



HOW TO TURN YOUR WORST HOLE INTO YOUR BEST

By Simon Gidman

If members at a golf club were asked which was the worst hole on their course, most would come up with a different one and most would probably base their views on the hole they played the poorest, and who can blame them.

As an architect my views are perhaps slightly different.

But firstly, what constitutes a poor hole in the first place? Is it one laid out in dull surroundings, one on flat land, one without bunkers or other features. It could be all of these but it doesn't have to be. I know of many golf courses set among dreary surrounds, others laid out on featureless terrain, and others with no bunkers at all; and many of these are fine courses.

No, what constitutes a bad hole is one that sets no challenges for the golfer, one that requires no thought as to how it is played, in other words, one poorly designed. Anybody who has attended the Golf Course Design workshop at Harrogate knows the emphasis that we lecturers place on the three philosophies of golf course architecture, penal, strategic and heroic – probably to the slight bewilderment of our audience! But these philosophies are the main ingredients of our business.

The beauty of golf, at least from the architect's point of view, is that through the use of these philosophies, we set the challenges for the golfer. Without them you have a poor golf hole, one that will lack challenge and interest. It will be bereft of hazards, artificial or otherwise, and if you include limited visual interest, poor detailing and poor maintenance in the brew, then you have a bad golf hole.

The process of change comes first with a complete reassessment, not only of the hole in question, but of the whole course in its entirety. It is a gross mistake when redesigning an individual hole, to take that hole in isolation and not to review the remaining golf holes on the course. Ideally no two challenges should be repeated on a golf course and hence it is vital to know and understand the rest of the course. Repeat the same challenges as on other holes and frankly any improvements are fairly superficial.

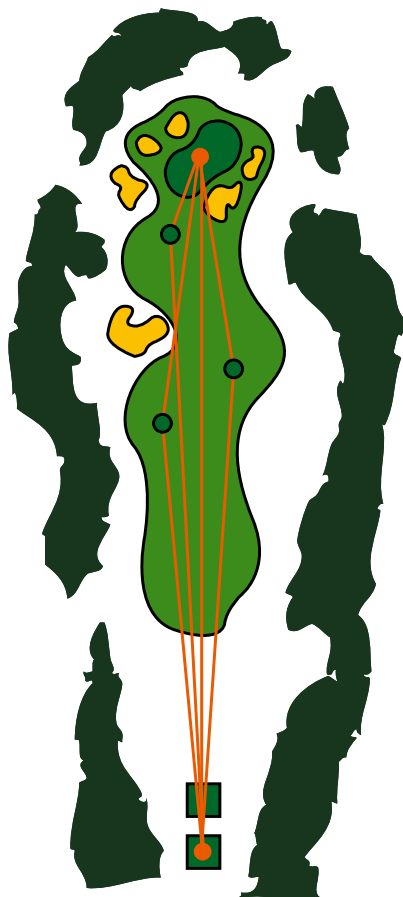
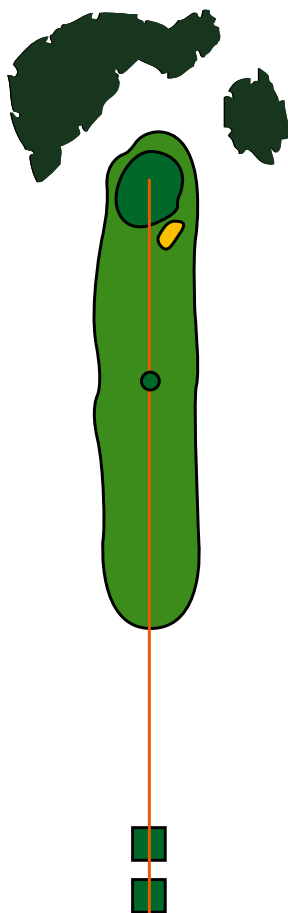
As an example of change, review the plan of above (fig.1). The hole is one of barely 290 yards but as can be seen both from the plan and the photo there is very little else of interest. The tee shot only requires a straightforward drive and a chip to a rather dull looking green – not much decision there! The green itself is barely 300m² but at least in its favour it is fairly flat and there are a decent number of pin positions on the green – even if the putt itself is not that interesting. So, a fairly innocuous challenge. Furthermore the green as one would expect was of the “push up” type using local clay topsoil and is thus closed for large parts of the winter.

A hole with few recommendations!

However the hole has potential.

Short par 4 holes can be great holes. They can create so many options, both for the high as well as the low handicap golfer and distance off the tee is not a prerequisite to success. They give the golfer the opportunity of either playing short and chipping up to the green or, for the more adventurous, an opportunity to go the for the green for a birdie or eagle. Strategic golf!

In the revised design (fig.2) I have suggested a number of alterations. To start with I have placed a bunker at about 230 - 245 yards, just to the left of the fairway. This bunker is a real nuisance as it asks the longer hitter to decide whether to play over the bunker and reach the green or to play short and be conservative. The “soft” drive is the one to the right but the revised angle of the green makes a shot into the green difficult – and it doesn't need another bunker at this point to challenge the golfer any further! For the average golfer the angle of the green determines that the drive be played to the left of the fairway in front of the fairway bunker. But if you play short of the fairway bunker then obviously you have a longer second shot into the green – albeit not significantly longer. I considered the possibility of water but frankly water set half way up a slope rarely looks good and it certainly wouldn't have done in this instance.



The green has been raised by about 0.6 metre partly to emphasise the pitch shot into the green but also to allow greenside bunkers to be set into the slope of the green – and for them to be visible from the fairway. Around the green, the bunkers are sited, 1) to emphasise the best angle into the green, 2) to defend the right side of the green and 3) to improve the overall visual setting of the hole. One cannot completely change the aspect of any hole but you can at least improve it and mounding and good bunkering provides the hole with visual interest and dynamism.

At this particular golf club all the greens are being reconstructed in phases, to USGA specification and to appropriate dimensions. 300m² is far too small for modern day play and while the general flatness of the green maximises pin positions, nevertheless the green presents few challenges. For a short par 4 to retain the interest of the golfer throughout it must have a putting surface to match. I am not a great believer in the extreme gradients and slopes that one sees occasionally on new greens. Tiering is fine and even tiers that might fall from front to back are perfectly acceptable on a short par – particularly if the architect is trying to encourage more of a chip and run shot to the flag. For this particular green I wanted the option of both a pitch shot if the pin was placed at the front half of the green, and a pitch and run shot if the pin was placed to the rear. I eventually settled on a green of about 480m² which rose from the front to the middle (for the pitch shot) and then fell away from the middle to the back (to encourage a pitch and run shot). Furthermore I wanted to discourage still further the shot from the right, so in addition to the bunkers guarding the right of the green, I graded the back of the green both tilting away from the approach but also with a slight right to left slope. Nasty eh! These gradients also provide good competition pin positions. All these design intricacies are illustrated on a detailed scaled plan, usually 1:200 and it takes experience and a considerable amount of skill to replicate what is on the plan, onto site, and anybody who has witnessed quality shapers at work will marvel at the accuracy that can be achieved by skilled drivers with tilt buckets. These people can comb your hair with their buckets if you ask them to – not that I would advise it – and every inch of detail shown on the plan can be reproduced on site. To some extent it doesn't matter how good the architect is or the plan is, if the shaper is not up to scratch then the green will never work – good shapers bring a green to life!

So, we've redesigned the hole, prepared detailed designs and reconstructed the green to a decent specification but it's still only partly complete. As you can see from fig.1 tree planting is fairly limited and a hole like this needs trees – however small they are when they first go in. We have increased the planting considerably and also included for carefully placed individual trees (planted as extra heavy standards) at about 230 yds to the right and 260 yds to the left.

And now comes final part of the jigsaw – the maintenance regime. Whatever potential a golf hole may have on plan or even during its construction, the full promise of a golf hole only materialises during maintenance. As most of the readers of this article will know bringing on a green from seeded, bare earth, to a finely polished surface requires great care with new diseases to confront and new maintenance regimes to incorporate. I have not met a greenkeeper yet who has not enjoyed the experience of bringing on a new green from construction and equally haven't thoroughly enjoyed the challenge.

So, after about two months of discussion and planning, a month or so of construction and six months of maintenance the new hole is ready. The hole has been redesigned with a new green and construction, additional mounding, five new bunkers, reshaping of the fairway and extra tree planting. No longer is the challenge rather uninspiring fayre. Now the golfer has to stand on the tee, make a decision of how best to play the hole and hit it accordingly. It also looks a lot better too. All this and no water!

Simon Gidman is an internationally renowned Golf Course Architect, www.gidmangolf.co.uk