COURSE WORK BY TOM DOAK



The First International

My series on underappreciated Golden Age architects concludes with Willie Park, Jr.

Though you don't hear modern golfers talk much about him, Willie Park, Jr., was renowned as both a golfer and later a golf course designer in his day. Willie was Open Champion in 1887 and 1889, following on the heels of his father [who won the first Open in 1860, one of four overall] and his uncle, Mungo, who won the title on the family's local ground at Musselburgh in 1874.

Willie was the first golf professional to write an instruction book—*The Game of Golf,* published in 1896—and, notably, devoted a chapter of his book to "Laying Out and Keeping Golf Links," the first published thoughts on golf course architecture in any book. Much later, in 1920, Park wrote a second book: *The Art of Putting,* the skill for which his game was most renowned and most feared by opponents.

Here in America, though, Willie Jr. might be the most forgotten designer of all. His peers in the UK considered him the best of the best. He got started in the business with his father on courses like Silloth, Gullane, and Western Gailes, then made headlines on the outskirts of London when he completed what is now known as the Old Course at Sunningdale in 1901. It was widely recognized as the first great inland course, not just for the quality of the golf holes but for overcoming the difficulties of inland soils to produce an excellent playing surface in contrast to the muddy courses that preceded it.

The success of Sunningdale prompted a building boom of inland courses across England, and Willie was one of several designers to cash in. He was consistently busy up until the start of the Great War, with successes including Formby, Notts Golf Club (aka Hollinwell), Stoneham, and Coombe Hill. He was renowned for his accurate plans, for setting new standards for golf course construction, and for consistently producing courses of the highest quality.

One of his best courses (and among the most well-preserved today) was Huntercombe, west of London, but the project also set back his career considerably. It was the first course that was integrated with a housing development, and Willie was a major investor in the project and promoter of it, so many of the other new clubs being developed around the city turned to his contemporaries Harry Colt, Herbert Fowler, or J.F. Abercromby to design their own courses. Willie's timing on the investment was also poor: when development sales failed to materialize, he was left well in the red on the project.

Undeterred, Park also began to work internationally, designing some of the first respected courses in France (at Dieppe, Dinard, Evian, and Monte Carlo), in Belgium (at Royal Antwerp), and even in Austria (Vienna GC).

When war took over the Continent, 52-year-old Willie emigrated to America in 1916. He established an office in New York City and another in Toronto, and from those bases he designed more than seventy golf courses in the U.S. and Canada at the start of the great boom between 1916 and 1923 – an average of ten courses per year! And they were not close together: his successes span the continent from the Met Area to Castine in Maine, Olympia Fields (North) in Chicago, Hot Springs in Arkansas, Mount Bruno near Montreal, and Calgary G & CC in western Canada. Perhaps his work suffers for recognition today because nearly all of these courses were built for private clubs.

For all of his productivity, the amount of work he did near his headquarters in the Met Area was limited but significant. He wasn't afraid to tackle tough sites, so he ventured into Fairfield County in Connecticut, sorting his way through rocks and tough soils to build the first nine holes at the Country Club of New Canaan, Woodway CC in Stamford, and a bit further up the road, New Haven CC and Shuttle Meadow CC. He also redesigned Atlantic City Country Club to take it from 18 holes to 27, though most of that work has disappeared in subsequent redesigns.

My former associate Bruce Hepner, who has consulted on five of Park's courses, is the closest I know to an expert on his work, but doesn't associate him with a recognizable style of bunkering. He does believe Park's greens were superior to those of his contemporaries, with "tiers, swales, internal rolls, and tilts" all incorporated into each design ... which should be no surprise from the golfer who wrote *The Art of Putting.* Bruce considers Battle Creek CC, in Michigan, as the best preserved of Park's American work.

By far, though, Park's biggest contribution to the Met Area was the redesign of Maidstone Club in 1922-23. The course had evolved several times over its early years, moving steadily closer to the dunes along the Atlantic Ocean as the club acquired property to try and get away from several road crossings in the older layouts. The Park family was involved right from the beginning, as Willie's brother John was also the head professional for several years. The club eventually managed to assemble 80 acres in the dunes on the Gardiner Peninsula, west of the clubhouse, and Willie was called in to undertake a thorough redesign.

Maidstone has the reputation of being an old-fashioned course now, because it has never been lengthened (due to lack of acreage) and because for so long they resisted introducing fairway irrigation – but when it opened it was seen as radical and modern. The short fourth, the first of Park's new holes, played across Hook Pond, which is also a hazard at the 5th, 7th, and 15th – an unusual amount of water in play for a course built in the 1920's. The Cape-type par-four 7th was actually filled out into the pond with material excavated from the fairway of the par-four 9th, accentuating the beautiful valley into which the tee shot must be played on the course's most famous hole. The uphill pitch to the 10th and the tee shot at the short 14th are two scary and exacting shots into the wind, and at both of them merely being on the green in regulation is no guarantee of par due to the tilt of the greens.

Maidstone was Willie's masterpiece, and the last course he completed. In the fall of 1923 Willie fell ill, and his brother Mungo came from Argentina in early 1924 to take him back to Scotland. Willie never recovered, and died in the hospital in Edinburgh a year later. The great boom of golf construction in the 1920's, which he had helped set off in the first place, would ultimately give such designers as Tillinghast and MacKenzie the chance to overshadow their late competitor's work. ■

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