

Why classic greens deserve to be protected

Mike Clayton, Jeff Mingay and Frank Pont offer their thoughts on the implications of the recent works at the Old Course

The seed of this article was planted when it was recently announced that a 'classic' Irish links has plans to alter a number of its nearly century old greens designed by legendary British golf architect Tom Simpson. If that wasn't enough motivation to offer our opinions on the importance of preserving classic golf architecture, the previously-thought-untouchable Eden green, at the eleventh hole at St Andrews, was more recently altered in an attempt to gain a few more reasonable hole locations near Hill bunker, on its left flank, relative to modern green speeds maintained during the Open championship.

To describe something as 'classic' – whether literature, music, art, architecture or a golf green – simply means that it's something recognised as being of the first or highest quality. Granting classic status can sometimes be a subjective exercise, sure. But, there's never been much debate over the Eden green's quality. And there are many more courses throughout the world where the greens are also widely recognised as classics. As so-called classics do, such greens have served as important models for golf architects. The Eden green is among the most copied in history.

In *The Spirit of St Andrews*, written during the 1920s, Alister MacKenzie, who consulted to the Royal & Ancient Golf Club during that time, explained that the brilliance of the Eden hole is largely owing to the fact that the subtle slopes of the green and approach are overlooked. "There are few, if any, architects who have the courage to give the same marked tilt to the green," he added.

Unfortunately, the R&A and Links Trust recently had the same slopes MacKenzie so admired softened. Should a majority golf world continue to easily accept that classic greens, such as the eleventh at St Andrews, need to be altered to cater to increasing green speeds and the perceived requirements of modern professional tournament golf?

Would similar alteration to classic literature,

music, art or buildings be tolerated today? The Eden and other classic greens have worked for a century and more. Under whose authority these days should it be determined whether or not the quality and function of such greens are still any good?

With putting surfaces running faster than ever before, modern green design seems to be mostly about the construction of "pin placements". By comparison, most classic greens were not created to simply make it easy for those running the professional game to find six or more distinct places to cut a hole to see out a tournament week without complaints from contestants. This wasn't exactly a consideration in the old days, which is why we tend to find more interesting greens on classic courses than those constructed in the modern era with professional tournament play in mind.

If golf continues to follow this model, we'll sadly be left with 8,000-yard courses featuring flat greens. This is not a positive strategy for preserving golf's interest and enhancing its attractiveness to potential newcomers.

We feel that classic greens with bold character are a vital part of golf's heritage and key to the game's interest and attractiveness. In our minds, it is essential that such greens are protected from what many others, too, see as unnecessary change.

It's amazing how often we find newly constructed greens at older courses that completely contrast with the architectural style of the originals. Designing new greens on older courses without reference to the philosophy and style of the original architecture creates an undesirable lack of design continuity. And, unlike almost any other sport, history means so much to golf. Along with the routing of their courses, the most admired golf architects of the past focused on the design and construction of their greens above all else. Given that there was very little, if any, heavy machinery used to build greens during the pre-World War II era, classic greens tend

to have a unique character and beauty that strongly differentiates them from a majority of modern era greens. Respect for the craftsmanship of yesteryear – which is also difficult to match in new construction – is yet another reason to think thrice before redesigning a historic green.

Along with the effort and craftsmanship put into building classic greens, a lot of thought usually went into their design as well. Golf architects like Tom Simpson and Alister MacKenzie, for example, designed strategy into their courses using the shape, slope, contour and orientation of the greens and their surrounds. Changing the design of a classic green may not only alter the overall look and feel of a classic course and erase history, but can also negate the original strategy of a hole and disrupt the ebb and flow of a round planned by the original designer.

In the early 1990s at Yarra Yarra Golf Club, which lies on Melbourne, Australia's famed sand belt, two greens originally designed by Alex Russell (MacKenzie's design partner in Australia) during the 1930s were altered by misguided committees simply in an attempt to create more pin placements. Unfortunately the committee comprehensively failed to understand that the severity of these greens was Russell's whole point, to provide defences at a 130-yard par three and a 520-yard par five.

Clearly, redesign of a classic green is not something to be taken lightly. When we're asked to study a classic course, our approach is generally conservative. Where possible, we always try to preserve and restore rather than suggest alterations, in part because the perceived necessity of making changes to a green is very subjective. Classic greens are also very valuable assets to a club. Modifications should only be considered as a last resort, once all other options to resolve perceived issues are exhausted.

If it is entirely impossible to preserve a classic green, the putting surface and its

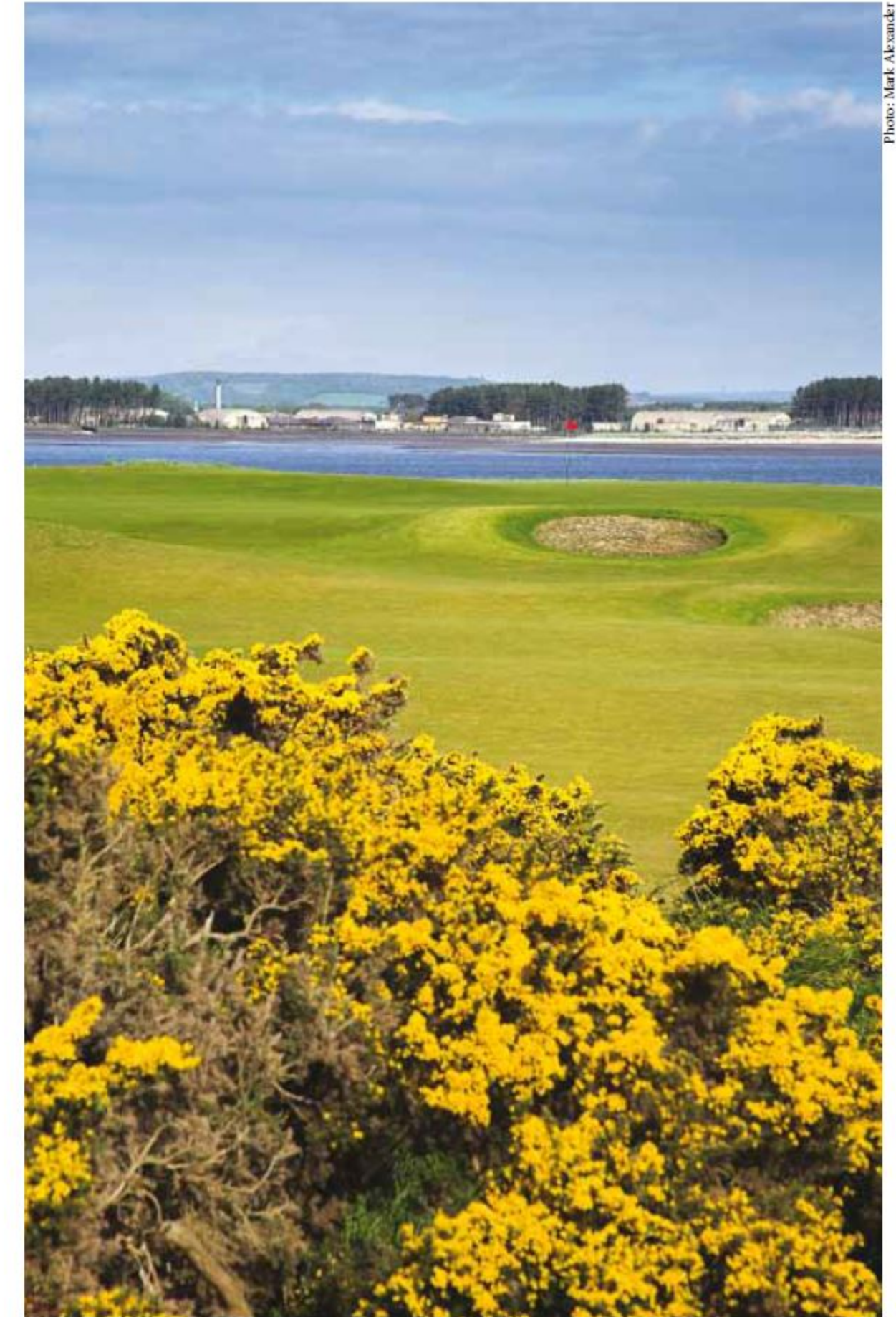
surrounding features should be mapped in three dimensions before any changes are made. This is something that can be done with modern technology for very little cost these days. Mapping provides opportunity to replicate the green in the same or a new location. This is what Jeff Mingay is proposing at the Victoria Golf Club's par four tenth hole, in British Columbia, Canada, where it has become necessary to relocate a wonderful classic green due to a serious safety issue. At Royal Hague in the Netherlands, Frank Pont used the same technology when all eighteen greens needed to be rebuilt for agronomic reasons.

In our opinion, it's dangerous to look at any green simply in terms of pin placements. The remarkable character of so many classic greens is attributable to artists, not engineers or mathematicians – or tournament directors looking for an easy life. Architectural character is necessary to preserve the interest and enhance the attractiveness of golf. In the same way restoration and preservation is encouraged in building architecture these days, we feel the same should be encouraged with classic golf greens.

Perhaps the recent work on the Eden green at St Andrews will instigate heightened awareness, prompting clubs with classic courses to learn more about and intelligently realise the value of their asset. This could lead to a renewed era of preservation in golf course architecture. Unfortunately though, it could also suggest to some that if classic greens on the Old Course can be modified for the perceived requirements of modern golf then there certainly must not be another course in the world that's untouchable. Let's hope not. *GCA*

Mike Clayton, Jeff Mingay and Frank Pont are leading restorers of classic golf courses in Australasia, North America and Europe, respectively

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The Eden green: previously thought to be untouchable