

GOLF BY DESIGN

The game may well have started in the 12th century, going by some of the ancient images I have seen from China.

But surely not?

Or in Holland, playing that game on the ice - KOLF was the name - or is that too much of a coincidence?

Or in France, as Jeu de Maille?

Or even by the Indians in America, before any Europeans found it - there is some evidence to say that a stick hit a round object in one direction or another all those years ago.

No! No! No!



Bundoran 11th approach

Let's stick to the east coast of Scotland, to the land behind the sea, alongside the river estuaries, and the great depositions of sand.

Let's stick to the dunes, no holes, just rabbit scrapes; no greens, just sheltered areas amongst them; no tees, just a short length from the previous hole; no fairways, just valleys in the dune slacks; no bunkers, just eroded areas where sheep may well have huddled to shelter from the elements.

Simple, rudimentary...natural.

Natural land, the links, natural designs, these golf courses.

No golf course architects, just Mother Nature and God...how well they did! How we have striven to follow them!

The spread of the game, to the coastlines of other parts of Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland, to the poor soils of the inland links on the heaths, eventually to the grasslands, the parklands, the arable lands - heavier soils, less than exciting topography and so unlike the links - meant more adjustment, more formalisation, more design.

So the profession was born...

Allan Robertson, Golfer from Dornoch; Old Tom Morris, Golfer from St. Andrews and custodian of the links: The Parks, The Dunns, Young Tom - all professional men in the game, all lent their hand to designing golf courses.

And as the game spread throughout the world - France, India, Portugal, and to USA - with the British, so we saw the skills of the home architect exported to those foreign shores before the nationals, particularly in America, copied us and developed their own profession, and how they developed the game, and its architecture in that next 100 years.

A game apart, a world apart, one might say, from those earliest of natural designs.

Through the great British architects:

- BRAID
- TAYLOR
- VARDON

*Continue
to learn*

The triumvirate - all Open Champions, all golf course architects, Braid incredibly prolific in this time - a time with no cars, planes, just the railways...

To the non-professionals:

- COLT
- AUSON
- ABERCROMBIE
- MACKENZIE
- FOWLER
- SIMPSON

...Laying out the most classic of courses at home and abroad

...And their American counterparts:

- TILLINGHAST
- BENDELOW
- BLAIR MACDONALD
- FLYNN
- TOOMEY
- THOMAS
- WILSON
- CRUMP

The list goes on and on...

What a great heritage my profession has!

And from simplicity, changing the use of the land for the game to the modern day...the complexity of it all, the artificiality of it all, the expense of it all, changing the form of the land for the game.

Do we? Yes!

Must we? No!

Should we? No!

From human hands, to horse and cart, to rudimentary machinery...to bulldozers, excavators, and more bulldozers and excavators, and even more bulldozers and excavators...modelling and shaping for the game.

Do we really need all this?

Have we lost our way?

Have we forgotten about how it all started, on those most natural of links?

Golf courses designed to fit into the natural environment, couched in nature, imperceptibly, must be what we need to pursue as both philosophy and practice.

Such is the responsibility of my profession.

Not always easy on some sites where nature doesn't give you too much help...the greater the challenge, sure, but the principle should not change.

"The essence of the game is its simplicity." So said Tom Simpson in 1929.

Apply that to today's golf course architecture, I say, some 75 years later!

Since that golden age, life in the design world has undoubtedly become more complex, more expensive - over elaborate, one might say.

So what does the modern golf course architect do?

He or she follows three philosophies of design:

- PENAL
- STRATEGIC
- HEROIC

By Howard Swan

The earliest adopted or recognised - PENAL - is simply punishing, wagging the finger at the player, saying: "Don't dare stray from the straight and narrow, and if you risk anything you'll pay a heavy penalty". Square greens, rectangular fairways crossed and sidelined with fearsome bunkers.

The likes of the 14th at The Old Course - LONG - was considered at the beginning to be utterly penal, but - as the profession developed and with the likes of Colt and, particularly MacKenzie, this hole was considered to have some strategy. A course from tee to green could be plotted, options for routing of play identified by the player, and taken.

The strategic approach is one of risk and reward, thought provoking, favouring the brave, rewarded to the risk-taker but giving the less mortal a chance at his or her own level.

Heroism in design may be considered to have come across the big pond. Bite off as much as you can chew, and a good bit more. Carry water bravely, cut corners to the pin and become a hero by doing so.

Death or glory!

Typically American, if I may say so.

Based on these philosophies or best a mix of them to stir the emotions in playing the fame, we golf course architects ply our trade.

He or she - yes, we have a few women in our midst, not enough, in my view, but some - has to be many, many things to encompass, around that creative flair that he or she should have, an understanding of soil science, agronomy, engineering, construction, drainage, irrigation; surveying, mathematics, computer science; greenkeeping, economics, finance and accounting, project management and planning - the list goes on and on.

And yes...an understanding of the game, playing it at some level, not necessarily the highest, although just like all those years ago, many professional players, current or past, label themselves as golf course architects....rather designers, perhaps, I might say.

There is a fundamental difference.

Conceptualising design is the first stage, creating the masterplan, taking that piece of land and laying out a golf course on it, as naturally, with as little impact - environmentally, economically - as possible.

It may be 18 holes or more, or less, and it is pertinent these days in maximising usage of land, expensive and scarce it may be in 60 hectare blocks, to consider less - three, six, nine, 12 holes, compact layouts, practice facilities, little courses for beginners, of all ages, and give a maximum return for the developer's investment.

Once the masterplan is in place, just the golf course or with other infrastructures - an hotel, real estate, whatever - a technical project needs to be developed. This might run to a hundred drawings for an 18 hole course - staking, site preparation, earthworks and grading, field drainage, greens, tees, bunkering detail, irrigation, lake construction, grassing, landscape planting, habitat creation, traffic (golfers' and greenkeepers') routing, and presentation management with standard profiling of all the new course's components.

All this accompanied by a Specification, which sets out the quality of the golf course, and Bills of Quantities, which details clearly in an orderly fashion exactly what is to be done, how much is to be done, and, after a bidding process, how much it may cost.

Quite a substantial set of documents but, in my view, essential in order to structure any project properly from the outset, a framework in which all the team can work, a framework not restrictive in stifling that essential creative flair, that exciting and spectacular end result, but enough to make the development controllable in financial and other terms.



Goodwood 17th

During construction and establishment, the modern, professional golf course architect needs to be on the site, overseeing the implementation of the design. He or she needs to do that regularly, not just once in a blue moon as some might, not just a couple of times, but at a meaningful frequency so that the project team - contractor, irrigation installer, greenkeeper, client and the consultants - are all pulling in the same direction and a quality result is achieved.

Such management may also be effected, if the budget allows - yes, golf course projects need, and sometimes do get realistic budgeting which is maintained - by having the eyes and

ears of the architect on site all the time; or relying on the greenkeeper of the client, appointed in a project as early as possible, to watch over the development process as the golf course takes shape.

Such a stage in any project, new course or renovation of an existing one, is quite vital and cannot be underestimated if the best interests of the client are to be protected, which is, after all, the ultimate responsibility of the architect.

This is what today's architect does, or should do. A far cry from those earliest of days of Robertson, Morris, even Braid, Taylor and Vardon.

But hopefully in this complex of modern worlds, simplicity might prevail.

Appreciation of the land, its natural feature, its value and its character, environmentally, is the essence.

Changing its use sympathetically is the challenge.

To do this the modern golf course architect needs what? - education and training, experience in the field, with a basis of technical and commercial understanding, and the opportunity to practise and develop those skills.

Learning about golf course design is available through a number of avenues - masterclasses like BIGGA's own at Harrogate, the postgraduate Diploma programme of the European Institute of Golf Course Architects - my professional body - a two-year part-time course, a Masters Degree run by Edinburgh College of Art.

The Diploma gives the chance to get out and practise through a mentoring and work placement programme, albeit not yet extensive enough, but developing every day.

The programme is turning out some talented, young golf course architects from all over the world, where the game continues to grow, or is just beginning to be established - teaching us old guys a thing or two.

So what of the way forward?

Learning, appreciating, applying those professional skills sympathetically and sensitively is what the members of my profession need to do. And to do so in the framework of the team in any project, working alongside specialists in allied fields and particularly the greenkeeping profession, an immeasurably valuable relationship, alongside the administrators of the game worldwide.

To push out the frontiers of the game, wherever, to create golf courses to encourage people to join the game and expand its base; encourage players to have their skills, develop their playing prowess, to reach their golfing zenith.

And, above all, to do so...naturally.

Howard Swan has been involved in designing and building golf courses for almost 35 years. After founding his own architectural practice, Swan Golf Designs, in 1987, he has become one of the most respected golf course architects in Europe. Today, SGD's portfolio includes 30 countries from the USA to China, as well as Iceland, West Africa and, now, the new golf markets in Eastern Europe. A leading member of the European Institute of Golf Course Architects, in 2004 he received the British Turfgrass Industry's Life Time Achievement Award.