

GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE

THE GLOBAL JOURNAL OF GOLF DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

ISSUE 38 OCTOBER 2014



European golf's wandering minstrel

Don Harradine brought golf to many parts of Europe that had never seen it before. With the aid of his son Peter and his biographer Götz Mecklenburg – Peter's German partner – Adam Lawrence explores his legacy

Anyone who has played much golf in continental Europe is likely to have visited a course designed by Donald Harradine. What is particularly interesting about Harradine, though, is that the further off the beaten track the course is, then seemingly the more likely he is to have designed it! Over the last ten years, *GCA* has profiled many architects in this *Pioneer* column, but few of them have deserved the title as much as Harradine. His legacy may not be a list of courses famous wherever golf is played, but there is no doubt that golf is played by many more people in many more places because of his work.

Born in Enfield in north London in 1911, Don Harradine discovered, and became good at golf at an early age. His stepfather, Albert Hockey, was a golf professional, and, among other activities, made clubs which were sold under his name. Don, who had been awarded a scholarship to attend the Woolwich Polytechnic school in south London, worked in his stepfather's business.

Tee pegs were unknown in this era, and so, before going to school each morning, the young Harradine would replenish the boxes of sand at each hole on which players would tee their balls.

When, in 1920, Hockey received his first commission to redesign a golf course, Don must have had, at age nine, his first exposure to what would become his life's work. But the early 1920s were difficult times, economically, in the UK, so when Hockey was asked, in 1925, to design and build a golf course at Bad Ragaz in Switzerland, the opportunity must have been too good to ignore, and the family moved over to the Continent.

At Bad Ragaz, the fourteen year old Harradine became his stepfather's assistant, and truly began his career in golf course design and construction. The club had been founded in 1904 and later expanded to nine holes, but now sought to become a full-scale eighteen hole course. Swiss golf, though, was still in its infancy, and so was the science of agronomy; building courses at altitudes in

excess of 1500 metres was not common, and establishing good grass was difficult.

Eventually, Hockey and his wife, Harradine's mother, decided to return to London. This juncture must have been a key point in Don's life; still a very young man, he did not go back to England with them. It is impossible now to say why, but his decision to remain in Switzerland must have required tremendous self-belief, and set the scene for the rest of his life.

Making a living in 1920s and 1930s Switzerland was not easy for the young man. He was commissioned to design a small course near the town of Flims – the course was built later, under his supervision, and still exists, now known as Bunavista Golf. But golf alone could not support him, and Harradine supplemented his earnings carting firewood down from the mountains on cumbersome wooden sledges, working as a bellboy, librarian and telephone operator at the Grand Hotel in St Moritz, and also as a cashier at the skating events of the 1928 Winter Olympics.





Harradine first demonstrated his design skills at Bad Ragaz in Switzerland, where he remodelled the old nine-hole course. The current 18 hole course at Bad Ragaz was designed by Harradine with Fred Hawtree



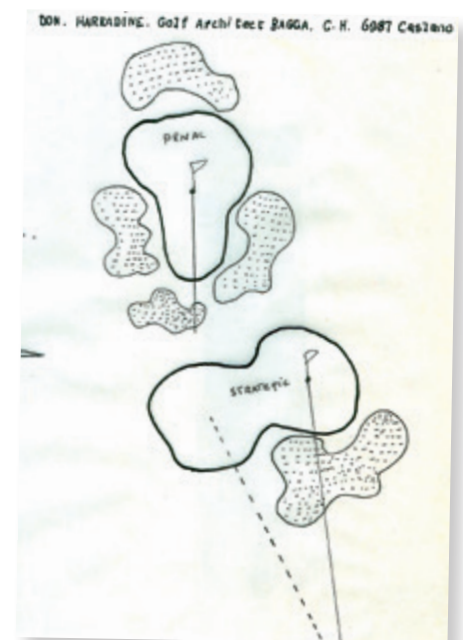
“Throughout those long winter months, I dreamed of beautiful golf courses and was quite homesick,” Harradine later wrote. He credited his friend Herr Klenberger, the managing director of the Quellenhof hotel in Bad Ragaz, for persuading him to stay. “He argued that in Switzerland I was one amongst a few Englishmen whereas back home I was one amongst millions of others and said ‘Your dream is to design and build golf courses, so go for it!’” he wrote.

Harradine explored many opportunities to kick start his design business. He lived in the Swiss town of Davos for a number of years during the 1930s and upgraded the golf course in the town’s Kurpark, or spa park, while offering five free golf lessons to anyone who bought clubs he had manufactured. He visited Spain and India in pursuit of golf design possibilities, the latter after giving golf lessons in Switzerland to the son of the Nizam of Hyderabad. This gentleman wanted to build his own courses in India, and Don travelled to the country to scout out suitable

sights. But, according to his writings, the Nizam himself was less keen on the idea, and he therefore returned to Switzerland. Later in the 1930s, a Spanish friend invited him to that country, but the trip again proved fruitless, as his contact was killed in the Spanish Civil War.

Don designed and built a number of courses in Switzerland during these years, in cities such as Berne, Arosa and Lenzerheide, as well as upgrading existing venues in Lausanne and Geneva. Most golf projects in Switzerland in this era were attached to hotels, and were part of Switzerland’s tourism development strategy. Harradine found that his clients typically knew little of golf, and the maps he was provided of potential sites lacked basic information, such as topographical details. As such, he became an expert at walking the site repeatedly before designing a layout, a feature of his approach that was retained even later in his career when topographical information was readily available.

Working on projects where the potential players were holidaymakers taught him the



Harradine in his own words

"A golf club board or green committee should have an odd number of members, and three is too many!"

"Do we golf architects worry enough about the future maintenance of the courses we design? In my opinion one of the first questions a golf architect should ask, before designing a course, is how much money will be available for maintenance?"

"The important thing is to visualise the finished golf course on the landscape and therefore make the best use of the landscape's natural advantages"

"Clubs and balls develop, but the game itself remains the same. A par three remains a par three, only the distances vary. In golf, you need a tee, a fairway and a green. You do not need to reinvent the game"

"If a golf architect can think of nothing else, he will build bunkers"

"It is a blessing that there are no fixed rules for the layout of golf courses, so I can try to find the right solution for every landscape"



Golfclub Seefeld-Wildmoos, in the heart of the Alps in Austria, was one of Harradine's personal favourites



Don Harradine with his wife, Babette, in 1946

benefit of not making courses too difficult, a philosophy he stuck to throughout his career.

Building courses in Switzerland was not easy. Land was in short supply, especially land level enough for golf, and when plots became available, they tended to be small. This experience taught Harradine how to extract the most golf from tight pieces of land, a skill that would stand him in good stead for the rest of his career. Building courses in a country where experienced golfers were scarce also taught him the folly of the penal school of design, which attempted to punish mistakes according to their severity. Don sought not to dole out punishment, but to encourage happiness. He rarely used sand bunkers in large quantities, for example, and even late in his life, he argued that bunker numbers should generally be reduced, to cut maintenance requirements.

After the war, in 1948, Harradine was asked to move to Caslano, near to the Italian border, and taken on the running of the golf course in the town, which had been losing money. In Caslano, he built a house which became the base of his operations for the rest of his life, and settled down with wife Babette and their young children, Kathleen and Peter. Over subsequent years, he renovated the golf course's existing nine holes and built another

nine, while transforming the club into a viable commercial operation.

From this came more opportunities, many across the Italian border. He constructed a number of courses, including the Torino club, that had been designed by British architect John Morrison, the former partner of Harry Colt, and began to win design jobs too. His first German course, the then nine hole Golfclub Hechingen-Hohenzollern in Baden-Württemberg, opened in 1955, built on difficult but beautiful terrain. Golfers remained relatively scarce in the countries in which he worked at this time, and clubs were rarely flush with cash, so he developed ways of working that suited his clients' means. Some would handle construction themselves, in accordance with the plans he had drawn and the instructions he gave on subsequent site visits. Materials for courses were difficult to come by, and Harradine established his own networks of supply for fertilisers, grass seeds, bunker sand and the like. His courses rarely required the moving of much earth, partly because of his determination to respect the natural landscape, and partly because of budgetary constraints — even in hilly, difficult terrain, he almost never moved more than 150,000 cu m of earth.

Back in Caslano, the Harradine office was for many years run by his wife Babette,



The first nine holes at Golf Club Arosa in Switzerland opened in 1945. Harradine's son, Peter, added a second nine in 2001



who as well as personnel manager for the construction company side of the business, learned to draw and correct plans so clients could still get support even when Don was on the road. Along with Babette, Don founded the International Greenkeepers Association in 1971, with the aim of improving standards of course maintenance across the continent, and recognising the greenkeeping profession.

By the time Harradine came to design the reborn golf course at Bled in Slovenia, which had been created before the war but later lost, he was 62 and one of Europe's most recognised course designers. Bled's King's course remains to this day a fixture in rankings of European golf venues. He had become a founder member of the British Institute of Golf Course Architects, and worked in Greece — where he built the first courses in the country, at Glyfada near Athens and in Corfu's Ropa Valley — Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, Italy, Germany and France, as well as in many other countries outside Europe. He continued to work into old age, finally being forced to retire at the age of 80. He died, aged 85, at his home in Caslano, where he had lived since the late 1940s.

The wide range of locations in which Harradine built courses, as well as the length of his career, make it difficult to draw

“A golf club board or green committee should have an odd number of members, and three is too many!”

conclusions about his design style. What can be said for certain is that he was an architect who wanted to make his courses pleasurable to play. He tended to place hazards that would affect strong players from the back tees more than they would weaker golfers playing further forward, and he had a strong distaste for building longer par threes, preferring wherever possible to keep them to a maximum length of 160 metres. Like many architects before and since, he sought, often in vain, to persuade clients that length was not everything, and that a good par 69 course was better than a poor par 72, and he favoured practical, maintainable design over all else. His legacy is found in the sustainable, living courses he built in some of Europe's farthest flung corners. **GCA**

Harradine's routing plans for Golfclub Göppingen (right) and Golfplatz St. Eurach, both in Germany

