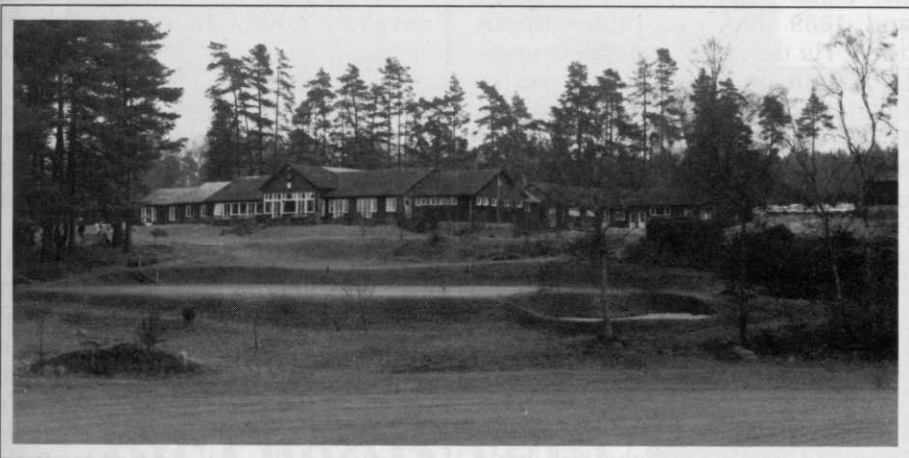


Exercises in golf course architecture

Fred Hawtree has praise for home grown talent



Liphook Golf Course designed by Horace Hutchinson.

Last month, I threatened to clobber you with a key to the style of golf course architects to help you establish responsibilities for your own course if the early Minutes are obscure. Even if they are absent, as is more common, there may still be one of those slim booklets which publicity firms produced gratis for nearly all golf clubs on the revenue from butcher, baker and other suppliers who felt it prudent to keep their names in favour with the secretary.

Given the connections, it is probably no accident that the Irish are equally addicted to discovering the identity and activities of their courses' designers. Reading a recent press cutting about a west coast, links, I was fascinated by a description of the architect's aims, style and mannerisms which could only arise from wide experience and reflection on the results. The account of these characteristics became still more riveting when it mentioned that they were mine.

These publications from firms like Temple Publicity Services, and The Golf Clubs Association (G.W. May Ltd.) generally started with a potted history and sometimes the name of the designer got in by mistake. The latter firm, particularly, used highly respected writers and these were more likely to look for the architect first. But apart from a few cognoscenti, British golfers have never been particularly interested in the man who designed their course. Even today he will only be

identified if his name is Nicklaus, Ballesteros or Langer. You don't believe it? Last week one of those travel writers who spend happy lives perambulating Europe sending home occasional dispatches on hotels where they lingered and four-course meals which, after a loving description, they generally sum up with a casual cost-guide like 'only £80 a head.' This man had been down the Costa Brava to Pals where he found the 'renowned' golf course which was host to the Spanish Open in 1973 (British designed, not mentioned). Farther south, he visited another golf course 'designed by Olazabal.' I guess that this would be Mr O's first and, since his father was a golf greenkeeper, it is likely to be very creditable. I also guess that he get a mention because the player is known. In this country, if the golfing press ever mention a British designer's name, they always feel obliged to tack on to it 'the well-known golf course architect' because their readers will not know who on earth they are talking about.

The American golfer is different. He wants to know who designed the course before he pays his green fee or very soon afterwards. Some of his interest may spin off the higher publicity profile adopted by resort courses; but some, at least, comes from a genuine interest in all the aspects of the game he enjoys and a desire to compare the designs of one man with those of another.

Clues in the form of mannerisms in detail and standard solutions to particular problems often provide the best cards in the golf course Identikit which I shall offer later. Much later, as it happens. You should allow at least 28 days for delivery, like everything else you order by post, because it is now clear that the names will mean nothing to you. Therefore the current exercise will be devoted to cataloguing the principal designers of the early days. After that there will be no excuse for you to say that you never heard of him.

We will return first to the happy days when there were no golf course architects - only golf professionals, though sometimes known as greenkeeper or custodian, until job descriptions became better defined.

Amateur golfers did not get in on the act until the early 20th century though men like Horace G. Hutchinson, Gordon G. Smith, John L. Low and Arthur Croome were already formulating theories of design which they were able to apply when consulted informally, Hutchinson at Royal Eastbourne and Royal West Norfolk, John Low at Woking and Croome later at Liphook. But these were mostly one off men, (there are still a few about). You are unlikely to come across them in this context and I should be hard put to it to define any recognisable features of their work.

Most designers or better, perhaps, 'layers out' of golf courses were professional golfers as late as 1910 and even after the Great War though things were changing. I say 'layers out' because a golf course would often be staked out in the afternoon following a morning inspection (though not on a Sunday in Scotland). Indications of bunkering might be discussed or supplied on a plan later but the detailed landscaping of greens and hazards was often the province of the local greenkeeper, professional or contractor.

This was not true of later disciples like Willie Park Junior to whom we will return to in a moment but probably characterised the more distant operations of the prolific

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Tom Morris (Snr.) 1821-1908. It is only fair to point out however that alterations of contours on any large scale were either impossible, unnecessary or not wanted at that time. The real art lay precisely in the staking process as in many ways, it does today save when the operation is only an exercise in landscape engineering and the original contours are ignored. Old Tom did marvels within these limits.

His contemporary, Tom Dunn, (1849-1902) was the most prolific of five golfing and designing Dunns. His father had laid out the London Scottish Golf Club's course on Wimbledon Common. Tom cannot be mentioned without crediting him for the golf course architect's favourite and most hackneyed quotation 'God obviously intended this to be a golf course.' He was a great cross-bunkerer and his formal style had an enormous influence on inland design until the knowledgeable young amateurs who followed took it apart and interred it. He did more than 50 courses in Britain and others overseas. His brother, Willie Junior, and nephews Seymour Dunn and John Duncan Dunn all started designing in Britain and Europe but then moved to North America where they left an impressive list of credits. Willie Park Junior came much closer to today's practising golf course architect although his talents penetrated every department of the game - golf

ball-maker, greenkeeper, professional, club-maker, golf architect, contractor, developer, inventor and author. To cap this record, he won the Open Championship in 1887 and 1889 and was runner-up in 1888. He designed over 50 courses in Britain, four in France, two in Belgium and a wide range in the U.S.A. and Canada.

Willie Park and the Dunns take us across the turn of the century to the early 1900's when James Braid started designing. Braid won the first of his five Opens in 1901 and his earlier courses like Machynlleth (1905); Stranraer (1906); Turnhouse, Edinburgh (1909) West Hove (1910) were followed by over 100, the majority constructed by John R. Stutt Ltd. of Paisley who will have done the detailed design on site.

J.H. Taylor, fellow member of the Great Triumvirate, was just ahead with Seaford (1904) before Royal Ascot (1905), Eastbourne Downs (1908), Clevedon (1909) and also seems to have got his nose in front at Salisbury and South Wilts (1894). His score exceeds sixty but after 1920, like Braid, the credits are blurred because he allied himself to a practical designer and constructor, my son's grandfather, who I happen to know did the donkey work until Taylor, also like Braid, put in an appearance at the Opening Exhibition matches. But his reports in the early 1900s, before this connection arose, were 'professional' and

wholly admirable. I was naturally convinced of this at Mortonhall, Edinburgh's first 'private' course, when I found, some years later, that my recommendations of 1973 for five new holes followed roughly the same lines as those which Taylor had suggested in 1905.

Vardon (1870-1937), the third side of the triangle though active, did relatively little. His score barely reaches 20 and a few of these are of dubious attribution.

Digressing for a moment, when Royal North Devon G.C. opened its museum at Westward Ho!, they played a recording of J.H. Taylor giving the encomium at Harry Varden's funeral. I thought it of marvellous quality and said so to Mr. Peter McEvoy who was next to me. "Met a lot of people!" said P.M. and that was that. But I think there was much more to it. In spite of leaving school at 11, J.H. acquired a style and presence which no further education could have improved. He did not need to imitate people. His eminence and his prose were notable because they were home-grown.

The last professional designer of note in those early days is Tom Williamson. He was greenkeeper and pro. at Notts. Golf Course for more than 50 years from 1896 to 1950 but was consulted for many new layouts. His extra-mural activities was confined almost exclusively to Nottinghamshire and adjoining counties.

His assistant was his brother, Hugh. In all, Tom was responsible for more than 60 new courses and remodellings and could even claim at one time that every course within 50 miles of Nottingham came from the Williamson stable.

If stuck for an answer to the provenance of an East Midlands course, you could therefore do worse than hazard a guess that the author might be Tom Williamson.

These are all the names you need to know for the moment. I will return to the matter next month when we will look at the amateur golfers who took over in the Twenties. By the time we have looked at all of them, I expect we shall again have to put off giving you the Identikit until a later issue. By then you will probably be too busy to read it anyway but it is nice to think that Spring is now with us.

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