



SPACE INVADERS

With developers keen to market “golf course views” many courses are being squeezed by adjacent residential developments. Jonathan Gaunt talks with Scott MacCallum about how best to solve the problem – with the desired aim of making the course safe to play.

With land at a premium it is not surprising that some golf courses are finding themselves hemmed in by housing, as private golf clubs and more commercial hotel developments seek to maximise their assets by either selling land to developers or extending hotel facilities. The downside can be that encroaching development creates health and safety issues where previously there were none. It’s a subject about which renowned golf course architect, Jonathan Gaunt, has some experience.

“I was called into Westerwood, near Cumbernauld, in Scotland, which is one of the group of hotels now owned by Leeds-based specialist hotel operator, Q Hotels plc. Over the years, land immediately adjacent to the golf course had been sold off in chunks by the previous owners, which created some big operational problems,” explained Jonathan, as we sat in his superb design studio in Bakewell, Derbyshire, at the centre of the Peak National Park. (Incidentally Q Hotels also owns Aldwark Manor where BIGGA Headquarters is based.)

As the sizeable piece of real-estate was sold off, the golf course ended up being boxed in, with no room for future expansion, and for whatever reason, holes 11, 12 and 13 were bordered to both sides by new housing – which had been built in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. The land area was barely the width of a fairway, so a mild slice or hook would end up in someone’s garden or conservatory – it was a fatal accident just waiting to happen...

It really was choking the golf course to death and having been called in by Q Hotel’s Director of Golf, Nic Oldham, Jonathan began looking at a number of options with George Oldham (Nic’s father) – a RIBA architect and planning consultant - for ways of returning the course, which was designed by Seve Ballesteros and Dave Thomas in the ‘80s, to a good standard and layout.

The only way to resolve the problem was to look for another piece of land altogether and at the same time aim to rationalise all the other problems of the course. They included drainage, irrigation and a chronic underfunding of the maintenance staff and facilities with whom, Course Manager, David Montgomery, was manfully working. I think he was down to four men with ancient machinery while the greenkeepers’ compound was an old ramshackle building with no heating or showers... and this was a prestigious hotel golf course development.”

Jonathan has a piece of advice for all golf clubs if, of course, they are in a position to do it: “Buy the fields next to your golf course as this will protect your boundaries and give you room to expand if the need arises. For example, Hillsborough GC, in Sheffield, was only on 110 acres for their 18 holes but they actually own 172 acres and this has allowed them to extend. If they decide to sell a field to housing developers in the future, the money they make will pay for something else for the club.”

Even if it stretches the finances, do not ignore any opportunity to buy up more land. “Meltham GC, near Huddersfield, bought a couple of pieces of land on the edge of the golf course because

they have a number of health and safety issues (crossing holes, narrow, sloping fairways, etc.) and while they don’t currently have the funds available to do the work, they have the land there for when they do. Let’s face it, the land is not going to lose value if they have to wait five, 10 or 15 years before making the next move.”

A masterplan has already been drawn up by Jonathan for the long term redevelopment of the course - irrespective of changes in committee and club officials, this plan will remain in place as a “policy document” for many years to come.

Back at Westerwood, Q-Hotels purchased land further north of the existing course and between the main Edinburgh to Glasgow railway line and the Antonine Wall (a World Heritage Site). Together with Nic Oldham and his father, George, a building architect and planning consultant with a wide knowledge of golf and planning issues, got the project moving.

“We looked at moving five holes to the new site. It is seriously beautiful, overlooking the Firth-Clyde Navigation and the Campsie Fells, while the land is gently undulating in places and quite steep in others. George had already prepared a suggested routing for the golf course extension, which worked very well and Jonathan fine-tuned this layout and made the new holes work in engineering and architectural terms, which were then approved by Nic. It meant that the tight, dangerous boxed in holes which had caused all the problems were taken out of play.”

The next stage was to present the plans to a sceptical membership who, at the time, were

pretty much against any new plans for the course because they believed that Q-Hotels was going to come in, raise subscriptions and force them out, leaving it as a high profile hotel course.

“However, Nick saw beyond that and told the meeting of around 60 members they were more important to him than any hotel guests as they were users of the facilities, not just the golf course, but the pro-shop, bar and restaurant. Having gone in feeling as though we were going to be stoned to death we finished, having been as open and proactive as we could have been, with them patting us on the back,” said Jonathan, who added that the additional information about improving the drainage, irrigation and health and safety issues helped to assure the members.

Having survived the meeting of members, the feeling in the camp was that progress could then be made but they hadn't reckoned for the planning issues that arose from the sensitivity of the site.

“As part of the planning application we had to get approval from Historic Scotland because access to the new holes was only available by crossing the Antonine Wall, which actually looks more like a railway cutting than a wall. Although it had been crossed on numerous locations prior to our application, we were only allowed to have one crossing point and were not allowed to make any earth works on the new 4th hole within 25 metres of it, so a “protected no-enter zone” was established before permission was granted.

“The other problem we had related to the railway line and ScotRail was concerned because work had been done at Dullater GC a number of years previously and there had been a massive landslide onto the line.

ScotRail felt that the same thing might happen at Westerwood so we had to produce a detailed design, including engineering drawings showing the contours and drainage proposals, so we could prove how we were dealing with any surface water

on the site, which is much more detailed than we would normally be expected to produce.”

So with the archaeology and the railway issues slowing the project right down, costing at least two months of valuable construction time they were only able to get on site in April 2007.

“The seed should have gone in the ground in September 2007, but we had to close the site down due to extremely bad weather for the winter in October and it was only in April 2008 that we were able to get back on site again.”

It is often political and diplomatic skills, as much as his creativity, which golf course architects need although using the correct experts for the job is extremely important.

“On Westerwood, without George Oldham and his experience of attending meetings with archaeologists and planning consultations, it would have been much more difficult. In actual fact, I feel that you shouldn't employ a golf course architect to do that sort of thing - you should always employ a specialist. However, when it comes to landscaping and environmental issues golf course architects can deal with those as they are much more closely related to core work.”

A scholar of golf course design with an extensive library of books on the subject, Jonathan has some interesting comments to make about older designs and how, what was acceptable 100 years ago, does not work nowadays from a health and safety perspective.

“In the past, courses with blind shots were all part of the game but now we try and avoid any blind shots - we'd see it as a fault in the design even although many of us enjoy playing holes with blind shots.”

“From a design perspective if you're presented with a par-3 which is on flat ground, followed by a par-4 which is played over the brow of a hill, you can effectively, 'design out' this 'design flaw' and swap the par-3 for a par-4 played to a green

at the brow of the hill and then a par-3 from an elevated tee. You've solved the problem!

“A course with blind shots designed out if it will be a much more saleable product to members and green fee payers while it does help the speed of play - not having the ball go out of sight and potentially lost and then the group behind having to wait for a bell to ring. These are issues we have to look at nowadays with eight to 10 minute starting times and the pressure of getting golfers around the course quickly and safely. These things were much less of an issue 25-30 years ago,” he explained.

Pay and Play courses generally expect 30,000 to 40,000 rounds of golf per year, minimum - that's a lot of golfers to get round the course at 10 minute intervals.

“It may make the course a bit more homogenised or formulaic but every new golf course is being designed for one particular purpose, and that's to make money. The clients I have now are building the golf course to help sell houses or hotels and the courses have to be marketable, as well as being beautiful, memorable and remarkable!” said Jonathan.

He can also envisage the day when it is common place for golf clubs to sell their urban-based golf courses to housing developers and relocated to a new venue out of town, on farmland, or reclaimed land such as pit heaps, landfill and wasteland.

“The Government is telling us that they want so many more homes built over the next 20 years and developers will tempt golf clubs by offering a new course, clubhouse and possibly a cash sum to move away from prime sites to enable houses to be built.

“It means some golf clubs will have to make difficult decisions in the future but stronger health and safety legislation may make the decision process much easier if older, golf courses on small, restricted sites fail to meet modern standards.”

