

AN INTERVIEW WITH

# JONATHAN GAUNT

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Jonathan Gaunt has over 20 years experience in golf course design and construction, and is currently working in Macedonia, Czech Republic, UK, Ireland and Morocco on a wide range of golf course projects. *EAT GOLF!* golf got in touch to find out more.

West Hill Golf Club, UK. Photo ©Kevin Murray



West Hill Golf Club, UK. Photo ©Kevin Murray

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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. For me to consider my own design style I suppose I am a perfectionist and you could say 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, 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 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 the design of a golf course.

I have played golf since I was 7 years old and as a teenager it was at UK (Yorkshire) county level, so I’ve maintained a Category 1 handicap now for almost 30 years - this gives me a great starting point for any golf course design. Also, I have worked on golf courses designed by the best golf course architects - Harry S Colt, Alister MacKenzie, Tom Simpson, Herbert Fowler, Willie Auchterlonie, J H Taylor, John Abercrombie, Willie Park, Guy Campbell, Philip MacKenzie Ross, etc., - you cannot fail to be influenced by these masters. I think you may see some of their ideas in my design, but brought up to date. But, I also have a great deal of respect for the work of more contemporary architects - Donald Steel, Robert Trent Jones, Robert Von Hagge, Cabell Robinson, Martin Hawtree, Tom Fazio, Tom Doak, Peter Harradine, along with pro-golfer / designers such as Jack Nicklaus, Gary Player and Ben Crenshaw.



**How many courses have you designed to date?**

Since 1987/88 I have designed over 30 courses in UK, Turkey, Denmark, Spain, Czech Republic and Morocco and I currently have another five in design process (to be built 2007 to 2010). I have also been involved in advising over 100 existing clubs throughout UK and continental Europe on reconstruction / restoration and renovation projects.

**What was the first course you designed, and how did the work come about?**

In 1987 I was employed as contracts manager for Brian Pierson Contractors Ltd (working firstly on the reconstruction of the Jubilee Course at St Andrews (original Willie Auchterlonie design, with

Donald Steel consulting), then bringing the 9-hole short course back into play at St George’s Hill (original Harry Colt design, with Donald Steel consulting). 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*<sup>1</sup> (then called Jack O’Legs Golf Centre). It was a 6,200 metres length 18-hole course and a 1,000 metres length 9-hole academy course (the ‘Lannock Links’) and driving range. The course changed owners

from Clubhaus plc to Crown Golf plc, who maintain it to a very high standard. It has proven to be a commercial success.

**How would you describe a Gaunt design?**

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 / digitized onto 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



Worplesdon Golf Club, UK. Photo ©Kevin Murray

Tell us a little about what has been your favourite project. Difficult question - I'd like to say that all my projects are favourites, each in a different way. If I say one is the best I'm only going to upset other clients. However, one does stand out, admittedly - *Ramside Hall Hotel*<sup>2</sup> in Durham, UK - because this was the first 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.



Wokefield Park Golf Club, UK. Photo ©Eric Hepworth

On the back of the work at Ramside I was asked by a local hotel owner to design a course for him at *Linden Hall Hotel*<sup>3</sup> in Northumberland, on a stunning site - I didn't even have to argue or negotiate on fees - the first meeting was "we want you to design our course, this is what we're paying you, when can you start, here's the site!" That was amazing. Immediately after that and on the strength of the work I'd done at two other hotel courses I was appointed to design *Wokefield Park*<sup>4</sup> in Berkshire, UK - on a site with an historic listing. Here I negotiated long and hard

with English Heritage to get planning consent for the 18-hole course in a beautiful parkland setting, less than 1 hour from London. Just a little mention also for *Redlibbets*<sup>5</sup>, Kent, UK too, the course plays through mature oak woodland in the Kent countryside and the client and his family have become great friends.

I'm also particularly proud of my work back in 2004 at *Castleknock*<sup>6</sup> in Dublin, Eire, as this was the highest budget I've been given for a new course (5m euro - except for *Los Barrancos de La Zagaleta* in Spain, which was

a joint design). Here the client gave me free rein to design what I wanted (although he did have some excellent ideas to add). The finished product speaks for itself.

*Kaskada*<sup>7</sup> in Brno, Czech Republic also stands out because this was my first project in Central Europe - working with a Czech contractor was really challenging, but under the supervision of fellow Yorkshireman, Chris Johnson, we completed a great project in record time within the 3.5m euro budget.

**What do you enjoy most about your work?**

The most enjoyable aspect 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 - which is more than just 'satisfying' or 'enjoyable'.

**How do you feel about changing another designers course?**

If the golf course is a 'classic' I regard it as an honour, honestly. 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 *Worplesdon GC*<sup>8</sup> (originally designed by John F Abercromby and later remodelled by Harry S Colt) and a complete reconstruction of the bunkers (plus other works) at *West Hill GC*<sup>9</sup> (a

Ramside Hall Hotel & Golf Club, UK. Photo ©Eric Hepworth



**"I relish the opportunity to make improvements for the long-term benefit of the course and members..."**

Linden Hall Golf Club, UK. Photo ©Eric Hepworth

Cuthbert Butchart and Jack White original, later remodelled by Willie Park Jnr and later Harry S Colt).

It was thrilling working at both West Hill and Worplesdon, especially as both clubs have such long and distinguished histories. In both cases the clubs are well-established in the Surrey sand-belt, with some important people as members in influential positions, so all eyes were on the work I was proposing. It was pretty daunting getting the committee and members to accept that what I was proposing for their courses would improve and revitalise them (as they had been neglected in design terms for many years). We went through long consultation periods after detailed historical research to make the design improvements in keeping with the works of the original architect, but playable and maintainable in the 21st century.

By carefully studying the great work of Willie Park Jnr., Harry S Colt and John F Abercromby it was possible to develop a design solution that worked for both courses - West Hill was more radical, as we undertook the complete reconstruction of

the bunkers which included the importation and laying of thousands of square metres of native heather (*Erica carnea* and *Calluna vulgaris*), which has established really well. At Worplesdon it was more of a restoration because the club wanted to maintain the John F Abercromby signature. This was less satisfying, I suppose, but the project was still a major success because we also undertook a massive amount of drainage throughout the course - ensuring that this heathland course remained playable 365 days a year.

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 GC* in Cumbernauld, Scotland, my first project in Scotland (apart for a small consultancy job at Carnoustie 5 years ago). 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 golf academy and new 9-holes executive course. We hope to begin construction in April 2007.

I enjoy reconstruction projects on existing courses that are not 'classically' designed, because, in general terms, the client will, invariably, give me licence to be a bit more comprehensive in design terms on the course, so I can show him / her just what can be made of it.

I'm currently working at *Lexden Wood* in Essex and in an initial telephone conversation the client asked my advice only on rebunkering six holes. At the first site meeting we immediately clicked 'personality-wise' and because I explained the great potential of his course in design terms and what could be achieved within a reasonable budget, we are now moving into the third phase of a reconstruction of the whole course. The client is really loving it - previously he just hadn't been able to see the courses' potential.



**“I create designs that are not formulaic, if the site dictates that the par 4 hole is a short 250 metre left-right dogleg through dense woodland, then so be it.”**

These pages: Castleknock Golf Club, Dublin, Ireland

**What are the differences between designing a course in the UK and Europe?**

I think there's very little difference in design terms - but the bureaucracy in some countries is more complicated - thankfully, we have had few problems achieving permits and consents for our projects overseas. 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*<sup>10</sup> (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 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 an unreasonably big risk for any investor or developer.

**How do you hope to counteract the advances in golf club technology?**

We are now designing golf courses that are longer than any we have designed before, however, our clients, thankfully, expect us to be aware that they 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 6,200 and 6,600 metres in length. I certainly consider this to be acceptable.

Let's say that about 5% (estimate) of golfers have the ability to hit drives 250 metres or more, well, I'd say that as they are in minority, although we need to consider their abilities / 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 it. 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 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.

**Should the ideal par 4 be a long hole or dogleg?**

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 dogleg 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 dogleg 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 dogleg 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 the individual holes - we're talking about 18 holes - that makes the course. It's difficult to get 18 classic holes on a site, but each hole must have something about it that is memorable and challenging.

**What do you believe is the perfect length for a par 3?**

Again, my answer to this relates to the one above. But there are some excellent par 3's between 130 and 170 metres throughout the world, probably one of my favourites is the 15th at Kingsbarns (Mark Parsinen / Kyle Phillips design) - from the regular tees this is a great six or seven iron with a cross wind from the west. I also really like the 11th at Castleknock, even though I designed it. But 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.

**Do you apply any modern features to your courses?**

By this I guess you suggest something like buggy tracks and complicated double and triple row full-fairway irrigation systems? If so, it depends upon the project and the client. 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.

**What do you see as the next 'big thing' in golf course design?**

It has to be Tiger Woods designing an 8,000 yard course. It was only a matter of time before he got involved in design. He'll certainly make the game more accessible (hopefully) as long as he doesn't get too drawn into creating purely exclusive resorts. It would be good seeing him design a course on a brownfield site or wasteland or a landfill site, somewhere near a big city.

**What is your favourite golf course in the world?**

I particularly like Morfontaine, near Paris in France - a classic Tom Simpson original (which is currently being modified by Kyle Phillips). I played there about 10 years ago and remember the place for many reasons apart from the beauty of the setting.

I quite like the ruggedness and exposed nature of the Ailsa course at Turnberry and Southerness, too - both MacKenzie Ross classics.

And West Hill in Surrey is truly a hidden gem - there are some really challenging holes there.



**Who are your favourite golf course designers and why?**

I mention Philip MacKenzie Ross before - he didn't do a great deal in comparison with, say, Colt or Alister MacKenzie, but he produced some excellent work and was respectful of the work of other golf course architects of the early 20th century.

Harry Colt was the bunker specialist - if you see his work at Sunningdale New you can immediately see why he has been so influential - the placement of bunkers (and other hazards), plus their style and shaping was inspirational. But he appreciated the shapes and contours of the original ground and used these as a starting point to create new features.

MacKenzie was bolder and more outspoken, you could say, in design terms - more brash, let's say, with boldly contoured greens and big sweeping bunkers (often lace-edged). No surprise he was given the best sites to work on. There's really only one contemporary golf course architect who can match them all - Tom Fazio. I can't say I've played many of his courses, but Wild Dunes in Charleston in South Carolina was a memorable experience. Tom Doak's pretty impressive as well.

**Do you enjoy playing your own course designs or those of another?**

I enjoy playing mine 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, or on what could not have been improved upon!

Of course, I always enjoy playing courses designed by others because I like to see what my competitors are up to or to pick up some ideas on what to do or what not to do.

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 of them, sadly.

**Do you prefer links or parkland courses?**

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) - Southerness 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 has enormous sandstone rock outcrops. In character it is like Morfontaine in France, which is classic heathland, except it is in North Africa and it overlooks the Mediterranean. Here, we are going to retain the "heathland" character to create a classically styled course in a most unusual setting.

**Given a choice would you prefer fame or fortune?**

I'd have to go for being a recognized 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, irrespective of what I would earn. I'm doing well now, I'm lucky to be doing a job I enjoy. I have a full order book - I've just bought a new office and, together with my fabulous staff, Jackie Morson and Graham Parker, we look forward to an exciting future. I hope to be working as long as my Dad has - well into my 70's. ⚡

1. [www.crown-golf.co.uk](http://www.crown-golf.co.uk)
2. [www.ramsidehallhotel.co.uk](http://www.ramsidehallhotel.co.uk)
3. [www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk](http://www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk)
4. [www.deverevenues.co.uk](http://www.deverevenues.co.uk)
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