

# Learning from the past

It's never been easier for clubs to learn about the design history of their golf courses, thanks to the public availability of historical sources, says Adam Lawrence

“The most important documents any course can have are aerial photographs of the property”



Le Touquet in France through the ages

It is hard, sometimes, truly to comprehend the scale of change that the internet revolution has wrought upon the world. Tasks that would have taken days a little more than a decade ago can now be accomplished in minutes. We have video-based conversations with friends or colleagues in far-flung parts of the globe, free of charge, and we think nothing of it. When a business contact is away from the office, we get irritated if he doesn't reply to our message within a few minutes, no matter where he might be.

It isn't just the internet itself, but the tools we have to interrogate it. When this

writer first had internet access in the mid 1990s, specialist publishers were putting out pamphlets with web addresses of relevant companies, because the searching tools available at the time meant finding a particular business online was as much a matter of luck than judgement, especially given that most websites were hosted by a few providers, and not many companies owned their own domain. Now, we type a company's name – or an individuals, or even a complex sentence – into our browsers, and we expect everything of relevance to appear before our eyes in less than a second. It is, when you step back to think, truly mindboggling.

You would struggle to find an area of life that has not been affected by this revolution. But in few cases has anything been transformed so much as research of any kind. So what does this mean for golf? The answer is that, for almost any older golf course, it is easier to understand the history and development of the course now than it has ever been before.

The trend for historical restoration of old courses started in the US, as do most golf trends nowadays. As golf clubs became more interested in their history over the last twenty years, so a group of architects specialising in restoration of old designs has

emerged. And this trend is starting to take hold in other traditional golf markets, such as Europe and Australia too.

It's not just those important old courses that can benefit from having a clear idea of their own past. All courses change with time, and even if there's no particular desire to put the original design back, it is still extremely useful to know how yours used to look. And, thanks to technological advances, finding this information is now relatively straightforward in most locations.

Where should a club looking to research its history start? Its own archive is an obvious place, but the lack of interest in

golf course history over the past century means many will find this a disappointing base camp – it's not coincidental that most club histories focus on people rather than the course!

There is, though, a vast quantity of information available, and with a little bit of persistence, a dedicated researcher can put together a good picture of what a course might have looked like at a particular point in history.

Dutch architect Frank Pont has established himself as one of the leading restorers of classic courses in Europe. He says that understanding design history is a matter

of getting to grips with multiple sources. “Obviously, the best situation is where a club has a really great archive of material of its own, but most of the time that seems to have been lost in a clubhouse fire at some point in the past,” he says.

For Pont, the most important documents that any course can have are aerial photographs of the property from as many different points in the past as possible. Depending on the location, such photographs can be very easy or almost impossible to find. In the UK, it is rare to find anything before the late 1930s, which means that the early history of some of



our finest courses is essentially guesswork, but from that period onward there is a fairly comprehensive record available courtesy of the Aerofilms collection owned by English Heritage. The collection is now being digitised and put online by EH at the website [britainfromabove.org.uk](http://britainfromabove.org.uk). The map-based searching on the site is not wholly reliable at the moment, but can be expected to improve.

Elsewhere, the availability of old aerials tends to be linked to military and mapping efforts. A key stage of the restoration of Pinehurst No. 2 by Bill Coore and Ben Crenshaw happened when club member Craig Disher managed to locate a comprehensive set of aerials taken by US government officials during the 1940s: these photographs guided the architects in their quest to put the course back to how Donald Ross had it looking towards the end of his life.

“Aerials are really vital, because they tell us about bunker placement, grassing patterns and tree lines,” says Pont. “If you can have only one document, a good aerial photograph would be the first choice.”

What aerials can't do is show lower profile details such as greens contouring. For this kind of purpose, the single best tool is the original architect's drawings. Architects such as Ron Prichard and Kris Spence in the US, who have built a speciality out of restoring Donald Ross courses, have grown used to interpreting Ross's green sketches, which are fairly plentiful given the way in which Ross worked, with multiple crews around the US building courses largely from his plans. But such sketches can be harder to come by for other architects. It is ironic that the proliferation of Ross courses makes his documents easier to come by!

Another precious source of material can be newspaper archives. Again, these are increasingly being put online: in the UK, for example, *The Times* has a complete digital archive of its editions going back as far as 1785. Even local newspapers have been digitised – the British Newspaper Archive website charges a subscription, but provides researchers with the ability to search hundreds of papers from across the country, an especially useful tool given that local media were more likely to report the goings on at clubs in their area in detail.

Ground level photographs and postcards can be useful if a project is to go as far as returning bunkers to their original style, or greens to their original shape. But they can also be extremely misleading, as Frank Pont says. “You have to use photographs with care,” he says. “It is very easy to misinterpret old images – even if something is clearly labelled, you can't always be sure



While Donald Ross did not invent cross-bunkers, he used them so prolifically that they became one of his trademark features. A rather straight mundane hole (top) has been transformed into a character-rich, multi-dimensional hole with the recovery of Ross's cross-hazards

that it shows what it says. But during Kris Spence's recent restoration of Ross's Roaring Gap course in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the availability of a good collection of old photographs played a key role in enabling Spence to replicate Ross's original features.

Local archives are often a vital source of information. “I think there is a lot more material in public archives than most of us have yet discovered,” says Pont. “The problem is that we aren't professional researchers, so we don't necessarily have the ability to find everything there is to be had.” Land registration documents, planning applications and the like can all be found in such archives, and are a potentially powerful tool for clubs and owners seeking to understand the history of their courses.

The most powerful tool of all, though, is a club member with a passionate interest in the course and a willingness to invest time and effort in seeking out information.

Older members in particular will often have useful nuggets of knowledge, and round table meetings with them might well reveal a crucial snippet that hadn't been discovered by other means. During Spence's Roaring Gap project, it was the determination of long-time member Dunlop White that drove the work forward, and club historians or archivists – almost always an honorary position! – are generally the best repository of wisdom that can be found.

Whether a course was originally designed by Harry Colt or AN Other, there is value to be had in a knowledge of how it has evolved. Not every golf club is interested in restoration, nor should it be. But an understanding of how the original designer wanted holes to play can only be of benefit. And who knows, perhaps a little bit of research will throw up the good news that your course is a long-lost masterpiece by one of the game's greatest architects! **GCA**