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Mr Colt's American legacy

Old Elm Club in Chicago is a unique course, the only place in the world where two legendary architects collaborated. Adam Lawrence reports on its restoration

When any list of the greatest architects in the history of golf is compiled then two names that are certain to feature on it are Harry Colt and Donald Ross. Colt, born to wealth and captain of Cambridge in his youth, will go down as the man who created the profession of golf architecture, the first ever to make his living solely from designing golf courses. And Ross, born dirt poor in Dornoch and an emigrant to the US as a young man proved to be his adopted country's most prolific creator of great courses.

There are Ross courses the length and breadth of America, and in any given city it is highly likely that the best course in town

will bear his fingerprints. Travelling across the country by train, leaving trusted foremen on site to carry out his plans, Ross, perhaps more than any other man, helped to create America's love affair with golf.

In America, the land of opportunity, Ross cast of the shackles of his poor Scottish upbringing and became a pillar of society. Had he stayed at home in Britain, no matter how successful he had become, he'd have remained a professional in a world dominated by gentlemen amateurs. Even James Braid, greatest of all Scottish golf exports, never truly became part of that gentlemanly milieu – towards the end of his life, for sure, he was venerated at his adopted home Walton Heath and elsewhere, but he was never really 'one of us'.

Though Colt's first experience of golf design was laying out the Rye course in Sussex while practising as a lawyer in nearby Hastings in the 1890s, it was from 1901 onwards, once he had been appointed as secretary of the new Sunningdale club, that he began to make his name as the man whose advice one should seek if trying to create a golf course. By 1910, with courses like Stoke Poges and Swinley Forest – which, to the end of his life, he named as his 'least bad' design – to his name, he was the world's leading expert on the subject, and his services were sought after wherever golf was played.

With golf in America growing apace by this time, though it was not the explosion



The short par four ninth hole at Chicago's historic Old Elm course, recently restored to Harry Colt's original design intent by architect Drew Rogers



Old Elm's new bunkering is typical of Colt's style, having a natural feel, with sand faces, as seen here at the par five sixteenth

that would come after Francis Ouimet's US Open win of 1913, Colt naturally looked to the US as a possible market for his design services. To this end, he made two extended tours of North America before the First World War, during which he designed a number of high profile courses such as Hamilton and Toronto GC in Canada, and spent a week advising George Crump on the creation of Pine Valley. And, while passing through Chicago, he created a design for a new club in Highland Park on the north shore of the city. It was there that he met Ross, although the younger man didn't make enough of an impression for Colt to remember his name – he referred to him, in his notes to the club, as 'Douglas' Ross.

Colt, as was his modus operandi even back home in England, didn't stick around for the construction of the Old Elm course. He left a selection of drawings, plans and instructions, and a recommendation that the club should be confident in letting 'Douglas' handle the construction work.

“The results are dramatic – bunkers now more closely resemble something that Mr Colt himself might have done”

This the club did, thus making Old Elm the only golf course on earth touched by the hands of both Colt and Ross.

A century on, Old Elm remains a resolutely traditional golf club. Its small membership is still all male, and the club maintains a very low profile, with almost no visitor play. It is, one might say, not unlike an American version of Swinley Forest, another elite club that feels no need to advertise its excellence. What has – or rather had – changed, though,

is the golf course itself, where the original Colt design still had, to an extent, been subsumed by the better-known Ross influence (there being only a very small number of Colt courses in North America, and around 400 by Ross, it is hardly surprising that the younger man's design style is better recognised and more influential).

Decision makers at Old Elm, though, led by general manager Kevin Marion, saw beyond this. They hired Ohio-based architect Drew Rogers, with a brief to identify and restore the Colt heritage as far as was possible. Rogers and superintendent Curtis James conducted extensive research on the design, considering not only the original plans, sketches, and notes from Colt, but also other designs he implemented around the same time. This research provided a crucial foundation for their approach to the work at Old Elm.

Over a period of several years, they removed hundreds of trees from the property, opening up Colt's intended hole corridors, while, in



Architect Drew Rogers referenced Colt's original hole sketches and historic photos of the course in his proposals for the redesign

the process, allowing the remaining specimen trees – mainly oak, hickory and, yes, even a few elms – to show their beauty more completely and returned proper width to fairways. “Not unlike Swinley Forest and St. George’s Hill, Colt employed grand width at Old Elm, with wide fairways and defining features that are broad, sometimes quite bold, and always blended harmoniously into the landscape. Colt was an absolute master of proportion,” says Rogers.

As the project moved on to greens and bunker shaping, the team brought in architect/shaper Dave Zinkand, a design associate at Coore and Crenshaw and regular member of their hot-shot construction crew. “Ross’s greens were beyond reproach,” says Zinkand. “We merely addressed areas that could no longer be pinned due to decades of topdressing and modern green speeds. But with Drew and Curtis having opened up Old Elm’s hole corridors, the opportunity – and indeed need – to address the bunkers was very apparent.”

The results are dramatic, with the bunkers now more closely resembling something that Mr Colt himself might have done. Colt’s career was long, and his preferred bunker style evolved over the years, but two things remained constant across the decades – that bunkers should appear natural, and that they should always have sand, rather than grass, faces. Before WWI, relatively early in his career, he wrote extensively about making bunkers appear as though they had been ‘torn out’ of a natural upslope – that is, with an edge that looked essentially random and unplanned.

Many architects have recently embraced a similar style, and rough-edged bunkers are now fairly common on courses around the world. It is not an easy style to get right though, and by employing a craftsman of Zinkand’s calibre, Rogers has gone a long way to hitting the mark at Old Elm. “The intentions were all there in Colt’s notes,” says Zinkand. “It just took 100 years to implement his aesthetic.” Rogers adds:

“Scale, proportion and fit, along with the proper ‘torn edging,’ were our primary considerations in trying to capture Colt’s intended design.”

Colt’s bunkers were also typically large, and, with his commitment to naturalism forefront in his mind, he was more concerned to find appropriate landforms in which to locate them than he was to ensure they were a particular distance from tee or green. He was, without any doubt, the first architect to emphasise the importance of artificial features being hard to distinguish from their natural equivalents – not for him the creation of obviously artificial mounds to support bunkers. Around the same time as Old Elm, at Swinley Forest and St George’s Hill, Colt built holes where, for the standards of the time, quite considerable amounts of earth were moved, yet, even now, it takes a sensitive eye and a close examination to see where. What Rogers and team have done at Old Elm is very much in the same spirit. **GCA**