

The restoration of Old Town Club, USA

Certain bunkers are so important they inspire meticulous hands-on collaboration. A case in point: bunkers on opening holes should make a strong impression.

Coore & Crenshaw's shaping trio: Dave Axland, Quinn Thompson and Keith Rhebb, fine-tuned these bunkers daily for more than three months until their leading edges and horizon lines appeared just right from the tee. Even so, the bunkers were not totally finished until Bermuda sod was hand-torn (not cut) from their inside lips, and when scoops of natives were dumped on the outer rims through a process known as 'chunking'.

Old Town also returned to native, tawny coloured river sand from the nearby Yadkin River in lieu of any white commercial selections. (Photograph by Larry Lambrecht)

Any golfer worth their salt will tell you there's a decipherable difference between hitting a shot from a flat tee and a tilting fairway. It's the slope of the terrain, and the swaying stance of an uneven lie, that often separates the good player from the great, and the fearless blow from the hesitant. Indeed, if undulation is the soul of golf, as noted British architect John Low once claimed, then Old Town rightfully earns its place among the noblest of playing fields.

Rarely does one encounter inland topography this ideal for the game, but that is exactly what architect Perry Maxwell discovered at the R.J. Reynolds Estate in Winston-Salem (North Carolina). The year was 1938 when Charlie and Mary Reynolds Babcock, scions of the Reynolds Tobacco family, set out to establish a small, private golf club next to their stately homestead. While known at the time as 'Reynolda', today it is listed in the National Registry of Historic Places as the 'Reynolda House and Gardens'.

One of Babcock's business associates at his New York investment firm, Reynolds & Company, was Clifford Roberts, legendary co-founder of the Augusta National Golf Club, Georgia. At the time, Roberts had commissioned Maxwell to remodel many of Alister Mackenzie's original greens and bunkers for the Masters Tournament. Delighted by those outcomes, Roberts naturally implored Babcock to enlist Maxwell to design the Old Town course at Reynolda.

Construction commenced on 6 December 1938, just three years and a day before Pearl Harbor Day. Given that World War Two roughly marked the end of the Golden Age of golf course design, Old Town today is widely recognised as the final significant course to emerge from that genre of venerated masterworks.

In a rare extension of luxury to any architect, the Babcock's offered Maxwell his pick of Reynolda's 1,003 acres in routing the eighteen-hole, par-70 golf course. Never known as one to tout his own courses, Maxwell was clearly elated with the 155-acre horse farm from which he carved the layout.

Decisively, Maxwell declared the following in a 1939 *Winston-Salem Journal* article: 'The Old Town Links is one of the seven finest in the nation.' Not the five finest, or even the ten finest, but seven! Maxwell, who by that time had visited and renovated many of the nation's revered classics, must have given the subject a genuine degree of thought considering the precise nature of such a billing. Also, for Maxwell to accord Old Town the status of a 'links'—normally reserved for the sandy seaside compositions of the British Isles—he must have been awe-inspired with the grandeur of the land.

The Old Town landscape is highlighted by broad, far-reaching fairways, meandering creeks, heaving uneven terrain, sweeping cross-course vistas and fiendishly artistic green contours, widely known for their trademark 'Maxwell rolls'.





Although golfers never tire of these intricate green undulations, it is those wildly sloping fairways—producing a variety of awkward stances and hanging lies—that drive golfers crazy. And if you're fortunate enough to play when it is firm-and-fast, the humps and bumps literally come to life and generate a variety of unpredictable bounces; all of which helps to make the experience downright fascinating—and infinitely different from round to round.

Undulation is precisely what makes Old Town one of the best proving grounds in the world for serious young golfers, according to Wake Forest legend Lanny Wadkins, speaking on behalf of a bounty of Demon Deacon PGA professional icons, who honed their skills at Old Town.

According to Bill Coore, the club's restoration architect, much of Old Town's brilliance emanates from its routing and undulating topography. Each nine-hole loop starts and ends at the clubhouse doors, weaving and twisting its way through the teeth of the property's most severe earth-forms. While many holes bend with the pitch of the land, other holes peel back against the terrain in 'reverse camber' fashion. Here, shotmakers learn the art of shaping different shots into all sorts of side-slopes to hold the grade of the terrain; and it is exactly this relationship between hole-shape and ground contour that yields some of the most varied challenges in golf. Coore, who became enamoured with the intricacies of the Maxwell layout while attending Wake Forest, discusses the genius of his predecessor's design. Says Bill:

I've always said that any serious student of golf course architecture must first go to Old Town to see how Mr Maxwell laid out the course over such an extraordinary piece of hilly terrain. Given the

hole-variety and the fact that it's still very walkable, that's quite an accomplishment. Old Town has always served as one of the cornerstones for my early understanding of what extraordinary golf architecture is all about.

The fabric of the golf course also speaks in a homogenous early-American manner. Blankets of mottled-green turf are juxtaposed against peripheral native grasses ablaze with a spectrum of tawny hues. Together, these contrasting patinas dominate the land plan, as if gang mowers cropped out the playing fields at its inception.

Other fascinating design features include its double green, shared tees and tee markers, merging fairways, crowned landing areas, valley-of-sin greenside depressions and a handful of 'blind' shots that highlight its timeless character and enduring charm.

Quinn Thompson, Coore & Crenshaw's bunker specialist from Chicago, was equally captivated by the virtues of the topography. In his unmistakable drawl, Thompson relayed the following opinion.

Sometimes you don't need the ocean, coastal cliffs or the mountains. Sometimes you don't even need sand. Of all the land I've had the privilege of 'drumming' on ... Old Town may be the most interesting. If there is a Lord, he surely pegs one up here every Sunday, whether we know it or not.

Again, when you layer Perry Maxwell and Team Coore & Crenshaw on top of a landscape known for its grand scale and contour, you come away with a golf course, so varied in its presentation and shot values, that it can stir your soul each and every step of the way.

OPPOSITE

Second hole: A downhill par-3 of 168 yards, it is the first of Old Town's four par-3s. Not only does each vary in yardage, they progressively build in length and face four different directions—another rare element of design variety found here.

This green-site best exhibits Maxwell's naturalistic bunker style, containing jagged-laced edges, rumpled lips and tall stalks of native broomsedge grasses enveloping the outer edges. These bunkers provide character-rich shadowing and a rugged appearance, as if they had been left behind by Mother Nature. (Photograph by Larry Lambrecht)



Old Town aerial: A view of its interior holes, with a backdrop of the Wait Chapel steeple at Wake Forest University. These neighbouring properties have served as the stomping grounds for many accomplished golfers in the university's storied past. (Photograph by Eric Kiel)

BELOW
Sixteenth hole: The putting surface sits comfortably on top of a volcano-shaped outcropping, with sweeping views of the heart of the golf course. (Photograph by Eric Kiel)



OPPOSITE
A view of the bunkering at the par-4, seventh hole. The restored bunkers encompass 152,000 square-feet of sand, while their former versions only comprised 35,000 square-feet of sand. Throw in a tight mowing pattern along their edges to 'welcome' balls, and the outcome is that these bunkers play exponentially larger than their expanded sizes would indicate. (Photograph by Larry Lambrecht)

Aggressive tree removal unveiled the sweeping character of the topography, which had long been obscured by tree plantings and long afternoon shadows. But nothing exposed the drama of the setting more than the removal of thousands of volunteer trees tracing a mile of creek beds. The visual transformation was mind-boggling, as breathtaking panoramas were recaptured across the heart of the golf course.

Today, reflecting a more old-school tradition, one swathe of fairway connects six holes, successively, without interruption of rough or vegetation. As a result, the fairways increased in width from thirty-two to sixty-five acres, reclaiming its 'links-like' feel of yesteryear.

Even today, Old Town continues to simplify modern maintenance procedures; not the least by reducing the number of different mowing heights and distracting mowing lines. In the foreground, the dynamic bunker at the twelfth hole contains a vintage directional pole and Maxwell's prototypical islands-of-turf, known as 'scabs'. (Photograph by Larry Lambrecht)



Here is a reverse view from behind the double green at the seventeenth and eighth holes. The sunrise illuminates the newly contoured Maxwell rolls, which Coore reclaimed throughout the large putting surface. To closer resemble its original source of inspiration at St Andrews, Old Town expanded the size of the green from 8,200 square-feet to 16,700 square-feet. (Photograph by Larry Lambrecht)



A view of the double green, as seen from the approach at the eighth hole (red flag left) and the seventeenth hole (yellow flag right).

Clifford Roberts encouraged Maxwell to build a double green in this location, because he thought it would inspire interesting conversations in the bar. Maxwell, who harboured an enduring affection for the Old Course at St Andrews, which houses seven double greens, easily embraced the idea proposed by Roberts. (Photograph by Dunlop White)



Fourth Hole: This reachable par-5 contains a partially 'blind' putting surface hidden at the base of a dell. From the approach, golfers instead marvel at the commanding view of the formidable sixth green sited deep in the backdrop.

Architect Tom Doak once claimed this knobby precipice, with the fall-away putting surface (from left to right as shown), is like trying to stop a ball on the front hood of a car.

Both green sites contrast sharply in style, and they are wrought with depth-perception challenges. (Photograph by Dunlop White)