



**Since 1988 Jonathan Gaunt has been designing golf courses, not only in the UK but also in Turkey, Denmark, Spain and the burgeoning Czech Republic. To date his 'stamp' is on over thirty courses and he is in the process of designing further courses to be built between now and 2010.**

**In addition, Jonathan has been involved in advising well over one hundred existing clubs throughout the UK and continental Europe on reconstruction, restoration and renovation projects. So, how does the mind of a course designer work?**

**Jonathan takes up the story.**

# CREATING *future classics*

**I**n 1987 I was employed as contracts manager for Brian Pierson Contractors Ltd., working firstly on the reconstruction of the Jubilee Course at St Andrews then bringing the 9-hole short course back into play at St George's Hill. This was excellent grounding for my career. In spring 1988 I answered an advert in a trade journal for a job entitled 'Contracts Manager/Designer' being offered by Golf Landscapes Ltd, based in Brentwood, Essex. On the second day I was working for them I was on site planning my first design (age 24), the Chesfield Downs Family Golf Centre in Hertfordshire, then called Jack O'Legs Golf Centre. It was a 6200 metres 18-

hole course and a 1000 metres 9-hole academy course.

There are no 'gimmicks', 'signature holes' or 'trade marks' with my golf course design style. I don't do 'traditional British' design, or any other label, for that matter - to me that's all very false. I have a design style that evolves and develops as I design (by hand before it is scanned and digitised on to computer). Each design is bespoke, developed for each unique site situation.

I don't have pre-set templates on the computer and I don't make promises to the client that he'll get 'something like Augusta or St Andrews'. I let the site dictate the design, but I allow my own

specific ideas as to what good golf design should be to shape the outcome. I suppose I am a perfectionist and I won't accept second best.

I strive to create features on a golf course that look natural to the eye, something that may have been created by thousands of years of wind and rain and ice and snow. A golf course that I am happy with in design terms is a landscape that doesn't jar the eye, but still offers a great golfing and sporting challenge. I'd admit that the contours I design do have smooth flowing lines - possibly influenced by life-drawing art classes at school. Who knows? I like to see the shadows on subtle contours on a



*“It was pretty daunting getting the committee and members to accept that what I was proposing would improve and revitalise their course”*

major (27 holes) project I was responsible for in 1994 and I'd say it is still one of my best designs. I'm delighted that the client asked me back 11 years later to design a further 14 holes for him (we are making some changes to the 3rd nine to make 36 holes in total), such has been the exceptionally high demand for the golf course.

The most enjoyable aspect of my work is seeing the drawings become reality. It is so satisfying to see a design that was conceived following a long process of surveys, assessment, analysis, negotiation, modification and fine-tuning become a three dimensional flowing landform - pure creation - more than just 'satisfying' or 'enjoyable'.

WHEN I am asked to change the design on another architect's course the thing I have to do is regard that as an honour to have been asked, especially if the course is a 'classic'. I just missed out on some work at Sunningdale, which I was a bit disappointed about because I'd previously done the restoration of all the bunkers at nearby Worpleston Golf Club and a complete reconstruction of the bunkers, plus other works, at West Hill Golf Club, also in Surrey.

If the course is not a classic, I relish the opportunity to make improvements for the long-term benefit of the course and members. We are currently undertaking a major upgrade of Westerwood Golf Club in Cumbernauld, my first major project in Scotland. The Westerwood course was opened in the late 1980's and heralded as a classic design by Dave Thomas and Seve Ballesteros. Indeed, it has one of the most spectacular par 3 holes in golf - set in a deep quarry. However, over the years (and due to a succession of owners) it has suffered neglect. I am currently designing a new layout with 5 new holes on the 18-hole course, a state-of-the-art

green or a bunker surround. Also, I find it a major challenge to create a finished surface that controls the flow of water (into a lake or stream, for example), away from the main playing areas. This has a big influence on how I design a golf course.

I have played golf since I was seven years old and, as a teenager, reached county level playing for Yorkshire. I have maintained a Category 1 handicap now for almost thirty years. This gives me a great starting point for any golf course design. Also, I have worked on golf courses designed by some of the best golf course architects, including Harry S Colt, Alister MacKenzie, Tom Simpson,

Herbert Fowler, and Philip MacKenzie Ross. You cannot fail to be influenced by these masters. You may see some of their ideas in my design, but brought up to date. I also have a great deal of respect for the work of more contemporary architects such as Donald Steel, Robert Trent Jones, and Martin Hawtree along with pro-golfer/designers such as Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Ben Crenshaw.

If I was asked what my favourite project has been to date I would have to say they all are, each for different reasons. If I say one is the best I'm only going to upset other clients. However, one does stand out - Ramside Hall Hotel in Durham, because this was the first

# *“It is not an individual hole that makes a golf course but all eighteen”*

golf academy and new 9-hole executive course. We began construction in April 2007.

I also enjoy reconstruction projects on existing courses that are not ‘classically’ designed, because the client will, invariably, give me licence to be a bit more comprehensive in design terms, so I can show them just what can be made of it.

WHEN it comes to working outside of the UK I find very little difference in the actual design process, but the bureaucracy in some countries is more complicated. Thankfully, we have had few problems achieving permits and consents for our overseas projects. In arid climates the big issue is water sourcing and supply, which is now becoming just as big a problem in UK.

In Spain, when I was working at La Zagaleta (originally a G&M Ltd project) we had a challenging time convincing the local Marbella environmental authorities that the design we were proposing was respectful of the protected river valleys (arroyos). The masterplan we created for the new Los Barrancos course was one of the most complicated we have worked on mainly because of the mountainous scenery - with numerous updates and revisions to get to a point of agreement between the client and the authorities.

I do think that UK planning laws do make the cost of getting permission for a golf course prohibitive, though. Nowadays you have to provide so much detail and documentation that the golf course has to be virtually

designed before making the planning application. This is often an unreasonably big risk for any investor or developer.

TECHNOLOGY in golf equipment has had a major bearing on how new courses are designed and existing ones modified. We are now designing golf courses that are longer than any we have previously designed. But we need to be aware that our clients still aim to attract as wide a range of clientele as possible, in order to make their project a commercial success. In general, we aim to design new 18-hole courses between 6200 and 6600 metres in length. I certainly consider this to be acceptable. Let’s say that about 5% of golfers have the ability to hit drives 250 metres or more. As they are in minority, although we need to consider their abilities and capabilities, we still don’t need to prioritise them. We design golf courses with numerous teeing platforms per hole (4, 5 or 6 depending upon hole length, location, steepness of slope, prevailing wind, etc.) and this provides multiple flexibility to accommodate all levels of golfer. This doesn’t counteract advances in golf club technology, but it takes it into account.

I am also of the opinion that most courses that decide to embark on hole-lengthening schemes do not necessarily need to do so. Many courses, in the UK in particular, are badly bunkered. By this I mean that fairway bunkers no longer come into play because they are too near the tees, mid-point between landing area and green, or too far removed



The Par 3 11th at Castleknock



The 16th at Kaskada, Czech Republic



Approach to 8th green at Castleknock



11th green at Ramside Hall

from the green. Many courses could be dramatically improved with a re-bunkering programme and made to be much more challenging to play for all.

I don't think there are any formulas for what should, or shouldn't be, an ideal par 3, par 4 or par 5. However, there are holes I have played which I would consider to be my favourites. I prefer to play an iron approach into a par 4 hole than a wood, so I'd say a shorter par 4 would be more ideal for me - say 350 to 390 metres. I think I prefer a dog-leg to a straight hole in general terms, however, a dead straight hole which has a carry over a ravine from the tee and has a water hazard placed left or right of the green is more interesting than a dog-leg hole that is completely flat. I create

designs that are not formulaic. If the site dictates that the par 4 hole is a short 250 metre left-right dog-leg through dense woodland, then so be it. If it is a dead straight 430 metre downhill par 4 with a backdrop of the sea or mountains, then it can still work. It is not an individual hole that make a course but all 18 holes! It is difficult to get 18 classic holes on a site, but each hole must have something about it that is memorable and challenging.

Saying that, one hole I really like is the 11th at Castleknock. It is pure 'risk and reward' stuff over a lake to a subtly undulating green; all in view from the lounge of the hotel. Pure drama.

Invariably, all of my resort projects have buggy tracks designed into them

and the more prestigious the project the more emphasis is placed upon having playable and maintainable high quality surfaces year-round, so irrigation systems get more complex to deal with this.

I enjoy playing my own designs to see where there is room for improvement. I am always willing to learn something new and playing your own courses, with friends, clients and family, gives you good feedback on what might have been more appropriate. Of course, I always enjoy playing courses designed by others because I like to see what my competitors are up to or just to pick up a few ideas. Playing golf on properly designed golf courses is always a pleasure. Playing golf on courses that have been just 'built' is always depressing, and there are so many



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of them, sadly.

My favourite courses are links with a heathland character (I love the smell of heather on a hot summer day and the sound of the sea) - Southernness is a great example. I also like heathland courses with forest - like Sunningdale or West Hill.

I'm working on a site in Morocco just now, which surprised me when I first went there because it has pine trees, heather (*Erica arborea*) and enormous sandstone rock outcrops. In character it is like a classic heathland course, except it is in North Africa and it overlooks the Mediterranean! Here, I am going to retain the heathland character to create a classically styled course in a most unusual setting.

I feel that I am not just responsible for the design of the golf course but also for the enhancement, protection or adaptation of the whole site and environment within which the course is situated. As a Senior Member of the

European Institute of Golf Course Architects, and a trained landscape architect, I look to create, protect, enhance and manage the golfing environment not only during the design and construction stages, but also through growing-in and during the formative years following the opening of the course for play.

Sometimes even the best golf course designs can be spoilt by poor maintenance and lack of good management. I don't just walk away from the site on completion. Our team provide an extensive, and intensive, presentation and management service to regularly assess how the site is being managed in relation to the original design intentions. As part of our philosophy we advise clients to consider a long-term management plan which provides a structure and direction for the maintenance staff to follow over an agreed number of years.

During these meetings we assess

ongoing maintenance and advise upon ecological practices, liaising closely with the course manager, greenkeeper, agronomist and course owner/committee. The end result is a facility which ensures the long-term financial and environmental success of the investment.

As a golf course architect my aim is to be a recognised and respected name in the industry - to have left behind me a varied and high quality portfolio of work. If fortune comes with it, then that's great, but it's not my reason for being in this career. I'm in for the long haul - this is the job I decided I would do when I was 14 years old. I hope to be working as long as my dad has - well into my 70s.

**Photo credits:**

**Eric Hepworth - Ramside Hall, Wokefield Park, Linden Hall Golf Clubs**

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**Andy Taylor - Worplesdon Golf Club**

**Jiri Kapes - Kaskada Golf Club**

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