

Tour Report: Dutch Naval Base at Den Helder, Fort Kijkduin (part of the Dutch Defence Lines) and the award-winning Kaap Skil Maritime Museum on the Texel

On 25 June, following ‘The Raid on Chatham Dockyard in 1667’ conference in Amsterdam, six tourists travelled by train (1.25 hours) to Den Helder and registered in the Hotel Wienerhof, located near the main shopping streets, museums and railway and bus stations. We were able immediately to enjoy Sail Navy at the Marinemuseum, visiting some of the museum ships (<http://www.saildenhelder.nl/> ; <http://www.marinemuseum.nl/>) and then watching the parade of ships from the dike.

On Monday 26 June in the morning we travelled by minibus to Fort Kijkduin, about 15 miles away at Huisduinen, where we explored its extensive defences, tunnels and artefacts, from the 18th to the 20th centuries.

We then visited Den Helder Marinemuseum/Willemsoord naval dockyard (<http://www.willemsoordbv.nl/>), taking lunch on the preserved ironclad HNLMS *Schorpioen* (1860s). Our guided tour included the historical exhibits and the submarine HNLMS *Tonjin* (1966). We then met Michiel Tegelberg, Chair Museum Port Willemsoord Den Helder, for a convivial discussion outside one of the re-purposed dockyard buildings.

Finally, on Tuesday 27 June, we boarded the ferry to the Texel, an island of dunes and dykes where in the 17th century over half the adult men earned their living from the sea. We had booked a bus to Oudeschild to see Mecanoo’s spectacular Kaap Skil maritime museum (<http://www.kaapskil.nl/museumvisit/> ; <http://www.mecanoo.nl/Projects/project/51/Kaap-Skil-Maritime-and-Beachcombers-Museum/t/0>). We saw the Reede van Texel/Texel Roads model of naval and commercial ships waiting in the anchorage, social history exhibits and artefacts recovered by local fishermen and divers from the many ships wrecked by storms. One such exhibit, a high-status dress, had just been removed, see <https://www.kaapskil.nl/garde-robe-eng.html>.

The federal Dutch navy was organised into five Admiralties, a system adopted by the United Provinces in the 1580s/90s: Amsterdam, South Holland (Rotterdam), the North Quarter (Hoorn and Enkhuisen), Zeeland (Vlissingen and Middelburg) and Friesland (Dokkum, later Harlingen). Each had its own navy, admirals, seamen and dockyards, financed from taxes and customs collected at the ports to protect Dutch trade, and by federal subsidies for war.

The importance of the anchorage and the Marsdiep sea-gate between Texel and Den Helder increased as Amsterdam rose in importance from the last quarter of 16th

century onwards, after the blockade of Spanish-held Antwerp led to sudden decline of that port. The sea-gate had been created in the devastating All Saints Day flood of 1170, when the sea broke through and turned a fresh water lake into the salt water Zuiderzee.

Large seagoing vessels could not access the waters of the Zuiderzee because of the Pampus shoals. Therefore, cargoes were transhipped between barges and seagoing vessels lying in the anchorage behind Texel and off Den Helder. Thus the anchorage became something of a Dutch equivalent of the Downs, with large merchant fleets often lying there for weeks, awaiting their cargoes and a fair wind. It was an important location for the Dutch East India Company, the VoC.

The Texel Roads also became a major assembly point for the Dutch naval fleet. Three of the five independent admiralties were based in the north of the country – Amsterdam, the *Noorderkwartier* or North Quarter of Holland (based at Hoorn and Enkhuizen), and Friesland (based at Dokkum until 1645, when it moved to Harlingen because of the silting of Dokkum harbour). The Texel was the natural location for the squadrons of the three admiralties to join forces before sailing south to rendezvous with those of the two southern admiralties, the Maas (i.e. Rotterdam) and Zeeland.

Therefore, the anchorage played a central part in the Anglo-Dutch wars. On a number of occasions, British fleets lay offshore, looking for opportunities to attack the shipping within, or to lure the Dutch fleet out of its safe haven. Both the battles of Scheveningen (31 July/10 August 1653) and the Texel (11/21 August 1673) were fought offshore and a little to the south.

Throughout the 18th century, the anchorage continued to be important for both Dutch mercantile and naval vessels. This was still the case in the 1790s, after a French invasion swept away the old United Provinces and replaced it with a new puppet state, the Batavian republic. In January 1795, the French captured the Dutch fleet using land forces alone, because the ships were stuck fast in the frozen sea – the only time a navy has ever been captured by an army.

The Battle of Camperdown (1797) was fought a little to the south, when Admiral Duncan's fleet attacked a Dutch squadron that had just sailed through the sea-gate. In 1799, a combined Anglo-Russian amphibious force landed on the beaches at Huisduinen, aiming to seize control of the anchorage and peninsula, thereby crippling the Batavian Republic's trade. The expedition, commanded by the 'Grand Old Duke of York', was a

fiasco, and culminated in an ignominious evacuation. There is a nice reconstruction model of the landing in Fort Kijkduin.

The fortification of the peninsula, and its transformation into a dockyard, began under Napoleon. In 1811, work started on what is now called Fort Kijkduin, followed in 1813 by the Willemsoord Dockyard), built 1813–27. A canal linked Den Helder to Amsterdam. The harbour is ice-free and protected by a granite dyke 6 miles (10 km) long. The Dutch naval college moved there in 1854, and in 1947 Den Helder became the Royal Netherlands Navy's main base.

This tour was a fitting accompaniment to the conference, giving delegates insight into Dutch coastal contexts. The Marinemuseum, especially Commodore Michiel Tegelberg, Chair Museum Port Willemsoord Den Helder, and Kaap Skil Museum were very helpful.

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