

Old-fashioned golf not out of style at Old Town Club

By **DUNLOP WHITE III**

When you first arrive at Old Town Club, it's readily apparent that this is not your typical country club. Normally, the golf course appears somewhat deserted. "Where is everyone?" inquired John MacKenzie, director of development for Davis Love Enterprises, who was obviously amazed that we had the course to ourselves on such a nice October day. At 340 members, Old Town is rather small, but the golfing membership is even smaller.

The first tee sets the stage for a good old-fashioned golfing experience. Not only is it positioned just a few feet outside the clubhouse door, but it also rests inconspicuously on top of native terrain. Kris Spence, a Greensboro-based architect who has an affinity for classical designs, once nodded with approval. "If it weren't for these two tee markers, golfers would never know that this was a tee," said Spence.

Old Town evokes an antiquated sensibility by its very name, but the old-style feeling and spirit continues to reveal itself throughout the 1939 Perry Maxwell layout. Golfers can't help but notice the archaic stone walls and bridges which pepper the course like ruins. Stout, wooden flagsticks are also used as a throwback from yesteryear.

Informalities are commonplace at Old Town. Standard groups comprise five or six golfers. Plus, the golf shop doesn't even take starting times, a time-honored practice that nearly all members appreciate. Jim Holt, club professional, holds back a smile as he divulged some infamous clublore. "Allegedly, a member once suggested that we consider using tee times," said Holt. "The suggestion was met with the most delicate response, 'if tee times were what he wanted, he should perhaps consider playing at courses that used them,'" recounted Holt.

Old Town has always protected the personal freedoms of its golfers, but the club has guarded its anonymity with much less success. From the beginning, the golf course was destined for prominence.

Perry Maxwell's Southern Jewel

In 1939, Mary Reynolds Babcock, of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco family, and her husband, Charlie Babcock, donated more than 170 acres to start a golf club adjacent to her historic estate, now known as Reynolda House and Gardens.

Charlie Babcock then managed a thriving investment firm by the name of Reynolds & Company, later to become Dean Witter Reynolds. In 1934, Babcock hired Clifford Roberts, co-founder of the Augusta National Golf Club, as a business associate.

Meanwhile, Roberts was desperately trying to bolster The Masters Tournament as a preeminent invitational for the game's elite. Afraid that Augusta was losing its bite, Roberts employed mid-western architect Perry Maxwell to reconstruct the greens on holes 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, and 18. Roberts, pleased with the results, recommended that Babcock commission Maxwell to come to Winston-Salem and design the course for his friend at Old Town.

Clifford Roberts actually accompanied



Golf course designer Perry Maxwell harbored an undying affection for the Old Course at St. Andrews and created the double green shared by the 8th and 17th holes.

Maxwell and Babcock around the construction site at Old Town and encouraged them to merge the adjacent greens together at holes 8 and 17. According to Blake Clarke, a longstanding Augusta member, Roberts insisted, "a double green would make for interesting bar room conversations." But Maxwell had his own incentive. Harboring an undying affection for the Old Course at St. Andrews, Maxwell embraced the idea.

Roberts also secured Old Town with its first teaching professional, Guy Paulsen, who had served as an associate to Bobby Jones for three years at the Augusta National.

In November of 1939, the *Winston-Salem Journal* introduced the club's opening as follows, "it will immediately take rank as one of the South's three great courses and as one of the nation's 10 best."

Perry Maxwell, however, had greater expectations. He endorsed the Old Town Links design, "as one of the seven finest in the nation". This is quite a compliment considering Maxwell had previously renovated other venerable layouts, including Augusta National, Pine Valley, Merion, National Golf Links of America, and Maidstone. Plus, Maxwell had already designed Crystal Downs in 1933, Southern Hills in 1935 and Prairie Dunes in 1937. Thus, Maxwell was involved with many legendary courses and still gave Old Town this high billing.

Old Town's routing is terrific primarily because of the character of the land. Bradley Klein, architecture and design editor for *Golfweek*, admitted, "I didn't realize how extraordinary the property was until I approached the interior stretch and noticed that distant site lines and sweeping vistas could be available of the entire premises."

Chris Clouser, a Perry Maxwell historian from Indiana, agreed that the course was meant to have an open, linksland look. In his manuscript, *The Life and Works of Perry Duke Maxwell*, Clouser pointed out that Maxwell always described it as the Old Town "Links."

"Maxwell never labeled any of his other courses as a links design, including Prairie Dunes, even though it's possibly the closest course to fit that description today outside of

Long Island", said Clouser.

The Babcocks initially gave Maxwell more than 1,000 acres of unadulterated, washed-out farmland, including the area where Wake Forest University is currently situated. Maxwell essentially had his pick of the litter, a luxury architects always crave. As soon as the ideal location was marked, evidently no landform was compromised.

All ridges, knolls, swales, and ravines were left undisturbed, while all ponds and streams were maneuvered only slightly for irrigation. Maxwell was a proponent of minimalist architecture – advancing the natural state of the land. Maxwell declared, "The site of the golf course should be already there, not brought there by man ... many an acre of magnificent land has been utterly destroyed by the steam shovel throwing up billows of earth."

As a result, Old Town's fairways are armed with varying degrees of lateral slope, giving golfers a greater premium for hitting the correct quadrant with the properly shaped shot. Golfers then encounter many awkward lies while playing approach shots from a variety of unlevel positions. The greens, however, offer the ultimate challenge, as they strategically tumble much like the fairways.

Coined as "Maxwell's rolls," Maxwell had a penchant for shaping putting surfaces with extreme contours. According to Bill Coore, America's hottest architect, Old Town's greens were the most intricate and undulating greens in the Maxwell repertoire. However, it wasn't the bold mounds and ridges that made these greens so exceptional. Instead, Coore exclaimed, "it was the artistic little bumps and rises here and there, which looked like someone just pushed them up from underneath with an air hose, that created their intimacy."

Today, golfers may have plenty of putts in the same round that slide laterally 10 to 15 feet, particularly from the wrong side of the hole. According to club historian Robert Whaling, "there are straight putts out there today, but you must be at point blank range to find them."

In the mid-1950s, the Babcocks were also instrumental in the relocation of Wake Forest College to Winston-Salem from the eastern part

of North Carolina. Again, the Babcocks donated a portion of their estate for the university campus just north of the golf course.

Consequently, Old Town has always been the home for the Demon Deacon golf teams and has groomed many tour professionals, including Curtis Strange, Lanny Wadkins, Scott Hoch, Leonard Thompson, Gary Hallberg, Jay Haas, Billy Andrade, Len Mattiace, Jay Sigel, Laura Diaz and Darren Clarke.

Lanny Wadkins professes, "Old Town offers so many varied challenges that it is the best course for training serious, young golfers."

Jim Ferree, veteran tour professional, and his father, Purvis Ferree, member of the Carolinas PGA Hall of Fame, also honed their skills at Old Town. Renowned professionals like Arnold Palmer, Mike Soucek, Lew Worsham and Billy Joe Patton played exhibition matches at Old Town, while other old-timers, including Byron Nelson, Lloyd Mangrum, Lawson Little and Ralph Guldahl, always tuned up at Old Town between the Greater Greensboro Open and the Land of Sky Open in Asheville.

Reclaiming a Masterpiece

The "Golden Age" of golf architecture faded with the onset of World War II. Chris Clouser noted, "In reality, it probably ended with Old Town Club, because it remains the last significant design by any architect prior to the war." With a heightened appreciation for Maxwell, Old Town has taken a special interest in preserving and restoring its architectural heritage, while also keeping pace with advances in modern technology.

Through the years, however, Maxwell's original design gradually deteriorated. As living landscapes, golf courses naturally evolve. Trees grow, greens shrink, and fairways contract. It's difficult to notice this ever-shrinking process in any one season, but over the course of 60 years, many golf holes have lost nearly half of their original playing areas. Plus, equipment technology continues to render golf courses narrower and shorter. Old Town was no exception.

In 2002, Florida-based architect Bobby Weed, with the aid of authentic aerial photography, implemented a modest tree management program, expanded the fairways to their original widths, and lengthened nine select holes to bring the intended landing areas and shot values back into play. Weed also installed multi-row irrigation for wall-to-wall distribution and upgraded fairways from common bermudagrass to a pure hybrid, called TifSport. Green chairman Logan Jackson and superintendents Mac and O'Neil Crouch were instrumental in this process.

Today, Old Town is a par 70 measuring just over 6,900 yards from the back markers.

Golfweek publication currently ranks Old Town as the eighth best course in North Carolina. In *The Confidential Guide*, noted architect, Tom Doak, ranks Old Town among the Top 10 in the country "Worth Groveling To Play" along with Cypress Point, San Francisco Golf Club, Pine Valley, Chicago Golf Club, Seminole, Augusta National and Fishers Island.

Though Doak's assessment may be ambitious, clearly the word is out about a Camel City classic that is aging quite well.