

Well *someone* must have designed it like that; in the first of a new series of articles, golf course architect JONATHAN GAUNT traces the early days of design philosophy and examines the 'penal school' and the 'strategic hole'

I have been playing golf for over twenty years, though only recently have I realised the true value of golf lessons. I've undergone a radical swing change and now stand on the tee looking at the course in a completely different way. I feel more confident about where the ball will go – which has a direct effect upon my playing strategy – and I can plan the way I want to play the course in direct relation to the way the course design influences my game. Because of this, I am increasingly aware of the design philosophy which I believe British golf course architects of the early part of this century possessed.

A well designed course is multi-functional (which it has to be in order to attract golfers of all ages and standards), but that stated, there are fine courses that cater for only a small group of golfers, such as Pine Valley, East Sussex National and Kiawah Island. These are long, difficult layouts which are enjoyable and eminently playable if you are a low handicap amateur or golf pro., but are of a design style that is penal or heroic, as opposed to strategic.

Since the beginning of this century an architectural style and philosophy has developed that best satisfies the criteria to rate it as 'good golf course design'. It has been successfully applied by a mere handful of architects throughout the world, with probably the most famous and well respected exponent being Harry Colt.

However, Colt was not the first to make his mark, for Willie Park Jnr. was highly regarded by both Tom Simpson and Sir Guy Campbell and they were of the opinion that it was he who first began to develop the strategic style – in 1901 – at Sunningdale and Huntercombe.

Park was one of the best professional golfers of his day – the ultimate all-rounder – having trained as both greenkeeper and club maker and masterminding a hugely successful clubmaking business. Also much respected, J F Abercromby was setting out golf courses around the same time, mainly in Surrey, where he also completed Worplesdon for Park.

The strategic style was said to be an adaptation of the characteristics and features found on the Old Course at St Andrews – a design philosophy based on the provision of an alternative playing route for the high handicap player whilst not removing the challenge. The Old Course was originally considered an example of penal design, but with alternate route to green alterations in the mid-19th Century it became considerably more strategic. To perceive the Old Course as the ideal form of strategic design is interesting, because it was, effectively, un-designed and had just evolved over hundreds of years, although *someone* must have first decided where teeing grounds and greens should be located. Now golf course architects were trying to achieve similar results by artificial means.

For the lower handicap player the strategic style provided more challenge – the bigger the risk the bigger the challenge. His best shots were rewarded, his poor shots punished. Strategic golf encouraged golfers of all abilities to improve their game by enabling them to use every club in the bag and build up a wider range of different shots.

Other architects began to make a name for themselves by appreciating and then applying the 'strategic' design philosophy to their own style of course design. In particular, examples of this style were to be found on the sandy soils of heathland and not, as previously had been the case, on linksland. Heathland was almost an inland form of linksland, invariably undulating with random ground cover of heather and silver birch. It was a golf course architect's delight, as the landscape needed very little alteration in order to create an exciting golf course. The skill demon-

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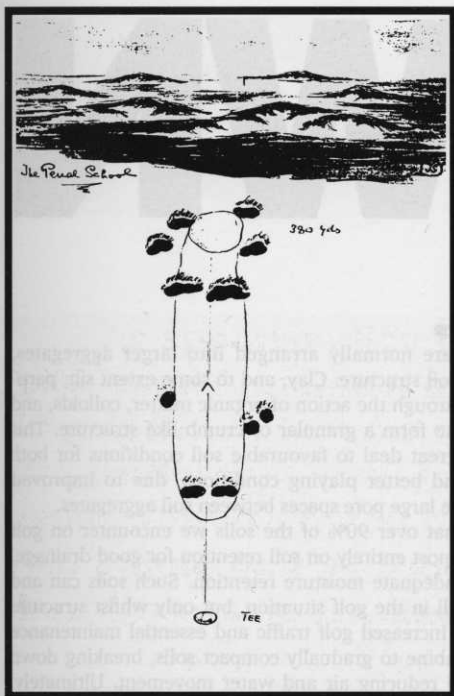
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strated by these architects was essentially that of making an initial analysis of the site, followed by thoughtful placement of greens, tees and hazards. Herbert Fowler was known to have spent two years planning the course at Walton Heath, its opening in 1904 heralded with an exhibition match being played by Vardon, Taylor and Braid – 'The Great Triumvirate'.

Because of his great ability to swiftly recognise the potential in a site, Fowler soon became busy with other projects, notably at The Berkshire (both Red and Blue courses), Saunton, and a total re-design of Royal North Devon at Westward Ho! Along with Park, Abercromby and Colt, he was one of the first golf course architects who could actually be regarded as professional, rather than a part-time designer working in 'spare' time.

Vardon, Taylor and Braid first gained recognition through golfing prowess, later through their golf course architectural skills. Vardon was less prolific in course design than his two golfing opponents, largely due to persistent illness from tuberculosis prior to the First World War. Braid went on to design courses throughout the British Isles and in Scotland particularly, notably Gleneagles Hotel (both Kings and Queens), Dalmahoy, Royal Musselburgh, Brora, and the unsung gem at Boat of Garten. Taylor went into partnership with the ex-greenkeeper, Fred Hawtree and together they designed many fine courses, including the remodelling of Royal Birkdale. They were renowned for setting up the development of many municipal courses in Britain, and in forming the first Greenkeepers Association.

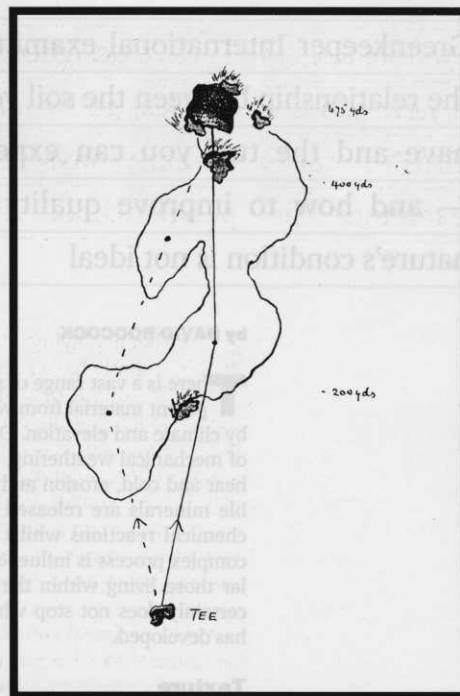
Harry Colt worked with two other architects, Alister Mackenzie and C H Alison. Colt and Mackenzie worked together at Alwoodley, Leeds in 1907/08, where Mackenzie was the Club secretary. Mackenzie was probably best known for his *Thirteen Essential Features of an Ideal Golf Course* and for his experience in the construction of camouflage features in the first World War. He was known also for being outspo-



The Penal School – the bunkers assist the good player to steer his shot and focus distance, acting as lighthouses and framing the green. They are a source of worry from start to finish to the inferior player.



A Strategic hole – the good player who wants to make his second easy must take an initial risk with his tee shot. At this type of hole the true line should never be the centre of the fairway. The inferior player is not worried by the multiplicity of hazards.



A fine test for all – a difficult 4 for the Tiger, a difficult 5 for others.

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ken and some of his comments were quite provocative. For example, he wrote the following in *Golf Architecture* in 1920: "A good golf course is an asset to a nation. Those who harangue about land being diverted from agriculture and used for golf have little sense of proportion. Comparing the small amount of land utilised for golf with the large amount used for agriculture, we get infinitely more value out of the former than the latter. We all eat too much." As a graduate with degrees in medicine, natural science and chemistry, he would know this better than most! He goes on to say: "The test of a good golf course architect is the power in converting bad inland material into a good course, and not the power of fashioning excellent seaside material into a mediocre one."

After a slump in commissions between 1918 and 1923, Colt set up in business with Alison (also previously a golf club secretary) and J S F Morrison. They worked on commissions throughout the country until 1962, when Morrison died. Alison and Morrison had been involved in contracts as far ranging as the USA, Japan, Australia and Africa.

Sir Guy Campbell, Cecil Hutchison and Stafford Hotchkin were all designing courses in their own right at about the same time, and in 1932 they set up a company purely to specialise in golf course design and consultancy. Campbell and Hutchison were both keen amateur golfers and Hotchkin owned his own Golf Club at Woodhall Spa in Lincolnshire. The course had originally consisted of nine holes, designed by Vardon, with Colt later designed a further nine to extend it to eighteen. Hotchkin bought the course in this completed state and added further revisions with Hutchison's assistance.

Sir Guy, writing in *A History of Golf in Great Britain* in the chapter entitled Links and Courses, defines the three architectural ages as Primitive, ie. natural, Orthodox, from 1848 gutta ball to 1902 rubber core ball, and Mechanical, from 1903 onwards. He claimed that during the Orthodox age

"some of these, almost all of them 'courses' (as opposed to 'links'), outraged nature in every respect. And they are best forgotten". I would tend to disagree with him, for there were notable exceptions: Ganton, Huddersfield, Sheringham, Royston, Royal Worlington and Woking, to name but a few.

From 1947, when the Town and Country Planning Act introduced strict restrictions on developments beyond the areas designated by District Councils, golf course developments were forced to move to sites which were often unsuitable for the style of course which had made Colt, Simpson and Morrison so popular.

It seemed that a second Orthodox Age was beginning, for golf course design really went into a depression. It was the age of building courses on a low budget whilst attempting to achieve high quality results. These courses were supposed to take modern maintenance techniques into account, though the implications of such was not considered in relation to the design of the course. This often meant that big sprawling tees, greens and bunkers were beginning to appear, due in part to the increasing influence of American design and, in particular, the design style of Robert Trent Jones.

Heaths and sandy warrens were no longer available and designers were now forced to turn their attentions to land with stony ground and heavy clay soils. Inevitably, drainage problems began as soon as soil was removed and, invariably though not always, designers had little knowledge of standard drainage techniques. The new courses may have been fine to play during the summer, but in winter they became quagmires and were virtually unplayable and as an alternative, temporary greens and tee-mats would have to be used. This was a time when a number of untrained designers (often ageing golf professionals), stepped in and effectively began a new career.

● Next issue: *The age of the Anglo-American hybrid.*

● The author and golf course architect, Jonathan Gaunt, is a graduate in Landscape Architecture. His recent commissions include the Family Golf Centre, Stevenage, Elemore in Sunderland, the 27 hole Farrington Golf Club, near Bristol, and Breinholtgard in Denmark.