158</sup> In December of 2020 the question was asked in the Belgian parliament by a French speaking socialist MP 'if this monument was not problematic'.<sup>159</sup> During the course of the following months, the story was picked up by the French magazine Paris-Match. The magazine blamed the Zedelgem municipal council of opening the door to the Flemish nationalist movement, stating they paved the

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<sup>155</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'In de Bijenkorf zoemen niet alle bijen hetzelfde', *De Standaard*, 6th of December 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211205\\_98030606](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211205_98030606).

<sup>156</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'Hoe Zedelgem met zijn bijenkorf een doos van Pandora opende', *De Standaard*, 26th of June 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625\\_97565834](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625_97565834).

<sup>157</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'Ophef over Zedelgams monument dat 12.000 Letse collaborateurs eert', *De Standaard*, 25th of June 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625\\_93050137](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625_93050137).

<sup>158</sup> Vloethemveld, 'De mall van het Letse kunstwerk op het Briviba plein in Zedelgem staat te blinken aan de inkom van het occupation museum in Riga', Facebook, 24th of September 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0uwbgXMrBVLnKEwZ3FfN6VKuUrPhpDcrueZT8DsLWs43GLkTpbI3HRureNep3vMKCl>.

<sup>159</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'Hoe Zedelgem met zijn bijenkorf een doos van Pandora opende', *De Standaard*, 26th of June 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625\\_97565834](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625_97565834).



way to give recognition to the Flemish soldiers who fought equally against communism on the Eastern Front.<sup>160</sup> Driven by these articles the case received an international audience.



Image 13: The Latvian Beehive monument.<sup>161</sup>

The main problem with the monument was that it hid the problematic parts of the history of the Latvian PoWs. On his Facebook page, the monuments' sculptor Kristaps Gulbis mentioned that the artwork resembled the unified European values.<sup>162</sup> The bees symbolize those values of peace, explaining that they only sting when attacked.<sup>163</sup> Despite the good intentions of the monument, there is some context that needs to be given on Latvia's collective memory towards WWII.<sup>164</sup> A nationalist view dominates the Latvian war memory since it focusses on the fight against the Soviet Union. In their telling of the story, the Latvians who joined the Nazi division only did this to take up arms against the Soviets and communism. The Soviets were threatening their dreams for national independence. The beehive monument resembled that struggle and served as a tribute to the anti-communist patriots.<sup>165</sup> However Latvia's participation in WWII was not without controversy as the Waffen-SS divisions of which they were a part of, were also involved in mass killings of the Jewish population in Latvia. The latter information remained unmentioned in the information board near the monument.

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<sup>160</sup> Marc Reynebeau and Ester Meerman, 'Gemeente Zedelgem verwijdert omstreden oorlogsmonument na internationaal advies', *De Standaard*, 3rd of December 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211203\\_92317535](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211203_92317535).

<sup>161</sup> Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, '2018. gada 23. septembrī Beļģijas pilsētā Zedelgemā, Brīvības laukumā atklāja vides objektu "Piemineklis brīvībai", ko veidojis latviešu tēlnieks Kristaps Gulbis', Facebook, 25th of September 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/okupacijasmuzejs>.

<sup>162</sup> Kristaps Gulbis sculpture, 'Human rights, freedom and the right of nations to self-determination are fundamental values of European citizens', Facebook, 18th of September 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/GulbisKristaps/photos/pb.100059604551683.-2207520000./10155780864453980/?type=3>.

<sup>163</sup> Letse bijenkorf – Latvijas stāvstrops, 'Letse bijenkorf voor vrijheid', Facebook, 4th of November 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/PolDenysZedelgem/photos/a.1088993087930897/1088992921264247/>.

<sup>164</sup> Letse bijenkorf – Latvijas stāvstrops, 'Letse bijenkorf voor vrijheid', Facebook, 4th of November 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/PolDenysZedelgem/photos/a.1088993087930897/1088992921264247/>.

<sup>165</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'In de Bijenkorf zoemen niet alle bijen hetzelfde', *De Standaard*, 6th of December 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211205\\_98030606](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211205_98030606).



Image 14: The corresponding information board.<sup>166</sup>

During the summer of 2021 the issue got resurfaced by the Flemish media, blaming the Zedelgem municipal council for being too selective and ignorant of the role the Latvians played in WWII.<sup>167</sup> The general opinion of many experts and historians was that the municipal council had been careless in their decision-making. Pierre Muller, historian from the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) and staff member of the War Heritage Institute mentioned that Zedelgem had taken ‘an unsubtle and naïve position in a very complex historical reality.’<sup>168</sup> *Vrije Universiteit Brussel* (VUB) professor Pieter Lagrou emphasized that the beehive should not be a tribute, but rather a warning, that people should know that there were SS supporters among the PoWs.<sup>169</sup> The controversy did have support from the

<sup>166</sup> Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, ‘Šajā dienā pirms diviem gadiem Beļģijas pilsētā Zedelģemā tika atklāts tēlnieka Kristapa Gulbja veidotais piemineklis “Latvijas stāvstrops brīvībai”’, Facebook, 23rd of September 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/okupacijasmuzejs/posts/pfbid02GbjdGq3cddMzn8zLZNaWm3dCVHcWPwNTDxbcfQJWUBtJd9TNbfHhHopNH3meJKBl>.

<sup>167</sup> Marc Reynebeau, ‘Hoe Zedelgem met zijn bijenkorf een doos van Pandora opende’, *De Standaard*, 26th of June 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625\\_97565834](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625_97565834).

<sup>168</sup> Marc Reynebeau, ‘Hoe Zedelgem met zijn bijenkorf een doos van Pandora opende’, *De Standaard*, 26th of June 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625\\_97565834](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625_97565834).

<sup>169</sup> Stijn Cools, ‘Ik vrees dat er nog accidenten zoals met het Letse standbeeld zullen gebeuren’, *De Standaard*, 6th of July 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210706\\_93846375](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210706_93846375).

municipal council, who took the offences seriously. In mid-June of 2021 municipal council member Jurgen Dehaemers (CD&V-Nieuw) declared at that time, that the monument would remain, but an extensive text would be added in consultation with historical specialists in order to avoid all possible sensitivities.<sup>170</sup> This was done in cooperation with Pieter Lagrou. During the same time an expert panel of 15 Belgian and international historians was assembled to decide the fate of the monument. By the beginning of July the information board had disappeared.<sup>171</sup>

On the third of December of 2021 the municipal council released a statement:

As concluded by the experts, it was never the intention of the municipality in erecting this monument to pay homage the Nazi regime, to justify certain war crimes or to deliberately hurt people.<sup>172</sup>

The decision was made to remove the monument in accordance with the conclusions of the expert panel.<sup>173</sup> The panel had the opinion that the memories of the PoWs of the camp deserve recognition, but no homage and that it must do justice to the complexity of the historical context.<sup>174</sup> It was decided that a reflection period would be put in place to determine a new purpose for the monument.<sup>175</sup> Additionally the experts believed that Vloethemveld needed to play a role in that new purpose and that it would assist in bringing a multidimensional context to the site.<sup>176</sup> In the long run Vloethemveld could become an innovative memorial within the European thinking.<sup>177</sup> The Latvian organisations involved in the project were disappointed with the decision, stating it honours the PoWs who found a temporary sanctuary in Zedelgem.<sup>178</sup> The museum of Occupation responded that the panel had not taken the opinions of Latvia into account.<sup>179</sup> In response, the museum appealed the decision. At the time of writing this dissertation the court case is still pending.

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<sup>170</sup> Jens Vancaeneghem en Arne Franck, 'Ophef over Zedelgemse monument dat 12.000 Letse collaborateurs eert', *De Standaard*, 25th of June 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625\\_93050137](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210625_93050137).

<sup>171</sup> 'Zedelgem gaat infoborden bij omstreden monument vervangen', *De Standaard*, 7th of July 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210707\\_96228157](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20210707_96228157).

<sup>172</sup> 'Reactie gemeente op advies internationaal panel betreffende de Letse bijenkorf en de erfenis van het Britse krijgsgevangenkamp op site Vloethemveld', Gemeente Zedelgem, accessed 15th of April 2023, <https://www.zedelgem.be/reactie-gemeente-op-advies-internationaal-panel-betreffende-de-letse-bijenkorf-en-de-erfenis-van>.

<sup>173</sup> Bruno Struys, 'Bijenkorfmonument in Zedelgem blijkt nazi's te vereren: 'Haal het beeld weg'', *De Morgen*, 4th of December 2021, <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/bijenkorfmonument-in-zedelgem-blijkt-nazi-s-te-vereren-haal-het-beeld-weg~b916bb2f/>.

<sup>174</sup> 'De erfenis van het Britse krijgsgevangenkamp op de site Vloethemveld,' Belgium WWII, accessed 15th of April 2023, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/debatten/de-erfenis-van-het-britse-krijgsgevangenkamp-op-de-site-vloethemveld.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Marc Reynebeau and Ester Meerman, 'Gemeente Zedelgem verwijdert omstreden oorlogsmonument na internationaal advies', *De Standaard*, 3rd of December 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211203\\_92317535](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211203_92317535).

<sup>176</sup> 'De erfenis van het Britse krijgsgevangenkamp op de site Vloethemveld,' Belgium WWII, accessed 15th of April 2023, <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/debatten/de-erfenis-van-het-britse-krijgsgevangenkamp-op-de-site-vloethemveld.html>.

<sup>177</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'Internationaal advies: 'haal dat eerbetoon aan SS'ers weg'', *De Standaard*, 3rd of December 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211202\\_98306649](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211202_98306649).

<sup>178</sup> Aivars Sinka, 'An honourable monument to freedom – Why the Zedelgem Beehive should stay', *Latviesi*, 23rd of December 2021, <https://www.latviesi.com/jaunumi/an-honourable-monument-to-freedom-why-the-zedelgem-beehive-should-stay>.

<sup>179</sup> Marc Reynebeau, 'Koude Oorlog laait op in Zedelgem', *De Standaard*, 18th December 2021, [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211217\\_97973536](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20211217_97973536).

These two examples of controversial moments that happened in the past years did not go unnoticed to the HWCV. During their meeting of the 24<sup>th</sup> November of 2020, a member pointed out the question on how to deal with delicate aspects of Vloethemveld's turbulent past.<sup>180</sup> Another member mentioned the need to make sense of the past and in particular the PoW camp period. This would entail having to explain what happened in that period and how to deal with it, but equally how to deal with it if a visitor makes a comment about it. Throughout the meeting, the HWCV concluded to put an emphasis on peace-education, wanting to propagate universal freedom values. This attitude was continued in the next meeting of 26<sup>th</sup> November 2021, a month before the statement of the expert panel was released.<sup>181</sup> The president repeated the need to emphasize those peace-making values of Vloethemveld and made clear that the monument is an initiative of the municipality Zedelgem, and is thus separate from the Vloethemveld partnership. In their meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> December 2022 the idea was posed to set up a database of oral testimonials. This should assist in contextualising the history of Vloethemveld.

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<sup>180</sup> HWCV, *Verslag Historisch Wetenschappelijk Comité Vloethemveld 24 November 2020*, video conference: HWCV, 2020.

<sup>181</sup> HWCV, *Verslag Historisch Wetenschappelijk Comité Vloethemveld 26 November 2021*, Zedelgem: HWCV, 2021.

## 3 Emerging themes

### 3.1 List of interviewees

In the following chapter an overview will be given on the main emerging themes that recurred during the conversations with the respondents. All statements mentioned in this chapter are mere impressions and opinions of a selected group of people. The advice they give to structure and organize the natural and cultural heritage aspects of Vloethemveld are their personal beliefs and are neither false nor correct from a scientific point of view. Therefore the researcher does not take a stance on certain positions since the goal of this dissertation was to collect opinions and perceptions.

Generally there were seven recurring themes. Firstly there is the ambiguity towards the function of the site. Because of the dual heritage aspects, the inhabitants showed appreciation for the site from various angles. At the same time the Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine crisis sparked a newfound interest within some people in various aspects of the sites. However that ambiguity towards the dual heritage status proved problematic in deciding on nature or heritage conservation. Some people had a preference of one over the other while others believed in the combination of the two. Consequently questions were being raised to which story the site should tell and whether the PoW camp should be highlighted or not. Certain concerns were also raised on how the partnership communicates towards the outside world. And this is unconsciously linked to what happened during the Latvian beehive controversy. How it happened and evolved throughout the years.

Respondent	Date of interview	Gender	Approximate age
R1	5.10.2022	Male	mid-twenties
R2	15.10.2022	Male	retired
R3	19.10.2022	Female	mid-thirties
R4	20.10.2022	Female	student
R5	22.10.2022	Male	mid-fifties
R6	22.10.2022	Female	mid-fifties
R7	19.11.2022	Male	retired
R8	19.11.2022	Male	retired
R9	19.11.2022	Female	retired
R10	11.12.2022	Female	mid-sixties
R11	11.12.2022	Male	mid-sixties
R12	05.01.2023	Female	mid-forties
R13	05.01.2023	Male	mid-forties
R14	05.01.2023	Female	student

### 3.2 Ambiguity towards the function of the site

Almost all participants acknowledged that they perceive Vloethemveld to be both a natural and cultural heritage site. The SCV and the associated committees also carry this message, wanting to maintain the site according to the European and Flemish regulations and construct a unique heritage reserve.<sup>182</sup> For almost all interviewees, Vloethemveld is mainly a place of peace and quiet, somewhere to get away from the hustle and bustle of the cities and the village centre.

The various interviewees have different connections to the site. Some have lived next to Vloethemveld their whole lives, others only got to know the site due to the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

<sup>182</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 10\_beheersdocumenten\_bundels, *Ontsluitings- en herbestemmingsplan Vloethemveld*.

Those who grew up in the surroundings of Vloethemveld showed a deeper concern for the future and management of the site, than those who only enjoy it out of personal interest in nature or history. The most intense personal connection could be found within two groups, one of the retired male participants (except for R7), who have an interest in the military. These men often spend a part of their young adulthood at Vloethemveld and recalled it as a time of happiness. The second group consists of the inhabitants whose families have lived at the site for several generations. Some of these people were already the fifth generation to live in the area. During the conversations it became clear that both groups sometimes still perceive the site in a haze of nostalgia:

R9: Vloethemveld is a part of your life. Those [recent] developments have not been negative, you always have a positive and a negative side of the story. That is with everything in life (...) it has had its charms.

R8: It was a beautiful time and now it is a different time.

Because of this personal connection with the site, these people became heavily interested in the history behind 'their' Vloethemveld. Specifically the military interested men wanted to know more about the military history:

We used those fields to do sports, military tactics, running track, obstacle courses (...) I have always been very interested in history, then suddenly this story came up, that there has been a PoW camp here (...) I always followed the whole story [of Vloethemveld] specifically the military part. (R2)

However the connection with their military past has not stopped them from developing a further interest in the site, beyond the military. This group in fact is even more enthusiastic to discover more information on the sites Roman and Medieval past. They fully support the development of the site through archaeological excavations, public readings and historical research. However one of their other sparked interests is the rich nature.



Image 15: One of the metal detecting findings at Vloethemveld: *Hautentgiftungsmittel*, a little box in bakelite where a chemical was held that detoxified the skin, dates somewhere between 1942 and 1946.<sup>183</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Doos, ZE18/VL/456, Zedelgem Vloethemveld, Raakvlak, [https://collectie.raakvlak.be/ze18/vl/456?nav\\_id=0-1&id=3478728&index=174&volgnummer=2](https://collectie.raakvlak.be/ze18/vl/456?nav_id=0-1&id=3478728&index=174&volgnummer=2).



Image 16: One of the metal detecting findings at Vloethemveld: copper coin showing French King Louis XV, dates somewhere between 1715 and 1774.<sup>184</sup>

One man (R8) now often visits the site with his binoculars and bird encyclopaedia. Another (R2) mentioned how amazed he is at how wonderful it is to walk around the area and see birds, roe deer and other animals.

An inverted evolution of interest can also be seen among the local residents who do not have a specific military interest or personal connection to the site:

Originally I recognised it [Vloethemveld] as a nature reserve. It is then by coming here in Zedelgem and the new contacts I made with different people from Zedelgem that I now also perceive it as a mixed site, a nature reserve with a historical area. (R7)

In the case of most of the older local residents, they first experienced Vloethemveld as a nature reserve. Although most of them had heard of it being military grounds, they now have rediscovered it as a leisure area where they can go for a walk, walk the dog, or visit with the grandchildren. They like the close-by green area that gives them a place to breathe and also appreciate the recent lavatories that have been installed at the reception building. The outer edge of the walking trail is accessible for people in wheelchairs and strollers. The only criticism those participants have, is that the barrack area is rough terrain and not easy accessible to some. The fact that there seems to be no discussion on accessibility bothers them. Despite their initially connection with the site as a nature reserve, they are currently rediscovering the history behind the site. Their favourite historic element is the PoW history.

The younger and middle aged interviewees who were children or young teenagers when the military left the grounds, have only known the area as a nature reserve. Since then, they have only shown interest in the site depending on their personal interest like sports, birdwatching, nature, photography and sometimes history. However through seeing physical remnants on the domain, they

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<sup>184</sup> Munt, ZE18/VL/665, Zedelgem Vloethemveld, Raakvlak, [https://collectie.raakvlak.be/ze18/vl/665?nav\\_id=0-1&index=0&imgid=4977564&id=4974722](https://collectie.raakvlak.be/ze18/vl/665?nav_id=0-1&index=0&imgid=4977564&id=4974722).

got more and more interested in the military history. The most pronounced of these remnants are the barracks, restored watchtowers and the barbed-wire around the site:

I can still see the watchtower [at the edge of silent area] before me. (R1)

I came across that [barbed-wire and a 'no trespassing'-sign] during my runs and that was something I would ask my parents about, what had happened there. Imagine if all of that were no longer there, all that history would be lost (...) it is in the little things you see. (R4)



Image 17: One of the two watchtowers at its inauguration in 2014.<sup>185</sup>



Image 18: A remaining sign of the time it was a military domain.<sup>186</sup>

This variety in interest, reflects the different functions the SCV want to implement on site, but this makes the management even more complex. Most of the participants acknowledge how this multitude of functions complicates the management of the site. R10 for example thought that it 'does not seem easy to work together with all those instances'. Opinions on whether this is beneficial for the future of the site are divided. All participants had their own ideas on what is predominant to maintain and which function should be more highlighted. But they all agreed Vloethemveld to be a combination of 'nature and heritage'. R10 and R11 did not believe the problems could be managed in the coming years while, participants R2 and R3 perceived Vloethemveld to be exemplary to other sites how nature and history can be united:

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<sup>185</sup> Zedelgem, *Bronnendatabase Vloethemveld*, 08\_Fotos\_externen, *Foto's genomen door archiefdienst bij inhoudiging kijktoren.*

<sup>186</sup> © Ruth Kindt



[Vloethemveld] is an example where people can live together under any circumstances (...) you should also always be able to stand above the situation and say 'look there is a future' and this is an example of future. (R2)

However apart from the aspects on site that ignited a greater interest in Vloethemveld, two recent events influenced the popularity of the site: the Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis.

### 3.3 Influence of recent events: Covid-19

During the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic people around the world were forced to stay at home and only leave the house for necessary shopping or walking activities. All over the world people rediscovered green areas in their vicinity to limit their feelings of isolation and solitude.<sup>187</sup> The pandemic led the inhabitants of Zedelgem and Jabbeke to Vloethemveld. The area is within walking distance of both village centres and became very popular during the course of the pandemic. The area still bears fruit of it to this day:

So yeah, you were only allowed to walk or stay in the neighbourhood and then we found out how clean Vloethemveld was and how well it had been maintained, in the past we almost never went there for a walk. (R10)

But the rediscovery also had some repercussions:

Before Covid it was very quiet in the forest, it was clean, but during Covid it was full of bags of dog poop and garbage. (R4)

That used to be different, when we went for a walk in the forest we always laughed that the forest was ours, because we could go for a walk all Sunday afternoon and we would not meet anyone, that is different now (...) it used to be untouched. (R12)

The days that the site was overrun by people, runners and cyclists are over, but it will never be as quiet as before. Residents have accepted that those times of lonely walk in the forest are gone and that they have to share the forest with others now, but they worry that the nature will be gradually effected by the growth of daily visitors. The partners of Vloethemveld have gradually established a possibility to accommodate more visitors by constructing a large parking lot along the east side of the area. A second parking lot is planned to the north of the area alongside Jabbeke.

The inhabitants around Vloethemveld do not oppose the arrival of more visitors because there are now more and better organized places to accommodate the visitors. R13 would have cars and even trucks parked on his property, which is a problem that has now resolved itself. But now questions rise on how this can be adapted to the current evolution of the site (R4, R10 and R11). Before Covid-19 the site's nature seemed manageable but today new problems came to light like some people who walked their dog without a leash. Respondents R8 and R9 specifically remember an occasion where a few roe deer were bitten by a dog whose owner was unable to control it. Since they live near to the entrance they, on numerous occasions, have had walkers tell them how much garbage they find during their stroll in the area.

The residents are worried that the intense visits will have an effect on the maintenance of the natural heritage. There are still some parts of the site that are not accessible for the public which makes

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<sup>187</sup> Masashi Soga et al., 'A Room with a Green View: The Importance of Nearby Nature for Mental Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Ecological Applications* 31, no. 2 (2021): 2248.

them happy. They especially worry that if the general public behaves so badly in the nature area, they would exhibit similar behaviour in the historic part of Vloethemveld:

It would be a shame if people behaved in the same way in the protected areas with all those historic remnants. (R4)

### 3.4 Influence of recent events: Ukraine crisis

Another event that unintentionally boosted the popularity of Vloethemveld is the Ukraine Crisis. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine leading to the first war on European soil since the Yugoslav Wars at the turn of the century. News coverage from Ukraine testified to the injustices and cruelty of war. The occasion seems to remind Europeans of the last time war raged in their regions and what the consequences of that were. These sentiments resulted in a growing interest in the past of the PoW camp, as people unconsciously wanted to understand the atrocities happening in Ukraine by learning about such situations in the past:

When you hear it now with the war in Ukraine going on, there are a lot of people fighting and they have to do horrible things, but they are ordinary people like us. With all that chaos and all that misery they have to go through, yeah. I cannot even begin to comprehend the horrific acts they have to do and then be able to live with that. (R10)

I think that a lot of those traumas are resurfacing because of the current war. (R6)

Combined with the fact that in twenty years it will be 100 years that WWII raged through Europe, a new fascination with war and suffering rises. Most participants, especially those who did not have a specific interest in history, acknowledged that a visit to Vloethemveld helped them understand what war meant and how it disrupts a society. Additionally they mentioned that Vloethemveld can play an important role in the education of the public and specifically children, to show what the consequences of war are. In an unrecorded conversation with one of the guides, the guide told a story of a visit of a group of highschoolers who visited the site during the spring of 2022.



Image 19: A glimpse into the interior of one of the barracks.<sup>188</sup>

<sup>188</sup> Vloethemveld, 'Het is een feit dat het Vloethemveld ook meer en meer bekendheid krijgt buiten het Brugse Ommeland', Facebook, 9th of May 2017,

Because of the Ukraine crisis the guide noticed that the highschoolers were more attentive than usual and asked more questions, often related to the subject of Ukraine. Since Ukraine is considered part of the European mainland, it worried the highschoolers that the war might come to the West of Europe. He was under the impression that the Ukraine crisis had brought the concept of war back to society, breaking the utopic theory that there would never again be a war in Europe. However the Ukraine crisis brought, according to some participants, the possibility back to engage in conversations about WWII. According to R2 we, as a society, are having troubles to cope with WWII. Since Belgium experienced a period of occupation, the public was afflicted by anxiety, distrust and mendacity. Except for the occasional conversation with a grandparent and commemoration ceremonies, WWII was generally not that much talked about. But R2 feels that this is now changing.

Because of the new found interest in wartime internment, it seems that the guides attached to the site are making an effort to build an experience out of the site. The experiential aspect of Vloethemveld is becoming more of a focus point, wanting to show the everyday life as a PoW in Vloethemveld:

[When looking at the sculptures] it shows the homesickness, they are stuck there and they do not know how long they will be there (...) you can only get [an emotional reaction] by seeing it in person. You cannot get that reaction by just taking a picture of it. There are photos and drawings made of it, but that is not the same as if you are standing there and that you can imagine what those people would have thought. We often go into one of the barracks and say 'look, 120 people have lived here'. In the future we intend to actually put beds there, a lot of beds and bedside tables, like how it used to be. (R8)

You can really see what was going on inside their heads at the time they made these [statues, sculptures and drawings]. (R12)

The guides and the partners at Vloethemveld find it essential to construct an experiential guided tour because it educates children and young people on how rough the living conditions used to be, not only in the PoW camp, but also at other points in the past. Especially the older guides found it important to point out to children that there was a time people slept under the ridge of the roof under the roof tiles in a room without heating. Life in the barracks, during winter time it would be very cold and very warm in the summer.

That urge for an experiential future for the site can also be found among the participants who are not a guide at the site. They believe that physical remnants of the PoW camp are the reason why people are interested in the site at all:

Reading something in the history books does not stick with me, since I am not much of a history buff myself (...) But if you can go see something, you can go see something that is different than reading books about it (...) And that is something that I still include in my processing, go to the place, do not talk about it, talk to it, and in the case of Vloethemveld go see it. (R6)

The participants indicated that they were more interested in experiencing the site because it engrossed their understanding rather than seeing it through pictures or videos. R10 remembered her first visit to the barrack segment, and how it still gives her a chill when she thinks about what those PoWs had to endure. According to the participants, especially those parts that give a certain affective response

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<https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0rfTeYPyMv9VnkSep6hq4j5B2S9rYiQ8J54uLi93RToUeWt2veugBfuUNUBbaPQThl>.

should be kept on site. R4 and R14 expressed their frustration on how they have seen certain elements disappear, which made them feel like they had lost a certain connection to the past.

### 3.5 Natural and/or cultural heritage conservation

As established in 3.2, in accordance with the SCV, all participants perceive the site to be of both natural and cultural value. However the interest of both valorisations often coincide with one another. The grounds of Vloethemveld are owned by ANB, whose central task is the maintenance of the nature. ANB has done a lot of work in the past twenty years to preserve the site's unique natural heritage:

They really have to fight to preserve every centimetre and are constantly having to explain to everybody how unique it is. There are very important elements in terms of nature because it has been protected by the military for almost 100 years. (R2)

Sometimes heritage buildings had to make way to make room for the nature to grow:

I actually think it is a shame that so much has already been demolished, especially from the ASP because you can still see a part of those barracks but the more there is, the more attraction and empathy you can create. Even those empty barracks can give you an insightful feeling (...) they will give a lot more impressions of how they lived. (R9)

I believe that the nature aspect of Vloethemveld can be further emphasized with some specific elements. That is something that still misses at the moment. (R2)

In the coming years they are planning to replant hectares of trees. That is definitely a positive story to tell. (R5)

Notwithstanding which aspect of the site the respondents find important, most of them agree that there is a need for a clear vision on where they actually want to go with the site and what has priority over other things (R4 and R10):

We are of the opinion, if I speak from the opinion of the non-profit organisation, we want to conserve as much as possible, but that also means finding a balance between ANB and the [cultural] heritage [elements]. (R12)

All participants agreed that it is a difficult task to make a decision, that there is no need to conserve everything and that a certain selection will need to be made:

I understand that they do not just want to get rid of those barracks. I also understand that they do not want to disturb the growing nature (...) but then you have to ask yourself if there is no preference, suppose you tear down those barracks, which would be a shame, if you leave the barracks and the nature will suffer of it, it would also be a shame. They would have to find an intermediate solution. (R1)

There will have to be gains and losses at both sides, because there is neither the time nor the money to efficiently take care of both. The implementation of the selection nature/culture and then what nature and what culture, varied from interviewee to interviewee, but there appeared to be two groups: those who argued for a strict selection preferred a demolishing of some heritage objects and those who chose a light selection had the idea to let nature take over the remaining heritage objects.

Those who advocated for the strict selection opted to hire art history, history and conservation experts to determine which objects were most valuable and preservable (R3). Based on those results the partners of Vloethenveld should decide what should go or stay:

RK: So do you opt rather to leave a few barracks and the rest are welcome to go?

R7: Yes, now my opinion is probably a little different than most others, but anyway yes.

The people who wanted a strict selection did want to preserve some of their favourite objects. Both R12 and R2 stressed the importance of the three sculptures which are located in front of the *Ferme Bocca* under the pretence that these sculptures capture much more the emotions and perceptions of the PoWs compared to the statue of Saint-George and the dragon. Both of them would see it as a loss to the cultural heritage of Vloethenveld if those sculptures could not be preserved in spite of the costs that would have to be incurred to save them. In R7's opinion only the objects with a specific art historic value should be conserved.

A second group had the idea to select a few heritage objects based on personal preference, material and/or emotional value. They would leave other objects of less material or emotional value to nature. This idea corresponds to the concept of curated decay, a concept created by Caitlin DeSilvey.<sup>189</sup> With curated decay, DeSilvey wants to create an ethical stance that allows a collaboration with natural processes to preserve cultural heritage. Other aspects of the participants opinion was that the current state of the statues, sculptures and drawings are part of the story these objects have:

It would be a shame to restore that [the sculptures, Marianne and Saint George and the dragon] because then you have a beautifully finished set that is perfect, while the story that these objects tell is not beautiful and perfect, it is a story with a lot of pain and sorrow (...) I would only reinforce the sculptures and statues and make it audience-proof. (R1)

Personally I also, restoration, I personally am not really a fan of it. The state is as it is and there is going to be decay anyway. (R5)

R14 even remembers that at the opening of the new reception building, some children were climbing on the statue of Saint George and the dragon, thinking it was a playground. In the opinion of the second group the site should respect the natural course of events. If nature decides to take over the barracks and other objects, then that should be the case. Participant R4 said that if the heather in the area is so unique it should be conserved at all costs because she feared that interventions to preserve the heritage objects would just damage the natural landscape. She believes that it is better to leave it as it is, because currently you can distinguish the necessary features to recognise the site is a PoW camp.

Both groups agreed that after a selection procedure, some objects or nature parts need to be restored; the question is to what state or era should those elements be restored. Since the site has a rich history there are a multitude of elements coming from different times. Some are more pronounced, like the PoW camp's remnants but others are not as visibly present, which does not mean that they are of lesser importance. The grids structure of the site, for example, is the result of nineteenth-century landscape re-arrangements while the restored ponds actually date back from Medieval times and were already dried out in de nineteenth century. The opinions to which state the objects should be restored to remain divided. Most of the participants agreed that each object and landscape will need to be evaluated individually by focus groups, as each person has a different preference on which era was important and which one not. During the writing of this dissertation the

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<sup>189</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

SCV communicated that the three sculptures in front of the *Ferme Bocca* will be removed and preserved at another location on the site.

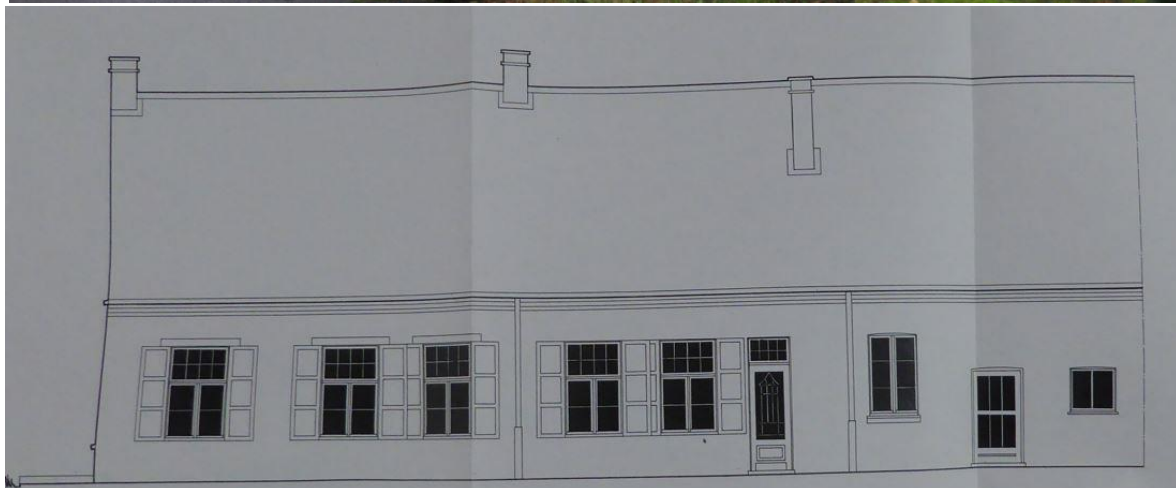


Image 20a-b: Current state of *Ferme Bocca*.<sup>190</sup>

One much talked about heritage object was the *Ferme Bocca*. In the recent months a decision was made to demolish the building and rebuild a wooden palisade at its former location. The construction would serve as a gateway to the quiet area of the forest and the structure of the construction should be the visualisation of the history the location has within Vloethemveld. Despite the fact that the

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<sup>190</sup> Vloethemveld, 'De Bocca', Facebook, 1st of March 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/vloethemveld/posts/pfbid0eDagCmB5PjCEu6iusnukkf9vgrLuRKWYQqoXgZG7pC7u8tkp8tbhpYWCfQJvqQAvl>.

decision on these plans are already fixed, it was noticeable that some participants were disappointed in the way the history attached to the building was so quickly dismissed:

It is a very nice project they set up but as a guide I think it is a pity, because as a guide you have so much to tell about it and now they made something out of it that is far from what it once was I think. My personal opinion of course. So that is something that I regret, that also we did not have that much of a say in it. (R12)

There was a lot of discussion on the *Bocca*, what people were going to do with it. If people would ask me, what do you think about that, I would tell them the story and show them that this is the past. And now they are going to break it down, well if they break it down, I might just say to my wife, damn it what are they going to do now, but that is all I have to say about that (...) but it takes time, everything takes time. (R2)

Generally speaking, the participants who had a personal connection with the building felt like their story had no place in the area. Others who were less attached to the building itself saw it as an unfortunate thing since they see the *Bocca* as the starting point of the military history of Vloethemveld. At the same time the building was interwoven with the pre-military history since it used to be the first foresters house.

Lastly, there were the speculations on what the future will hold in terms of opening up more of the nature reserve and the cultural heritage part to the CGIs. Again the opinions were divided. Two of the interviewees made it clear that they hoped for the former PoW barrack area to be opened to the public. The proponents of this opinion mentioned that making the area publicly accessible would contribute to the experience element of the site. Additionally it would be an excellent opportunity to give the correct context and perspectives on what has happened on the site, provided if there were good information signs. Together with participant R3, R6 emphasized the importance of putting the necessary information at the place where it actually occurred because it facilitates the general comprehension. They wanted to give the casual passer-by the possibility to discover the history of the site at their own pace whenever they wanted. But when asked about the practicalities of such open site both of them were more hesitant.

A few practical solutions were recurring among the various participants. Firstly there was the idea to build a wooden trail alongside the barracks and maybe parts of the nature reserve. Secondly, some of the participants had the idea to have a couple of days a year or a month where the area is freely accessible. The idea behind the wooden barracks would be that both the nature and the barracks would be protected. The wooden trail would keep the people from walking on the ground, leaving space for the nature to grow and a fixed trail would give the possibility to the partners to guide the visitors. Additionally the heritage segment would be accessible for people in a wheelchair, although there were concerns as to what the impact would then be for the area.

Making the area publicly accessible on certain fixed dates was also one of the suggested alternatives, provided that there is a presence of supervisors:

Or maybe they can work with supervisors? I understand you cannot just expose the site because then you will have damage and more but yes a combination maybe, I do not know. (R6)

However not everybody had the same opinion:

R6: Personally I would like it more if there were certain hours or moments on the weekends that the area was opened up (...) Then you have a wider audience for your heritage I think.

R5: But you can also do free guided tours, fixed days, every Sunday at two o'clock for example.

R6: Maybe if you do something like that, perhaps

R5: And you would not have to subscribe, but if you get to twenty people

R6: You are not for open accessibility are you?

R5: I am cautious, I am already happy that the rest of the area is not freely accessible. I am telling to that heritage area is not that big.

Even if the area would be opened up there are consequences the partners will have to suffer in order for the cultural heritage elements to survive.

### 3.6 Which (hi)story to tell

The SCV together with the HWCV want to focus on the 2000 year history of the area instead of having to constantly mention the period of the PoW camp. Such an approach provides the opportunity to include the rich natural and cultural history of the site thus appealing to a wider audience. According to the participants who cooperate closely with some of the organisations at Vloethemveld, there has been giving too much attention on the PoW camp in the past, limiting the possibilities of the area:

It used to be only the PoW camp that was covered here. Later on I delved further into the story of the Old Saint John's hospital and I discovered a different kind of stories. Those 600 years that the Old Saint John's hospital was here, that makes other great stories. It is precisely that multiplicity of aspects that makes Vloethemveld beautiful and interesting. (R2)

The aspects of the site that spark a deeper interest do not only limit itself to the distant past but also the more immediate. R14 wanted to know more about the military period of the 1970s and 1980s. Since some of the guides and members of the HWCV have an interest in military history, they are passionate learning more about it, but also want to expand their interests further than the military past (as mentioned in 3.2). As a result the recent story about the military presence often gets minimized compared to other aspects of Vloethemveld's history. R14 and R13 together with a handful of other interviewees agreed to this opinion, stating that they are under the impression that Vloethemveld's history ends after the disbanding of the PoW camp. Despite the site having a rich history, it does not contribute to an easy decision making:

Vloethemveld is too rich in history, but still it [the 2000 year history] remains undervalued in my opinion. (R2)

If you want to tell too much, people will no longer show interest. (R4)

During the conversations two different aspects are at play in the discussion on which part(s) of the site should be highlighted. One aspect is related to the age group of the participants and the other one to the fact that the PoW camp, for some people, is an only recently discovered fact. Important to note is that during the course of the conversations with the participants an attitude of presentism was apparent among the interviewees. Presentism is a way of historical analysis in which its user describes history in terms of the present.<sup>191</sup> This can often lead to a corrupted version of the past, since it is transformed according to the will of the executor. Each of the participants perceived the history of Vloethemveld according to their own knowledge and analytical abilities. In this regard no opinion is inevitably true or false, but it reflects a person's own version of reality.

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<sup>191</sup> 'Presentisme', DBNL Algemeen letterkundig lexicon, accessed 5th of April 2023, [https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/dela012alge01\\_01/dela012alge01\\_01\\_05011.php](https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/dela012alge01_01/dela012alge01_01_05011.php).



In accordance with presentism, age plays an important role to determine which part of Vloethemveld's past should be highlighted and which is only a substory. The younger respondents (R1, R4 and R14) expressed an interest in the military period after WWII, this is due to the fact that they did not grow up with the military presence at the site. To them, a structured organisation such as the military seem rather a vague concept. These younger interviewees were born at a time where stories about WWII were only a distant memory from their grandparent's time, unlike their parents, they were no longer raised with the consequences of war. Hence, they found the military history fascinating and therefore regretted that certain elements of that time had already disappeared:

R12: There used to be those things where they did exercised like climbing and stuff, they could have made a playground out of it.

R14: That was still being used, we had tournament there with our youth movement, we also had soccer trainings there too, so when that was suddenly gone it was a pity.

R12: The last few years they did not allow you to go in there anymore, it was too dangerous.

R14: But that running track was in use, for example our kubby tournament was held there, those fields were still used for many things.

R12: Nowadays it is still an open space though.

R13: Yes but that was a good running track, I went to run there a lot.

R14: Now we are going to be able to get back on that in the future, I agree with you that little attention has been given to that period of the 70s and 80s in the past, and soon it will be 100 years as well.

R13: I think it is a pity that they do not give more attention to that time.



Image 21: The information board on one of the watchtowers.<sup>192</sup>

<sup>192</sup> © Ruth Kindt

The middle aged interviewees who showed interest in that specific period of time, mainly did this out of nostalgia. As a young boy, R13 lived next to Vloethemveld during its military time. He vividly remembers seeing the soldiers parade and even sometimes had the opportunity with his father to join the officers at a lunch at the *Ferme Bocca*.

The older interviewees are currently at a state where they want to know more about Vloethemveld beyond the military past. Historical events as the period of the ownership of the Old Saint John's hospital and the story of the construction of the track bed are a growing interest. They do not blame the SCV and HWCV for having put a greater focus on the PoW camp in the past, but they want to break free from its negative connotation:

RK: You prefer to tell a positive story about the site, the story of the Old Saint John's?

R7: A negative story is something that will be put in the picture too much.

The PoW history is not necessarily something they want to counteract, but it has created this image they do not want to see associated with the site. Instead some interviewees want to emphasize a 'positive' association to Vloethemveld, telling the story how peace and the globalized world emerged from the ashes of WWII. How our economies got intertwined and co-dependent. This did not only affect the functioning of society but also the appreciation for nature. Putting an emphasis on that broader history enables the partners to weave the nature-history aspect of the site into a positive story. The PoW camp only spoke of the destruction of the nature but focussing on the Old Saint John's for example tells the story of the water irrigation systems of the ponds, the forestation and deforestation periods and the maintenance of the area over the years.

A second recurring opinion of a few of the respondent was that they actually wanted to know more on the PoW history. Mainly the younger interviewees had these opinions, due to the fact that they had only recently learned about the PoW past. The core of the interest arose from a lack of knowledge on what was going on at the site. The origin of this little knowledge lies in the military use after WWII. Since the area remained closed off to the public since the end of WWII, many residents lost interest over the years. The information that a PoW camp was stationed at that place seemed to have been minimalized throughout the years. Generally people accepted that the area was military grounds:

We have never been there much (...) as a child you were not allowed to go there either, if you were caught it was not good (...) but in general we did not know much about Vloethemveld. (R10)

I find that ridiculous that we never heard those stories. How is it possible, you live right next door, you are not going to tell me that you did not know anything about that [PoW camp] or that you never noticed anything, but they never told anything about that (...) the more I think about that the more I think damn. (R4)

Especially those respondents who have lived near the area, and never knew there was a PoW camp, felt betrayed that there had been so much secrecy around the place. Because of that secrecy and impeccability, the inhabitants are only now discovering information about their family's connection to Vloethemveld:

R12: The moment we really found out [about the PoW camp], his [R13] father had already passed away so we have not been able to ask him, but I am convinced he must have known something about that, he was a little boy then.

R13: From the year 30 [1930] so he must have known for sure.

R12: Must have known what happened here.

R13: And his father certainly must have known too, he was from the year 1900 so yeah he certainly must have known. My family has lived here since 1900, through both World Wars and so on (...) They must have known or they hushed it up.

Most of the interviewees expressed disappointment that they are not able to have more information. They feel frustrated that their family members never mentioned anything, realizing it is too late now, that a lot of valuable information is already lost. R4 for example regretted that she was too young when her grandfather died and that she now would have asked him all the questions she had. Various other respondents have the same observations:

But the people, I think the people did not know much about it either, his [R11] father did. That they knew that PoW camp was there and they did not seek contact with it, now you have everything in the media, only now we are getting information about that time. (R10)

There are people here in the village who should be able to tell what happened in that PoW camp. They would sometimes come to trade bread for cigarettes. (R7)

Throughout the years the inhabitants only received information bit-by-bit, since they only recently heard the full story they want to connect that information to the knowledge they received from their family members.

### 3.7 Communication

Regardless of what story the site wants to tell and what focus should be given, that content will need to be communicated to the public one way or another. The Facebook page and the website of the VZW, with the option of subscription, are the media through which most happenings and events are communicated. Despite the efforts made by the SCV and the workgroup communication, they found that often the information does not tend to find all those interested. The respondents considered that the SCV should put an ever bigger effort into the general communication because they do not have the necessary expertise to reach everyone. Some of the respondents pointed out that some topics get a lot of attention, like when how they shared all the blueprints on what will happen with the *Ferme Bocca*, but that they tend to be less transparent about other topics. One of these topics was on the removal of the pictures the SCV took on from Atlantikwall Raversyde. The people involved in the Vloethenveld partnership have a variety of interests:

It is a very mixed group, both younger and older people, which I think is positive. There are also people who have gained experience in different areas through their jobs which is beneficial for the management of the site. (R9)

However the vast majority of the staff members and volunteers are fifty and older. This often results in a cumbersome communication system with newsletters and overlong social media posts. Especially since the site carries a controversial history it is crucial to avoid miscommunication:

I do think it would be good that the people will be well informed because sometimes I am under the impression that people do not have a good view on that, certainly here in Zedelgem, the story with that monument has proven that. (R7)

Because of this system Vloethemveld's prominence often does not extend beyond Zedelgem or Jabbeke and the surrounding municipalities. Some staff members acknowledged this problem, and admitted that in the past they have always chosen the easy channels to advertise upcoming activities. This especially leaves out the growing target audience of the teenagers and young adults in their twenties:

Who in my generation knew that the reception house was opening? I have a friend who lives in Zedelgem, she lives not far from the Colruyt, so that is like 1 or 2 kilometres from the forest. She did not even know Vloethemveld. She had never been there before. (R4)

In practice, three distinct target groups are mainly addressed: children, young parents and their children, and people who are over fifty. The teens and young adults fall completely in between these targeted groups, giving them the impression that the area is not for them:

It is actually because of you [RK] that I am getting some more information on Vloethemveld. Everything you are telling me now surprises me (...) it is not because we are teens, so to speak, that we do not have an opinion or that we do not want to be informed. They are stuck in a kind of old pattern. The question is if those old people all give up, who is going to do it? If they do not involve us, we are not going to be able to take over. We are not a target group and I do not feel as a target group. I think that that is one of my biggest frustrations. (R4)

There is always the opinion that young people are not interested, I think that that is not true. (R13)

When asked about their willingness to join a workgroup inside the structure of Vloethemveld most of the younger informants expressed an interest, and even mentioned that if they did not have the time, they knew other people who would. Attracting a teenage audience is something that is not so self-evident. But throughout the conversations a few ideas came up: improving the Facebook posts, developing an Instagram account or events that interest this target group. Especially the importance of a well-developed social media platform was emphasized. Not making the posts too long, using attractive images and most importantly assigning and training a group of volunteers to specifically manage such platforms.

However, the social media efforts did have some impact on the older generations. R10 is very fond of the pictures that get posted on the Facebook page. Especially those taken by amateur photographers stand out to her. But she admitted that she almost never reads the posts because the texts are often too long to keep her attention. The communication around the opening of the reception building was a topic that was often discussed. Overall the opening weekend was a success with over 1.000 visitors, but most of these visitors were invited guests, family members, nearby residents and frequent visitors. Occasionally there would have been a casual passer-by. The younger and middle aged respondents who were not affiliated with the Vloethemveld partnership only became aware of the opening weekend after it had taken place.

Nonetheless the SCV and the workgroup communication have come a long way and the respondents were proud of that as well. As they see the area grow, they discover new aspect they had not seen before. R10 mentioned she was eager to visit again and specifically wanted to know more about the nature. R7 called Vloethemveld the discovery of the recent years and R3 felt that more and more people begin to care about the growth of the area.

This growing interest is also something the partnership has noticed and currently this has manifested in various outlets. Firstly there is the timeline that was inaugurated along with the opening of the reception building. The timeline was extensive and to some too long and too high, but it has, in three parallel panels, successfully gone over the entire 2.000 year history of Vloethemveld:

There was a lot of information on that timeline. All the text was also really pushed together (...) at one point I was just reading so intensely that I actually lost sight of what I was reading. (R4)

The participants who had seen the timeline were very enthusiastic in how it had highlighted the various key moments in its long history.

The second outlet is the publication of the first book on Vloethemveld history, natural history, current state and future. During the course of the conversations most respondents had already ordered or already had received the book. They were also happy that the book gave them the opportunity to explore Vloethemveld at their own pace, having various chapters on a variety of topics.

Thirdly some participants joined the idea to make temporary exhibitions on certain topics. Since Vloethemveld has a complex history with various assets it is not always easy to explore everything all at once. Such solution gives the opportunity to circulate around different themes without having to put an emphasis on anything in the permanent guided tour. R5 pointed out that the site will have to renew itself every year in order to keep attracting visitors, because it cannot thrive on the permanent story alone. R7 endorsed this saying that the site will fail to continue to captivate the CGIS if no new knowledge and information comes at hand once and again.

Lastly there is the agreement between the schools for the organisation of the week of the forest at Vloethemveld. The week of the forest is a week traditionally organized in the local primary and first years of the high school where the students are specifically educated in the well-being and maintenance of nature. Previously the school would only visit other nearby forest areas but now Vloethemveld is adapting their schedule to those weeks, preparing them to welcome a lot of schools.

### 3.8 The Latvian beehive controversy

The beehive controversy showed the timeliness of the need to deal with the pasts of WWII PoW camps. The story is complex and deals with numerous parties involved. Despite the fact that the partnership and organisations associated with Vloethemveld did not have any involvement with the beehive, almost all respondents spontaneously referred to the monument during their conversation on Vloethemveld. Out of all the participants only one interviewee (R4) did not seem to know the controversy. The participants knew that there was a monument put in place, but at the time did not fully understand why. In general they had no issues with it being a memorial:

RK: If the monument still would have been there, you would not have mind? Did you understand why it was there?

R10: I thought that it was good that the people of Zedelgem knew that there were so many Latvians here (...) because most people did not know that. (...) those who were interested were able to learn what had happened here and what was connected with it. Because of this, this story has become known to the people of Zedelgem.

Some even believed that the hasty removal of the monument was an overreaction, whether more discussion should have preceded it. One participant (R7) even wondered what the impact would have been if a referendum had been issued to the people. If the public would have voted to put the monument down.

The participants however felt that they were not well informed about the motives behind the monument and that the information they got was one-sided. For some of them the monument was the first time they learned that there has been PoWs at Vloethemveld. The respondents immediately indicated that it is inappropriate to worship Nazis, in doing so they left the question open to what the

role of the Latvians were in their structure. R7 nuanced the situation, stating that there are people who actually had noble intentions but had ended up in the war by fate or a series of unfortunate circumstances. He acknowledged that naturally there were Latvians who had other motives to join the SS forces, but that this should not mean that all Latvian PoWs could not be commemorated in an universal way.

The fact that the issue had been resolved by an expert panel was received with approval but the respondents were left with some unresolved questions:

It is okay for me that that monument can safely stand somewhere, I have no problem with that, but it would not be better to place that monument at Vloethemveld and not where it was before? I never understood why they [Zedelgem municipal council] had put it there. (...) I know that within the organisation they would not be happy that the monument would be put at Vloethemveld, I can understand that, but I also do not see where you should put it then? So if it cannot get there, where should it go? (R7)

A link could be perceived by all respondents between Vloethemveld and the monument since Vloethemveld was the area where the Latvian PoWs had actually stayed during their wartime internment. R10 said that she was very surprised and even confused to find out that the monument had not been put at Vloethemveld in the first place.

The story of the PoWs is complex as it is, but the respondents indicated they felt the need to contextualize and give it a place in society. They want people to talk about what has gone wrong in the past. And that monuments are mere objects, that they have not killed people but can facilitate a discussion:

The time in which it happened is very unfortunate, but in those days everyone had to choose a side. Some were on the right side and others on the less fortunate side. I think that it is something beautiful to show (...) A story always has two sides. Every side should be highlighted equally. I do not think Vloethemveld should have to hide something (...) The message they give can be a positive one, the area is ours now but we share it with others and we should cherish and maintain it together. (R1)

You have to look at that in a different light. I am obviously not in favour of the Nazis but we should put everything more into context. Yes they did terrible things which I am certainly not going to defend, but it is a part of history. It is not pretty, but then draw some lessons from it somehow. Unfortunately there are still people who are in favour of it [the atrocities the Nazis did] (...) I understand that if you have experienced that piece of history or that you have been more closely involved in it, that it is sensitive. You do not have to promote it, but you can show more of it, explain it to the people. (R4)

According to the interviewees the story of the PoWs should be fully explored, in all its beauty and terror (R12). Which is why most of them suggested to have a research unit at the centre of the organisational structure at Vloethemveld. They argued that Vloethemveld should take a neutral stance on the subject, and not hide the ugly truths. The beehive controversy for them proved that although the SCV and HWCV say they have dealt with the issue of the PoWs, it is not yet fully figured out and acknowledged.

The future of the monument is currently uncertain but R11 was curious to know where the monument currently was kept and whether it would ever be used again. The participants agreed that if it ever had to be re-built, a clear information strategy needed to be constructed in order to tell the full story. The presence of the PoWs at Vloethemveld only lasted three years, at the same time Vloethemveld has a bigger story due to its long history, something that should not be shadowed by

the monument (R2). All participants believed that there is a future for the monument at Vloethemveld and that it will play an important role in future to come.

At the same time there is an understanding of the partnerships' fear of being dragged into a nationalist narrative, which is not the story that Vloethemveld wants to tell (R2). For the Latvian PoWs, Vloethemveld was not only a place of internment but also the starting point of their nationalist movement:

They [the SCV and HWCV] are afraid that they will be dragged into the controversy around the monument, which I understand. But if you contextualize that well with the necessary communication and information, I think that should be possible. (R7)

The interviewees did not necessarily see that as a problem since it is the right of the Latvians to be proud of their nationalist heritage if they wanted to but enough context is needed when a monument like that is placed near Vloethemveld:

There is a difference between putting up a monument for something like a commemoration, that is history I think and that is something we should try to preserve (...) But that is something historical that you want to preserve but it is not a monument that you make of it, you just want to show history and tell the story around it. That is different than glorifying a certain ideological goal and making a monument around it. That may be a thin line. (R6)

Generally the beehive monument controversy should not be problematic. R7 believed that what happened around the monument could be a cathartic moment for the partners of Vloethemveld. They have responded just when the controversy escalated but also took some necessary steps which will assist them in the future when similar problems arise.

## 4 Discussion

All information in the chapter mentioned above are a summary of topics emerging during the course of the interviews. In what follows, some of those topics will be tackled against a number of recurring theories in the heritage field. In the first paragraph a reflection will be made on the perceptions of the SCV and the partnership towards the balance between natural and cultural heritage in Vloethemveld. This will be underpinned by theories constructed by David Lowenthal, Bruno Latour, Rodney Harrison and Deborah Rose. The second paragraph will argue that Vloethemveld is a dark heritage site and what that could entail for the current management of the site. Additionally the question of dark heritage at Vloethemveld will be linked to the evolution of forgetting and silence around a heritage site as a result of a difficult past. At the same time the dark heritage elements, and the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, are measured against Freeman Tilden's concept of 'interpreting heritage' through provocation of the visitor. Lastly the final discussion paragraph offers the opportunity to set up a public participatory project at Vloethemveld in the hope to balance out and mitigate future discussions.

### 4.1 Natural and cultural heritage at Vloethemveld

Despite the fact that the partnership of Vloethemveld has a clear narrative they want to entail for the future of the site in terms of the natural and cultural heritage aspect, opinions remain particularly divided. The majority of the participants were under the impression that the site is unique due to it having a combination of both 'nature and heritage'. The group of participants that specifically appreciated the mixed elements of the site, had an initial interest in either the natural or cultural heritage aspects, but as time progressed, showed a growing interest in the other aspect as well. Few participants were torn between having a preference for the nature reserve or the cultural heritage remains. Before this balance between natural and cultural heritage objects can be discussed, an explanation needs to be given on the artificial separation of natural and cultural heritage.

#### 4.1.1 Synergetic natural and cultural heritage

Despite the divide in opinions on the natural and cultural heritage elements of Vloethemveld, all participants unconsciously distinguished natural heritage to be different from cultural heritage elements and vice versa. This was noted in how the respondents repeatedly used the phrasing 'nature and heritage' when referring to the combination of values on the site. When referring to nature or natural elements other words like 'forestry', 'green', 'reserve' and 'nature management' were often attached to it.<sup>193</sup> Half of the times the word 'culture' was used to indicate the cultural heritage elements, but that only occurred when it was combined with the word 'nature'; presumably to demonstrate the opposite between the two elements.<sup>194</sup> It became clear through the conversations with the respondents that they perceived nature and culture to be two different entities, whereas culture was valorised in accordance to heritage laws and nature was perceived as something unrelated to heritage. This separation of spheres has been at the centre of many heritage debates.

The idea of a divide between nature and culture has a long history in western thought.<sup>195</sup> David Lowenthal, however, acknowledged that this divide had not always existed. By the beginning of early modernity, scholars and humanists like Petrarch acknowledged an emotional connection to nature.

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<sup>193</sup> Data resulting from analysis in NVivo software

<sup>194</sup> Data resulting from analysis in NVivo software

<sup>195</sup> Harrison and O'Donnell, 'Chapter 3 Natural Heritage', 89.



This connection was linked to the cultural existence of man and how it affected their perceptions of the past and the future.<sup>196</sup> In their opinion, admiring nature was a way of preserving the memory of the past. This could be expressed through maintenance but just as much through neglect of the nature site as they believed that decay permeated all earth's features and was a natural part of how the world worked. Ruins of supposedly Greek and Roman temples and cities were marvelled at by these early modern scholars and made them feel connected on a deeper level to these ancient societies. As these ruins were often in a decaying state, it made them comprehend the power nature has over the relationship with the past, present and future.

With the growth of industrial capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, this harmonious cohesion developed into two separate domains.<sup>197</sup> The outlook of nature changed forever in the wake of this age of engineering.<sup>198</sup> Nature was no longer seen as something to hold on to but something that was wasteful. This led for romantic writers and scholars to develop the notion of a realm outside the influence of technology and commercialisation where wilderness and agrarian economies would flourish. Cultural remains, like the ruins of Pompeii and the Parthenon, were scrutinized due to an exotic fascination with the unknown past.<sup>199</sup> Nature conservation and an equal fascination for nature compared to cultural elements emerged during the course of the end of the eighteenth century. To ease the different domains in worship, a divide arose to no longer let nature coincide with the cultural aspect of heritage.<sup>200</sup>

It would take until the second half of the twentieth century that the divisions of natural and cultural heritage would be challenged. The 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage made a distinction between cultural and natural heritage indicated by differences in natural features, geological and physiographical formations and a precise delineated natural area of outstanding universal value (OUV).<sup>201</sup> The convention made the first steps towards an acceptance of seeing natural and cultural heritage as one entity, however it merely ignited the discussion. In 1991 Bruno Latour defined this lingering distinction as a modern Cartesian dualism, since this separation assumes a divide between humans and non-humans, nature and culture and mind and matter.<sup>202</sup> Cartesian dualism perceives the past to be distant and separated from people in the present, which is why heritage exists to translate this past for ordinary people to understand.<sup>203</sup> But it is difficult for people to see nature as part of this heritage, which is why the concept is a dualism.

In accordance with Rodney Harrison, both Latour and Lowenthal recognised heritages of culture and nature to be interconnected and indivisible.<sup>204</sup> Lowenthal noted that heritage is everything that has been handed down to us from the past and is different among various people and over time. But the attachments they make are universal for everyone because it makes people think about what we do with land, law and justice.<sup>205</sup> Natural heritage comprises the lands and seas we inhabit and exploit, the soils and plants and animals that constitute the world's ecosystems, the water we drink and the very air we breathe.<sup>206</sup> This natural heritage has been profoundly reshaped throughout the years due to human actions, but it does not imply that they are of lesser importance. Latour sees the

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<sup>196</sup> David Lowenthal, 'Natural and Cultural Heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11 (1 March 2005): 82.

<sup>197</sup> Lowenthal, 83.

<sup>198</sup> Lowenthal, 84.

<sup>199</sup> Lowenthal, 83.

<sup>200</sup> Lowenthal, 84–85.

<sup>201</sup> Harrison and O'Donnell, 'Chapter 3 Natural Heritage', 90.

<sup>202</sup> Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Routledge, 2013), 205.

<sup>203</sup> Harrison, 104.

<sup>204</sup> Lowenthal, 'Natural and Cultural Heritage', 85.

<sup>205</sup> Lowenthal, 81–82.

<sup>206</sup> Lowenthal, 81.

concept of nature as a collective notion, involving the whole community of humans and non-humans in their varied states, of 'being' in the world.<sup>207</sup> As a result, natural heritage issues become cultural heritage ones, as their common heritage ground are the basis of a functioning society.

Harrison based his heritage of culture/nature theory on his experience working with the Aboriginal people in Australia. During his time as an archaeological heritage consultant in the beginning of the 2000s, Harrison noticed how the Aboriginals saw themselves as having a kinship with particular plant and animal species.<sup>208</sup> For many centuries these groups had their daily lives guided by nature, making their pasts intertwined with their feelings in the surrounding.<sup>209</sup> They criticized the western separation of natural and cultural heritage in the management of heritage at regional, national and global levels.<sup>210</sup> Deborah Rose used the term ecological connectivity to describe this relationship.<sup>211</sup> Rose's theories suggests that the Indigenous Australian ontologies present a profound challenge to the idea of intangible heritage and the definition of heritage inherent in the World Heritage Convention.<sup>212</sup> She suggested that there is no boundary between nature and culture in which culture is everywhere, which contrasts with the modern Cartesian dualism.<sup>213</sup> Together with Rose, Harrison therefore argued in favour of the UNESCO adding the category of 'cultural landscape' in 1992 to recognise the unity between human communities and landscapes.<sup>214</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Synergetic heritage elements at Vloethemveld

Cultural landscapes embrace a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment.<sup>215</sup> According to UNESCO, a cultural landscape falls into three main categories: clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man, organically evolved landscape, associative cultural landscape. Vloethemveld as such, is an example of a cultural landscape as the site's natural elements, next to the heritage aspects, are the result of former economic and administrative imperatives in association to its natural environment. According to the Flemish heritage decrees, the greater region of Vloethemveld has been a protected cultural-historic landscape since 2008 with the demarcated area of the former military domain and current nature reserve recognized, but not protected, as build heritage.<sup>216</sup> A Flemish cultural-historic landscape falls under acts of protected built heritage.<sup>217</sup>

Despite the regulatory defined status of Vloethemveld according to the UNESCO synergetic approach of heritage, the Vloethemveld partnership unconsciously treat the natural and cultural

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<sup>207</sup> Bruno Latour and Catherine Porter, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 235–39.

<sup>208</sup> Harrison, *Heritage*, 211.

<sup>209</sup> Lowenthal, 'Natural and Cultural Heritage', 86.

<sup>210</sup> Harrison and O'Donnell, 'Chapter 3 Natural Heritage', 90.

<sup>211</sup> Deborah Rose et al, *Indigenous kinship with the Natural World in New South Wales* (Hurtsville: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003), <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Aboriginal-cultural-heritage/indigenous-kinship-with-the-natural-world-new-south-wales.pdf>.

<sup>212</sup> Harrison and O'Donnell, 'Chapter 3 Natural Heritage', 90.

<sup>213</sup> Harrison, *Heritage*, 212.

<sup>214</sup> UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, WHC-92/CONF.002/12, Santa Fe (United States): UNESCO, 1992, <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/1992/whc-92-conf002-12e.pdf>.

<sup>215</sup> 'Cultural landscapes', UNESCO World Heritage Convention, accessed 2nd of May 2023, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/>.

<sup>216</sup> 'Militair domein en natuurgebied', Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 1st of May 2023, <https://inventaris.onroerenderfgoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/209443>.

<sup>217</sup> 'Soorten erfgoed', Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May 2023, <https://www.onroerenderfgoed.be/soorten-erfgoed>.

heritage aspects as two separate domains. The policy agreement of 2019 enacted by the SCV, stated that the partnership and its committees agreed to take care of the 'heritage and nature' attached to the site.<sup>218</sup> The document also emphasized how unique the site is for having a dual status of cultural and natural heritage elements. However, it is not unusual for a heritage site to hold this dual status. Other WWII and non-WWII related heritage sites show similar characteristics. Finnish Lapland is part of Sápmi, the transnational homeland of the Sámi people. Despite the area having natural-spiritual importance for the people, remains of the Nazi occupation during WWII are scattered across their lands.<sup>219</sup> Throughout the years the wartime material traces have become important for the Sámi since the presence of the dual status of natural and cultural heritage elements gave them a sense of heritage ownership and custodianship.<sup>220</sup> This connection between the natural and cultural heritage aspects have resulted in a variety of balanced management organisations surrounding various heritage sites.

Vloethemveld is owned by ANB whose main task is the maintenance of the natural aspects. Because of the presence of cultural heritage elements, they have taken up an interest in conservation and preservation and have surrounded themselves with partner organisations to assist them with these objects. But since their first priority is the maintenance of the natural aspect, discussion have often resulted in the necessary removal of cultural heritage objects. Because both cultural and natural elements were not perceived as one entity by ANB; the SCV and other partner organisations have often followed this perception. The same applies to the perceptions of the HWCV who have and are still researching Vloethemveld's history. The HWCV approached Vloethemveld as a historical site who was formerly owned by the Old Saint John's hospital for forestry purposes. Despite the acknowledgement of the natural history of the site, the HWCV approached this history from a material cultural perspective rather than a natural and cultural site in its entirety. The natural elements of the site were only mentioned in accordance with cultural counterparts.

This separation in perception leads to an internal mismatch between the partner organisations. The SCV, chaired by ANB, and the HWCV both believe they are fighting for the same goals, but their initial intentions and starting points are different depending on their interest in the natural and cultural heritage elements. Since this ambiguity causes confusion within the partnership, it is reflected upon its surrounding. The participants too were divided between two different options of conserving the site's heritage aspects unconsciously based on that culture/nature divide. One group advocated for a strict selection on which of the cultural heritage objects should remain, based on the opinions of heritage and art specialists. This line of reasoning completely removed the heritage objects from its natural surroundings, only approaching it as cultural elements. A second group had the idea to select a few cultural heritage objects based on personal and emotional preference. This second group also seemed to be in favour of the concept of curated decay for the remaining heritage elements. Despite the hinting towards a unity between culture and nature through the proliferation of nature over the heritage objects, this option approached nature to be the antagonist to cultural heritage.

It is perceived by the partnership and participants that the site, due to the mix of natural and cultural heritage values inherently should have a complex management structure. They believe that there needs to be a dominant aspect or a vision on what heritage aspect is predominant and gets the favour of conservation. Consequently they still treat the natural and cultural heritage aspects as two separate domains. Since the organisations in the partnerships themselves do not acknowledge the synergetic approach to heritage, the people living around the site do not acknowledge this either.

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<sup>218</sup> 'De drijvende krachten achter Vloethemveld', (unpublished document, 25th May 2023).

<sup>219</sup> Oula Seitsonen and Gabriel Moshenska, 'Who Owns the "Wilderness"? Indigenous Second World War Landscapes in Sápmi, Finnish Lapland', in *Conflic Landscapes: Materiality and Meaning in Contested Places*, ed. Nicholas J. Saunders and Paul Cornish (London: Routledge, 2021), 197–98.

<sup>220</sup> Seitsonen and Moshenska, 109–10.

There is a balance that needs to be found between ANB, SCV and the other organisations in the partnership on how both cultural and natural heritage aspects should be perceived. Therefore any future conservation decision needs to be scrutinized and valorised according to the cultural and natural heritage values attached to it. This can ensure that future occurrences such as the predominant disappointment with the *Ferme Bocca* can be countered.

## 4.2 Vloethemveld as a (provoking) dark heritage site

As mentioned in the first chapter, dark heritage is a nuanced term that is constantly challenged and revisited by various researchers. Dark heritage sites are often closely related to places where an atrocity or dramatic fatal accident happened that had a major impact on a big group of people on a societal level. Due to that impact a series of heritage values are linked to that place, stemming from a historic or an emotional bond to the appreciation of the commemoration practices. People's association with dark heritage sites are perceived to be on a scale, depending on inside knowledge, family connection or intimacy with the object or site itself.

This definition of dark heritage fits well within the current state of Vloethemveld. The site knew a long history but at certain points in time during the World Wars and especially in the aftermath of the Second World War, the activities happening on the site had an immense impact on the nearby residents and other stakeholders. The reign of terror during both occupations of the German army left the inhabitants of Zedelgem and Jabbeke with remaining scars which were passed down from one generation to the next. The presence of the PoWs in Vloethemveld after WWII, further latched onto that trauma, reinforcing the memory of their suffering. However there are also aspects of Vloethemveld that are not seen as dark heritage as they are completely unrelated to the PoW story. The story of the Old Saint John's hospital, the gradual forestation and deforestation programs show another side of the story of Vloethemveld. The same applies to the later military function of the area, despite its military presence the emotions attached to that time are often more positive and nostalgic, rather than traumatic.

Some of the respondents did not even associate and perceive Vloethemveld to be a dark heritage site, due to the fact that their interaction with the site was founded in other aspects, like happy memories or a joyful youth. Other interviewees were persistent not to approach Vloethemveld as dark heritage, since it could cause negative attention to the site. Similar studies carried out by Suzie Thomas and Vesa-Pekka Herva and their colleagues in Finland on the nations' WWII heritage, came to the same conclusions. Instead of distancing themselves from the terrors of what happened to their people during WWII the Finns and Sámi showed a deeper interest in what they called their heritage.<sup>221</sup> Since discovering the past about the PoW camp, the inhabitants of Zedelgem and Jabbeke, like the people in Lapland, want to acknowledge the PoW camp as part of their local history.<sup>222</sup> Their connection to the material cultural left behind by the PoWs and military adds to its status a dark heritage site.

### 4.2.1 To forget a dark memory

It is not unlikely for a dark heritage site to have parts of its history pushed aside by mechanisms of memory and forgetting. Vloethemveld's dark past has, throughout the years, gradually disappeared from the public's collective memory. There are various reasons why a dark heritage site and the

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<sup>221</sup> Vesa-Pekka Herva et al., "'I Have Better Stuff at Home': Treasure Hunting and Private Collecting of World War II Artefacts in Finnish Lapland', *World Archaeology* 48, no. 2 (14 March 2016): 276–78.

<sup>222</sup> Koskinen-Koivisto and Thomas, 'Lapland's Dark Heritage'.

organisations surrounding it have, consciously or unconsciously, tended to forget certain elements of Vloethemveld's past. In the case of Vloethemveld, Connerton's concept of 'Forgetting as a humiliated silence' matches the site's current state.<sup>223</sup> In this theory, forgetting manifests itself in a widespread pattern of behaviour in civil society and it is covertly, unmarked and unacknowledged leading to a massive silence. That silence is brought upon by a particular kind of collective shame, that leads to a desire to forget. Eventually this attitude evolves into the actual effect of forgetting. The presence of the PoWs in Vloethemveld was not a pleasant experience for the local residents and the people had the desire to move on from this period of time. Consequently the placement of the ASP and military school conveniently aided in granting this wish as their activities helped in the effacement of grievous memory traces. Giving the site a new destination at that moment in time, covered up the traces of the most recent past.

These unconscious mechanisms to forget, continued to have consequences on how the dark heritage aspect of the site was perceived throughout the years. The structural forgetting of the site's dark past had continued to the next generations living around the area, since some family members had never even mentioned the existence of the PoW camp, but has also manifested within the day-to-day management. The consequences of these actions for the SCV and the partner organisations are measured according to the theories of Mason and Sayner on museal silence. Despite these concepts being created for museums, they are equally applicable for heritage sites. Out of the eight distinct ways a museum could silence a part of their history, two coincide with the current Vloethemveld management: 'Museums' collusion in society's silences' and 'Museums thinking they have nothing to say.'

The first concept learns that silences are often shared or advocated at the level of the institution, as sometimes owners of a heritage site wish not to remember or commemorate a specific event or person.<sup>224</sup> This can be seen at Vloethemveld as well. Due to the delicate nature of the cultural heritage elements, the SCV and specifically the HWCV intent to shift their focus to a more broader history of the site. A story of its 2000 year old past, recognizes its military history but only sheds light on the PoW aspect when related to peace-making mechanisms. This 2000 year story is not a bad thing as it acknowledges more aspects that enrich the site, but it is a pity that due to this process the issues related to the PoW camp get dismissed. This attitude also reflects the way the partnership dealt with the preparations, negotiations and the final escalations concerning the Latvian beehive monument. During the time when the monument was much-discussed, the partnership remained distant, wanting to have no involvement in the controversy. Typical for institutions in this situation is that they hope that the passage of time can lower the temperature of disputes about these events or even heal the wounds it has caused.<sup>225</sup> However it is established that such situations of silence could be a prerequisite for dialogue and community cohesion which can ignite new discussions. This only on the condition that all committees and stakeholders involved agree to it first.<sup>226</sup>

There is however a divide between the members of the HWCV on how to approach the PoW history. Advocates of the 2000 year history narrative want to elaborate on the rich history the site entails and the positive story the site can tell for future generations. They are afraid of the repercussions an uncontextualized text can mean for the image of the site. Moreover they are of the opinion that already enough attention has been given on the PoWs and that they may not too often be pushed into the victim role. But this coincides with a group who wants to delve deeper into the PoW history in order to have full knowledge and come to terms on what happened in the camp. They are of the opinion that a thorough research should be carried out on that particular part of history

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<sup>223</sup> Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', 67.

<sup>224</sup> Mason and Sayner, 'Bringing Museal Silence into Focus', 9.

<sup>225</sup> Mason and Sayner, 10.

<sup>226</sup> Banks, Koskinen-Koivisto, and Seitsonen, 'Public Engagements with Lapland's Dark Heritage'.

before any other decision can be made, no matter what the outside world wants. Neither of both groups are right or wrong in their argumentations and believes, but it is up to the SCV to, together with the HWCV, find a balance between both opinions.

The latter concept of 'Museums thinking they have nothing to say' partly applies to Vloethemveld, in the sense that the partnership itself stated that they simply do not possess the reflective capabilities to talk about the dark material culture of their heritage objects, if they even perceive it as dark.<sup>227</sup> Similar to what happened at the Vloethemveld partnership, organisations tend to have a specific disciplinary lens on their site and only want to talk about aspects within their own discipline out of comfort and familiarity. This can foreclose their ability to actually see other potential histories and heritage approach.<sup>228</sup> In order to assist the SCV in reflecting on these dark aspects of Vloethemveld an intense collaboration and cooperation based on mutual trust needs to be set up between them and the HWCV. It might even be beneficial to set up a research unit of experts and members of the HWCV to specifically tackle the difficult aspects of the PoW history in order to facilitate the SCV in staking a stance on the dark materiality of the site.

A similar attitude of 'difficult to find the right words', was observed in the aftermath of the Latvian beehive controversy when the expert panel encouraged the Vloethemveld partnership to make the site a multidimensional heritage site, an example of the new innovative European memorial thinking. During the meetings of the HWCV it was often cited that contextualization was essential to have a correct communication towards the public. At the time of writing this dissertation, the partnership and the HWCV has not mentioned any plans in developing and kind of European program or structural contextualized texts.

#### 4.2.2 To provoke interest and educate

There is a common misconception that museums are mirrors for society and reflect society back to us.<sup>229</sup> But in reality organisations of the kind similar to Vloethemveld need to do the reverse and actually educate society by showing the unpleasanties of reality while also acknowledging and tapping into the general interests. When a museum takes the 'safer' narrative, certain images and objects become canonised and accepted as the most truthful or appropriate way of organizing the world. Over time this repeated representation will no longer challenge the original content of the museum and will eventually impede critical thinking.

There is the 2000 year narrative that is brought forward by the partnership and the HWCV. For this narrative the HWCV in cooperation with the SCV decided to put an emphasis on a broad and nature-intertwined story focussed on forestry and maintenance through the military. Despite the fact that this approach, while beneficial to enhance the connection between natural and cultural heritage elements, is propagated by the partnership, the question can be asked if this is the story CGIs actually want to hear. The partnership made it clear they wanted to use this broad approach to create a positive association to the site. They prefer to tell a story of peace and prosperity and how a new globalized world emerged from the ashes of WWII. However a variety of the participants still maintain various opinions on that decision of historical approaches.

All participants perceived Vloethemveld to have become a beautiful place where they enjoy leisure activities, resulting in a deeper connection to the natural elements of the site. Regardless of whether they had been aware of the PoW past for a long time or not, they did not let that aspect disrupt their fascination for the site. Even those who were specifically interested in the PoW past

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<sup>227</sup> Mason and Sayner, 'Bringing Museal Silence into Focus', 11.

<sup>228</sup> Mason and Sayner, 12.

<sup>229</sup> Mason and Sayner, 12.

approached the site from a positive perspective, believing it could educate future generations on the destructive consequences of war and how it still have an impact on society. These opinions showed that a positive story can be told without leaving out the hardness of what happened at the PoW camp. The wishes of the partnership is to present a story of peace but this story can also be told while including the PoW cruelties, as part of a peace-making process. The interest of the CGIs in the negative aspects of the site should not necessarily be a bad thing.

With that narrative the partnership could issue frames within their goal to educate their visitors. Every participant had their own opinion on what visitors should be educated about and which story was important to teach. But throughout the interviews it became clear that most of the interviewees are mainly interested in the military time of the site, and in particular the PoW camp. This goes against the narrative of the partnership. The reality seems that the PoW camp predominantly attracts the people's attention, firstly because the public only recently got informed about that PoW past and secondly because the remains left behind by the PoW time appeal to the imagination of the visitors. Additionally the material culture of that time is remarkably well preserved compared to many other PoW camps in Europe, making it more alluring.

Essentially a heritage site needs to appeal its visitor to rethink their connection to the place. Mesmerizing CGIs with the material culture ignites the possibility to create intangible connections. This theory was first described by Freeman Tilden in his book 'Interpreting our Heritage'.<sup>230</sup> Tilden was mainly active in the 1950s until the 1970s and dedicated his work to discovering how people interpret various forms of heritage. He is seen as the godfather of the interpretation movement.<sup>231</sup> Noteworthy is that he based his theories on the interaction between humans and nature and attached them to the perceptions of heritage, further proving how cultural and natural heritage elements are heavily intertwined.<sup>232</sup> Tilden even pointed out how nature and man are inseparable companions. In his book Tilden discussed how there is always some sort of an appeal that makes people actually connect to heritage as they are able to relate it to their own lives:

In the field of interpretation, whether of the National Park System or other institutions, the activity is not instruction so much as what we may call provocation. It is true that the visitors to these reserves frequently desire straight information, which may be called instruction, and a good interpreter will always be able to teach when called upon. But the purpose of interpretation is to stimulate the reader or hearer towards a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statement of fact.

(Tilden, 2007, 59)

Tilden distinguishes two subsequent steps: instruction and provocation. Instruction comprises of the tasks executed by a guide: informing the people. Information is created out of the existing materials at hand, wrapped in a stream of facts and stories. But the problem with instructing the public is that often most of the given information overwhelms the listeners, leaving them stunned and non-attentive. It is only when the visitors feel connected with the existing materials at hand that they give their full attention.<sup>233</sup> This connection is roused by provocation, it lets the visitor in on the expedition and experience of the site.<sup>234</sup> A provocation makes visitors rethink their position in society and lets

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<sup>230</sup> Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1967), 59.

<sup>231</sup> Pam Meecham, 'Book Review: Heritage Interpretation: Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks (Museum Meanings)', *Visual Communication* 6, no. 1 (2007): 116–18.

<sup>232</sup> Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 67.

<sup>233</sup> Tilden, 55.

<sup>234</sup> Tilden, 64.

them reflect on a deeper level what they would have done if they would have found themselves in that situation in the past.<sup>235</sup>

When looking at Vloethemveld, one wonders what the provocative elements are that people take home with them after their guided tour. When talking to the respondents it became clear that the PoW camp stood out compared to the history of the Old Saint John's hospital. This has mainly to do with the fact that the visitors do not feel connected to the Old Saint John's because they do not see any intriguing remains of that time. Although the ponds have been restored to how they presumably were at one point the Middle Ages, it does not have the same effect as the PoW barracks, mainly because the ponds are situated in the silent area of the site where visitors are not allowed. The barracks on the other hand, are accessible to visitors with guided tours. The visual markings and drawings in and around the barracks enhance the provocative elements that appeal to visitors. Because of these aspects, the emotional and intangible connection is stronger towards the PoW camp remains compared to the Old Saint John's hospital.

It is not even present elements that can trigger the public. Recent elements connected to the aspects of a site may as well provoke CGIs to rethink their own position in society. This was shown with the Ukraine crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. The beginning of the Ukraine crisis suddenly made the inhabitants of Jabbeke and Zedelgem reconnect with the past, seeing links between the cruelties of war and the difficult situation of the PoWs. Even the younger public suddenly felt more connected to the PoWs. This emotional connection could only emerge due to the fact that the site informs them about the conditions of war due to physical remains.<sup>236</sup> Additionally the public questioned what has happened and how their ancestors had dealt with the matter.

The same applies to the impact the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had on society.<sup>237</sup> As Vloethemveld was firstly known as an area where not many people went, it evolved into a central artery in the natural experience of the local region. Most people who visited Vloethemveld during the lockdown now cannot imagine their lives without walking through the woods every now and then. In their opinion, visiting the site also educated them on the unique natural elements the site possesses and made them realise how fragile nature is. This fear of losing natural elements made them also reflect on how the current situation of the site and how it became the way it is now. This made CGIs grateful for the how the military men maintained the area throughout the years after the PoW camp was disbanded and the ASP and military school installed.

### 4.3 Community cohesion through IAP2 public participation

Throughout the conversations it was noticeable that a lot of the respondents had an interest in Vloethemveld albeit for the natural or cultural heritage elements. Generally they were under the impression that their opinions and feedback did not have an influence and impact on developments on site. There are ways of communication in which visitors and inhabitants receive information like the Facebook page or newsletters. But the participants found that the intercommunication between them and the partnership mainly happened in a one sided way. Those who were most enthusiastic about the means of communication was the older generation of the respondents. Most information was not novel to them and they had the time to engage in activities happening on site. They specifically love the amateur photography content that gets posted on a weekly basis on the Facebook page.

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<sup>235</sup> Tilden, 41–42.

<sup>236</sup> Jan Packer, Roy Ballantyne, and David Uzzell, 'Interpreting War Heritage: Impacts of Anzac Museum and Battlefield Visits on Australians' Understanding of National Identity', *Annals of Tourism Research* 76 (1 May 2019): 76–77.

<sup>237</sup> Joanna Sofaer et al., 'Heritage Sites, Value and Wellbeing: Learning from the COVID-19 Pandemic in England', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 11 (2 November 2021): 1117–32.



Apparently there is even a private Facebook groups specially made for Vloethemveld photographers. It is proven that professional photos improve the readability of a social media post.<sup>238</sup>

Not all participants were as laudatory on the information output of Vloethemveld. The teenagers and young adults were of the opinion that most information put out often contained too much information, making the site more complex to them. According to the interviewees, the Facebook posts are often over 2000 characters which is too long for a social media post.<sup>239</sup> Despite the comments of the younger participants on the social media posts, they did admit that the posts had improved in recent months.

But overall teenagers and young adults felt left out in the process to connect to Vloethemveld because their fields of interests are not reflected online or in activities surrounding the site. However during the writing process of this dissertation a 'murder mystery' group activity had been set up in the past month.<sup>240</sup> The 'murder mystery' is a guided tour where participants take on the role of a fictional character of the past and have to solve the mystery of someone who has been murdered on the site in the past by determining who was murdered, when the murder took place, who did it. Despite that, activities like this murder mystery are already a first step in trying to find a middle ground with all stakeholders as the young people were still under the impression that they were not wanted at the site. And for that reason that information did not come their way. Despite the sometimes lacking communication from the Vloethemveld partnership, all interviewees were proud of the growth the area had made throughout the years, especially in terms of simplifying the information towards the public who has no former knowledge.

What all the respondents connected through the process of the interviews, was the desire to know more about the site and often be consulted on the events happening at Vloethemveld. In general the partnership of Vloethemveld would benefit from having public participatory projects. The partnership mainly exist out of volunteers and currently there are no ongoing projects were the public is sustainably involved. Public participatory projects maintain an interactive relationship with the CGIs within a range of processes and projects.<sup>241</sup> Participatory projects within the heritage sector are common or even necessary according to some.<sup>242</sup> The advantage of such projects are that they can occur on various levels of organisation. In recent decades public participation as a governance instrument by which individual behaviour is shaped and directed by governmental policy and associated institutions, has been growing. In the UK they often perceived this within the range of community archaeology.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Yiyi Li and Ying Xie, 'Is a Picture Worth a Thousand Words? An Empirical Study of Image Content and Social Media Engagement', *Journal of Marketing Research* 57, no. 1 (1 February 2020): 1–19.

<sup>239</sup> Li and Xie.

<sup>240</sup> 'Moordmysterie in Vloethemveld', Vloethemveld vzw, accessed on 17th of May 2023, <https://vloethemveldvzw.be/moordmysterie/?fbclid=IwAR2ewl-VyyNvey5ygRX8fkzliKGtVDWm6CfrNbYRfftAGpa6lP9MmHWoS4c>.

<sup>241</sup> Cath Neal, 'Heritage and Participation', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, ed. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 346.

<sup>242</sup> Ghaderi et al., 'Community Participation towards Conservation of Touran National Park (TNP)'.

<sup>243</sup> Christine Baker et al., 'Creating Opportunities and Managing Expectations: Evaluating Community Archaeology in Ireland', in *Transforming Heritage Practice in the 21st Century: Contributions from Community Archaeology*, ed. John H. Jameson and Sergiu Musteață, One World Archaeology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 16–18.

Ever since the Faro Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society of 2005, the principles of public participation in decision-making became more widely accepted.<sup>244</sup> The goal of the convention was to promote a wider understanding of heritage and its relationship to CGIs. It specifically wanted to emphasise that objects and places become important to CGIs because of the meanings and uses that people attach to them and the values they represent. The term CGIs refers on a broader scale to the people involved in the attachment towards a heritage site.<sup>245</sup> The convention believed that participation acts as an indicator to show the health of society, since it presents cultural heritage activities to be more inclusive.<sup>246</sup> These efforts are executed to make sure that certain groups who otherwise may feel excluded from cultural heritage, have the opportunity to engage with the democratic process. It is believed that a heritage site, object or intangible feeling is a meeting place for all actors in society. The communal responsibility to maintain this heritage establishes a bond, that combines all knowledge, experience, interests and positions in society.

The desire to be more involved in the Vloethemveld partnership was made clear among the participants. Naturally, the opinions on the future of Vloethemveld are diverse. Heritage communities are never uniform homogenous groups, only few share entirely common opinions and priorities.<sup>247</sup> As seen above a variety of factors like age, personal connection to the site or prior knowledge all change the way the participants see general involvement in the site. However, the SCV with the organisations would generally benefit from having some discussions with other stakeholders, even if their opinions could focus on the 'negative' story of the site or completely dismiss either the natural or cultural heritage aspects. The essence of participatory projects is to filter all information and opinions into one consistent advice. Such processes will not happen overnight, the opinions of the CGIs will have to be gradually structured over time.

Organizing a sustainable system of public participation opens the gates for intense communication between the SCV, the committees and the CGIs. A possible step-by-step strategy that Vloethemveld could take on to get this organisational structure is the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation (IAP2). The IAP2 was first created by the International Association for Public Participation and aids in the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process.<sup>248</sup> Besides explaining the various steps in a participatory project, IAP2 also provides a toolkit for community collaboration. The model was first developed to work within government policy frameworks but was later adapted by Cherrie De Leieun and Susan Arthure for heritage communities during their study of Irish community groups in Kapunda, in the northern region of Adelaide, Australia.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Council of Europe, *Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, Council of Europe Treaty Series – No. 199, Faro, 2005, <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016800d3814>.

<sup>245</sup> Marc Jacobs, "Article 15. Participation of Communities, Groups and Individuals. CGIs, not Just 'the Community'", in J. Blake and L. Lixinski (eds) *The 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention. A Commentary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 273-289.

<sup>246</sup> Council of Europe, *Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*, Council of Europe Treaty Series – No. 199, Faro, 2005, <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016800d3814>.

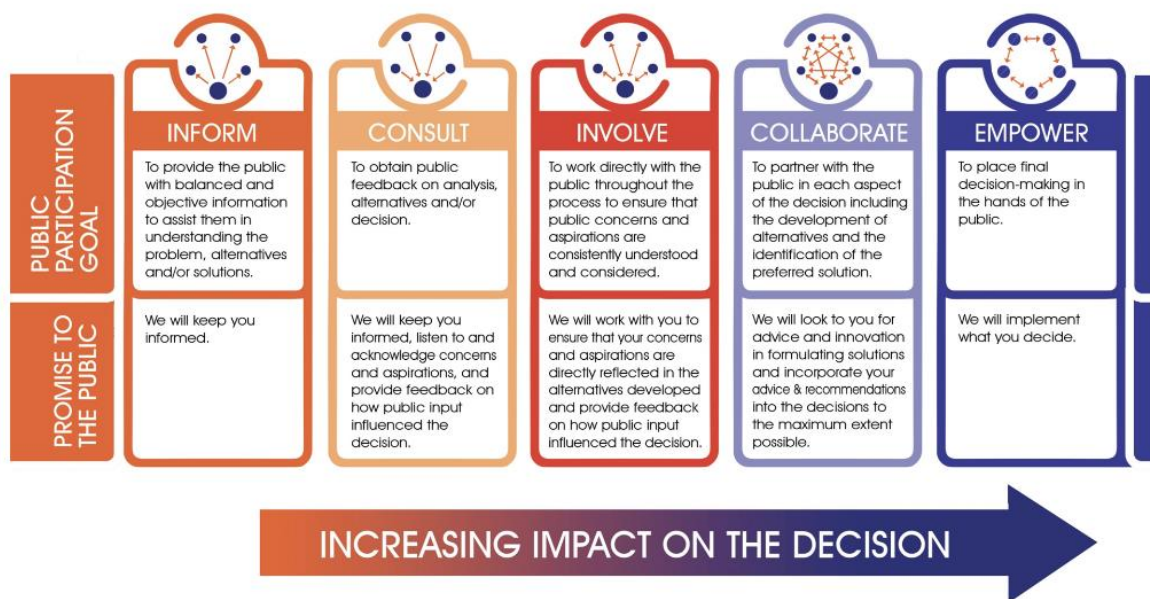
<sup>247</sup> Suzanne Elizabeth Thomas, 'Doing Public Participatory Archaeology with "Difficult" Conflict Heritage: Participatory Research in Archaeology', *Post Classical Archaeologies* 9 (26 May 2019): 148.

<sup>248</sup> 'Advancing the practice of public participation', IAP2 International Association for Public Participation, accessed 2nd of May 2023, <https://www.iap2.org/page/pillars>.

<sup>249</sup> Cherrie De Leieun and Susan Arthure, 'Collaboration on Whose Terms? Using the IAP2 Community Engagement Model for Archaeology in Kapunda, South Australia', *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* 3 (3 May 2016): 81–98.

The IAP2 model is the most applicable to the Vloethemveld case since the model is a spectrum. Each participation level is built on the previous one and all the steps have a certain freedom of interpretation to them.<sup>250</sup> Not all organisations will succeed in all stages of the spectrum but that is not the point either. The point is to let heritage organisations rethink and speculate on where they want to go in terms of public involvement and the future of the site. This model can assist Vloethemveld in two specific ways. Firstly it will make sure that there is a good representative group of participants who will have the adequate opportunity to be involved in the project and plan activities all while taking into account age, proximity near the area, personal connection or other aspects. Secondly the model provides the possibility to harness community knowledge. Sharing knowledge has the potential to lead to different research avenues, answers and explanation, creative collaborations and better planning.<sup>251</sup> Additionally engagement with CGIs can also foster a more holistic understanding of past experiences and social conditions.

The spectrum consists of five steps:



Graph 2: IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation.<sup>252</sup>

**Informing** is a one-way communication system that provides a balanced and object perspective on the site but also an increased understanding of issues.<sup>253</sup> The goal is to present accurate information in a way that is easily understood and relevant to the target audience. In the case of Vloethemveld this first line of communication still provides some issues. The SCV wants to appeal to the largest possible group, but as a result mainly seems to attract older people and young families with small children. This can be attributed to their main means of communication of long Facebook posts with nice pictures and email newsletters. These ways of communicating leave out a part of the community like the teenagers and young adults who gather their information on other media platforms and in different ways. But especially the international community of stakeholders who have a personal past with the site do not really have any means to keep themselves up to date on the site's developments.

<sup>250</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 90.

<sup>251</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 89.

<sup>252</sup> 'The 3 Pillars of Public Participation', IAP2 Canada, accessed 2nd of May 2023, <https://iap2canada.ca/Pillars>.

<sup>253</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 'Collaboration on Whose Terms?', 90.

Despite the sometimes lacking means of communication on social media, the site has been growing in providing communication outlets through the creating of the timeline, a book, planning future exhibitions and ensuring that 'the week of the forest' of the local primary and middle schools are organised on site. Opening up their means of communicating together with a structured communication plan could give the possibility to also attract individuals from outside the area. The advantage of attracting external individuals is that they can provide critical information that would otherwise have remained unknown.<sup>254</sup>

Once the communication aspects are sorted out, the **consult** category moves up the spectrum and results in a two-way process that involves feedback and ideas.<sup>255</sup> The idea behind it is to gradually gather community input as it is critical to the future of the site to have timely feedback. These ways of back and forth communication is often physically organised in public meetings or workshops. The goal is to actively seek community views on alternatives or decisions. For Vloethemveld these could be organised in informal open days where people could give their opinions or presentation meetings. Important for every activity is that the community expectations should be managed by ensuring that there is a shared understanding of the purposes, goals and communal outlets the project should have, as well as what is non-negotiable.<sup>256</sup> It is essential that there is full transparency in this phase of the spectrum on what is put on the agenda and in what way the public is expected to participate.

A step further from simply consulting the public is actively to **involve** them. Vloethemveld mainly runs on volunteers, with some of them having a degree of decision-making. But the active involvement of volunteers can be estimated beyond those who are already involved in the project. Focus groups should be organized to create a discussion environment where people talk in small groups about topics of interest. These groups can be moderated by the active volunteers since they have a background knowledge on the site, but it is of vital importance that a wider community of interest is attracted to these events since they can often provide new opinions and comments. Current management of Vloethemveld mainly revolves around the same volunteers who have been active in the partnership for over a decade. New insights could also give them new perspective on Vloethemveld.

At the **collaborate** stage, the incentive is to partner and share with the community to develop an understanding of all the issues.<sup>257</sup> Final decisions still remain with the lead organisation but there is the possibility for sharing responsibility with community members. However for the collaboration to be successful, high levels of mutual trust need to be on the basis of the project. In some situations like the decisions on the *Ferme Bocca* the majority of the volunteers already had an opinion on the matter which resulted in them not involving the public in the decision-making on this project. Consequently some people were disappointed and felt hurt when they heard about the project plans without having the possibility to change it. All participatory projects are based on trust in the participant's abilities and vice versa.<sup>258</sup> Collaborative projects comprise of participants that are invited so serve as active partners in the creation of projects that are originated and ultimately controlled by the institution.<sup>259</sup> Important in this phase is the fact that is assist in re-shaping the community interest and make the heritage site become a shared value. Currently, Vloethemveld is perceived as a mixed site where nearby inhabitants valorise a mixed set of natural and cultural heritage elements. Although these values are diverged, such collaborative projects will aid in bringing their opinions together and see the area as one instead of a mix.

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<sup>254</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 90.

<sup>255</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 90.

<sup>256</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 91.

<sup>257</sup> De Leiu en and Arthure, 92.

<sup>258</sup> Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010), 183.

<sup>259</sup> Simon, 187.

The last and vital stage of the Spectrum of Public Participation is the **empower** stage, where the responsibility for all decision-making is passed to the community.<sup>260</sup> Generally it is unusual to reach this stage, but some elements can be put into projects of all kinds. Compared to the collaborate phase, the community engagement is lower as at this level a decision would be made by the community through a process that requires little interaction or engagement like a referendum for example.

One last vital aspect that should be addressed and was briefly mentioned in the informing phase is that the Vloethemveld partners should decide which stakeholders they want to include in the story of the site. The focus of this dissertation was to put an emphasis on the members of the Vloethemveld partnership and the surrounding inhabitants. But these are not the only CGIs who have an attachment to the site. Belgian living further away can still associate themselves with Vloethemveld just like family members of former PoWs or guards who were passed down the stories of their ancestors. Especially a focus on the latter group could assist in deciding how to approach the dark heritage aspects of the site. Most of the descendants of former PoWs live scattered around the world in the USA, Canada or Australia in diaspora groups who still attach great importance to their homeland heritage.

#### 4.4 What the future will bring: some critical reflections

Vloethemveld is a dark heritage site. The PoW camp that used to be stationed at the site brought traumatic memories to the inhabitants of Zedelgem and Jabbeke; dismissal of the reality of the situation was passed on to one generation after the other. Now the area is owned by ANB and exploited by the SCV. Together with their associated committees they try to balance out these darker heritage elements against the future they envision.

But the SCV did not make it easy on itself since the structure of the partnership together with the committees, work groups and Interlocal Association is very complex. The intercommunication is sometimes difficult and a majority of the members do not even understand the structure of the partnership itself, who has what executive powers and who has casting votes. When asked about a complete overview of the whole structure, it took the SCV several months to provide a concise document. The fact that the partnership will have to take a clear stand on a couple of difficult topics in the future is hampered by this complex structure. Whether or not the SCV and the organisations perceived Vloethemveld to be a dark heritage site, the PoW past must be placed in a correct perspective before deciding how to organize the site in the future. The SCV and members of the HWCV have expressed a fear of falling into a narrative of 'negative' associations of Vloethemveld or having a too big focus on the PoWs by putting them into a victimized role. But the SCV could ask themselves the question of whether it is not better to take the PoW narrative into their own hands than to lose control and end up in situations like the Latvian beehive? Additionally dark heritage need not be seen in a purely negative light which is something the SCV has to take into account as well because different emotional experiences can arise out of 'positive' interactions with such places..

Dark heritage conceptually resonates with Tilden's concept of 'interpreting heritage', because it expands the set of narratives offered at a site. According to Tilden, the public's experience during a visit in a heritage site is only limited by their own imagination.<sup>261</sup> In the case of dark heritage elements, it tends to only appeal more to the public than what you would call 'normal' heritage aspects.<sup>262</sup> Even for myself, as a researcher, it was that first connection to these dark elements that sparked an interest to set up a project on the site. Most of the interviewees have acknowledged a similar evolution of

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<sup>260</sup> De Leiuwen and Arthure, 'Collaboration on Whose Terms?', 93.

<sup>261</sup> Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 57.

<sup>262</sup> See chapter 4.2.

interest. Rather than complicating the heritage aspects of the site, the dark heritage elements further enrich Vloethemveld. The SCV and the HWCV act on their fear of misinterpreting or miscommunicating information of the PoW camp to the outside world. But that first ‘provocation’ of the visitor is something that the SCV should further exploit, rather than hold back. It is a pity that it is currently being looked at rather dubiously. The site of Vloethemveld can be exemplary to other dark heritage sites in engaging in active dialogues on their dark elements with a varied set of stakeholders. Additionally the natural heritage aspect will not be undercut by this focus on cultural heritage aspect, since they are one and the same set of heritage values.

Secondly there is the advice to further establish ties with a set of volunteers and local residents. Naturally working in the heritage sector with volunteers is already complex.<sup>263</sup> Volunteers seldom agree on every aspect of the management of a heritage site because each operates within their own set of rules and experiences. This was shown through the balance act the SCV has to take between the natural and cultural heritage aspect of the site or the mutual difference the guides have depending if they have an interest in the military or nature. It would also aid in the discussions in the HWCV on what aspect of the history of Vloethemveld should be highlighted. Having opposite opinions compared to other colleagues is not negative in itself, but it is when it paralyses the flow of an organisation. The fear of making an in depth analysis on the history of the PoWs has hindered certain volunteers from expressing their interests in the dark elements, currently resulting in a stalemate situation. This draw situation is currently preventing the public from entering the discussion. In the long run the lack of dialogue on the dark elements will become a difficulty the SCV will have to overcome if they would consider setting up participatory projects in the future. The current volunteers operating at Vloethemveld, have the site’s best interests at heart which is why the hopes are high for the site to evolve into a site of social cohesion and regional development.

Despite what some members of the SCV and the committees might believe, Vloethemveld is not an isolated case of a dark heritage site that struggles with their complex management needs. Since 1997 Vloethemveld became a member of the European Natura 2000 to assist them in maintaining their natural heritage, but similar recent projects have been set up to aid dark heritage sites. In 2016 the Pact of Amsterdam established the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality in regional and urban development projects in Europe.<sup>264</sup> One of the Partnerships attached to the Pact is the Urban Agenda Partnership Culture and Cultural heritage: Actions. This partnership has ten action groups attached to their organisation, one of the action groups is Action 10: Integrated and Regional Approaches to Dissonant Heritage.

During the course of two years the action group researched potential opportunities for dark heritage as an impulse for social cohesion, democracy building and urban/regional development.<sup>265</sup> Additionally they also wanted to raise awareness to the public, especially the local actors of the potential that dark heritage sites have and even provided a toolbox on their website to aid similar sites.<sup>266</sup> The Action Group wanted to emphasize that sites need an increased and coordinated cooperation at local, regional and national levels but also intensified the networking at the European

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<sup>263</sup> Damian Stamer, Kimberly Lerdall, and Chao Guo, ‘Managing Heritage Volunteers: An Exploratory Study of Volunteer Programmes in Art Museums Worldwide’, *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 3, no. 3 (1 August 2008): 203–14.

<sup>264</sup> ‘The Urban Agenda for the EU’, European Commission: EU regional and urban development, accessed 18th of May 2023, [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/themes/urban-development/agenda_en).

<sup>265</sup> Jan Schultheiß, ‘Introduction: Goals in the Urban Agenda for the EU’ (Presentation, Monthly meeting on Integrated Approaches for Dissonant Heritage in Europe, 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2022), <https://vimeo.com/759112382>.

<sup>266</sup> ‘Research project: Integrated Approaches to Dissonant Heritage in Europe’, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, accessed 18th of May 2023, <https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/research/programs/ExWoSt/FieldsOfResearch/dissonant-heritage/01-start.html>.

level.<sup>267</sup> It also recommended to link dark heritage to other sectors such as education, tourism, culture and community engagement. Besides awareness the Action Group also gave some tips in ensuring the financial viability of dark heritage sites through the explanation of the various financial resources a site is entitled to.<sup>268</sup> In their recommendations section the Action Group set up three possible synchronous steps a site with dark heritage could take: better knowledge, better regulation and better funding.<sup>269</sup>



Graph 3: Institutional framework of Action Group 10.<sup>270</sup>

**Better knowledge** tackles the fact that dissonant heritage sites need to be dealt with by setting up a network of stakeholders and professionals. The idea is to share knowledge about dissonant heritage sites and support each other in managing them. The document also emphasized the importance of having multiple stakeholders, which also strengthens the argument to set up future projects with Latvian diaspora and possible survivors of the PoW camps as well as their family members. Another important argument set up by the Action Group is to have a coordinator who is specifically in charge for organising network exchanges. Currently these interactions are performed by several volunteers on their own account rather than being under a structured coordinator. At the same time it also argues

<sup>267</sup> Jan Schultheiß, 'Introduction: Goals in the Urban Agenda for the EU' (Presentation, Monthly meeting on Integrated Approaches for Dissonant Heritage in Europe, 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2022) <https://vimeo.com/759112382>.

<sup>268</sup> Mario Aymerich, 'Ensuring the (financial) viability of Dissonant Heritage sites (Presentation, Monthly meeting on Integrated Approaches for Dissonant Heritage in Europe, 11<sup>th</sup> of October 2022) <https://vimeo.com/759112382>.

<sup>269</sup> Urban Agenda Partnership Culture and Cultural Heritage: Action Group 10, *Integrated Approaches to Dissonant Heritage of the 20th Century with a focus on smaller towns and remote areas in Europe: Orientation Paper*, Petra Potz and Nils Scheffler, Berlin, 2022, [https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/research/programs/ExWoSt/FieldsOfResearch/dissonant-heritage/orientation-paper.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=3](https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/research/programs/ExWoSt/FieldsOfResearch/dissonant-heritage/orientation-paper.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3).

<sup>270</sup> 'Research project: Integrated Approaches to Dissonant Heritage in Europe', Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, accessed 18th of May 2023, <https://www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/research/programs/ExWoSt/FieldsOfResearch/dissonant-heritage/01-start.html>.

the importance of successful participatory processes and cooperation. Stating that it ensures further ownership and validation.

**Better regulation** focuses primarily on ensuring that the organisation is politically independent and in charge of management of dark heritage site within a decentralised decision-making structure. It gives organisations tips on how to organize themselves as efficiently as possible with the best possible outcomes. The document also mentions that part of the problem also lies in national and international deficits to actively acknowledge dark heritage as a category for monument protection.

**Better funding** cites that structurally from Europe, but also nationally, more recognition should be given to dark heritage sites, which may result in more funding. It also argues an implementation for of simplified procedures of funding programmes for smaller organisations. The organisations themselves can, in the meantime, develop independent sources of income like membership and entrance fees but also books, events and festivals. Something that Vloethemveld has already implemented in the past. But since it is a dark heritage site it needs to be kept in mind that the site's dissonance limits site-specific revenues, since merchandising should not be made on the former PoW aspect.

Conclusively the SCV and the committees at Vloethemveld could learn from this project to tackle future problems.



## 5 Conclusion

This dissertation tackled the balancing act of the natural and cultural heritage elements that are at play at Vloethemveld, a former PoW camp in Zedelgem, (West-Flanders) Belgium. Vloethemveld can be seen as a dark heritage site, since it is a site that within certain points of time is associated with unpleasant memories. The process of conducting semi-structured interviews gathered opinions and perceptions on the site by a variety of stakeholders like local inhabitants and members of the SCV and/or committees attached to Vloethemveld. A total of fourteen interviews were conducted from early October 2022 to January 2023.

The interviews resulted in seven recurring themes ranging from questions on the manner information gets communicated to the public to whether certain cultural heritage objects should remain on the site or not:

- Ambiguity towards the function of the site
- Influence of recent events: Covid-19
- Influence of recent events: Ukraine crisis
- Natural and/or cultural heritage conservation
- Which (hi)story to tell
- Communication
- The Latvian beehive controversy

These topics were the result of the opinions and perceptions the respondents had towards Vloethemveld during the course of the interviews. Some topics were discussed more intensively, depending on the respondent. The interviews that were carried out only presented a fraction of the heritage processes behind Vloethemveld. More people should be interviewed in the future to get a broad impression on the needs and possibilities of the site. The perceptions on Vloethemveld are extensive and every person who knows the site has their own opinion of it. But large-scale interviews may be beneficial in the long run for site management and social acceptance.

Each of these themes were weighed against current debated concepts within the heritage field in the discussion chapter. The concepts of memory and forgetting occur in situations where people involved in a traumatic experience had led to a collective disappearance from the public memory. Paul Connerton's 'seven types of forgetting' and Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner's 'museal silence' corresponded to Vloethemveld's current situation where next generation of inhabitants have failed to receive stories about the PoW time from their ancestors.<sup>271</sup> This collective forgetting is characteristic feature of dark heritage and influenced how these dark heritage elements are perceived throughout the years. Within the structure of SCV and organisations around Vloethemveld, this had led to an anxiety to approach the topic. This because of several reasons like the fact the SCV feels they do not have the correct scientific knowledge to deal with a profound discussion or that it will lead to a negative association with the site. The public on the other hand had a rediscovered interest in the PoW camp because they had not heard from it from their family members, due to the unconscious structural silence throughout the years. The topic of the PoW does not frighten them but on the contrary fascinated and pulls them to Vloethemveld. This is what Freeman Tilden described as the provocation of the visitor by making them reflect about their own position in society and the present.<sup>272</sup> In Tilden's concept the interpretation of heritage happens through provocative elements. The remaining physical

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<sup>271</sup> Mason and Sayner, 'Bringing Museal Silence into Focus'; Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting'.

<sup>272</sup> Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 64.

remnants of the PoW camp trigger visitors into reflection. The Ukraine crisis aided in this process but equally the Covid-19 pandemic made visitors readjust their relationship towards Vloethemveld based on the natural heritage aspects.

The main discussion that was most often brought up was the question whether the natural and cultural heritage objects were predominant in relation to each other. Natural and cultural heritage elements are essentially indivisible, but in the public mind, it is rarely understood this way. Scholars like David Lowenthal, Bruno Latour, Rodney Harrison and Deborah Rose have criticized this artificial separation, recognizing the ecological connectivity.<sup>273</sup> This led to the 1992 addition of 'cultural landscape' to the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. Cultural landscapes embrace a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between humankind and its natural environment. Vloethemveld's natural landscape evolved through the changes in economic and administrative imperatives and serves as a cultural-historic landscape. The SCV and organisations associated with Vloethemveld should strive to get to a synergetic cooperation between the natural and cultural heritage aspects.

Lastly a suggestion was made for future public participatory projects based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation.<sup>274</sup> One of the recurring elements during the interviews was how the respondents often felt left out in the decision-making process on events and conservation of heritage elements. The intercommunication between the public and the SCV mainly happens in an one sided way, resulting in certain stakeholder groups feeling left out or even remaining uninformed until this day. The IAP2 will make sure that there is a good representative group of participants who have the equal opportunity to be involved. But the model also harnessed all possible community knowledge on the history of site, both of the PoW camp as other aspects of Vloethemveld's past. The stages of the spectrum are designed to build on the previous one but still give the most possible freedom of interpretation to the using organisations. Additionally there is also the discussion whether the SCV should include more stakeholder groups since the heritage value of Vloethemveld exceeds further than the borders of West-Flanders, or even Belgium since a variety of nationalities have historically been involved on site. Further research will have to be set up to trace back all the stakeholders and their descendants in their current home countries.

Despite all these measures, the site of Vloethemveld has already grown a lot throughout the years. All people involved at Vloethemveld, want the best for the future of the site. Nobody knows what the future will bring and it highly depends on what the SCV and other organisations like the HWCV will decide to emphasize. But it is certain that Vloethemveld will play an important role in the lives of thousands of people for years to come.

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<sup>273</sup> Lowenthal, 'Natural and Cultural Heritage'; Latour and Porter, *Politics of Nature*; Harrison and O'Donnell, 'Chapter 3 Natural Heritage'; Deborah Rose et al, *Indigenous kinship with the Natural World in New South Wales* (Hurtsville: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003), <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Aboriginal-cultural-heritage/indigenous-kinship-with-the-natural-world-new-south-wales.pdf>.

<sup>274</sup> De Leiuwen and Arthure, 'Collaboration on Whose Terms?'

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## 7 Annexes

### 7.1 Examples of interview questions

The questions mentioned below are translated in English, the actual conversations were conducted in Dutch. These questions were a starting point for a conversations, in most cases these actual questions did not need to be asked as the conversation evolved around them spontaneously.

1. Were you familiar with the area of Vloethemveld before the start of this interview?
2. Do you have a personal relationship with Vloethemveld?
3. Do you see Vloethemveld primarily as a natura area or also as a heritage site?
4. Do you have some strong emotions regarding Vloethemveld?
5. Were you familiar with the history of Vloethemveld before the start of this interview?
6. Have you heard about the controversy surrounding the monument of the Latvian beehive in Zedelgem?

## 7.2 Photo archive of PoW camp

In the following series a few photos are shown to give a broad impression of the PoW camp. The pictures originate from the Riga photo museum and were provided by Juris Ziverts.



The interior of a barrack.



The barbed wire around the PoW camp.



The exterior of a stone barrack.



The exterior of a wooden barrack.