



Harry S. Colt in The Netherlands: a surprising legacy

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Most people have an image of The Netherlands as a country mostly below sea level, with large areas covered with dykes, lakes, and canals. In such an environment one would not expect to find many, if any, world-class classic golf courses. How wrong one can be.

Unknown to most, The Netherlands boasts one of the finest and most accessible collections of Harry Colt-designed golf courses in the world. Colt, together with his associates, Charles Alison and John Morrison, built ten golf courses in The Netherlands. These are Royal Hague and the Kennemer (links); Eindhoven, de Pan, Hilversum, Toxandria, and the Dommel (heath); and the parkland layout, Amsterdam Old. Two other links,

namely, Oostvoorne and Noordwijk Old, have sadly disappeared.

That a large number of Colt courses have survived in a small area is, in itself, special; that many of these courses are still in their original settings makes it all the more noteworthy. I am fortunate as a golf-course architect to be involved with the restoration and renovation of six of the remaining eight Colt courses in The Netherlands.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Colt did not leave us with much written text on the subject of golf-course architecture. If you add up the one book he wrote on the subject and the two articles he contributed to books published by others, his output barely reaches 100 pages. His written texts, even if they are

limited in size, are an essential starting point. However, to understand Colt's work, one really has to go out and observe/study his courses. From his work one can deduce a number of key design points he utilised on every course he built. Visit many of his courses and one will see Colt's design rules further emerging.

A problem, however, is that in many cases when casually looking at a Colt course, one often doesn't know what aspect of a Colt course is still original. Moreover, assessing what has changed over subsequent years is not straightforward. Old pictures of the golf courses definitely help in this respect. Such pictures show us, for instance, that Muirfield—which now has neatly trimmed



OPPOSITE The 275-metre second hole at Eindhoven is a short, strategic par-4, with two heather fairway-islands that appear, falsely, innocuous to golfers. The position of the flagstick determines which side of the island constitutes the ideal tee-shot line. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

OPPOSITE The glorious rolling fairway of Royal Hague's 439-metre, par-5 tenth hole, which virtually always yields an uneven stance. Other than thick trees to the left, the hole's only other defence is the small greenside bunker. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

sod-faced bunkers—initially, after Colt's extensive changes to the original Old Tom Morris course, had the rough-edged, sand-faced bunkers he so advocated.

Colt also helped us in a way he probably was not aware of at the time. His methods of working and applying his design principles were so methodological and consistent; any deviation of these rules enables someone familiar with Colt's work to quickly spot where alterations have been made.

A good example of this was at Kennemer. When I first arrived at this course I noticed that most of the greens were symmetrically defended by bunkers on both sides of the greens. Given that this goes directly against the strategic principle of Colt to design and defend his greens asymmetrically, I was fairly sure that significant changes had been made over the years. Subsequent investigations using old aerial photographs of the site proved that original bunkering of the greens had, indeed, been asymmetrical, and that many bunkers were later added to make the course 'tougher'. But before we continue with more examples, perhaps it's time to

outline the design rules of Colt. Although he never made a formal list of his rules, I have tried to pull one together based on his writings. I found roughly ninety design statements, which, in my view, cluster into the following seven broad design rules.

Work with the natural features of the site. Colt did not believe you could design a golf course from behind a drawing table. One had to spend significant time on the site to get to know the lay of the land, discover the potential green sites and see where the best views from tees were.

Landscape changes should look natural. Colt was not averse to making significant changes to the landscape, especially considering the limited earth movement capabilities of the time. As such one cannot characterise him (or Alison) as minimalists. They were adamant that changes, regardless of how large or small, should look natural and not be clearly visible to the casual onlooker.

Apply links playing conditions on inland golf courses. Although Colt was instrumental in bringing the game of golf to inland sites, he remained a *Links Man*. One sees this in his

emphasis on allowing bump and run shots into the greens by having large and firm fore greens, and positioning bumps, hollows, and short mowed grass around the greens.

Systematically route the course, while presenting the player with infinite variety. Routing the golf course was one of Colt's strongest areas. All his courses have good routings. Some of them, like de Pan, have superb routings. Golfers often remember most of his holes after the first round, so varied are his many individual hole designs. Again one can spot changes made to a Colt course when this balance is missing.

Stimulate players to think strategically with their tee-shots. Colt placed his bunkers, and other hazards, near his greens and on fairways to stimulate the player to think about how much risk they were prepared to take with shots. He was very precise in the placement and the depth of his greenside bunkers, often in a diagonal line and, in most cases, an uneven number of them prevailed. His bunkers were always visible by banking the sand well up on to the face of a bunker.





Defend a green by its location, size and hazards, rather than an extreme putting surface. Colt was not a man who designed wild greens, even less so on the continent than back home in England where there are some wild examples. He felt that once on the green everybody should be able to make their two-putt ... and then get on with it. Colt's greens are often very well defended by bunkers, humps, and hollows to catch and/or deflect any ball stuck slightly inaccurately.

Design severely for the scratch player, but sympathetic for the bogey player. A less-known design trait of Colt, but no less revolutionary than the introduction of strategic design, was to design severely for the scratch player, yet sympathetically to the bogey golfer. A good example of this is the short mowed grassy hollows around the greens. These hazards tend to be easy for the weakest players, who can escape them easily with a putter, and hard for the best players who often become confused by the myriad of options they have to play their ball.

One can conclude that Colt's design philosophy was rather straightforward. Given

this, it is puzzling to conclude that very few architects have been able to translate this into Colt restoration work that looks authentic. Too many courses are marked by poor restoration work, where it is obvious at first glance that Colt's design philosophies were just shrugged aside.

But rather than just being critical of other people's work, let me give a short overview of how I work. My approach to restoring Colt courses leans, generally, toward the conservative side. Where possible I really try to restore rather than change. This is demonstrated by the following key guiding principles.

Keep the original greens where possible. In my view the greens (and the routing) are the most important assets of a Colt course. One should only consider moving or changing an original Colt green if all other options have been exhausted. It never ceases to amaze me the ease with which people decide to move or change original Colt greens.

If not possible to keep the green, then map—and rebuild them accurately. If the current greens cannot be kept, then the first thing the club should do is to get a detailed 3-D map

made of them. This gives the possibility to either rebuild them exactly as they were on the same location (something we did at Royal Hague), or to have the original to go back to (if the new green has not performed as expected).

Where greens are not original, change them into Colt-style greens. If the green clearly deviates from Colt's design principles, I feel one has more freedom to change the green again and bring it more back in line with the other Colt greens throughout the course.

Make fore greens firm and fast. This aspect was a key Colt strategy; he even wrote that on the best courses the fore greens were as good as the greens themselves.

Re-establish grassy hollows around greens, and mow them short. Many of the grassy hollows around the greens have been allowed to become rough. Even worse, some now contain shrubs or even trees.

Restore sand faces back in bunkers. On many Colt courses, the clubs in the past decided to eliminate sand-faced bunkers; the prevailing thought was that they required too much maintenance.

OPPOSITE The feature of a bottleneck fairway, further defended by three sand-faced bunkers, forces golfers to carefully place their tee-shots at De Pan's 338-metre, par-4 tenth hole. Indeed, the hole is unique among Colt's two-shot holes in The Netherlands. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)



ABOVE The intricate 144-metre, par-3 second hole of the 'B' loop at De Kennemer. Any tee-shot that finishes short or left of the green leaves the player with a very tough recovery shot to secure a par. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)

OPPOSITE Another gem at Royal Hague is the 377-metre, par-4 fifteenth hole. Don't be fooled by the fact that there are no fairway bunkers and the fairway looks wide; the ideal tee-shot landing-zone allowing the player to go for the green measures only a few metres. (Photograph 'at sunset' by Frank Pont.)

Restore the visibility of the green from the tee. On almost every original Colt hole, one can see the green. Exceptions are those holes that are 'blind', due to inherent landforms.

Make the bunkering of holes strategic again. Restore the original strategy of holes by re-introducing the typically asymmetrical patterns. Greenside bunkers should be restored to their original positions and shapes. With fairway bunkers we can be more flexible.

Remove trees and shrubs from the playing areas of the holes. I don't see the point of having trees in the middle of fairways—a direct contradiction to Colt's design philosophy.

The eight remaining Colt courses in The Netherlands are all very interesting layouts and, in most cases, of high quality. Most clubs are serious about their Colt legacy and are engaged in long-term restoration efforts.

Royal Hague

This superb links was built in 1938, mostly by Alison. With its exceptional and extremely rolling landforms, I've noted how US visitors have found it strikingly reminiscent to Eastward Ho. The course only has one fairway bunker, large and deep greenside bunkers, along with many raised greens. The

course is loaded with strategic shotmaking requirements. In 2008, the renovation of all the greens will be finished.

Kennemer

Another great links; this one was built in 1928, with the work mostly done by Colt (B/C course). The course is a more traditional links, with a large number of classic holes running through a number of pronounced dune-ridges. The course was severely damaged during World War Two. Its routing and greens have not changed much over time. The focus of the restoration efforts is bringing the bunkers back to more of a Colt-style.

Eindhoven

This classic and grand heathland course was built in 1930; the work was done mostly by Colt. A very spacious routing with a majestic setting around a lake, Eindhoven requires both good driving and sound approaching skills. It has, quite likely, remained in the most original state of all the Colt courses in The Netherlands.



The raised green of the 363-metre, par-4 finishing hole of the 'C' loop at De Kenemer, requiring an exacting approach shot at the end of one's round. In the background, the distinctive thatched-roof clubhouse can be seen. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)



De Pan

An intricate heathland course built in 1928, the work at de Pan was mainly undertaken by Colt. Considered the prettiest inland course in The Netherlands, it features a superb routing and very firm playing conditions. The current work is centred upon on restoration of all the bunkers.

Hilversum

Hilversum is a strong heathland course, with the original nine holes built in 1917 by H. Burrows. In 1928, Colt added nine holes. The Colt holes are solid and better than the original holes. The course, therefore, has an unfortunate feel of two halves. Kyle Phillips is currently working with Hilversum in changing ten of the eighteen greens.

Toxandria

This is a good heathland course, and it materialised in 1930. The work was undertaken by both Colt and Morrison. It presents interesting, raised green sites, allied to highly undulating fairways. Restoration of all the bunkering is underway.



Dommel

This heathland course was built in 1929, with Colt tackling most of the work. Recently, all of Dommel's greens were remodelled by Martin Ebert.

Amsterdam Old

The only Colt course below sea level, this parkland course was built in 1934; the work was primarily completed by Alison. The original course had eighteen holes, but due to

expansion of the railway, only nine holes remain today.

It is no exaggeration to state that The Netherlands has a unique set of Colt courses! Indeed, any serious golfer, or fervent admirer of Colt, really should come to play each one at least once.

ABOVE A bench has been provided to savour the view from De Pan's 291-metre, par-4 seventeenth hole. Although driveable for long hitters, the most prudent tee-shot play is a sensible lay-up. Far more birdies are scored in this manner than by a big 'blast' from the tee. (Photograph by Frank Pont.)