

# In·My·Opinion

## Fred Hawtree

WHO said golf is too cheap? Pretty well everyone at some time between 1960 and 1980. Now they should think again.

Last May, I ploughed round a new course under construction in North Carolina in a Jeep. It looked as if something over 100 acres had been stripped of topsoil. When the golf course architect had redesigned the contours to provide his favourite humps and hollows, all that soil had to be spread again and something like £350,000 would have been spent before they asked the bank to pay for the greens and tees.

There were some notable humps and hollows made at Royal Mid-Surrey in 1911 and they did not take the whole course up to build them. They were constructed to the instructions of the resident professional J.H. Taylor by the greenkeeper Peter Lees who was described in 1910 by Bernard Darwin as a 'transcendent genius among greenkeepers.' Not a bad epitaph!

There was a time when the golf course architect took each site as he found it and used every scrap of natural feature it contained to enhance his layout. His signature was not important. He modelled the ground here and there to produce the green and the golfing interest he wanted, but, basically, the local topography dictated the style. Thus, every golf course had its own character and even though trees grew taller and frills were added, you could still tell one resort course from another.

Today, each new venture tries to outdo its neighbours. (The longest, the hardest, the greatest). Unless it generates publicity, its associated activities, such as housing, hotels and holidays, do not bring in the cash necessary to pay for it. So, the golf course designers (who also feed on this publicity) tend to apply their own artificial formula, preferably with a few 18th century Scottish archaisms, which are reintroduced as novelties.

Whoever heard before of all the greens on a new course being recontoured after a year's play? It happened last year. This singular event received much attention,



**Hawtree & Son, golf course architects, are based in Woodstock, Oxford.**

meetings were held, articles written, but the saddest aspect of all was that nobody seemed to find it odd.

Worse may be yet to come. There is now talk of 'this modern trend towards a wilder natural look.' (I quote from *Golf Digest*, May 1984.) So, having spent a few millions on denaturing a site, no doubt they will now spend a few more putting it back as it was.

How natural should nature be? Perhaps the sensible approach is to leave it alone in the first place. There are plenty of environmental conservationists who will applaud.

The next most effective way to achieve a natural look is to cut the budget. The designer will then throw the artificial lakes and waterfalls out of the window, plan his greens with a

couple of wing bunkers instead of a sea of sand and generally stop tampering with the landscape in the hope of getting his baby into the Top Fifty. We shall then be able to know whether we are playing in Malaga, Bermuda or Chorlton cum Hardy without reference to the scorecard.

We shall even be able to concentrate on the game itself. Those who yearn for swaying palm trees can go a few degrees south in January to sharpen up their game for the bets at home in the summer. The rest of us can always muffle up and temper the east wind with thoughts of a warm clubhouse and the elixir known in Ulster as 'a hot one.'

Cutting the budget, however, has to be linked to demand. The new course has to attract golfers even in its simpler form. It will do so provided there is pressure on the existing courses in the vicinity.

Mistakes arise more often from applying the luxury formula in areas already well served in that respect. The Sports Council, in one of its first regional surveys, affirmed that one part of its territory needed no more private courses. Only public courses were needed. It was right. Three superior ventures never really took off while four public courses, three driving ranges and even short nine-holes and par-threes are busy every day.

Golfers move up all the time through the socio-economic grades, but requirements at the top levels are soon satisfied because of the law of 'the higher, the fewer.' In the 1960s, in a short and somewhat premature boom in golf round Paris, ten new 18-hole courses followed each other in quick succession. The first one was very grand and creamed off the odd duke, bankers, big business, couturiers and film stars. It never looked back.

The rest, with one exception, blindly followed the same formula and found that there were simply not enough marquises to go round. They needed another boom 15 years later and golf on television to fill them up. The exception achieved a good compromise between price and style

been done on this subject. His preliminary views appeared in *Greenkeeper* (July 1983). The editor of *Golf Monthly* read this article and invited him to contribute a series.

We spent much of this past winter pursuing the story from early times to the present day, looking at the history of golf courses and greenkeeping and also at the game in general. It became plain that the introduction of the bouncier and heavier rubber cored ball from 1900 onwards had produced an element of luck for which golfers had demanded remedies, such as water and fertiliser, which had produced their problems.

The aim of the series is, therefore, to get golfers to think about the game and their demands on their golf course. Only then will greenkeepers have any chance to pursue (and be able to stick to) sound policies. We hope greenkeepers will find it a help in discussions with committees and members.

I believe strongly that it is more than time to stop the pernicious view that the golfer (and, therefore, the greenkeeper) has a choice of numerous options. We don't! Chemicals, machines, water and any other inventions are merely useful aids. We must work with nature and that means this country's climate and conditions.

So, there we are—'amateurs', so we can say what we think, which is not always possible when you earn your living from the golf course. 'Traditionalists'—believing British golf, as it was invented, is the most enjoyable game and that traditional British greenkeeping, updated by modern machinery, can produce the best golfing turf in the world (and, in this climate, the only turf with a viable future).

Jim Arthur is still our valued source of advice and I am still in daily charge of things and if you are thinking that I don't really understand your problems you would be wrong. Over the last 42 years, I think I've met most of them. It has left me with little sympathy for those who do not want to learn, but great admiration for the sensible majority trying to carry out a difficult job with too many obstructions.

Maybe through *Golf Monthly* we will have reached a wider audience than this excellent technical journal could hope to achieve and possibly with helpful publicity from the likes of Tom Watson and Ben Crenshaw and other 'traditionalists', we shall get home to Mr Average Golfer the message that it is all worthwhile, especially if he wishes to play all the year round.

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and soon filled its 36 holes with 1,200 members.

Fashion, snobbism and commercial connections also tend to direct aspirants to a few established clubs. Even the higher subscriptions of those where there is most demand may not be as high as those new ones where profit is part of the operation. The earlier clubs have paid for everything except upkeep. The new ones have to look at the interest on the loan.

The dilemma may be solved where estate development accompanies the golf course. This combination has facilitated the formation of only a few courses in Britain, such as Wentworth, Moor Park and Little Ashton, but now it leads, because of the large funds it develops, to the competitive window-dressing that menaces us all. The more extravagant the claims, the more numerous those persons, one of whom is said to be born every minute, who queue up to weekend, retire or holiday beside these lush and elegantly syringed fairways.

Once the possibilities of extravagant length alone were exhausted (even the professionals jibbed when it got to 8,000 yards), the sandhills, spectator mounds, lakes, palm trees and other extravaganza were imported to bait the hook.

Unfortunately, because colour printing is so much cheaper than formerly, they have become part of the everyday vocabulary of better-known designers; still more, of their imitators and especially of those professional golfers who turn to the design department in order to extract an extra dividend from the reputation they have built up on the tour.

Their household names also permit the developers to stick another worm on the hook. Whether this tit-bit is as tempting as it should be, may or may not be proven. (There are still people who believe in the shoemaker and his last.) But we can be quite sure it is not going to make the budget any slimmer.

One of these newcomers also provides himself with a residence on each of his favourite developments. Presumably, this goes on the bill, too. Thus, a few hundred golfers can casually let slip that they happen to live next door to The Master. This is still good for their personal publicity,

even if they only see him over the fence or through the palm trees once a year.

Since the United Kingdom is built on a relatively small scale, its planners tend to have strong views about the development of housing in their backyards. Competition from the Costas, whether Blanca, del Sol, Smeralda or de la Luz, also restricts imitation by home developments to more austere lines, even if the British climate is to be ignored.

The return to nature, if indeed we ever left it, is, therefore, welcome as British endeavours to splash out Florida-style have all been on the pawky side of enchanting. Even Robert Trent Jones must have found himself limited by some atavistic quirk, for so knowledgeable an authority as Peter Alliss to have had reservations in describing Moor Allerton.

I am not so sure that the return to nature in greenkeeping is quite so simple as the philosophy suggests and one or two advocates insist at great length. Artificial demands on grass by insatiable golfers can hardly be met on traditional lines. Green and tee construction must be abreast or rather in advance of the state of the art. Intensive use, often in unfavourable conditions, must alone demand artificial preparation.

This work already adds 40 per cent in real terms to the bill for 18 holes compared with 20 years ago. But no amount of pools, ponds or sleeper-faced bunkers will comfort a golfer if the greens are soggy when he wants to perform.

Frills can, however, be added later, but they should be envisaged in the original concept. Too much frippery at the start will soon bring us to the end of the road. Then, only government grants for reclamation, rehabilitation or investment by those with large funds in estate development, hotel, time-share or prestige projects will give us new courses.

We shall have lost forever the scope for a group of golfers to get together, scrape up funds, find a piece of land and build themselves a golf course. Provided they start with a good master plan, programme it, build it and maintain it sensibly, they will be achieving something precious for themselves, their neighbourhood and for golf—at least, in the next generation.

We should not forget that in these hard times—especially if they get any harder—golf is not too cheap. We should not let it get too expensive either.