



The History of Golf Course Architecture, Construction, and Planning

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The game of golf evolved from the links of Scotland. Early golf courses in Scotland would forever influence, in many ways, the golf courses that would follow. The design, construction techniques, and planning have been varied over time, but the standard measure came from these early golf courses. As the interest in the game grew, the need for more golf courses increased as well. Soon, golf spread from Scotland throughout the British Isles and eventually to North America and is now played throughout the entire world.

In order to understand the history of golf course architecture and construction, one must start at the beginning—the early Scottish links. These early Scottish links were largely influenced by the environment in which they were constructed. The wind and weather (including precipitation) played a major role in the way the game was played and how golf course design developed. The landscapes in the early Scottish links courses were devoid of trees and water features characteristic of most modern golf courses. The winds often drove the livestock grazing on the land to trample grass in certain areas

resulting in sandy scars on the land which eventually became known as “bunkers.” Early courses only had a few to maybe 5 golf holes. These golf holes consisted of a starting point or tee and an ending point or cup. Eventually, early golf courses were designed so players left the clubhouse playing “out” for 9 holes and then they returned to come “in” for 9 more holes. Most of these early golf holes were located right along the sea.

The grass was predominantly bentgrass and fescue, which generally grew well on the sandy soils commonly found near the sea. The maintenance of the course was rarely considered in the early designs of golf courses and it is evident today as golf course maintenance involves a more “natural” low-maintenance method; including non-irrigated fairways and long grass areas that are rarely mowed. In fact, man had very little to do with the management of these early links, and it is believed that bird droppings and periodic rains contributed to the health of the turf.

The preeminent golf course in early Scottish links was



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St. Andrews. Records show that it existed in a somewhat primitive form as early as 1414. Many changes in design and the game of golf happened at St. Andrews, including putting greens being instituted as early as the 1700s. Eventually, particular attention was given to these areas and the need to keep these greens adequately covered with turf.

Expansion of the British railway system led to expansion of the game of golf throughout the British Isles. Allan Robertson (1815-1859), an early professional golfer of St. Andrews, is believed to be the earliest known golf course designer. Some of his projects included work on his home course at St. Andrews as well as various links throughout Scotland. Other professionals who became designers included Tom Morris and Tom Dunn, who would lead the early designers following Robertson. "Old Tom" (Morris) did considerably more in the area of golf course design and management than his predecessor Robertson and staked courses throughout Scotland, Wales, and Ireland; while Tom Dunn designed golf courses located inland to compensate for the dramatic increase in the number of golfers. This change from links style courses to inland golf courses didn't occur until the end of the 19th century. Modern golf course architecture would forever be changed by this move away from the sea as designers began changing fields of clay to satisfactory fields for golf by moving the earth and constructing various features.

By the late 1800s, the game of golf spread to North America. For the most part, Scottish green keepers and professionals designed the early "links" throughout America, yet it could not compare to the true links of Scotland and England. It would be up to various American and British designers such as C.B. Macdonald, Donald Ross, A.W. Tillinghast, and Alister Mackenzie to create a different standard for golf course design for North American golf courses in the early part of the 20th Century. Canadian born Charles Blair Macdonald was the first to coin the term "golf architect" and is known as the father of American golf course architecture. The 1920s are considered to be the "golden age" of golf course architecture due to the high number of superb layouts that resulted. During this time of great expansion, funds were available, real estate costs were relatively low, and ideal land was open for development.

Following the difficult economic times of the 1930s and the Second World War, a golf course architect by the name of Robert Trent Jones led the charge of modern golf course design and began creating many masterpieces across the world; eventually he would design over 400 courses. He is considered to be the most influential person in golf course design. However, this period has been viewed by some as being a bland or uninteresting period in golf course design, because of a relatively low number of advances or creative changes in design. In the

late 1960s and early 1970s this would change when Pete Dye began creating golf courses from nothing by moving great amounts of earth. He introduced golf course concepts that still exemplified the influence of early links courses including the use of pot bunkers characteristic of Scottish courses; furthermore, he introduced the use of railroad ties and created nontraditional amphitheatres for spectators to view golf competitions more easily.

Today, modern golf course architects consist of many different people from various educational and training backgrounds. There are still a large number of trained landscape architects who design golf courses, but there are also many golf course architects who are simply golf professionals who give a player's perspective to the design of a golf course layout. However, all modern golf course architects face new challenges that the early architects did not face including recreational water restrictions and environmental issues and groups. These challenges will continue into the future as golf course design grows exponentially with the growth in the number of those who play the game of golf.

Editor's Note: Jason M. Grode is a December 2001 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison turf management program.

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