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UPDATING OUR OLD COURSES – RESTORATION OR RENOVATION?

Restoration – act or process of restoring – not very helpful- let's try “to restore”

Restore – to repair: to bring, put, or give back: to make good: to reinstate: to bring back to a former state

Renovate – to renew or make new again: to make as if new: to regenerate

Restoration – to bring back to a former state – is this really a serious choice for our older courses? One only needs to look at some of the early plans of these courses to realise that they often played as 6000yd courses, with hazards placed at 170 –190 yds from the tee and landscapes which were quite often immature and undeveloped. Golf club members, I would suggest, do not want to go back to those times.

Bear in mind too that many of our older course have gone through a number of reincarnations. As such it is perhaps worth asking how far back in time would one go before settling upon which layout to restore? Would St. Andrews go back to the pre 1850's when it was played on the same route going out as in again? Definitely not. Would Shinnecock Hills one of the greatest of inland courses go back to pre Toomey and Flynn days? One hopes not. These are perhaps absurd examples but the point needs to be made that golf courses have evolved and changed, they are living landscapes that change in response to the demands of equipment, the ambitions of the membership and the popularity of the game. Whether or not they have evolved in the right direction is another question – but I do not know of any of our older courses that have done nothing and have still survived.

If a golf course stagnates it dies. Pinehurst no. 2, one of Donald Ross's greatest legacies, has holes some of which he altered as many as three times. Not many of us have clients so willing for constant change but Donald Ross knew that his course had to adapt to change both to his own ideas and to developments within the game. I doubt that Pinehurst would have been the great course it is today had Ross not made those fundamental improvements.

This was a matter of renovation rather than restoration.

Renovation is nothing new. Indeed one only has to look at the careers of some of our earliest architects like Colt, Mackenzie, Fowler and Willie Park jnr to realise how much remodelling work they undertook. Colt for example started his career in golf as secretary at Sunningdale Old Course – originally designed by Willie Park jnr – and spent much of his early days moving bunkers, adding trees in strategic places and creating other features on the course. Mackenzie was remodelling Royal St. George's, Lahinch and Blairgowrie; Fowler – Ganton, Royal Lytham & St. Annes, Royal North Devon and so the list goes on. These modifications came about partly in response to the need to create a full 18 hole golf course but more often as a result of major improvements to the golf ball and dramatic changes in the philosophy of the game as it moved from the penal to the strategic schools of architecture.

On the question of strategy, history and equipment generally, it is interesting to note the effects this has had on modern design. In the past great emphasis was placed on the location and angle of approach bunkering. Golf was played with the 1.62inch ball to firm (non irrigated) greens and to stay on the green it was critical to play short and allow the natural contours of the approach to direct the ball toward the flag. Accurate driving to a certain opening in the fairway and equally accurate second or third shots to a point on the approach was the hallmark of a good golfer. Hence the value of the approach bunker. This approach to golf strategy is less relevant these days. Golfers of all handicaps now expect to hit a ball through the air directly onto the green and for the ball to stay on that green. Thus the modern approach to designing greens is to angle the greens away from the centreline and to protect the surface with more hazards both to the front as well as sides of the green.

But many of our older courses have an abundance of approach bunkers well short of the green. They don't often come into play these days but they do set up the approach to the green beautifully, and whatever we may say about the exact location of bunkers, who could forget Ross's timeless comment; “there is no such thing as a misplaced bunker ... It is the business of the player to avoid it.”

Every architect will have their own view on this issue – but my own? Well, much will depend on each hole and the strategic influences of the hole. But as a principle I prefer to retain the original concept and framework. By all means move the bunkers forward and narrow the green approaches, slightly, but the spirit of the original design should be retained. I suppose my answer to the question of renovation is – what would Harry Colt or Herbert Fowler or Abercrombie have done to their courses had they the chance to remodel their own creations 100 years later.

When one visits these established, properly designed, courses it always surprises me how well they have fared through the years. Whilst the fundamental principles of golf design have not really altered over the years, nevertheless green complexes are mostly as challenging now as when first built and the location of hazards around the green still demand thought and precision. Equally the layout of the golf holes rarely needs to be changed in a Braid, Colt, Simpson layout unless perhaps it is due to development encroaching close to the boundaries of the course.

So golf is a game that has changed and evolved and in response restoration of these old courses to a former self is not really a serious alternative. But renovating an old course to its original style is an entirely different matter.

Like all creative people, these early architects had certain styles and traits which characterized their courses. Yet, when one visits many of these older courses it is amazing how easy it is to detect the amateurish additions that have been added over the years. Changes, inspired by personal taste rather than course philosophy often leave a course bereft of its original strategy. Bunkers and other hazards have been taken out and others put in for no obvious reason. As a result many of our older courses lack design continuity as every participant attempts to leave their own, often ghastly, stamp on the course. What a course needs is unity not a jumble of ideas and statements. Above all else when renovating, these “carbuncles”, as Prince Charles might have called them, need to be re-assessed and invariably removed.

To date, I have tended to concentrate on golf courses with some kind of architectural heritage and the issues related to the remodelling of these courses. But there are many older courses with no such heritage. These courses, though by no means all, tend to have certain inherent weaknesses. Sometimes these problems can be fundamental with holes laid out poorly – I still occasionally come across holes that cross each other, though these have often been removed in previous changes. However more often it is simple things like small greens, bunkering that does not challenge as perhaps it should and mounding that needs modification. But a wholesale approach to change is still something to be avoided. These courses may not be of architectural significance but they are of enormous importance and affection to the members that play the course. The little nuances of the course, the strange shapes, the grassy hollows and knoles are all significant. This after all represents the character of the course.

But both from an agronomic and architectural viewpoint changes need to be made. The greens will invariably be clay based and often closed for parts of the winter, unlike their new, recently built neighbours and tees will be too small and bunker faces worn and sub-bases not drained. From an architectural viewpoint basic golfing principles and shot values may not have been addressed at all in the original layout or simply need to be reviewed. Trees, planted many years previous, now encroach onto the playing surface casting shade and leaf litter, and how often does one find these golf courses lined with totally indigenous planting – a mass of dark pine, larch, cupressus and poplar with little thought given to long term indigenous planting. Despite these inherent weaknesses the charm and character of the courses are an all-important asset that need to be retained. Members want their courses upgraded, the specification of greens and tees improved, hazards moved to a more appropriate position and they might even want a little water incorporated to add to the heroic nature of the course – but above all else members want the character of their course retained.

Marrying the two principles is a difficult though not impossible task. Green sizes can be enlarged to accept current volumes of play – but still be small(ish); bunkers shapes and designs can maintain their uniqueness – but be better placed; and grassy hollows, swales and mounds re incorporated – yet retain their historic style. Despite the awkwardness of some of these features to maintain it is surprising how rarely maintenance, or rather the improvement or ease of maintenance is given as a cause for renovation. The odd mound or deep sided ditch might be removed but on the whole the Club will have lived with these features and tend to accept and even enjoy these strange oddities.

In Britain the development of new golf courses in the late 80's and 90's has not only helped to satisfy the demand in popularity of the game but it has also made existing golf clubs reassess their own courses. Enlightened members, realising that they have been the beneficiaries of the previous generation's foresight are often conscious of the need to pass on to the next generation of golfers a product that will last for the next 100 years. They know that unless they adapt and improve their own course, in time it too will fall by the way side and as a result many are taking the positive step to renovating their course.

Many of these courses represent a wonderful and valuable golfing heritage that have taken years to reach the degree of maturity so envied by newer courses. This heritage needs to be carefully adapted to the modern demands of the game, improved but not obviously modernised, renovated but rarely restored.

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