



Despite creating only a very few courses over here, Harry Colt was likely the most influential and innovative designer the game has known

It's likely that at some point in the last few years you've read an article asking if Harry Colt was golf's greatest, or at least most influential, course architect. The implication being that, yes, he was.

Most readers have had to take the writer's word for it, however, as Colt's work on this side of the Atlantic was limited to a small handful of courses, all of which are private. Some confusion endures over how many times the Englishman came to the U.S.: Was he here just twice—in 1911 and 1913—or was there a third trip in 1914? Regardless of how many trips he made and how many courses in North America he had a hand in creating, his influence on the direction golf course architecture took at the beginning of the 20th century can't be doubted.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Colt didn't publish a strict set of design principles. However, in his 2018 book *The Evolution of Golf Course Design*, Keith Cutten says he can identify 14 "rules" in Colt's eminent treatise, *Some Essays on Golf-Course Architecture*, which was published in 1920. Frank Pont—of the architectural firm of Clayton, DeVries & Pont and a Colt restoration specialist—consolidates his words into seven distinct tenets, the most important of which, and something Colt emphasized often, being that a course "has to live." That sort of thinking hadn't really been considered or voiced prior to Colt's emergence: He was able to see how the game, and golf courses, would evolve over time, and the changes for which he was largely responsible, and the evolution he inspired, were considerable.

Before Colt, inland golf in Britain had been a monotonous affair consisting of straight fairways separated into equal parts by rampart bunkers. These unseemly hazards consisted of a shallow rectangle of sand with a waist-high ridge of earth immediately behind it, set at right angles to the direction of play. Shortish two-shot holes required one of these hurdles, while longer holes needed two. You'd surely grow weary of this type of golf as it was unnatural and formulaic in the worst possible way, something Colt abhorred and was determined to stop. Colt (along with his associate, Charles Alison) wasn't slow to bash the golf that preceded him, but what he did to transform it would show the world how fun and interesting the game could be.

After graduating from Cambridge University, Colt started a career as a solicitor (lawyer), but soon rejected that business in order to become the secretary, in 1894, at Rye Golf Club on England's southeast coast, a course he would redesign, demonstrating his extensive skill. In 1901, he went to Sunningdale, west of London, whose Willie Park Jr.-designed course he would also alter significantly (though he always credited the course to Park).



There's little doubt Colt was the first to make golf course architecture an approved profession, and was a pioneer in drawing plans for golf holes. He strongly believed a course should be part of the natural landscape and sought to make the very most of every single hill, ripple, contour, ridge, bank, trough, depression, mound, stream, or ditch that he could find. "It will be generally agreed that intense importance should be attached to utilizing every feature in the ground, so far as it is compatible with a satisfactory framework," he wrote. "To depend to the maximum extent upon nature, and to the minimum on art (human intervention), makes for interesting golf and minimum expenditure."

He believed well-built hazards were necessary to create interest and should not only be natural in appearance but, ideally, diagonal or staggered. Diagonal fairways, he said, forced you to consider what your most appropriate line should be and gave lesser golfers ample opportunity to play a hole safely. And, as Pont says, he very rarely created symmetrical hazards or even numbers of bunkers around the green at par threes. Given his desire for variety, wide fairways, and holes that required study and thought rather than a repeat of the same shots played at the previous hole, Colt built courses with character and soul that remained enjoyable and engaging no matter how many times you played them.

“He never really missed,” Pont adds. “It probably sounds wrong, but he was almost boringly consistent. Sure, he had a lot of great land to work with, but he always made the most of it. Even on less than ideal sites, he was perfectly capable of building beautiful hazards and configuring holes in a way that made them interesting.”

Clearly a fan of the man as well as the architect, Pont says Colt was a humble, diligent, reliable gentleman who didn't seek attention. “He was a fairly uncomplicated, religious man. Not terribly charismatic and very generous: He quietly paid off Alister MacKenzie's debts following his death in 1934.”

Colt is thought to have designed or been involved in the creation of 446 courses—a list that includes dozens of solo originals, a similar number of total redesigns or courses where his changes resulted in what's there today, and those where he was an indispensable consultant. His own designs include the New course at Sunningdale, Swinley Forest, and Wentworth (East and West) in Great Britain; Utrechtse de Pan, Eindhovensche, Kennemer, and Koninklijke Haagsche in the Netherlands; Hamburger and Frankfurter in Germany; Royal Zoute in Belgium; and Saint-Germain, Saint-Cloud, and Le Touquet in France.

Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland began life in 1888 as the County Golf Club on a 9-hole course that Colt had nothing to do with. Old Tom Morris advised on its extension to 18 in 1889, but the course over which the Open Championship will be played this summer was designed by Colt in 1929. Royal County Down, 90 miles to the south, is largely the work of club member George Combe, but Colt made several important additions and alterations in 1926. Muirfield, east of Edinburgh, isn't a Colt original, but what he did to Old Tom Morris's layout in 1925 makes it his.

In Canada, Colt designed Hamilton Golf and Country Club and the superb Toronto Golf Club, greatly influencing a young Stanley Thompson, and in the U.S. his credits include the original design of the Country Club of Detroit and, in the same city, Bloomfield Hills. (His partner, Alison, would establish an office in Detroit and design many courses in the U.S. as well as in Japan and South Africa.) He also collaborated with Donald Ross in 1913 on the design of Old Elm in Chicago.

American architect Drew Rogers, who played a large role in restoring Old Elm between 2010 and 2024, has long been a huge admirer of Colt. “I've always been impressed with his ability to design holes that aren't just strategic but also fit so well into the landscape,” he says. “Everything just seems to fit as it should in perfect balance. Obviously, that starts with a smart routing, but the way he engaged natural elements and ground movements to bring shot values forward is nothing short of brilliance.”



Muirfield (photo by L.C. Lambrecht)



Royal County Down (photo by Evan Schiller)

On that 1913 trip to the U.S., Colt was also heavily involved at Pine Valley, the course consistently ranked as the best in the world. Too many conflicting views over exactly how many holes he designed there exist for us to say with any certainty how great an impact he had on George Crump's dream layout half an hour southeast of Philadelphia. Suffice to say, it was very significant. We know he pitched a tent and camped there for a week and that he produced a set of 18 blueprints, which are in the club's possession. (There's also some evidence to suggest that of all the great architects Crump called on for advice, Colt was the only one who got paid.)

Colt always said Swinley Forest was his "least bad course," but Jasper Miners says St. George's Hill, 25 miles southwest of London, might have been his favorite project. Currently in the process of forming a Colt Society, Miners is partnering with Renaissance Golf's Brian Schneider, Angela Moser, and Clyde Johnson and agronomist Chris Haspell in creating a masterplan for the club that will possibly result in a major restoration of its 27 holes (Colt actually designed 36, but the New course, opened in 1929—16 years after the first 18—was reduced to nine holes in 1946). While Schneider will be the lead architect, Miners is project manager and provides historical research. "Colt was hired by the landowner, W.G. Tarrant, to build the best course possible," Miners says. "He wasn't dealing with club committees and having to consider numerous opinions and demands but a single owner who just wanted a great course. The original greens were strongly contoured (later softened) and I think Colt felt totally uninhibited. It may have been his masterpiece."

Spectacular par threes were Colt's specialty and largely what he is remembered for today. There are many great examples—the 5th at Sunningdale (New), 11th at Hoylake, 16th at Royal Portrush, 4th at Royal County Down, 5th at Pine Valley—but it would be a serious error to remember him only for his short holes. "He was very good at finding interesting greensites for par threes, and cleverly used them to aid routing challenges—Pine Valley's 5th is the best example," says Simon Haines, a Colt enthusiast and member at Colt's Copt Heath in the English Midlands. "In most cases, short holes are less likely to change, which probably emphasizes his talent for building great par threes while diminishing the rest of what he did. But I certainly don't see him as a one-trick pony in this regard."

Colt had a profound effect on golf course architecture, transforming a rudimentary, systematic discipline that usually produced mundane courses into a creative, imaginative venture that made golf a very different game. He was a visionary who had a huge influence on his contemporaries and partners (MacKenzie, Alison, John Morrison, J.F. Abercromby) and on how golf developed globally. He designed some of the greatest holes and courses in the world.

Does all that make him the greatest course architect in history? Probably.

