



# SIMON GIDMAN

International Golf Course Architects

Planning & Development Consultants and Project Managers

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## SHINNECOCK HILLS GOLF COURSE – HOLE 12

One of my early memories of college is that of the lecturer in historic landscapes repeatedly referring to gardens as palimpsests, knowing full well that us first years had no idea what he was talking about. Of course after the lecture we all scuttled off to the nearest dictionary to find the following explanation – “a manuscript in which old writing has been rubbed out to make room for new”. If the description of a palimpsest can be directed at a garden landscape it can certainly be applied to a golf course.

So many of our great golf courses have undergone transformations over the years; courses with often fairly inauspicious beginnings improved to become testaments to great golf course architecture. Shinnecock Hills G. C. on the eastern seaboard of America is certainly one of those courses.

Initially a reservation for the Alonquin tribe who roamed from the Shinnecock Bay to Montauk, the symbol of the American Red Indian is entwined into all aspects of the club, most notably on the club's motif.

The golf course, initially designed as a 12 hole layout by Willie Davis in 1891 always seemed to be the forerunner of golf in America, constantly introducing new ideas and forever moving forward. It was not the first course in America perhaps but the first, possibly shared with Chicago golf course, to have 18 holes; it was the first to have a clubhouse, the first to be an incorporated golf club and was possibly the originator of the use of red for the ladies' tees, when an additional nine holes, known as the Red course, was designed for the exclusive use of the lady players. This separate Red course was not an overwhelming success and soon after it's opening the two courses were re-arranged to form a single 18 hole layout.

However perhaps the biggest changes to the golf course came in 1928 under the direction of then club president Mr. Lucien Tyng who not only purchased new land for development but also employed Dick Wilson and his constructors Toomey and Flynn to reorganise the layout. This was completed in 1931 and it is broadly this layout that forms the basis of the golf course today. These changes increased the overall length of the course from less than

5000yds. to 6749 yds and since then a further 163 yds were added for the 1986 US Open to create the current layout of 6912 yards par 70.

There are so many great holes at Shinnecock Hill G.C. and normally it's the 13th or 14th that receive the most plaudits, but to my mind it's the 12th hole that typifies great architecture. Perhaps it is because it comes after the slightly disappointing short par 3 11th hole, or perhaps it was because I took a 5 on the 11th hole and a par 4 on the 12th, I don't know.

But after a short walk uphill from the 11th green one is immediately impressed by the shape, scale and arrangement of the 12th hole. A straightish hole played in its own amphitheatre; the hole measures 472 yards and plays over naturally undulating rolls. There is no unforeseen trickery about the hole – what you see is what you get. The architects have not needed to overcomplicate or exaggerate the design. The hole is set in its own vast expanse with no other golf hole in sight, making the personal duel between the player and the game somehow seem more intense and personal. The 12th is a marvellously thought through and beautifully presented hole. The choices off the tee are almost unlimited. The easy drive is to the left of the central fairway bunker where there is the bulk of the rolling fairway until a distant fairway bunker beckons at 250 yard. The better or more challenged golfer will take on the central or right hand



bunkers and gain as much length as possible to reduce the pressure on the long second shot.

The approach to the green is protected by a series of bunkers, almost penal in nature, with sand either side of the fairway. Yet for those who have taken the easy option off the tee and played to the left of the fairway the second shot is a serious challenge. The golfer, assuming he cannot reach the green is left to decide whether to draw the ball into the very narrow space that is the approach or to drop it short of the road and chip on from there. For those who have braved the right side of the fairway and the narrow bunkering at the 250 yd mark the shot is, whilst shorter, equally challenging. You obviously have to avoid the approach bunkering and to hit an accurate shot to the green that tends to shed the ball into a series of hollows and swales off the putting surface. There is no let up on the hole, the decision off the tee needs to be carefully considered, the drive properly struck and the second shot demands both thought and accuracy of execution.

It's been said often enough in the architectural world that great holes are a mixture of risk and reward and the 12th encapsulates all that is great in a golf hole, both from the playing of the hole as well as the visual beauty of the surrounds.

The featuring on the hole, and the course for that matter, is outstanding. No "fancy dan" bunkers on these holes, but large elliptical sand features set into strong grass faces. They have a certain grandness about them that does not draw the

eye to their shape or design but fit, as strong features should do, perfectly into the landscape – their scale and style matched to the surrounds into which they are set.

Each hole at the Shinnecock Hills is set into its own landscape prompting Ben Hogan to comment "Each hole is different and requires a great deal of skill to play properly. All in all I think Shinnecock is one of the finest courses I have played".

Despite being British and loving almost all British courses my views are similar. It has been likened to British seaside courses, though the careful design of the holes contrasts with the often idiosyncratic challenges that characterise many British seaside courses. However the 12th has all the markings of a great hole; choice, beauty, scale and challenge.

I recall vividly the first time I played the course in late summer. We had finished the round and a mist was beginning to descend on the course. We had a quick drink and were then ushered gently out of the clubhouse into the crisp evening air. We drove down the driveway and you had the sense that, whilst the golfer roamed the course during the day, the original inhabitants, the American Red Indian returned and reclaimed their mystical and spiritual home at night. Balance restored I think.

**Simon Gidman**  
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