

Podcast Amsterdam Trading Culture- From the Golden Age to Now

Episode 7: The notary as a bridge between golden age and future

Welcome to Amsterdam's Trading Culture, a podcast by Lexence in honour of Amsterdam's 750th anniversary. My name is Hidde Bruinsma, and in this episode we dive into the history and future of the notarial profession. What does the life of eighteenth-century notary Jan de Vicq tell us about the role of the notary then, and what does the profession look like today?

Historian Myrthe Bleeker unravels the city life of notary Jan de Vicq through centuries-old deeds. Together with notary Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst, we discuss what has remained and what will inevitably change. From beer carriers to governance models from paper wills to digital deeds. This episode is a story about trust accessibility and the enduring value of independent record-keeping.

Hidde Bruinsma: The notary provides a bridge of trust and security between different parties. What do you guys think about that?

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: I recognise that immediately. The notary is in the middle of the transaction, independent and impartial. We ensure that the agreements are clearly recorded, so that all parties know where they stand. That role of mediator and guardian of clarity is crucial.

Myrthe Bleeker: You can see that in history too. Clients came back to the same notary, year after year. That says a lot about the trust people placed in that one person. The notary knew his clients, their situation, their family history. He was an anchor point.

Hidde Bruinsma: Yet the image of the profession often remains somewhat dusty. Why is that?

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: Perhaps because of the formal nature. When I studied notarial law myself, I thought: nice profession, but I can't see myself becoming a notary. Only during my internship did I discover how rich in content and people-oriented the work is. It is anything but boring - you puzzle, advise, negotiate. You're really on top of things.

Myrthe Bleeker: People often don't know exactly what notaries do. The same applies to archivists, by the way. We are also quickly labelled as stuffy. While the work is actually very lively, full of stories and meaning.

Hidde Bruinsma: Myrthe, you worked on the All Amsterdam Deeds project. What did you find out about Jan de Vicq?

Myrthe Bleeker: He worked in Amsterdam for forty years. Initially without an office, just from home. He walked the city, from client to client. No coach, no carriage - this is evident from his estate inventory. He was accessible. And you can see that in his deeds: the times,

locations, sometimes even the rush or circumstances of the moment. On his deathbed, he still stopped by for a will.

Hidde Bruinsma: And what kind of clients did he have?

Myrthe Bleeker: From beer carriers to preachers, pitchers to women on deathbeds. The whole social spectrum came to him. This is precisely why you see people in notarial archives that you don't find elsewhere.

Hidde Bruinsma: Nowadays, as a notary, you are also a gatekeeper. What does that entail?

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: You prevent wrong or criminal money from entering the system. There are strict requirements for that. You have to screen clients, assess the origin of money. As a notary, you are partly responsible for that. And if you don't do your job properly in this, heavy sanctions follow, and rightly so.

Myrthe Bleeker: That was also true in the eighteenth century. Notaries were appointed by the Council of Holland and could lose their position if they did not follow the rules. There are records of court cases against notaries who did not work with integrity.

Hidde Bruinsma: Hendrik, you said earlier that sometimes you don't pass a deed for weeks. What do you do then?

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: A lot. I work with entrepreneurs, on acquisitions and restructurings, draft governance structures and advise on the legal set-up of organisations. This is substantive and strategic work. The deed is the final piece, but the process leading up to it requires a lot of coordination and advice.

Hidde Bruinsma: Myrthe, you yourself were once at the notary and recognised something in the language of the deed?

Myrthe Bleeker: Yes, I asked if I could read the deed quietly, and to my surprise, I recognised many phrases. That is because I have read many eighteenth-century deeds. The structure remained surprisingly constant.

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: We are trying our best to make the language more accessible, but there is still a lot of tradition in it. That's why explanation is so important. My job is to make sure people understand what they are signing. That they not only sign, but also understand what the consequences are.

Hidde Bruinsma: In the days of Jan de Vicq, networking happened at the stock exchange. What about now?

Myrthe Bleeker: Back then, notaries literally walked around the exhibition floor. There they met clients and colleagues. It was physical and personal. And it often worked through families: sons succeeding their fathers, daughters marrying notaries. Real networks emerged.

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: Today, a lot goes digital - LinkedIn, e-mail, online documents. But the first meeting, I prefer to have that physically. You build trust in a real conversation. After that, you can easily continue digitally.

Hidde Bruinsma: And what does AI change?

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: AI is going to change the profession. Standard deeds will be automated. The notary's added value will then lie even more in advice, guidance, strategic thinking. If you don't go along with that, you will fall behind.

Hidde Bruinsma: What can we learn from the past?

Myrthe Bleeker: That the notary used to be accessible to everyone. Even people with little means or education knew how to find him. We need to keep that approachability, or even bring it back.

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: We are working on that, with campaigns and ideas like the social notariat. Everyone should be able to manage their affairs well, regardless of income or language level.

Hidde Bruinsma: In conclusion. What would happen if we no longer had notaries?

Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst: Then we get chaos. No clarity on ownership, unreliable transactions, legal uncertainty. The notary provides confidence in the system.

Myrthe Bleeker: The notary also used to be the place where trade and agreements were properly and securely arranged. That was essential, and remains so.

Hidde Bruinsma: That brings us to the end of this episode of Amsterdam Trading Culture- The notary as a bridge between trust and progress. A podcast by Lexence Lawyers and Notaries in honour of Amsterdam's 750th anniversary. My big thanks to my guests, Myrthe Bleeker and Hendrik Bennebroek Gravenhorst, for their insights, stories and sharp reflections on a profession that has been moving with the city and its inhabitants for centuries.

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