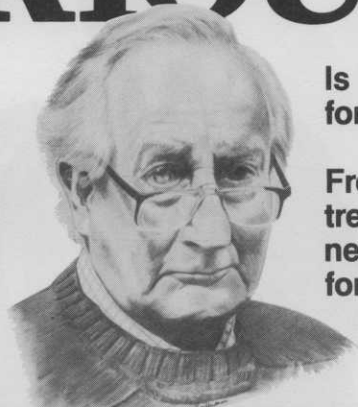


# CURIOUSER

and



Is this the way forward for Golf Course Architecture?

Fred Hawtree looks at current trends in the confection of new courses and yearns for a classical revival.

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They are at it again, as you have no doubt noticed. I refer to professional golfers. In times gone, they designed the world's earliest golf courses. Then, as the purses got bigger, they concentrated on their own game while Colt, Alison, Morrison, Simpson, Mackenzie, Mackenzie Ross and many others, all amateurs, developed a profession and set out a few rules on how to do it best. Now, just when the purses, the prizes, the sponsorships, and the rewards for endorsing somebody's tee shirt have anything up to five noughts on the price tag, the pro's are back with a vengeance and a few more noughts are being added to the price of today's new lay-outs.

Well, it's a free country with a market economy and we all like to see our lads doing well even if we ourselves pay for it in the end. But I am bothered by those extra noughts and by some of the reasons for them appearing on the bill. There is no need for me to declare an interest as we of riper years can rise entirely above all that is petty, envious or malicious and pass on to you the pure distillation of half a century's experience without fear or favour.

Let's first take a look at where all these extra noughts on the cost of today's golf courses are coming from.

First of all, the top names in any sort of job do not come cheap. The sportsman probably comes less cheaply still because he only has about twenty years to turn it into cash. Fortunately in golf, the Seniors' Circuit will now help him to prolong the season but the principle remains the same. The best hay is made before the seedheads start to appear.

But then a name in itself is not an isolated item on the bill. It has to be emphasised, publicised and maximised. This process, besides requiring more payouts, involves other insidious erosions of the bank balance. To justify an expensive intervention, the design of the golf course spreads a nasty rash over the countryside. This will be due to so much sand, so much water, so many rockeries or so many mini-mountains that the visual effect is outlandish: One used to be able to describe a layout in broad terms as 'links', or 'park' or 'heath'. Not any more. Eager to engrave a strong signature on a piece of ground which he may well only see two or three times in his life because he has little time to spare from other commitments, your 'professional' golf course designer will do his damndest to ensure that, when the dust settles, the result is as unlike any other golf course as he can make it, except for the number of holes. (And I am not so sure that even the mystical figure 18 is sacrosanct any more).

The result will be interesting though puzzling for archaeologists in the 25th century but not always much fun to play in this one. And expensive.... just listen to this. In order to transform a little piece of Britain into a displaced section of the Gobi Desert, the first thing these rascals do is strip the top-soil off something like 50 acres. It may be 100 in practice but 50 will do to start with. Now this morning at 10.00 a.m. the price of this operation by your friendly contractor was 25p per square metre. A quick sum in your head which you have probably done by now, turns 50 acres into 20 hectares so you do not need me to tell you that those mounds of



earth all over the place cost  $200,000\text{m}^2 \times \text{£}0.25 = \text{£}50,000$  to put there. Another quick calculation suggests that when we spread all that top-soil out again, we shall be spending another £50,000 on top of the first. And now we can start building the golf course. So it's no wonder the green-fee has to be £25 and upwards and you can't always get a comfortable round.

But don't rush off to get your clubs yet. There is more - much more. All those exotic earthworks have got to be maintained because they don't really belong in their new situation and do not easily adapt to our native routine. I am indebted to Donald Steel, current Chairman of the British Association of Golf Course Architects who ferreted out the vital figures while he was covering the Ryder Cup at Muirfield Village

for 'The Sunday Telegraph'. 'The reason', his article concluded Muirfield Village's condition was so perfect is its maintenance budget of \$850,000 a year, including salaries for 43 greenkeepers to give it tender, loving care'.

See what I mean? A whole new golf course every twelve months.

He also said that it was a mistake to compare any aspect of American and British golf. I am not so sure about that if they are attacking us in our own back-yard although the general premise is very true. It has taken at least fifty years to get rid of the image of golf as a rich man's game. Then just as it is finally shed, along come **super-luxe** developments which risk putting it out of reach of the new wave of enthusiasts. What we really need is more developments along





**Above:**  
*Severiano Ballesteros, another pro golfer 'architect' involved with Dave Thomas at Westerwood, Scotland.*



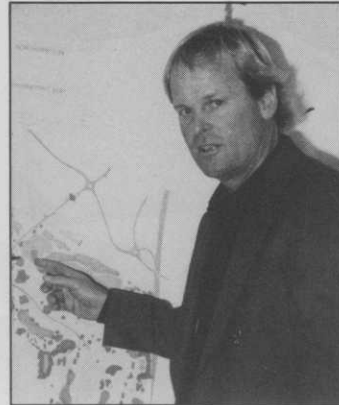
**Left:**  
*Jack Nicklaus at St. Mellion's; sculptured by bulldozer from the farmland of the Bond family and forests of the Duke of Cornwall's Estate.*

the lines of the Hoebridge Golf Centre near Woking in Surrey. Here the beginner will find a Driving Range, Par 3 Course, a full 18 holes, with another 9 holes Intermediate Course under construction. All these are served by central club-house facilities which are more than adequate and probably a great deal better than most private clubs. This development is only a few years old but serves a very wide spectrum and none are put off by the cost.

But cost is not the only danger. The greatest growth industry of recent years has been the departments of planning allied to conservation. Since they really started to flex their muscles, it has become more and more tricky steering a new project through the early stages and making sure that all the authorities,

associations, societies, residents and pressure groups who might be remotely interested have all been consulted and persuaded that the proposed golf course will not ruin the view, will not result in an increase of traffic hazards, will not destroy the badger's favourite habitat, will not destroy the last breeding ground of the natterjack toad, and might even give a few hundred people the chance to join in the hitherto limited appreciation of these desirable features. It may sound impossible but that can still be done. But we shall be wasting our time if we turn loose many more American professionals who presumably twist the arms of the tame designers standing in their shadow in order to achieve the shock novelty they need to get their brain-child into the limelight.

Another sobering thought occurs to me - this anonymous character in the background who draws the plans and instructs the contractor between the annual visits of his overlord. Who is the real designer? The pro? Or the chap who sweats it out on the site? The wheel has come full circle. When James Braid or Harry Vardon used to



**JOHNNY MILLER**

lay out a golf course in a day's visit, it was the greenkeeper or local contractor who had to make it work afterwards. And very little credit he got for it. It was not such a big deal in those days. But now that a new project needs the full publicity treatment to create maximum 'impact' why do we never hear the name of the man who is doing the real work while the big name poses for 'pix' holding a spade, of all unlikely implements. They simply don't use them any more. (If you find this scenario a trifle far-fetched, turn back to a recent issue of this magazine for confirmation...

And still another thing. If the invisible man is clever enough to translate a few lordly waves of the hand in between air-port transfers, why does he not put his own signature on the result? He certainly deserves as big a medal as the part-time pro. Most ghost writers in golfing literature (With one possible exception) get a mention in such titles as "The Day I won the Open" by Fred Hawtree with Joe Bloggs'."

This does not mean that they have changed the format of the Open Championship to Foursomes. It only indicates that I made a few off the cuff comments to Joe B. (God bless him), on the way to the locker-room and that he then went off home with his tape-recorder and turned them into a book for me after a modest amount of research. You can always tell the 'with' books because they never quite get rid of the chatty style of the original tape with its endless 'you know's', 'You see's', and 'However's' but they certainly earn their cut. So does the man standing behind the Big Name. I therefore hope that we shall see the layouts of the next decade being designed by Ben Nickler **WITH** Caspar Weinberger or whoever else they take under their wing.

I also hope that the promoter ensures that the end-result of their operations will bear some resemblance to the original landscape and derive its special quality from its own surroundings and internal features. He will find this cheaper, the planners will be less suspicious, the populace will be less aggressive, and we shall be able to play a round on it without budgeting in three figures.

In case you are still not convinced, look around your own county and select the course which you judge to be the most generally popular. Then try to judge the extent to which that popularity is derived from what was there before they built the course and is still there afterwards. With the long winter evenings on the way, play this game in other counties too. Send me your nominations and we will see if we agree. My theory is that the less you see of the architect's work the better the course. That is not to say he has not put his heart and soul into it. He has. But he has used the site as his fourth dimension not as a means to expressing bizarre theories.

**FEATURE 2**

## TO GET YOU GOING, HERE ARE A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR CHRISTMAS LIST:-

- |               |                                       |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| Yorkshire     | Ganton                                |
| Lincolnshire  | Woodhall Spa                          |
| Norfolk       | Brancaster (? I don't know it myself) |
| Suffolk       | Ipswich G.C. (Purdis Heath)           |
| Essex (?)     | (I'm open to suggestions)             |
| Kent          | Knole Park                            |
| East Sussex   | Crowborough Beacon                    |
| West Sussex   | Pulborough                            |
| Hampshire.... | O.K., now you take over               |

*Greenkeepers — Why don't we take a leaf from the leading golf publications and compile our list of top ten natural courses?*

*Pick your ten in order of merit and send to:  
The Editor, Golf Greenkeeping, P.O. Box 12, Wetherby, W. Yorks.  
The Results will be published in 1988*