



## Awaking Sleeping Beauty: restoring Royal Hague's greens

Frank Pont

Royal Hague, built in 1938, was the last of the ten golf courses that Harry Colt's firm designed in the Netherlands. By that time, due to his advancing age, Colt wasn't traveling anymore. In this instance, the on-site design work was undertaken by his close associate, Charles Alison.

Royal Hague is strikingly different from the other remaining Colt courses in the Netherlands. A major part of this difference is the distinctive, dunal landscape in which the course is situated. 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 nineteen bunkers were used on the course, including one bunker on the thirteenth fairway—another clear difference is

Alison's routing and the green locations, which are significantly more adventurous. 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 to this day remains an important gift to golf.

What is still quintessential Colt & Co at Royal Hague 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.

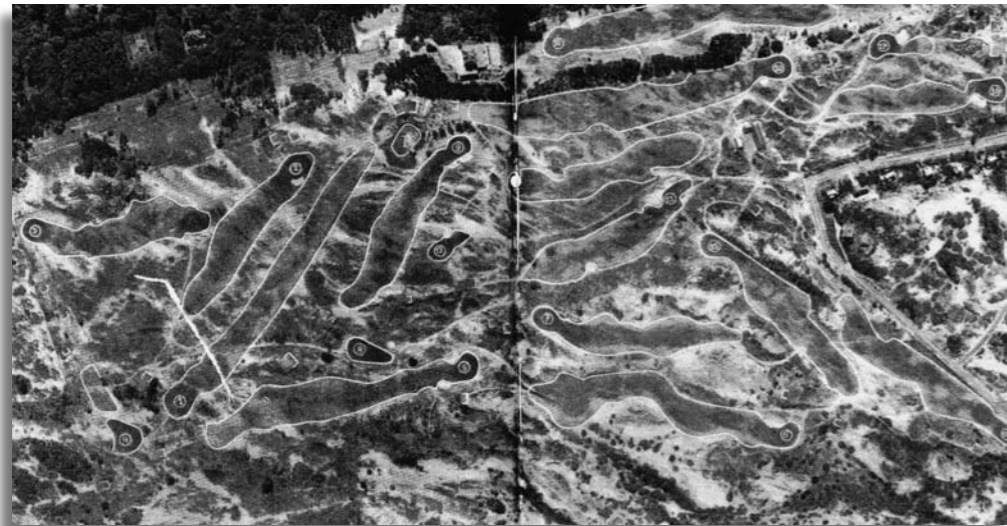
Because the dunes surrounding Royal Hague were relatively barren at the time of its construction—the course was nicknamed 'the Pine Valley of Europe'—the decision was made to transport fertile, clayish soil on

to the areas of the greens, tees and fairways. This worked fine in the first decades and allowed for golf to be played in this otherwise barren dunal landscape. It later, however, became problematic: in winter the fairways are softer than desirable for a links-type course. Tellingly, the old clay layer had sunk so deep after seventy years of topdressing on the greens that it had become an impenetrable layer that could not be broken down anymore with normal maintenance equipment. The golf club, therefore, followed the advice of a number of well-known agronomists to rebuild all eighteen greens. I was delighted to assist the worthy cause when Royal Hague commissioned me to provide the architectural and Colt/Alison expertise on this project.



**OPPOSITE** Royal Hague Golf & Country Club, The Netherlands: On a clear day, the skyline of The Hague becomes visible in the distance when looking back over the third green. Directed over a broad ravine, the tee-shot on this 350-metre par-4 is among the most exciting on the layout, while the elevated green has a treacherous front that 'swallows' approach shots that come up short. The front also takes care of over-enthusiastic putts back to the flag. [Photograph by Frank Pont.]

Royal Hague: This aerial of Royal Hague was taken just after WW2, and it shows the routing of the course through the barren dunes. Close study indicates that very little has changed to the basic layout of the holes over the years. (First published in *Golf* magazine.)



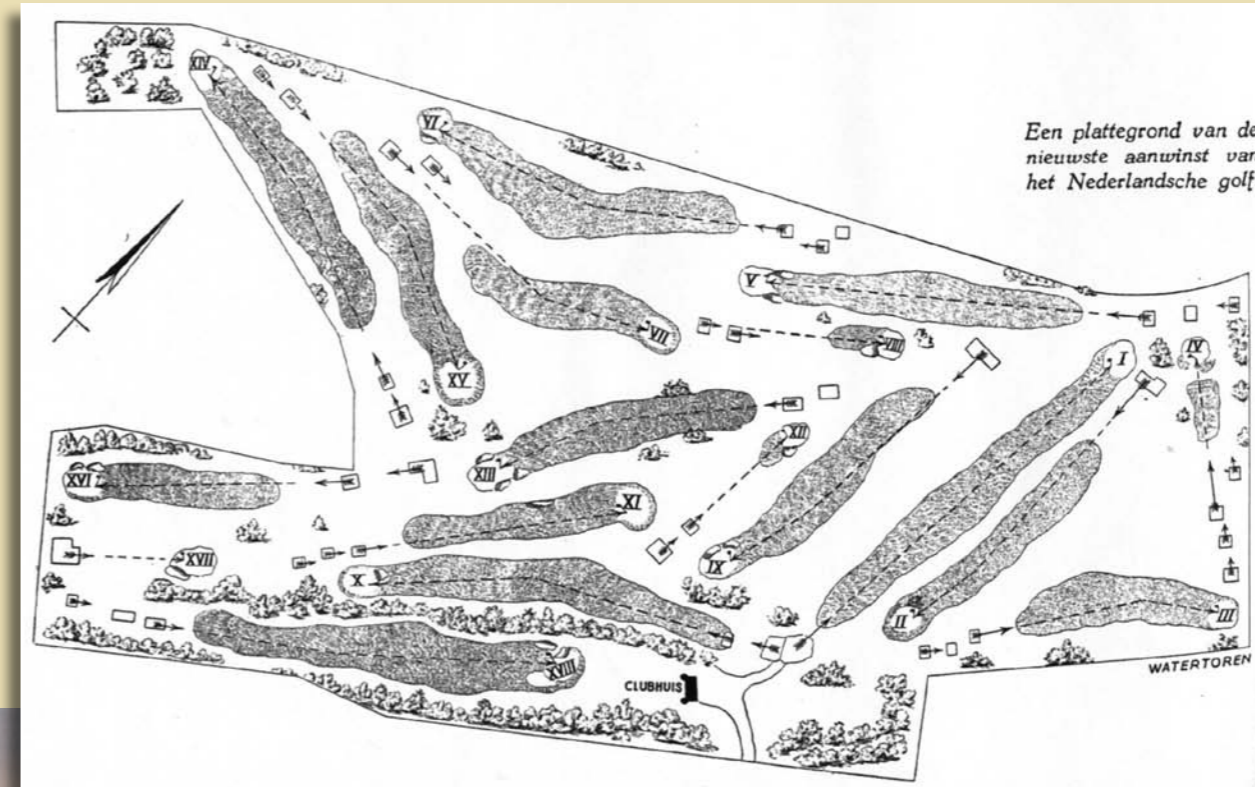
BELOW Royal Hague: A 1938 picture taken during the 'grow-in' phase of the course, showing the sandy wilderness surrounding the 230-metre par-3 fourth hole. Note the penal waste area in front of the green, forcing the weaker players to play a safe lay-up shot. (First published in *Golf* magazine.)



*De korte 4e hole van 230 meter der Wassenaarsche baan, waarover wij hiernevens een en ander vertellen.*

My goals at Royal Hague were two-fold: firstly, to restore the thirteen greens that were still original as accurately as possible; secondly, to create putting surfaces for the five greens that had been changed or moved over the years, so they'd look and play like original Alison greens to knowledgeable visitors. To this end, all the greens were painstakingly detailed measured in 3D, thereby allowing us to rebuild them in exactly the same form.

Two further elements were instrumental in recreating Alison's style at Royal Hague. Firstly, to mirror his large, sand-faced green-side bunkers we studied old aerial pictures of the course to determine their exact locations and contouring. Although the bunkers are rather large and 'in your face', we decided to stick with this peculiar historic style rather than opt for more organic-looking bunkers. Secondly, historical analysis of the grassy hollows (with short grass) that he carefully positioned around his greens was instructive. These had become overgrown and filled-in over the years; we made a concerted effort to bring these important 'hazards' back into play.



LEFT Royal Hague: This rendering of Royal Hague's course routing shows its compact nature—a feature the casual visitor isn't likely to notice during their round, due to the clever way Allison weaved the sequence of holes through the dunes. (First published in *Golf* magazine.)

BELOW Royal Hague: The singular green of the sixth hole bares its 'teeth', on account of a deep, grassy hollow on the right, and an 'even' bunker on the left. The 430-metre par-4 hole, in most cases, forces players to hit long-irons or metal/woods into the prevailing wind to this rather unreceptive green. The hole also holds the distinction of being undeniably the hardest hole in the Netherlands. It also happens to be Kyle Phillips's favourite golf hole, worldwide. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)



OPPOSITE ABOVE LEFT  
Royal Hague: A view of the devilish, short-mown grassy hollows behind the 355-metre par-4 second hole's new green. They are prime examples of the type of 'hazard' that Colt and Alison were keen to utilise; namely, being difficult enough for good players and 'forgiving' for less-talented golfers. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

OPPOSITE ABOVE RIGHT  
Royal Hague: The green of the 328-metre par-4 ninth hole lies high atop a dune ridge, guarded by a deceptively difficult bunker. The unpredictable wind is always a vital factor in choosing one's club for the approach. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

OPPOSITE BELOW  
Royal Hague: The green of the 202-metre par-3 fourth hole, as seen from the back tees, still provides players with a breathtaking view of the dunes and, occasionally, passing ships on the North Sea. It doesn't, however, diminish the threat posed by the three bunkers, or the OOB along the right-hand side of the hole. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

In restoring the original greens we took great care to recreate the exact playing surfaces; we also repaired some areas that had clearly changed over the years. One example was an enclosed depression in the thirteenth green that clearly was the result of consolidation of the soil over the previous decennia.

Restoring the original greens was rewarding; the highlight of our project, however, was designing and building the new ones. The following text describes some of the thoughts and issues that went into that process.

The first of the newly constructed greens was on the second hole. The previous green had been very small: all upward-sloping, and it had a 'band-like' dune behind it that appeared artificial. The hole is a medium-length par-4 where, due to a massive valley in front of the green, the shot into the green is either approached 'blindly' with a short-iron, or to a visible target with a medium-length iron. The goal was to give the player hitting into the green with the longer shot more room to land on the green, while making the longer hitter's 'blind' wedge shot into the green an even harder proposition. Another goal was to remove as much visual backdrop

to the green as possible, so that better players would have a hard time judging the distance to the green.

The new green we built was almost fifty per cent larger. The front of the green remained the old surface, while a new back section was added—flat for the first portion, sloping away from the player, thereafter. Grassy hollows were installed behind the green.

Another new green was installed at the seventh hole, where the main problem again was that the green was too small. The solution here was to lower the green surface by about a metre, which created just enough extra space on the right side to make the total green surface large enough. A welcome, extra dimension of expanding the green to the right has become apparent: it makes the tee shot even more strategic, for any drive that is not sufficiently leftward on the fairway, leaves a daunting 'blind' shot to the green.

Royal Hague's thirteenth green provided quite a different challenge. The supplanted green was grossly out of character with its two-tiered structure and double-flanking bunkering left and right of the green—clear

indications that it wasn't an original green. Because the hole is a difficult par-4 that is usually played into the wind, we were keen to provide players with more space to land a long-iron on the green, and to improve the odds of golf balls staying on the surface. This was achieved by moving the green rearward, making it significantly longer in the process. The new green is defended by a bunker on the front, right side and flanked on the left by a little 'nasty' hump at the entrance to the green. The entire left-hand side and back of the green is defended by three, huge grassy hollows that gather most of the less-accurate shots of the players. Putting on this long, upward-sloping green is far from easy, since it plays 'tricks' with your eyes—from both the front and the rear of the green, it seems the green slopes to the left. Obviously, this is a physical impossibility.

The sixteenth hole is a short par-4, which, from the men's tee, is driveable for the big-hitters. The green had a large pine tree right next to the green, which many members liked, but it wasn't present when the course was built. It certainly didn't fit Alison's design philosophy. The most negative aspect of it





**Royal Hague:** The 462-metre par-5 first hole plays a lot shorter than its distance would indicate; its green is also one of the more 'friendly' on the course—the hallmarks of a typical Alison-style opening hole. The fourth green shares a deep, grassy hollow with the first hole. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

**OPPOSITE Royal Hague:** Defined by a 'blind' tee-shot over a towering dune to a wide fairway, the 345-metre par-4 seventh hole is the kind that isn't built anymore. Don't be fooled by the hole's width: successful tee-shot positioning is everything here, enabling golfers to attack the flag. This especially holds sway when the pin is on the new, expanded right-hand side of the green. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

was being a perennial maintenance nightmare for the greenkeepers. We decided the tree had to go, and that it would be replaced by a new bunker, which also would increase the number of greenside bunkers to three. To further amplify the interest of the hole, the valley situated before the green was widened. In this manner, shots into the green that were short, including drives, would roll all the way down to the right of the fairway. From this area, recovery shots can be delicate, tricky or downright murderous depending on one's short game skill.

The final par-3 of the course, the seventeenth hole, represents the last of Royal Hague's new greens. The hole suffered through having its previous green poorly vis-

ible from the tee; it didn't assimilate in the existing landscape, and the green only yielded a few interesting pin positions. In designing the new green, along with its surrounding landforms, we wanted to achieve a number of outcomes: the front part of the green should be sloping upward to enhance visibility from the tee; the back-left part of the green should be lower than the top plateau to create a hard-to-hit target; it should be more harmonious with the surrounding landscape. Lastly, we wanted to incorporate three bunkers, each with various degrees of difficulty and flashed-sand faces, to make the defence of the hole more varied. Additional strengthening of the hole was achieved after we constructed a number of low, grassy hollows behind, and to

the right of, the green. And last, but not of least importance, we allowed for a less-risky 'bail-out' area for the benefit of older members in the front, left of the green. Now, a relatively easy chip onto the green is possible.

The fortitude that Royal Hague displayed in having all its greens restored has paid off handsomely. Not only are the putting surfaces back to their original high standards and presenting firm and fast greens, but there is real excitement around the club knowing that it now possesses one of the most exciting inward nine holes one could ever hope to play. The 'sleeping beauty' that Alison created has truly woken up; may she live a long and happy life.



**Royal Hague:** Another long par-3, the 209-metre eighth hole requires a precise tee-shot to keep the ball on the green. The upside of a 'missed' green is the infinite variety of exciting recovery shots one is presented with in trying to scramble a par. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

**OPPOSITE ABOVE**  
**Royal Hague:** The new row of bunkers, allied to the enlarged valley in front of the green of the 261-metre par-4 sixteenth hole, makes any effort to drive the green both exciting and potentially dangerous to your score. A great match play hole; it comes at exactly the right moment in the round at Royal Hague. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

**OPPOSITE BELOW**  
**Royal Hague:** The last of the par-3s, the 143-metre seventeenth is another hole that offers the player with numerous tee-shot options. The hole's defense is its three bunkers, and the front and back-sloping areas of the green, subjecting players to pin positions that vary from 'easy' to 'impossible'. Always, however, the astute player can find a way to avoid trouble, be it at the loss of a stroke. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)



**Royal Hague:** The green of the 403-metre par-4 eleventh hole has a deep, 'bathtub'-style hollow in its front entrance that eludes approach shots that are slightly inaccurate—a design element that was a favourite of Colt & Co. Behind the green, grassy hollows were reinstated during the works. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)



**BELOW LEFT**  
**Royal Hague:** Even though the par-3 twelfth hole has the largest green of the course, and it only measures 158 metres, an always-shifting side wind makes this one of the hardest greens to hit in regulation. Several deep, grassy hollows make the resulting up-and-down shots both interesting and tricky. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

**BELOW RIGHT**  
**Royal Hague:** The new thirteenth green now sees the 397-metre par-4 as being almost as challenging as the sixth hole. Not only is the green well-defended by grassy hollows and a bunker, it's bolstered by a hump at its entrance, which serves to push slightly inaccurate shots both left and right. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)



**OPPOSITE**  
**Royal Hague:** The severely undulating tenth fairway and the hole's contrasting green, as seen from the right-hand side of the fairway. From this photo's general vicinity, long-hitters usually attempt to reach the green of this 439-metre par-5. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

