

Royal Hague Golf Club

Wassenaar, The Netherlands

Adam Lawrence says Frank Pont's careful work has polished Alison's Dutch jewel



It's hard to imagine more perfect golfing terrain than the land on which Royal Hague's tenth hole sits

Great golf courses generally come in clumps. There's the occasional place – Ganton in the UK, perhaps, or Prairie Dunes in the US – where a wonderful course exists, miles from anything else worth playing, but these are the exception. When you think about it, there's no surprise: great golf depends so much on great terrain, and most pieces of great terrain are large enough for more than one golf course. Hence golfing Meccas such as the Melbourne sandbelt, the Surrey heath, and the northern end of Long Island.

Golfers, being predominantly male, are prone as a breed to rating and ranking, so such groupings of great courses are as a red rag to a bull. Which is your favourite, Sunningdale or Swinley? Pebble or Cypress? Bandon or Pacific? These are

the kind of debates that rage on when golfers meet up (actually the courses don't even need to be that great – just listen to a

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post-golf discussion in any city around the world and you can bet it will turn to the local venues and their respective merits).

The set of links courses in the dunes of

the Dutch coast are collectively a match for pretty much any clump anywhere. Kennemer, Noordwijk, and Royal Hague, the first and last designed by Harry Colt's firm before the Second World War, and the second by Frank Pennink rather later (Pennink also added the third nine at Kennemer, largely according to a Colt routing) could and should attract exactly the same discussion.

For me the choice is clear. Kennemer and Noordwijk are both terrific courses, but both have their compromises. Royal Hague, built primarily by Colt's longtime associate Charles Hugh Alison, has better terrain, better greens and a more consistently interesting set of golfing challenges. And now, after an extensive renovation led by Dutch architect Frank Pont, it is



The sixth is a brutal long par four. Inset: the ninth green



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better than ever.

The iconic photo of Royal Hague’s tenth fairway demonstrates the sort of land the course traverses. What it doesn’t show is the genius of the greens, which can best be illustrated by a closer look. Pont, by regrassing the surfaces with a traditional links mix of bents and fescues, and also by sensitive removal of trees and recapturing of lost green surface, has returned Alison’s brilliant design to the highest ranks of European links.

In some ways, Royal Hague is an atypical course for Colt’s company to have built. The great architect himself

is known as a challenging, but forgiving designer, always inclined to give the weak player a good, if more costly alternative to taking on the most difficult of shots. Alison, I suspect, had a more sadistic mindset.

Yes, the course is eminently strategic, and only in one place is there a shot that simply must be executed — the tee shot on the difficult third hole, which must cross a deep valley, and which is decidedly iffy for short-hitting women golfers. Pont told me that he and the club pondered long and hard about placing a forward tee, but the problem is that any such tee would be at the bottom of the steep incline — not a whole heap easier.

Elsewhere the course is like an old-fashioned schoolmaster — strict but fair. The magnificent sixth hole, described by Kyle Phillips as his favourite par four in the world, demands two perfect shots, and even then may not yield a par. Like many of the holes, the sixth has a severely crowned green, and what might seem a

glorious approach could easily run into trouble. For much club play, the hole is considered a par five — and there are possibilities to build a new back tee that would make it a quite stunning one, too — but Pont feels it should remain a two-shotter, testimony to Alison’s severe genius.

Even when the greens are not crowned, the course is stiff. Take the fourteenth hole, perhaps my favourite on the course, even though it ate me for lunch. Here, the golfer stands on a tee and sees a hole heading up a natural valley to a green high in a saddle. The fairway appears a mere ribbon, but in fact is rather more welcoming. Hitting the short grass is only part of the challenge, though: the rise in front of the green is matched by



The fourteenth has a glorious greensite. Inset: the renovated sixteenth green complex



a similarly steep falloff to the back. The high dunes to left and right can be used to increase the effective size of the target, but even then the shot is demanding. I hit what I thought was an excellent approach, designed to bounce off the left dune, but it was a few metres too short, and was gobbled up by a massive hollow, from where the recovery shot was way beyond my limited powers.

Pont's brief at Royal Hague was varied. Several greens had been rebuilt over the years, and part of the project was aimed at recapturing a consistent look and feel across the entire course. But another problem was agronomic. In order to help keep the grass alive on the pure sand, during the initial build, the site was capped with clay to help retain moisture – a far cry from the sandcapping now common on golf projects.

This process achieved its goal, but it naturally compromised the site's perfect drainage characteristics. And, more pressingly, the clay layer on the greens had been deeply covered by years of topdressing, so even the most

aggressive greenkeeping techniques couldn't get far enough down to break it up. Hence the need to rebuild.

But the opportunity thus created meant that the course could be returned to something more akin to what Alison originally created. In places, this has had dramatic results. At the short par four sixteenth, for example, a tree had grown up to the right of the green, interfering with greenkeeping efforts, and getting in the way of golfers. By removing the tree, putting an extra bunker in its place and, crucially, adding fairway to the right of the bunkers as far as pin high, an excellent short par four has been reborn. Now, the temptation to have a pot at the green is much stronger, though the risk of doing so remains just as high as before.

The fine green at the par three seventeenth is another example of Pont making new work that looks entirely at home with Alison's original. In particular, the lower back left plateau achieves two

things: it creates a devilish sucker pin – especially demonic if the tee shot is left a good distance away, as putting will then truly be the stuff of nightmares – but it also helps the green tie in much better to the sloping ground that surrounds it. It typifies Pont's work at Royal Hague: he has taken a masterpiece, and given it a subtle, sympathetic facelift, and made it better still. **GCA**

ROYAL HAGUE GOLF CLUB

Golf design: Frank Pont, Infinite Variety
Construction: Heijmans Sport en Groen
Agronomist: David Stansfield