

COURSES

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TOP 100 SPOTLIGHT

Royal Hague

As we savour a month of pros playing links, Chris Bertram assesses Continental Europe's top-ranked seaside course.

The Netherlands has a flat reputation for good reason. Almost a quarter of its land mass sits below sea level and of the remainder, half is less than a metre above. Ideal for cyclists and farmers, less helpful to golf course designers. So it's ironic this 'Low Country' is home to the course in our Continental European Top 100 with the most dramatically undulating topography.

Royal Hague – Koninklijke Haagsche, in Dutch – is the most southerly of three seaside courses sitting on a strip of coast between Rotterdam and Amsterdam. The Kennemer is at the top close to Haarlem, Noordwijkse is 10 miles away in a remote spot, and a further 10 miles south is Royal Hague, on the northern edge of the influential city of The Hague.

Royal Hague Golf & Country Club was founded in 1893 but its original course was destroyed in World War II. Its members found this new home two miles from the sea in the 1940s when they acquired from businessman Daniel Wolf the course he'd built for himself in 1938.

The wealthy Wolf – who lived nearby – hired Harry Colt, who is revered in perpetuum by the Dutch, but by the late '30s his health prevented him from travelling widely. So he left the 10th and last Dutch design by his firm in the hands of his trusted associates John Morrison and principally Charles Alison.

Within two decades it was showcased to the world when Byron Nelson played Gerard de Wit in a 1963 episode of Shell's Wonderful World of Golf. It is available on YouTube and, in spite of the modest picture quality, makes for fascinating viewing, not least in how much Royal Hague has changed; back then the course sprawled with glorious lack of inhibition over the dramatic linksland with a notable lack of trees.

In the five decades since, a myriad variety of trees have flourished, especially on the back nine, so that while the turf retains its linky characteristics and the trees sprout from enormous banks of sand, there is now a different look to the one on the grainy film. It is one we are not really familiar with in Britain, and the best likeness might well be Le Touquet's Mer course in northern France.

Indeed, this is a distinctive course in **■**

LEFT: The undulating fairway of the 10th leads to a contrasting green – it is essentially very flat.

BELOW: A relatively large green at the short 12th.



more than one respect. “Royal Hague is strikingly different from the Netherlands’ other Colt courses,” leading architect Frank Pont tells *Golf World*. “A major part of this difference is the distinctive, dune landscape. But Alison’s share of the difference is markedly expressed in other areas. Not only is the bunkering larger, deeper and bolder than on the other Colt courses – a mere 19 were used, including one on a fairway – another clear difference is Alison’s routing and the significantly more adventurous green locations. One could even say the green complexes are extreme, in comparison to what Colt had designed in his Dutch work to this point. For these reasons, and others, Royal Hague remains an important gift to golf.

“What is still quintessential Colt & Co are the devilishly difficult, deceptively flat-looking greens, the beautiful shaping of humps and hollows around the greens and, of course, the infinite variety and superb strategy of the holes.”

Pont is well placed to comment. His reputation as sympathetic to Colt’s philosophy saw him commissioned by the

‘There is a colonial hue to the interior design and a feeling of robust homeliness in this country club’

club after the turn of the Millennium to enhance its heritage in tandem with the necessary rebuilding of all greens as a result of the clay bed on which they were founded becoming impenetrable.

The work enhanced the course, not least in the eyes of our Top 100 panel, to a level accordant with its eminent history.

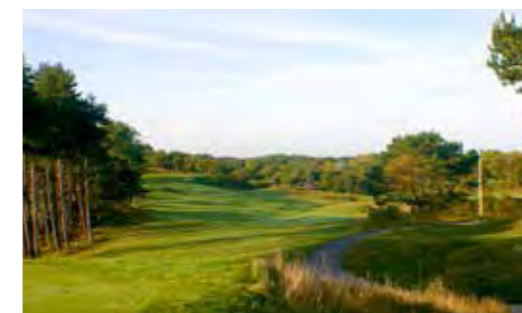
Bestowed its prefix by Queen Beatrix in 1993 to celebrate the club’s centenary, it hosted the first two Dutch Opens – in 1972 (Jack Newton) and ’73 (Doug McClelland) – and a further in 1981 when Harold Henning edged out Nick Price and Ray Floyd. It also held three Senior Tour events from 2010.

A distinguished experience is thus expected as you crawl along the tree-lined driveway and it duly begins in the clubhouse, a sumptuous affair of deep leather armchairs, grand paintings adorning tartan-papered walls, intricately-carved fireplaces and stout bookcases. There is a colonial hue to the interior design as well as a feeling of robust homeliness in this ‘country club’, where the old-money lawyers from The Hague mix with well-heeled businessmen from Amsterdam.

The authentic yet fresh feel is easily



ABOVE: Undulating fairways and towering trees on the 10th hole. **LEFT:** Side on to the short 8th. **BELOW:** A view down the 11th fairway that turns left to right, with the par-3 12th further in the distance. **BOTTOM:** An alternative view of the 10th, showing the shape required to find this rippling fairway.



A SYMPATHETIC REVISION OF ‘A COLT’

Exclusive: Frank Pont recalls his work on the last Dutch course in the portfolio of Harry Colt’s firm.

Royal Hague was built by carting in fertile clay-ish soil onto areas for greens, tees and fairways. This worked fine in the first decades and allowed golf to be played in this barren dunes landscape, but became a problem in the winter, with fairways turning softer than one would like for a true links-type course.

Also, the old clay layer, after 70 years of topdressing on the greens, had sunk so deep it had become so impenetrable it could not be broken anymore. The advice, therefore, of a number of well-known agronomists was to build new greens. Royal Hague rebuilt one (18th) of the greens itself. Although the process went OK, they were convinced by the architectural issues that came up that they wanted help from a golf architect with experience in working with Colt courses. I was fortunate to be chosen.

The budget was good; we were able to expand the greens out into the adjacent grassy hollows, which in turn allowed us to cut the areas shorter than normally would have been the case.

My brief was to design 17 greens, greenside bunkers and green surrounds. These had to be as close as possible to the originals in the case of the greens that were still original, and for the

greens and bunkers that were not now original I was asked to redesign them if necessary. Finally, I was expected to be present at the club virtually all the time during construction of the greens in the summers of 2006 and 2007.

My goal at Royal Hague was to try to restore the original greens, their surrounding bunkers and the surrounds as accurately as possible to the earliest pictures I had of the course.

I first obtained pictures from 1954, then later on from 1946. The oldest aerial picture I found was taken in 1938 – but unfortunately it was taken just before the course was built.

The only changes I allowed were to correct drainage issues such as enclosed areas on the greens that did not surface drain and probably had resulted from variable compaction of the sub-soils over time.

In the last few years we have also rebuilt all the teeing areas, something that was necessary because many of them had been built as very large platforms in the 1960s, a style that was easy for maintenance, but did not fit the quality of the course.

• **Read much more from Frank on Royal Hague in our Continental European Top 100 (November issue).**



explained; the clubhouse burnt down in 2002 and had to be totally rebuilt. A year earlier, its twin Royal Mid Surrey had suffered the same fate. On hearing the news from the Netherlands, the English club returned the letter of sympathy they had received from their Dutch cousins 12 months previously, with the heartfelt, handwritten addition of 'Same to you'.

But while this weekend sanctuary for high fliers shares many characteristics of our traditional clubs – the prefix to its name, the unobtrusive luxury, and its insouciant atmosphere – one notable difference is the proximity of the 1st tee to the clubhouse. At our old clubs, the 1st tee and 18th greens are routinely just a few yards away but at Royal Hague while the last green is overlooked by distinctive red parasols on the vast clubhouse verandah, the 1st is nowhere to be seen.

A short walk up a winding path between gently swaying pines is required to reach your opening shot, owing to Wolf's preference for the clubhouse not being visible from the links.

Starters here need thick skins, for they must be used to having conversations with distracted golfers, so much is there to take in from the 1st tee. It is clear what lies ahead for the golfer from this lofty vantage point, the eye absorbing the exciting sandy terrain created by centuries of prevailing westerly winds that have



ABOVE: The uphill 9th is made more testing by a false front to a green on a dune. **RIGHT:** The 8th is, like the 4th, another downhill short hole with magnificent views. Everything is in clear sight on this par 3. **LEFT:** The 15th is part of a terrific closing stretch. Use the slopes on the left to nudge your ball onto the flat fairway.



FOUR OR FIVE?

Once a birdie chance, now an exacting two-shotter.

The 6th, 470 yards, Par 4

This used to be a par 5 when Royal Hague's overall par was 73 – and indeed Jack Newton made eagle here en route to a 64 during the 1972 Dutch Open ...a score matched that same week by Peter Oosterhuis.

For all but elite amateurs and pros, it remains a three-shotter. Indeed, when we played here we mistakenly noted it was a 'reachable par 5'. It is only 15 yards longer than the 5th, which is actually still a three-shotter.

Length is but one of the challenges on the 6th though. The back tee is a splendid affair and worth going back to at least for a look. But playing from it means most of us are

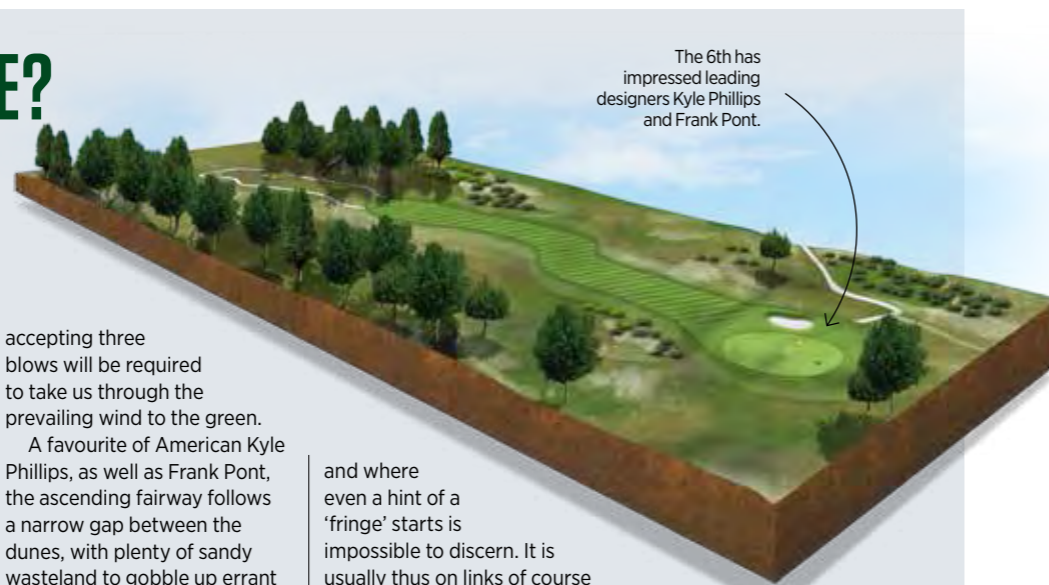
accepting three blows will be required to take us through the prevailing wind to the green.

A favourite of American Kyle Phillips, as well as Frank Pont, the ascending fairway follows a narrow gap between the dunes, with plenty of sandy wasteland to gobble up errant shots. If successful, you then have a go at the green, but with a lot of club in your hand it will require skill and fortune to hold the turtleback surface; less-than-perfect approaches shots are rejected left or right. In fact, where the green ends

and where even a hint of a 'fringe' starts is impossible to discern. It is usually thus on links of course but here it is especially so.

As a result your exacting recovery shot from the hollows will probably either be nudged into the shorn greenside slopes or putted up the bank. The alternative punishment is a splash out from the deep

The 6th has impressed leading designers Kyle Phillips and Frank Pont.



bunker that sits front left.

The smallish green has significant slopes and holing out for bogey is no disgrace.

It is after all, stroke 1 on a thoroughly challenging championship course.

incrementally deposited sediment to form this spectacular landscape.

The nature of the topography means the course is almost inevitably exacting and while describing it as a rollercoaster seems twee, it is accurate. To suggest it is Perranporth adorned with bushes and trees is not totally ludicrous.

Much of Royal Hague involves threading your ball along narrow paths of land that plunges and rises across natural mounds, hollows and ravines. It means often there is tangible difference between a really good drive and a decent drive, or a decent drive and a modest drive; a clear view of your next shot is usually the reward. The penalty for straying off the short grass is often severe too, with bushes, trees and tall fescue grasses in wait. The greens are generally of a good size but the false fronts and run-offs to the side and back combined with their crowned nature mean there are often relatively small 'safe' landing areas. This premium on accuracy is accentuated by the firm turf throughout that necessitates a crisp strike with every type of shot. When putting, subtle borrows are

'The 18th is a reminder one of the Continent's finest is actually in the famously flat Netherlands'

exacerbated by the rapid surfaces.

It may all sound like laborious work, and although no monster by modern standards at 6,882 yards and with fairway bunkering restricted to the 13th, as a general rule this is probably a course strong players will relish more readily. Nevertheless, off the blues (5,800 yards) higher handicappers can cope with and enjoy the undulations of Royal Hague.

Part of that enjoyment comes in the uncommon variety to the style of holes. Such is the diversity, it takes stringent recollection afterwards to ensure the correct order and description is applied to each hole – and to pinpoint favourites.

After the gentle par-5 opener and two stellar two-shotters comes a memorable downhill par 3 whose tee offers the only view of the sea from the links. Other highlights on the front nine include the long par-4 6th (see left) and the sporty

7th, with a blind tee shot over a post on top of the dune. The 10th is a sumptuous three-shotter with pine trees lined up with military precision on the horizon of the hill all the way down the left like an army of troops preparing to enter battle.

You exit the trees to play the more open 12th – a terrific par 3 to a domed green – while the 14th might be the pick of the lot, part of a strong closing run.

It ends with a lovely hole, albeit one that happens to be out of character with the rest. After an elevated tee shot the rest of the sheltered, tree-enclosed hole is extremely flat. It is a reminder after hours of clambering breathlessly over and around muscular dunes that one of Continental Europe's finest is actually in the famously flat Netherlands. **GW**

KEY INFORMATION

Royal Hague Golf & Country Club
Wassenaar, The Hague, Netherlands
t: +31 070 5179607 w: khgcc.nl
Green fees: €150. Mon-Thu (before 11am & after 2pm) and on Friday before 11am.