



# SIMON GIDMAN

International Golf Course Architects

Planning & Development Consultants and Project Managers

## GOLF COURSE DESIGN – A DIFFERENT OUTLOOK

Many readers will remember the R and A publication, “The Demand for Golf” which, along with other factors, helped spark a huge upsurge in golf development in this country. Based on American/Scottish quotas of courses per population it was estimated that Britain needed to produce a further 700 courses by 2000 to meet demand. Cue massive development.

Some of the new courses proved to be inspiring, others proved less so with poor basic design, poor specification and poor construction – quite a catalogue of failure! One can understand any developers desire to keep costs to a minimum and work to a strict budget. What many of these courses exhibited however was ego and bravado over business sense and long term planning. This lack of basic quality is now beginning to haunt these developments. Many are faced with stiff competition from courses built to a better standard, that are open throughout the year and often do not charge any entry fee.

Bobby Weed, an American architect wrote recently about the development of “start-over” projects in the USA. The principle of the start-over course being initial purchase at relatively low cost followed by subsequent redevelopment. This re-development often resulted in an increase in membership or green fees, often by as much as a 66% to 100% .

Is this entirely realistic in the British market? Many courses are on the market at the moment and most are sold. But spending more money on redevelopment? Not often.

However assuming that there are no fairy godmothers around the corner, some developers might consider the revenue raised from using imported fill material to recreate the golf course that had originally been hoped for. Imported fill is, by its very nature an unglamorous concept. This fill material is not lumps of concrete or brick – it is natural subsoil. It is subsoil brought from other building sites, by lorry, to the golf course. It means lorries driving onto the course on specially prepared hardcore tracks, on a frequent basis and it means the reappearance of topsoil and subsoil heaps and golf holes under construction - yet again. Days that most developers and members thought they were well past. On the other hand it can mean a useful and steady source of income. An income that can be used to upgrade the course to reconstruct the greens and tees and even improve otherwise colourless areas on the course.

No one should assume that such a procedure is straightforward. Planning permission will be required as

the project often entail fairly major engineering works and permission is often difficult to negotiate. Furthermore many local authorities would prefer to see existing quarries reinstated to former levels before an existing golf course is improved and a strong case needs to be made to satisfy these concerns. On the other hand these planning complications are somewhat offset by the fact that the site already has planning permission for golf and authorities are often keen to help upgrade an existing development. As long as no environmental damage is done - in fact the authorities would expect to see an improvement in wildlife habitats, landscaping and flood prevention, the planning authorities can be quite helpful.

Projects can take on various levels. One course we are currently working at is undertaking the works over a seven year period with three new holes constructed in phase one and thereafter a further three holes being taken out of commission every year. Another course is developing a further nine holes so that, after this 9 holes comes into play the remaining 18 holes will be reconstructed in two phases. I know of another course where fill material was imported to re-level a practice ground – again quite a large project. It might be possible to consider infill material for smaller projects like bunker construction, but the need for special haulage routes and the rather haphazard nature of these jobs might preclude their consideration.

For large scale projects importation of infill material is certainly worth considering.

However there is a major downside to the use of land infill material because, apart from the ongoing re-construction works, such a project is by definition disruptive both to the playability of the course and to the membership, to green fees and to societies.

There are no real solutions to this disruption and whilst no golf club owner warms to the idea of losing societies or members, the approach of such development is to look to the future and accept that say, after a couple of years completion, the resultant golf course is a good quality facility, well designed and constructed and in better shape to look to the next 100 years. There is also the sweetener that there is still at least an income from the importation of fill material.

**Simon Gidman**

*March 2005*