



PHOTO: Suttons Turf for Sport

Philip Mackenzie Ross

The last flowering of golf's Golden Age? *Jonathan Gaunt* profiles Philip Mackenzie Ross, designer of Southerness and recreator of Turnberry

When I was 12 years old I went to Dumfries and Galloway on holiday. It was Whitsuntide 1976, and it rained all week. In spite of the weather, the highlight of my week was playing golf at Southerness on the coast of the Solway Firth. Although I spent most of the round in the gorse, heather and bunkers, I can still remember most of the holes clearly. Little did I realise that 31 years later I would be writing about the architect who designed the course, Philip Mackenzie Ross. I was pleased to have the opportunity to return to play the course – and again spend most of the round in the gorse, heather and bunkers!

Mackenzie Ross was fortunate enough to learn golf at Royal Musselburgh, and he won several amateur medals as a youth. After the First World War he left the Army to pursue a career in golf, beginning, in 1920, as a construction supervisor and assistant to the eccentric golf course architect, Tom Simpson. It is said that Simpson employed him because of his suggestion on how to mount the licence plate on his Rolls-Royce! Simpson was then working alongside Herbert Fowler, but by the late 1920s they had split up and Mackenzie Ross effectively

replaced Fowler as a full partner in the new firm Simpson and Mackenzie Ross.

Mackenzie Ross remained with Simpson until the 1930s before setting up in business as a golf course architect in his own right. He developed a considerable reputation by building the course at Southerness in 1947 and then rebuilding the Ailsa course at Turnberry in 1951 after it had been concreted over during the Second World War.

Mackenzie Ross must have been delighted to be appointed at Southerness, because the site was perfect golfing land – gently undulating links, with streams criss-crossing it. It was a sprawling piece of land, some of which took the course almost a mile from the beach, whereas some holes were alongside it. An interesting thing about the course is that by looking into the fields adjacent to the first nine holes, which are now being grazed by sheep, one can easily imagine what the land was like before the course was built.

What makes Southerness remarkable is that it is, as far as I am aware, the last true linksland course to be built in Scotland (excluding Kingsbarns which, although it looks like a links course, was previously

mainly farmland). And, although Mackenzie Ross created a legend when he reconstructed the Ailsa course at Turnberry, he is known by members of the club to have been prouder of his achievements at Southerness.

It would have been so easy for an architect without imagination to have created a mundane layout, but Mackenzie Ross really showed his skill by his careful placement of the tees, greens and bunkers. He used the site to its full potential, particularly with regard to the weather conditions – he was able to route the holes in such a way that the wind would affect the golfer from all directions. The course measures 6,250 yards from the standard tees and over 7,000 yards from the back tees, but when the wind blows off the Solway Firth it seems twice as long. In fact, when the wind is strong, the members often miss out the 12th, 13th and 14th holes because they are the most exposed and therefore the most demanding.

It's a shame, because I would consider the 12th hole to be the best on the course. It plays southwards towards the sea and is a right hand dogleg requiring a carefully placed drive between three

fairway bunkers (two to the right side of the fairway and one to the left) and an accurate shot into a saddle green between two tussocky mounds with a drop to the beach immediately behind. There is also a hidden pond to the left of the green to catch the drawn approach shot. This is a typical Mackenzie Ross hole – encouraging, or even teasing the golfer into making a decision either to take the risk and attempt to fly the fairway bunkers from the tee, thus gaining considerable distance, or to play conservatively down the middle of the fairway and possibly take an extra shot to reach the green.

Southerness is a course where accurate, well-placed driving is essential, due to the long carries over heather, bracken and gorse which border each fairway. The overriding element, though, which makes good scoring all the more difficult, is exposure to the wind.

At Turnberry, too, Mackenzie Ross routed the course to make the wind a major factor of the design. The reconstruction work he carried out was based on drawings and models originally produced by Willie Fernie. The most spectacular hole on the Ailsa is the ninth,

where the tee is set out at sea on the rocks and there is a 200 yard carry to a narrow hogsback fairway from the championship tee. Mackenzie Ross may well have found inspiration from similar holes in America, such as the 18th at Pebble Beach and the 17th at Cypress Point. Pebble Beach, designed by Jack Neville and Douglas Grant in 1918, must initially have had a great influence on Alister

MacKenzie, who designed the course at Cypress Point in 1926. Both courses are situated on the craggy Monterey Peninsula on the west coast of America, allowing the architects numerous opportunities to locate tees and greens in spectacular positions, as Mackenzie Ross did later at Turnberry.

Although Mackenzie Ross was the last architect to design a linksland course in



Mackenzie Ross built Southerness in 1947



Southerness's twelfth hole has the beach directly behind the green

THE PIONEER

Great Britain, Robert Trent Jones was later commissioned at Ballybunion (New) in 1981, and Arnold Palmer (with Ed Seay) at Tralee in 1984, both in South-West Ireland. Greg Norman's firm designed Doonbeg in County Clare and Mark Parsinen/Kyle Phillips designed Kingsbarns in Fife, Scotland. In fact, it may have been due to Mackenzie Ross's association with Tom Simpson that he was chosen as architect at Southerness and Turnberry, as Simpson had been employed at Ballybunion (Old) to recommend alterations prior to the course hosting the Irish Amateur Championship in 1937.

Although Mackenzie Ross had gained such valuable and varied experience throughout his career, he wrote very little. He did, however, write a short article alongside Tom Simpson in *Golf Courses – Design Construction and Upkeep*, about the lessons to be learned from some of the oldest courses. The article gives an important insight into his design philosophy – obviously influenced by the ideas of Tom Simpson and Alister MacKenzie – which is an appreciation of the natural characteristics of the site and sympathetic design, allowing the natural topography of the ground to dictate the nature of play. Simpson's influence is most evident in Mackenzie Ross's bunkering style and in the mounding around greens.

Mackenzie Ross was of the opinion (held by many architects and writers of the time) that the first golf architect to

successfully recreate the characteristics of linksland courses inland was Willie Park, notably at Sunningdale, West Hill and Huntercombe.

The infinite variety of links courses illustrated to Mackenzie Ross the essence of strategic golf course design – the hills making natural hazards while the valleys, hillocks and hollows contribute towards the individuality of each hole. He regarded bunkering as being all-important on these links courses, especially pot bunkers in fairways. He felt that although many of the links courses 'evolved', some of the features, such as fairway pot bunkers, were actually designed and did not arrive purely by accident. He refers to Alister MacKenzie, who, in *Golf Architecture* (1920) wrote: "Most of the bunkers have been left where nature placed them, and others have originated from the winds and the rains, enlarging divot marks left by the players; and some of them possibly by the greenkeepers, converting those hollows where most players congregated into bunkers, owing to the difficulty of keeping them free from divot marks. The bunkers at St Andrews are thus placed in the precise positions in which the ordinary green committee would suggest they should be."

Mackenzie Ross's views on bunkering were also in keeping with many other golf architects of his era – he felt that golf was not a game of pure strength, neither was the centre of the fairway always the correct line to the hole. He wrote: "Bunkers on a direct line to the hole will

worry the good player because he will not always be quite sure whether to go for a carry or to shave past as closely as he dare to gain the necessary distance and position required for the next shot. The very uncertainty is a spur to further adventure. The long handicap golfer has no such worries, for he will find an alternative route comparatively free from trouble, even if an extra shot is required. He is entitled to choose the route which he fancies he can play best."

Mackenzie Ross considered that a golf course should cater for match rather than strokeplay, possibly because, at the time he was writing, many club golfers played only two or three medal rounds a year. However, the situation has changed dramatically over the last 40 years, and it is now the case that club members play upwards of 50 medal rounds a year. Sadly, this has had a direct effect on modern golf courses and how they are designed to keep play moving, with a trend towards ensuring that all the hazards be visible from the tee – no blind shots, no obscured bunkers and certainly no surprises.

The Australian golf professional (and now course designer) David Graham once said: "On the US Tour we play many courses that effectively eliminate thought. You step up and aim at the centre of an obvious target area each time. But at Augusta every shot offers an option."

It is because of the American golfing authorities' keenness to provide uniformity in course conditions that the one important requisite of a true champion has been stifled – the ability to think his way around a course and to vary his strokes accordingly.

Matchplay golf is said by Mackenzie Ross, Simpson and JL Low to demand an element of luck, and this can only be achieved on contoured greens and on fairways where the hazards are often not clearly visible from the tee, therefore providing more margin for error and the potential for a more challenging, unpredictable and exciting game. Augusta is a perfect example of this. Although Mackenzie's original design has been altered considerably since the 1970s, the strategic design principle behind it has been retained. The heavily undulating fairways, the boldly contoured greens, and even blind drives, make it the most exciting championship course in the world. Tournaments can be lost right down to the last putt in the US Masters and this is because of the remarkable variety provided by each hole.

"Variety is the spice of the game," Mackenzie Ross said. "No two holes and



PHOTO: Southerness Golf Club

Southerness is the last true links to be built in Scotland

no two greens should ever be alike. Particular attention must be paid to the greens' sites and to their slopes as to the lie of the land and to the approaches to these greens. If the course is laid out conforming to these basic principles, then it will prove interesting to all classes of players and will have animation and life." I like this principle, because it suggests that each green should be bespoke – that it should be designed for that specific, unique site location, not uploaded from a folder in a computer database.

During his career, Mackenzie Ross had an opportunity to work alongside and compete with some of the most respected architects of the mid-20th century. John Hamilton Stutt built many courses for Mackenzie Ross and other architects, such as JSF Morrison, in the 40s and 50s. Mackenzie Ross and Morrison both actively encouraged and instructed him and eventually he set up on his own as a golf course architect. Morrison was the former associate of Harry Colt and CH Alison, and he also worked with Sir Guy Campbell at Prince's. Morrison had built a reputable design business on the Continent, designing such courses as Le Biella and La Mandria in Italy. He continued to practice in Europe until his death in 1961. In 1972,

Mackenzie Ross was elected the first president of the British Association of Golf Course Architects (now the European Institute of Golf Course Architects). He continued to practise, working on many new and reconstruction projects, until his death in 1974.

Mackenzie Ross was not as prolific an architect as many of his competitors, yet the courses he designed or remodelled illustrated his genius, each layout having a considerable impact on modern golf course design. His skill was the ability to see the potential in a site and then maximise it.

This is what I find most impressive about the work he carried out. He wouldn't make a decision until he had considered it long and hard. He would explore all the alternatives, weigh up all the benefits and constraints, and only then would he eventually commit himself to a layout for the course. His work has stood the test of time – Southernness and Turnberry will continue to provide a challenge to all levels of golfer for many years to come. As proof of this, Southernness has played host to the Scottish Amateur Championship in 1985, the Scottish Ladies championship in 1988, the Ladies British Open

Championship in 1989 and the British Youths Open Amateur Championship in 1990.

His work can be regarded as of equal merit to that of such legendary contemporary architects as Fowler, Colt, MacKenzie and Simpson. They all understood the intricacies of the game itself, and they studied closely the designs of the older courses from which they found their inspiration. They all seemed to possess a similar vision – to maintain the mystique of the game, and to keep this element alive.

Golf courses will always provide a golfer with a pastime, but should never be regarded as just exercise or a pleasant stroll in the countryside – they must be mentally stimulating and a challenge to the strategist.

The young, enthusiastic golf course architect must look for the true meaning behind the game by learning about its fascinating history and through studying the design philosophies of the great architects of the past. Only through this will he find true inspiration. I admit I still have some way to go. **GCA**

Jonathan Gaunt is principal of Gaunt Golf Design



Turnberry's Ailsa course was rebuilt after being used as an airfield during the war

PHOTO: Westin Turnberry Resort