

Who Was Graaf Floris?

We have used the name of Graaf Floris as the name for our distillery as our adventures in gin started out in Graaf Florisstraat, Amsterdam. Having a street named after Graaf Floris in the Netherlands is not unusual, and many towns and cities across the land also have streets (lanes, ways etc.) named after this character. Who, you may be wondering, was the person behind the name?

Graaf (Count or Earl) Floris V (1254 – 1296) is an authentic Dutch legend. He reigned as the Count of Holland and Zeeland from 1256 – 1296, but his legacy reaches down through the ages (especially when a street needs a name!) as his story has inspired books, songs and plays in the Netherlands. With the passing of time his mocking nickname of ‘God of the Peasants’ merged with reality and over the years Floris became remembered as a saint by the peasants of Holland. In many ways, Graaf Floris has similarities with the English Robin Hood story, although Floris has the added distinction of being a recognised (and real) historical figure.

The sharp eyed amongst you might see that he made an impressively early start, becoming a Count at the age of two years old when his father was killed. Floris naturally had guardians until he reached the age of 12 years and he was accepted as being old enough to take the sole reins of leadership on 10th July 1266. As can so often be found across European history, the reign of Floris was punctuated with an assortment of wars, some more localised than others. Floris attacked the Frisians several times over the years (1272, 1282 and 1287-88), a habit that very likely had its basis in the fact that the Frisians had killed his father in 1258 and not returned his body. Graff Floris did manage to recover the body of his father after defeating the Frisians at Vronen in 1282

Floris also managed to start a war with allies of the Count of Flanders that ended after his capture in 1290 at Biervliet. King Edward I of England persuaded Floris to stop his belligerent approach with Flanders as he had trade interests that were damaged by the conflict. In 1292 launched his ancestral claim to the throne of Scotland but was not supported by Edward. King Edward did, however, support the war with Flanders. This agreement fell apart when Edward moved his woollen trade from Dordrecht in Holland to Mechelen in Brabant. Floris swapped his allegiance to the French so Edward banned all trade between Holland and England and started to plot with the Guy of Flanders to have Floris kidnapped and spirited away to France.

The kidnapping part of the plan worked well as Gijsbrecht IV of Amstel, Herman of Woerden and Gerard van Velsen captured Floris while he was out with a hunting party. They took their new captive to Muider slot castle, not so far from where Amsterdam still sits. At this point the popularity of Floris had an impact and the local people were very unhappy about his capture. Fearing the wrath of the local people, the lords attempted to escape with their captive and left the castle. The escape plan was foiled by a mob of outraged local peasants. Gerard van Velsen lost the plot, panicked and killed Floris and then fled the scene with his fellow lords. Gerard van Velsen was later captured, detained and then killed in Leiden.

Floris was succeeded by John 1, Count of Holland, in 1296. John married Elizabeth, daughter of Edward 1, so European aristocracy again managed to keep relationships and alliances alive and well through the ongoing tactical marriage program. Nobody remembers John 1, but Count Floris V is still remembered across the Netherlands more than 700 years later. We fondly imagine that given the chance, Floris would have enjoyed a glass of our Parakeet gin.