



John Low and Modern Golf Architecture

Part II of a re-evaluation

by

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THE FIRST OPEN in which all contestants played with the new Haskell rubber core ball was held at St Andrews in 1905. The new ball was a great worry to the Royal & Ancient. It could be driven distances once thought impossible. Bunkers that had been placed 'scientifically' to catch fozzles hit with the older *gutta percha* balls were now easily carried and irrelevant. Herbert Fowler, discussing the impact of the ball in 1902 observed, with tongue planted in cheek, that 'bunkers and hazards ... have apparently shifted their positions, and many old terrors have departed'. Some of the best courses of the era were no longer tests for stronger golfers. With those concerns in mind, in late 1904 the Royal & Ancient formed a special committee to look into ways to strengthen the Old Course for the upcoming Open.

Rumors began to circulate almost immediately about the changes. There was talk that a continuous chain of bunkers might be built along the right side of the outward nine; that a ditch was to be cut through the middle of the course to separate the nines; and that the holes at the turn might be lengthened and rebuilt.¹ Nothing so radical was carried out, but the changes actually made were nonetheless 'comprehensive and unparalleled'.² The course was lengthened by 200 yards, most of the new length added to holes on the outward nine. Some tees were repositioned to bring fairway bunkers into play. The rear portion of the eleventh green, the Eden, was flattened and expanded, making it more forgiving of shots hit past the pin. The area between the Road Hole green and the road was 'sloped' to make it less severe. The biggest change, however, was the addition of thirteen new bunkers on the right side of the second, third, fourth, sixth and seventh fairways and to the rear of the third green. The new bunkers and extended tees are shown (right) on a plan that appeared in the 1907 *Nisbet's Golf Year Book*.

The thirteen new bunkers proved to be the most controversial of the changes. Prominent among their critics were professional players who thought the bunkers 'far too numerous', 'badly placed' and 'unfair'. Willie Anderson, the winner of two of the previous three US Opens, was among those who were displeased:

In my opinion they have ruined St Andrews. The addition of twenty-seven (sic) new traps has made it so now that from the tee it is only possible to 'shoot' on the line on two of

the eighteen holes.... The traps are all over and it is next to impossible for a player to keep out of trouble, a drive a few yards off the intended line being penalized a deal worse than a bad pull or slice.³

Alex Smith, originally from nearby Carnoustie, but then living in America had a similar reaction:

Bunkers have been added in bunches [at St Andrews] recently, all in the line of the cups. This makes many trick holes and renders it nearly impossible to get to the holes, which seem to be in impossible places, on the second shot.⁴

The unhappiness over the new bunkers was captured by three cartoons that appeared in *Golf Illustrated* soon after the 1905 Open (shown right). In the first cartoon two rows of pot bunkers extend into the distance while some of the era's most famous professionals struggle in vain to extricate themselves. Contemporary readers would have spotted JH Taylor, Harry Vardon, Sandy Herd, James Braid and others flaying away in the new 'spittoons'.

In a second cartoon an easily recognizable Taylor is shown trying to negotiate a maze of deep bunkers. Taylor's playing companion would have been less recognizable. He is smiling and seems quite pleased by Taylor's predicament. A golf bag bearing the initials 'J. L. L.' gives the first clue about his identity. More hints are provided by the text in the upper right corner of the cartoon, which reads: 'Thinking Golf (As Recommended by a Notable Amateur) Pitch and Run'.

A final cartoon pulls no punches. John L Low is quoted in the caption: 'Thinking golf is what the golfer wants, the fairness of the plane (sic) [playing?] field is hardly attractive.' While his caddy sits on a golf bag that again bears the initials 'J. L. L.', Low is depicted measuring his next shot across a sea of bunkers as another caddy points to a narrow spit of turf.

Garden Smith, Editor of *Golf Illustrated*, also saw Low's hand in the 1905 Old Course changes. Looking back at the controversy in 'The Hazards of St Andrews', Smith wrote:

The doctrine of what may be called 'the narrow way and the open, but straight gate,' for which Mr. John Low is mainly responsible, has received the widest acceptance, and may now be held to have superseded the old doctrine of the obstacle hazard which the crooked and straight alike had to surmount before winning the green. The obstacle hazard is

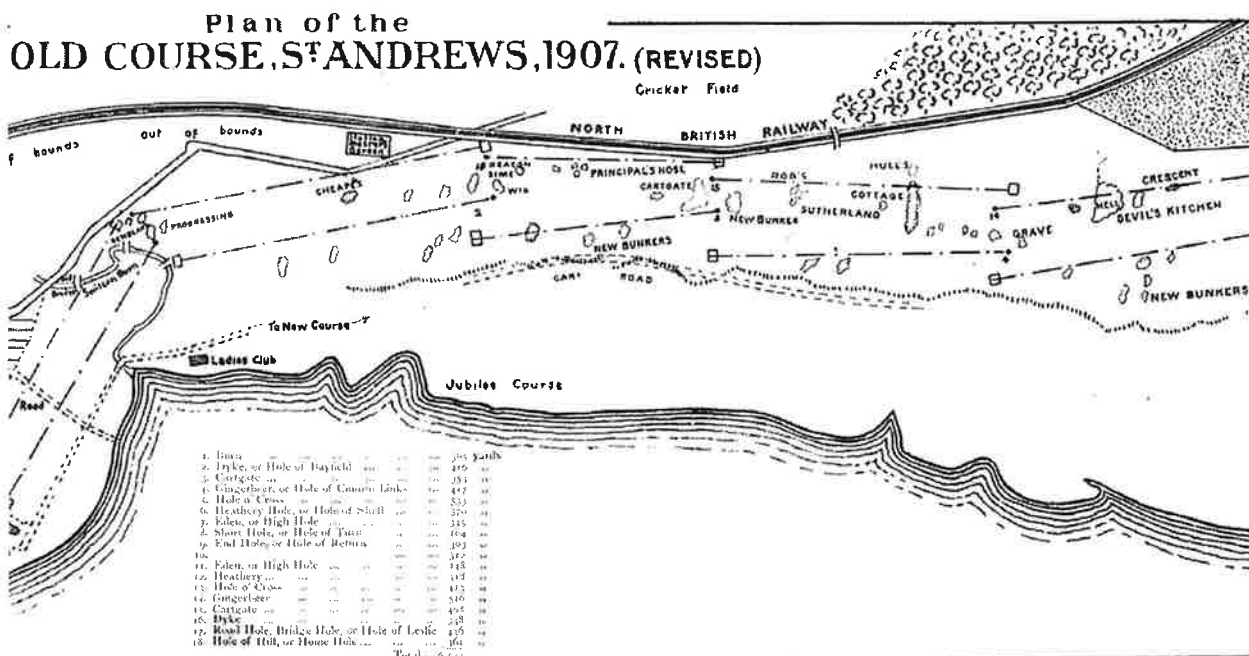
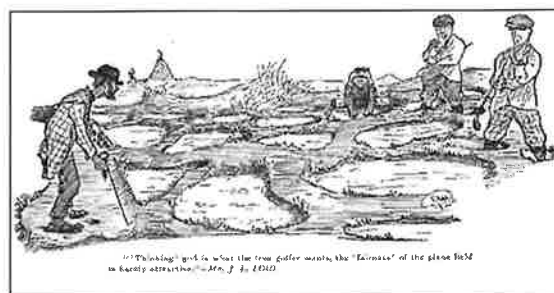
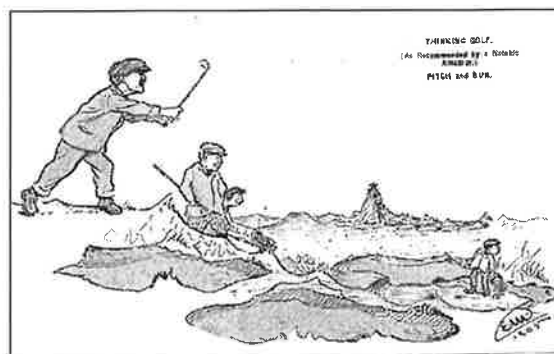
now reserved for those who fail to keep the straight or crooked, but always narrow, path mapped out by the authorities as correct line to the hole. ... But it is possible to think that at St. Andrews the new theories have not yet been rigidly applied or carried to their logical conclusion.⁵

Smith thought that the application of Low's 'new theories' at St Andrews had gone badly awry.⁶ In the event, Smith's criticisms of the new bunkers were pointed:

We submit that unless all shots struck off the true line to the hole are punished proportionately to their askewness, a course laid out on the new theory fails of perfection according to the number of chances it affords the crooked [shot] to go unscathed. And it must be admitted that St Andrews affords too many such chances, as the play in the recent championship frequently demonstrated. The *leading* hazards, that is those that are supposed to limit the narrow and true line to the hole, are small in size and very retentive. It therefore repeatedly happens that a shot which is all but perfect is trapped, with the certain loss of at least one stroke, while the opponent, who has gone ten yards wider, goes scot free, and even if he can't reach the green, he is close to it in two, while the bunkered player has to play the odd or more from practically the same distance. The hazards which delimit the course should be continuous if the system is to be logical, so that all crooked shots should be equally punished, and the more crooked ones would, in addition, lose the distance by which they have erred from the straight line.

Not all commentary was negative. Henry Leach approved of the new bunkers, and he too saw Low's influence:

Of late years people have been railing against the bunkers on the [Old Course], and the increase thereof; but after all it is to be remembered that the placing of the majority of these bunkers has been the result of the aggregate of thought of some of the best golfers in the world for a period of years, and they must be considered in the spirit that Mr. John Low suggests, that no bunker can really be unfair.⁷



Low's map from the 1907 edition of Nisbet. In addition to those marked, the three bunkers behind the third tee were also new

A new theory of golf architecture

That so many people believed Low should be held to account for the changes at St Andrews would seem odd at first. While Low had been advocating the addition of new 'side bunkers' to the course for several years,⁸ he was not a member of the R&A Green Committee at the relevant times. Nor did he serve on the special committee that had recommended course changes during the run-up to the Open that year. Low was chairman of the powerful R&A Rules Committee, but course alterations were not under its jurisdiction. Certainly Low knew many of the men officially charged with making the changes, but there is no record of any special pleading by Low. Yet virtually everyone on the scene seemed to believe that the changes to the Old Course should be laid at Low's feet.

If he had no official role in the alterations, to be nonetheless the lightning rod for so much criticism (and some praise) suggests the reach of Low's architectural ideas at the time. That reach stemmed partly from his prominence within British golfing circles and partly from his reputation as a fine amateur player. But it stemmed mostly from Low's writings on golf and golf architecture. During the first decade of the 1900s Low wrote prolifically. His essays appeared regularly in *The Athletic News*, *Golf Illustrated* and other periodicals, including *The Pall Mall Gazette*, a literary and political journal that counted George Bernard Shaw, Robert Louis Stevenson, Anthony Trollope and Oscar Wilde among its contributors. It was a mark of golf's arrival and of Low's own stature in the game that he was asked to write for the *Gazette*. Low's 1903 book *Concerning Golf* and its remarkable chapter on golf architecture were based on pieces that had first appeared in these periodicals.⁹ From 1905 to 1912 Low also edited *Nisbet's Golf Year Book*, an annual survey of golf courses in Britain. Low enlisted Horace Hutchinson, Harry Colt, ACM Croome, CH Alison and others to write course commentaries. Low also conducted plebiscites in *Nisbet's* on favourite British courses, with the Old Course topping the ballot by wide margins each year.

Low used his many bully pulpits to urge, among other things, a rethinking of the fundamentals of golf architecture. The then dominant approach to golf design, an approach called in the first part of this essay the 'Normal View',¹⁰ placed great emphasis on 'equity' in golf design, understood to mean that the severity of a hazard should always correspond with the degree of error in the missed shot it is intended to punish; hazards should inflict their pain proportionally. Low's had very different views about the function of hazards, but his objections to the Normal View were not just academic ones. At issue was the practical matter of designing and building the hundreds of new inland courses needed to meet the game's exploding popularity. If, as Low urged, these new courses should reject the hoary Normal View, what were the new principles that Low favored and, as importantly, how were these new ideas to be applied on the ground? The first answers to those questions came in 1901 with the changes Low and Stuart Paton made at Woking Golf Club, changes that Bernard Darwin, Alister MacKenzie and others

saw as revolutionary. Tom Simpson noted about the events at Woking: 'Thanks to [Low's and Paton's] guidance, Woking has exerted a considerable and beneficial influence on golf architecture, and has done much to educate public opinion upon the fundamental principles underlying golf-course design.'

Low's 'considerable and beneficial influence' extended not just to the changes made to the Old Course in 1905, but also to a group of men who would set golf architecture in a new direction. Harry Colt, Herbert Fowler, Tom Simpson, ACM Croome, Alister MacKenzie, CK Hutchison, CH Alison and JF Abercromby represented a different breed of golf course designer.¹¹ Unlike the professional players that had theretofore dominated the discipline, these men had taken up golf as an avocation and played as amateurs their entire lives; they came from middle class (or in some cases aristocratic) backgrounds; they attended university or military colleges or apprenticed with financial firms in the City. For reasons of both class and education, their approach to golf architecture reflected a very different relationship with the game. They went on to end the hegemony over the business of golf design once enjoyed by professional players. By 1906 Garden Smith was able to write that Low's 'new theories' had won the day, 'superseding' older approaches to golf architecture. The courses designed by Low's friends and cohorts remain among the best in the world. Indeed, they ushered in what we call today golf architecture's Golden Age.¹²

A wide range of contributions to the game

John Laing Low was born in Perthshire in 1869 to a family that had made its fortune in the jute business. He learned the game as a boy playing with his uncles at nearby Carnoustie and the Old Course. Low attended Clare College, Cambridge, inheriting the golf team captaincy from his friend Harry Colt. Low frequently noted that while at Cambridge he never lost a match to an Oxonian. He went on to a distinguished, if short, tournament career, finishing second in the 1901 British Amateur and losing twice in the semi-finals in 1897 and 1898 to Harold Hilton in heart-breaking matches that went to extra holes. He won the Jubilee Vase, the Calcutta Cup and the George Glennie Medal. It was during these years that Low became friends with Freddie Tait. At the height of his golfing powers Tait was killed in the Boer War, an event that inspired Low in 1900 to write *F.G. Tait: A Record*, the first book length biography of a golfer. *Tait* became one of the most popular golf books of the era.

With his friend 'Crumbo' Croome, Low founded the Oxford and Cambridge Golfing Society in 1898. The Society's annual tournament held each winter at Rye quickly became an amateur event of note. The President's Putter awarded to the tournament winner had once been Low's own. The signal event in the Society's early history was a Society team's 1903 tour of America to play a series of matches in Boston, New York, Chicago and Philadelphia. Low captained the Society team that routed the Americans, winning eleven of the twelve team matches, and generating along the way tremendous goodwill for the game. Of note is the remarkable number of participants then or soon

to be involved with golf architecture. In addition to Low, the Society team included CH Alison, an Oxonian who later partnered with Harry Colt (another Society member) to form one of the leading British golf design firms during the Golden Age. The Society's local opponents comprised a virtual Who's Who of early golf architecture in America. Herbert Leeds, Charles Blair MacDonald, Walter Travis, Max Behr, AW Tillinghast, Devereux Emmet, HJ Whigham, and H Chandler Egan all played against the Society team in one city or another. With concern then peaking that the Haskell was rendering many golf courses obsolete, it's hard to imagine that Low's 'new theories' weren't a frequent topic of discussion and debate.

Concerning Golf, Low's second and last book, appeared soon after the Society team's triumphant return to England. Low was skeptical about the utility of teaching the golf swing. His book focused instead on the causes of certain kinds of shots. Knowing, for example, that a slice is the result of a ball spinning clockwise should lead a player to adjust his swing, but what those changes might be Low left to the golfer. But it was the book's more philosophical passages, including the chapter on golf architecture titled 'The Links', that made *Concerning Golf* one of Bernard Darwin's three favourite golf books.¹³ As the chronicler of the 'Heathland Miracle' Darwin had a deep appreciation of both Low's architectural ideas and his prominent role in the transformation in golf design that occurred on courses west of London during the first decade of the last century. Among the book's many virtues, special note must be taken of its opening sentence, surely the best of any golf book:

Golf is the peculiar game of a peculiar people: its trend is onward in parallel lines; it is the pastime of the Scots.

The first uniform rules of the game

It was as the first chairman of the R&A Rules of Golf Committee that Low is probably best known today. At the time the committee was formed in 1897 golf was played under a confusing welter of local rules. The Old Course was played under St Andrews rules, Prestwick under Prestwick rules and so forth. The first charge of Low's new committee was to draft uniform rules that applied to all golfers wherever they played in Britain. The rules promulgated by Low and his committee superseded conflicting local rules on lost balls, unplayable lies, out of bounds and casual water. Rules controversies continued to erupt during Low's tenure. Battles over amateur standing, the stymie and limitations on balls and clubs (Walter Travis' center-shafted Schenectady putter set off a particularly nasty debate) all became very heated. At the epicenter of them all was John Low.

The single most important rules dispute that his committee faced arose early in Low's tenure. The introduction of the Haskell ball in 1901 triggered a debate that offered little room for compromise. Horace Hutchinson, among others, thought the ball a godsend for the average player and opposed banning it. Low feared the ball would diminish the skills required to play the game and render hundreds of golf courses obsolete in the bargain. His account of his first encounter with the Haskell

captures both Low's concerns and his sense of humor:

Mr. Maitland teed [the Haskell] up again with a view to driving back to the last hole [at St Andrews], but unfortunately this ultimate shot was a high slicey one, and the ball pitched on the steps of one of the houses between the Marine Hotel and Tom Morris's shop. It bounded in the air, as far as we could see, a great height, but the day was foggy, and we lost sight of it against the grey stone houses. We searched for that ball with much care and labour, but no sight of it was vouchsafed to us; nor as far as I know, has it been found to this day. Perhaps it rests on one of the house tops, perhaps it bounded over the roofs into some neighbouring street; it may still be bounding over the roofs into some neighbouring street; it may be still bounding along the east coast of Fife.

Low argued that unless something was done to halt the ball's use, courses would soon be lengthened to accommodate it, thus making it the *de facto* official ball of the game. Low, however, lost the final vote of the rules committee¹⁴ and his bitterness about the decision lingered for many years. He never wavered in his conviction that the new ball had done real harm and that failing to outlaw it had been a spineless concession to popular opinion and the ball manufacturers.¹⁵

After several years of declining health Low died at *Dunkeld*, his home at Woking, in January, 1929, at the relatively young age of 59. His contributions to the game during the pivotal first two decades of the last century are hard to overstate. It would be an exaggeration, but perhaps not a great one, to say that no single



Low pictured in 1893 as the Cambridge team Captain

person was more responsible for the game as we know it today. Low's pioneering contributions to golf architecture, to the rules, to international team competitions on which the Walker Cup and Ryder Cup matches were later modeled, to the founding of the Society, and to the regulation of balls and equipment, were all important and enduring contributions without which golf might be a different game today.

The controversy over new bunkers on the Old Course

Low came to the defense of the Old Course's new bunkers in an essay entitled 'St Andrews Hazards Old and New'.¹⁶ Low began the essay by taking on Taylor's 'scientific' theory of hazard placement:

Although many books have been written about golf during the past twenty years, J. H. Taylor's volume, published in 1902, was the first to take into consideration the scientific placing of hazards. A few months later the present writer published a book in which he advocated a rather different theory of hazards ... ; but [my] book was in no way an answer to or an attack on the former work, for it had been written, and indeed most of it published, in article form before the appearance of Taylor's interesting criticism. 'Taylor advocates strongly that 'due care should be exercised in seeing that each hole is placed well clear of obstacles, and that hazards should only be calculated to catch and punish a player who after playing a bad or faulty stroke deserves to meet such fate'.

Low's quarrel with Taylor wasn't just about who had published first. His quarrel was with Taylor's views about the function of hazards, views that Low believed to be at the root of the criticisms of the 1905 Old Course changes. Critics thought that the new bunkers had been placed too closely to the preferred lines of play, catching good shots that did not 'deserve to meet such fate'. Equally objectionable was that too many bad shots, shots that Taylor believed fully deserved 'to meet such fate', went unscathed. The new bunkers were 'unfair' because, given their location and severity, they failed to dole out punishment in a way that corresponded with the quality of the shot they ensnared. In short, the new bunkers violated one of the axioms of the Normal View.

But whether or not hazards doled out 'just desserts' was for Low the wrong question. Low set out his very different views in 'Hazards Old and New'. In so doing Low also made the case for the new bunkers on the Old Course:

It is this *nearness of hazards to the perfect line of play* [Low's emphasis] which seems to me to make St Andrews so fine a test of the game. For in every good game the player must be hustled before we can find out his quality. ... [I]t is only when the hazards come 'close in' that we can recognize the great player.

Most important was orienting hazards along the 'perfect line of play':

... The true hazard should draw play towards it, should invite the golfer to come as near he dare to the fire without burning his fingers. The man who can afford to take risks is the man who should gain the advantage. It is a coarse kind of hazard that only demands of the player that he should send his ball

over it anywhere up in the air, in almost any direction. Yet how many such bunkers exist on modern courses, and how few of the finer side hazards, which must be coquetted with and passed within an eye-glance if perfect play is to be made? ... Such a condition of affairs obtains at St Andrews and the complaints that are commonly made about unfair and unseen hazards really arise from a lack of appreciation of the difficulties of the course. A player fires on the line to the hole and slightly heels his shot, when he gets to his ball he finds it in a little round bunker and is annoyed. Now if you play on the bee-line to a hole at St Andrews and slice you are nearly always in a bunker, because you are running the line 'very fine'. But there is plenty of room – too much I would say – on the left; and it is only because you have dared to go too close to the *shortest* route that you have been trapped.

The new pots did indeed make the course more difficult for good players like Taylor. But affecting good players was the point. The bunkers were meant to 'bustle' those taking aggressive lines to the hole, singling out for punishment shots played along the 'bee-line' that were 'not quite good enough'. The new bunkers were to 'find out the quality' of such players. For less aggressive or weaker players, however, the course need not be more difficult. Such players were afforded, as Low notes, 'plenty of room' in which to avoid the new hazards, though they would be left with more difficult follow-on shots. Players of all skill levels were presented with a range of playing choices, each involving different possible lines to the hole and different degrees of difficulty. Golf should be seen as a 'contest of risks' in which the risks are defined by hazards that might be engaged or not, depending on a player's golfing skills and scoring ambitions.

For Low, the work of hazards was best seen as setting the terms of a golfing wager. Hazards should be arrayed so as to define a golfing bet in which the player wagers that his golfing skills are up to the scoring returns he seeks. Rather than simply punishing bad play, hazards set the price of a player's lost gamble. They mark when a player's execution of a shot fails to cover his golfing ambitions. As Tom Simpson put it, a well-designed hole should invoke 'the [same] qualities found in the man who "lives by his wits", who "sails near the wind" in the conduct of his business'. Good holes present 'as much opportunity for mental agility as ... for physical effort'. Which is what Low meant by 'thinking golf'. Well-placed hazards demand not just well-executed shots, but also and as importantly well-conceived shots.

Seeing hazards in that way had important implications for their placement. To create the golfing wagers sought, Low wanted fairway bunkers to be pulled in much closer to the 'bee-line', as had been done with the new bunkers on the Old Course. For the same reason greenside bunkers needed to be placed much closer to putting surfaces, as had been done at Woking with the controversial 'Johnnie Low' greenside bunker on the Seventeenth. Unlike hazards on older inland courses, hazards were to be placed more 'tightly' (Low's term) against the preferred line of play. Such placements of bunkers and other hazards are so commonplace today that they go without notice. But *circa* 1905 such ideas represented a striking and quite revolutionary change in how inland courses looked and played.

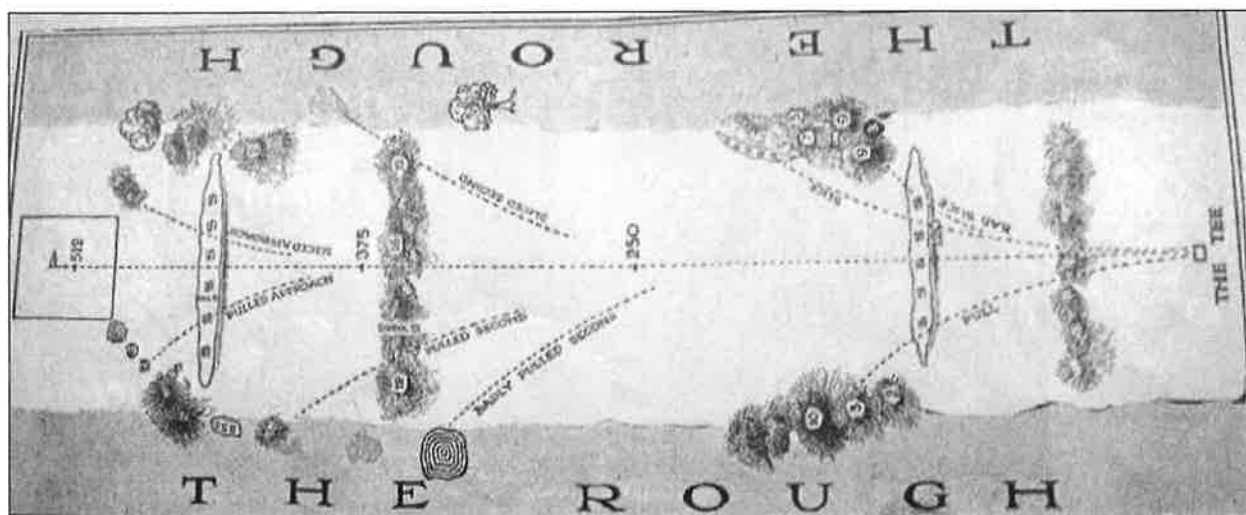
Most of Low's contemporaries would have understood, in ways not well appreciated today, that the crux of Low's differences with Taylor and other critics of the Old Course changes was the weight to be given to equitable concerns in golf architecture. A good hazard for Taylor was one whose severity corresponded with 'the degree of the error' of the shots it caught. Such hazards Taylor believed to be 'fair', his highest encomium. A corollary notion was that no shot should ever be punished more harshly than a worse shot. Looking back in 1910 over the dramatic changes that swept over golf architecture during the decade, Taylor was displeased that his favored equitable tenets seemed to be losing their sway:

After a while the pots even made their appearance in the fairway, But generally placed in such a position that the worst of bad shots was quite safe, while the good drive or second shot invariably came to rest comfortably tucked up right under the bank.

Taylor resisted the growing popularity of 'thinking golf'. His 1910 design for a par 5 at Royal Mid-Surrey, for example, was intended as both his rebuttal of the architectural ideas then gaining wide acceptance and as a demonstration of how his own, very different ideas might be implemented.

shots, considered the worst fizzle and, therefore, meriting the most severe penalty. Bunkers set well away from the centerline are provided for off-line shots deserving less harsh punishments. At the green the difficulty of bunkers increases as their distance from the green increases, thus punishing wider misses more severely than closer misses. The hole's centerline is quite spacious, leaving unaffected a wide range of 'nearly good' shots. All with the result that punishments will be proportional to the degree of missed shots. Taylor's hole is a little equitable universe in which all possible playing errors are matched with their appropriate equitable outcomes.

The point of Low's 'thinking golf' was to reverse that architectural result. Indeed, the paradox of Taylor's hole can be thought of as the problem that the theory of strategic golf architecture was invented to solve. But if that theory was born in the act of rejecting 'sporting equity' as a design fundamental, its birthing pains have been largely forgotten. They were, however, very much on the minds of architects and commentators in Britain during the first decade of the twentieth century. It was



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one of Low's most important architectural insights to point out that the Normal View's emphasis on equity and proportionality was at the root of the widespread dissatisfaction with inland golf courses at the turn of the last century. Architects such as Tom Simpson, Harry Colt and Alister MacKenzie and commentators such as Bernard Darwin and Henry Leach also understood the significance of the issue and discussed it often. 'Crumbo' Croome's expressed concerns that were typical:

As a general rule arguments [about the location of hazards] based upon equity should be ruled out from a discussion of golfing problems. The admission of them has been the cause of many errors in course-construction. Bunkers, for example, which have been made solely to discriminate fairly between shots of all kinds, are the most futile of created things. A bunker is good or bad according as it does or does not add interest to the play of a hole. The very best bunkers, such as the pots bang on the direct line to the Long Hole out at St. Andrews, very rarely trap anything but a clean hit ball; the top or the schlafl does not reach them. This is manifestly unfair, but it adds immense interest and infinite variety to the play of the hole.

Though the vocabulary has changed over the decades since, debates about the 'fairness' of golf courses are still very much with us. Nor is there any reason to think such debates will end soon. But anyone wanting to better understand the origins of that debate and the important architectural issues lurking just beneath its surface would do well to revisit the discussions stirred up by the 1905 changes to the Old Course.

The importance of the history of the Old Course

More than half of Low's essay 'Hazards Old and New' is taken up with hole-by-hole accounts of the evolution of the Old Course since 1848.¹⁷ Retelling that history was important to his defense of the 1905 changes because Low wanted them to be seen as a return to the playing characteristics of an older, largely forgotten Old Course. Low was reminding the critics of the new bunkers of how that older course once played in what Low considered to be its better days. The new bunkers were installed not because they represented some new, more clever design idea, but rather because they were restorative of older playing values. Specifically, in the case of new bunkers, Low noted that they substituted for the lost whins that had once pressed tightly against the bee-line in the same locations.

But Low's recourse to the history of the Old Course was not just nostalgia for an Old Course of yesteryear.¹⁸ The point of the new bunkers wasn't to do a restoration for the sake of restoration. Rather Low's appeal to accounts of the course in earlier times was to ground his theory of the function of hazards in the playing values of the most historic and beloved of all courses. The ultimate justification for the new bunkers was that they exemplified design principles that had proven themselves over time to be the best. Those principles were not to be derived from abstract, normative concepts like 'equity' or 'fairness', but rather from ideas that were *sui generis* to the game to be found in the great links courses. It turns out that Low's 'new theory', the theory that lay behind the 1905 changes made to the Old

Course and that went on to influence a larger revolution in golf architecture, was really not new at all. In fact it was as old as links golf itself.

Designing for challenge and enjoyment

The ascendancy of 'thinking golf' brought with it changes not just to golf courses but also to how architects practised their discipline. Rather than focusing on building venues that emphasised 'fair' competitive outcomes, the focus shifted to building courses that would heighten the pleasures of playing the game. As Low wrote:

The pity of golf today is that men play entirely to win and are afraid that they may be defrauded by some inequality of penalty from gaining the end of their desire. It would be happier for golf if we would only remember that the true good is in the playing, not in the winning.

The older emphasis on hazards that dispensed 'just desserts' gave way to different goals. The quality of the playing process itself came to matter more. The point of Low's centerline bunker on the fourth hole at Woking, for example, was to generate the drama inherent in forcing a player to choose among several possible playing strategies – do I risk the out of bounds on the right, play safe to the left or lay back short? Whether the hole yielded 'fair' results (whatever that might mean in the context) was largely irrelevant. Differently put, the architect had ceased to be responsible for playing outcomes. That responsibility had shifted to the player.

Such new design goals brought unprecedented design freedom. If the point was to stimulate interesting and varied playing choices, something that might be accomplished in a virtually unlimited number of ways, then the lid came off the type, shape and size of hazards that might do useful work. Existing landforms with their natural irregularities and unpredictability, water, trees and so forth, almost anything (natural or otherwise) entered the architect's toolkit. More naturalistic courses were built not just because they were more attractive, but also because using existing natural terrains was not foreclosed by concerns about 'sporting equity'. But it wasn't just a matter of having more and different things in the designer's toolkit. It also became possible to achieve more architecturally with less. A single, well-placed bunker might set up strategic quandaries that affected shot-making from the tee forward. The small bunker that Low built into the face of the third green at Woking is the hole's only hazard, but it influences every shot on the hole. How you place your drive on a generous, sloped fairway determines how you negotiate the deep pot fronting the green. Tom Simpson called it the prototype of a 'governing bunker', a type he thought to be among the best hazards because of their extraordinary strategic reach.¹⁹

The new design freedom also brought unprecedented prestige to practitioners. Once released from the rigid formulae of the Normal View, the quality of a golf course depended as never before on the skill and imagination of the individual architect. The unique contributions of a designer became much more determinative of the quality of the final product. Who a golf

course's architect was mattered as never before, in large part because architects were given the creative space to develop their own distinctive styles. As their styles became better known, architectural reputations were built. For the first time men might become famous (and in some cases wealthy) solely for their work as golf architects.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the acceptance of Low's 'new theory' meant that the goals of the golf architect were ratcheted higher. If inland courses were to be designed using the same principles found on the great links courses – principles that Low was the first to articulate in a systematic way – there was no *a priori* reason to think that inland courses must always be second best. It wasn't just a matter of building more naturalistic, attractive inland layouts, though that was part of it. It was also and most critically about understanding how hazards functioned on the best links holes and applying lessons learned to courses in different physical settings. There were suddenly reasons to think that new inland courses might aspire to be as good as any course anywhere. And, of course, with such higher aspirations for inland golf courses came higher expectations for their architects.

Conclusions

Too often the history of golf course architecture is written as if architects operated outside of history. The evolution of golf architecture, however, is not a sequence of disembodied ideas and discoveries. Rather the best ideas tended to emerge as solutions to problems of a particular era. That is what was going on when John Low proposed a very different way of thinking about golf architecture *circa* 1900. He was unhappy with inland golf courses and believed there was a better way to build them. The solutions he proposed were appreciated immediately by some. Others believed Low's solutions to be quite wrong-headed. Sides were taken and debates, albeit polite ones, ensued. All of which might be no more than a minor historical footnote except for the fact that those who embraced Low's views not only went on to design some of the greatest golf courses ever built, they also set the foundations for what is called today 'strategic golf architecture', an approach to golf design that still dominates the discipline. Which is why revisiting Low is worth the candle. He was a revolutionary figure whose pivotal contributions to golf architecture deserve to be better understood and appreciated.

Notes

1. See *Golf Illustrated*, various issues for the months of October and November, 1904.
2. MacPherson, Scott, *St Andrews – The Evolution of the Old Course*, Hazard Press, 2007. MacPherson provides a detailed account of changes to the Old Course over its long history. Highly recommended.
3. *Golf*, 'The Open Championship of Great Britain', July, 1905, p. 22.
4. *Ibid*.
5. *Golf Illustrated*, 'The St. Andrews Hazards', August, 1906.
6. The reasons Smith gave, however, suggest that he misunderstood Low's 'new theory'. The telltale was Smith's objection that the new bunkers did not punish shots 'proportionately', something that was not an important factor in Low's 'new theory', as will be discussed below.
7. Leach, Henry, *The Spirit of the Links*, Methuen, 1907.
8. See Low, John, *Concerning Golf*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1903, p17, where Low says that twenty new side bunkers should be added to the Old Course. He notes that Andrew Kirkaldy thought even more were needed.
9. Part of Low's obscurity today is due to the fact that so much of what he wrote about golf remains buried in these and other defunct periodicals. Even reprints of his book *Concerning Golf* are difficult to find and, when found, tend to be very pricey.
10. Crosby, Robert, *Through the Green*, 'John Low, Woking and Modern Golf Architecture', September, 2009, pp. 34–39
11. Writing in April, 1913 in the *US Golf Illustrated* about his critics, Colt noted that, 'There are some opinions that I value very greatly, and if, for instance, my old friend, John L. Low, were to criticize my work unfavorably, I should feel there must be something wrong ...'
12. Willie Park, Jr is hard to place. Simpson, however, would have put him in the professionals' camp, noting that, 'The result of [my] studies convinced me that the professional golfers who designed courses during this ill-fated period were misinterpreting the true nature and intention of a golf course. Willie Park, junior, it is true, was a redeeming example amongst the professionals in showing any aptitude for the work. But even he, like most of his brethren up to the present day, persisted in regarding the presence of a bunker as serving the one and only purpose of catching a bad shot.' A view that was for both Simpson and Low something of a cardinal architectural sin.
13. Darwin, Bernard, 'Reading in War-Time', *The Times*, September 23, 1939.
14. Among those on the committee who voted against Low were his friends Horace Hutchinson, Harry Colt, Leslie Balfour-Melville, Charles Hutchings and HSC Everard.
15. Low's enduring unhappiness with the Haskell was shared by Max Behr in the US. Behr too thought that the Haskell had done real harm to the game and actively advocated for its rollback into the late 1930s.
16. *Nisbet's Golf Year Book*, John Low, ed., Hodder & Stoughton, 1907, pp. 25–32. To be noted is that several paragraphs in the essay appear to have been lifted almost *verbatim* from Low's book *Concerning Golf*.
17. Low retells the evolution of course changes using extensive excerpts from HB Farnie's *Golfers' Manual*, (pub. 1857), and James Balfour's *Reminiscences of Golf of St Andrews Links*, (pub. 1887).
18. Hutchinson's defense of the bunkers was that, yes, they made the course harder, but that was as it should be because in the old days when whins were more prolific the course was indeed harder. Hutchinson's defense, however, was just the starting point for Low's defense. Low agreed with Hutchinson that the bunkers recovered older playing values, but they weren't to be justified only because they restored the difficulty of the course *dantan*. Low went on to make the more interesting point that what was best about the older versions of the Old Course was the way in which it played harder. That is, the lesson to be gleaned from the history of the Old Course wasn't simply that it had more hazards that narrowed playing corridors. The lesson was the manner in which those hazards operated on players. 19. By contrast, the same 'pot' would have been condemned by the Normal View as unfair. It severely penalizes shots that barely miss the green, while leaving much worse shots with easier recoveries.