

Age of the Anglo-American hybrid

Golf course architect JONATHAN GAUNT continues his series with an examination of the so-called 'American style' and tells how its interpretation this side of the Atlantic resulted in a mismatch of styles... something of a monster

Last month I wrote of the coming of the second Orthodox Age, a transitional period in golf course design beginning in the late 1940s, when several untrained designers and aged golf professionals muddied the waters of classical design, often viewing a move into golf course architecture (sic) as a stepping stone to a new career.

The design of their courses, increasingly built on stony ground with heavy clay soils, was very often basic, appearing as just 'tracks' which were normally long, dull and uninspiring. Monotony was the watchword, with few design features apart from lakes and impossible to maintain 'bunds' around greens. As for following an accepted specification for green construction – such as those recommended by Jim Arthur, the STRI or the USGA Green Section – little or no notice was taken. Construction often seemed to be nothing more than the simple excavation of a borrow area short of the green and pushing earth up to form a raised and featureless plateau (supposedly to aid drainage). Often the banks leading to the green would be too steep and difficult to maintain – or indeed to play the hole – and it would be virtually impossible to hold a ball on the green with a pitch shot. Drainage on the greens depended upon the budget and the designer, but it was often the case that an inferior sub-standard rootzone mix was used.

Although a move soon came towards creating more easily

maintainable course features, designers were increasingly influenced by what was then beginning to be seen throughout the world – either while the pro's were playing tournaments or what they had seen on television – in particular the so-called 'championship' courses and especially the 'American Style'. Unfortunately, by the time 'American Style' had reached our shores it had become diluted and Anglicised, a mismatch of styles and something of a monster.

These characteristics revealed a gross misunderstanding of the principles of good design and construction or of the game itself, especially in relation to the higher handicap player. It appeared to some to be almost a revolt against the classic design style of architects such as Colt and Mackenzie: of their tried and tested principles and of all that had been shown to work so successfully for 50 years. For some reason the new designers knew better – or thought they did. The Anglo-American hybrid style was like a new fashion which only the fickle and foolish would follow regardless. Fortunately there were architects like Hawtree and Morrison who knew that the classic style was best – and they stuck to it, while choosing only to take certain influences from Trent Jones and Wilson which they thought either complemented their own style or improved maintainability.

There appeared to be an obvious lack of understanding of the design principles of American architects such as Trent Jones Snr. and Dick Wilson (who competed ruthlessly for appointments in the 50s and 60s). These men really knew their trade. What was most noticeable about their work was their attention to detail and the incorporation of hazards in relation to the design strategy. Take, as a perfect example, the bunkering style of Colt, the green designs of Mackenzie and of the quality and standard of work undertaken by Trent Jones and Wilson.

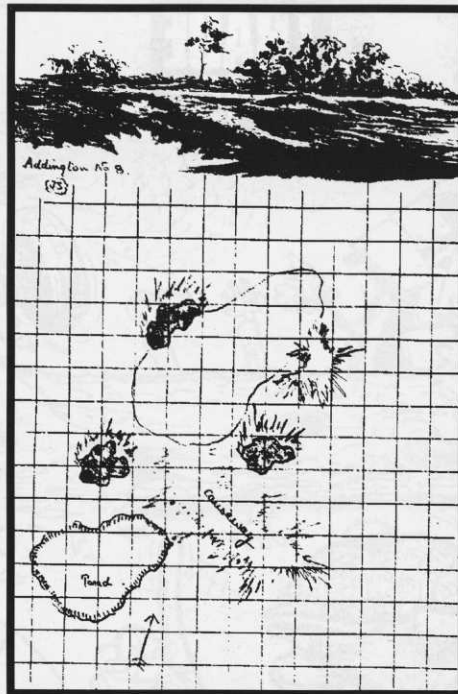
Trent Jones Snr, a trained landscape architect, had been responsible for setting up his own education while at Cornell University, training in subjects directly related to a career in golf course design. Both Colt and Mackenzie had been good competitive golfers with a wealth of knowledge in the rules of the game and construction techniques. Wilson actually built many of the courses he designed.

It was probably because of Augusta National (originally designed by Alister Mackenzie with Bobby Jones in 1933), that Robert Trent Jones began to be widely known throughout the golfing world, for he was employed by the Augusta National Club in 1946 to make alterations to the course. His most notable change involved damming the lake on the 16th and altering the orientation of the tee, a concept which gained him recognition and acclaim for his confident, forthright and exciting design style. Two years later, Trent Jones collaborated with Bobby Jones at Peachtree, and here he designed a course which marked a turning point in golf course design – the course having tremendous flexibility because it could be played in numerous ways – largely due to large tees and greens with features such as mounding and hollows being incorporated instead of bunkers.

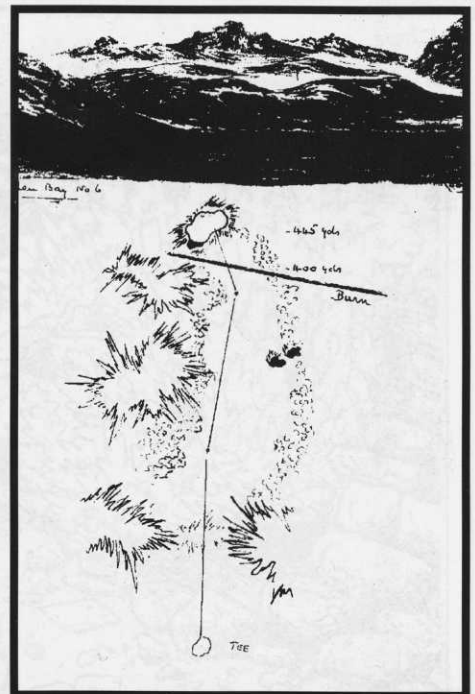
The major difference between the new British designers of the 50s and 60s was that many were coming into golf course design indirectly and were therefore not true professionals, accepted they had flair and exciting ideas, but putting them into practice was where the problems began. This happened in the US also, but often the professional golfers worked with practicing architects – Jack Nicklaus with Pete Dye, Desmond Muirhead, Jerry Pierman and Bob Cupp; Arnold Palmer with Francis Duane, Ed Seay and Xenophon P. Hassenplug (!); Gary Player with Ronald Kirby. By working with the career architects the professional golfers were prepared to appreciate that they had a lot to



A clever one-shot hole. Perhaps the finest hole of its length that exists on any golf course. The 15th at West Hill.



There are three great holes of this length in the London area, 350 yards or thereabouts. Of their kind unsurpassed. This, the 8th at Addington New, is perhaps the best of the three. The others are the 14th at Coombe Hill and the 6th at Wentworth.



The 6th at Cruden bay. This hole is only 445 yards in length, but the green is so constructed that it will not receive and hold anything stronger than a four/five iron unless the wind be against the player.

learn about golf course design, even though they had been playing top-level competitive golf for years.

Machinery became more readily available in construction of golf courses in the 50s for major earth movement work, and together with the trend towards the confused Anglo-American hybrid style, some particularly unattractive results were achieved. A popular feature was the raised convex green and sprawling shallow bunkers. Some really hideous mistakes were made, purely through ignorance. Thankfully, not too many such 'follies' were built in the British Isles, as was the case in the USA, with the excessive use of bunkers and cliches like island lake greens. One thing is certain; no golf courses following this style has become famous for its' good design. There had to be a point where people began to get tired of an accepted style, and as a result try to do something radically different in order to affect change. We must be thankful for this, I suppose. The 50s and 60s were depressing years for golf course architects and designers in the British Isles, (particularly so because of the austere post Second World War years). It was not until the late 60s /early 70s that architects and designers became accustomed to the capabilities and limitations of machinery in golf course construction and maintenance. An understanding, perhaps, of the principles which make a course great as opposed to being just a 'track' was again becoming apparent.

It is because of the influence of Colt and Trent Jones on modern golf course design that we now begin to see the quality of the finished product improve so considerably. Developers are much more demanding, expecting much more from a golf course architect. It is no longer enough for an architect to spend a day pegging out a route of the course with the developer and contractor, followed by the supply of standard green designs which could have been used on a dozen previous courses, never to be seen again until the invitations come for the champagne opening. He is employed as a consultant to provide designs, specifications and bills of quantities, responsible also for detailed contract management to ensure that the work is carried out to those designs. The financial aspect is also becoming an increasingly important consideration because many courses are now set up purely as business ventures, not as private gentlemen's Clubs. They have to provide the developer with a return on their investment. The architect can help the developer to achieve this by planning the most cost-effective way of building the course.

The golf course architect is therefore much more responsi-

ble for the work he produces. It is often said that a good contractor can make a poor design look good, though this should not be the case. An architect should never leave part of his job to the contractor, for he is failing in his responsibilities by doing this. He should be confident that his design and specification will work, whichever contractor builds it. Any contractor, whether he is a specialised golf course constructor or purely an earth-movement contractor, can build a good golf course. If there is proper design, a sound specification and bills of quantities to follow there is never reason for a poor quality course.

When a golfer plays a Colt or Trent Jones course he sees the obvious differences of how such design influences his game, and he compares this to other lesser courses. Only with the golfing public being able to play on courses like these will they start to demand better quality facilities. Then things will improve for all other levels of development, for no golfer enjoys playing off mat tees to temporary greens whilst walking quagmire like fairways.

This has gradually evolved into the current situation where not only does the golf course architect need to have a good understanding of design principles and construction techniques, but must also have a multi-disciplinary education, both theoretically and in practice. He will need a firm understanding of how golf is played and of the rules of the game, and the ability to apply his design principles to the romantic ideals of the client in order to make them work on site. He must have experience working on site in order to understand the problems which can occur because of careless design, or because of lack of research into existing site characteristics. Above all he should be aware of the capabilities of the complexity of machines being used to build the course and of the methods the contractor uses to achieve the desired effects demanded by both architect and developer.

A golf course architect has to understand the development of golf course design throughout the years, to appreciate the mistakes that have been made and learn from them.

The sign of a good golf course architect is one who can identify the good things in other designs and adapt these to his own individual style, whilst not plagiarising.

He should also be able to juggle all these disciplines at once without losing sight of the objective: to create a golf course that any level of golfer can find challenging and enjoyable to play, for it is this above all that will encourage a player to improve and to return to the game time and time again.

● Continuing his series, Jonathan Gaunt will look next at a favourite architect, attempting to view his design philosophy and defining the style that characterised his work, giving him an essentially individual trademark.