

Road works

Robert MacIntyre called for the Road hole at St Andrews to be 'blown up' after losing three shots to it on the weekend of the 2024 Alfred Dunhill Links Championship. If it was, what could go there instead? We asked ASGCA members to make some suggestions.

It didn't take long for Scottish golfer Robert MacIntyre to somewhat retract his call for the Road hole at St Andrews to be blown up. "You got both barrels," he said via social media. "Sorry 17th hole. All heat of the moment… nothing personal."

But by that time, it was too late. The wheels were in motion. We had already put the call out to ASGCA members to redesign the most famous hole on the most famous course in golf.

We waited.

We waited some more. "There are not many worse holes in world golf," MacIntyre had said. Surely someone would be happy to redesign it?

Finally, a response. "There are an almost unlimited number of golf holes that could be improved with some type of modification – the Road hole is not one of them," said Thad Layton, ASGCA.

This was shaping up to be one of the shortest articles in 20 years of *By Design*. More responses trickled in, but it wasn't getting any better. "The depth of character, uniqueness and history of the Old



Photo: Kevin Murray

course is something to be celebrated and preserved," said ASGCA Past President Doug Carrick.

Jeff Lawrence, ASGCA, replied: "The notion that a hole is 'outdated' simply because it doesn't conform to modern norms or is more challenging for current players can overlook the essence of what made those holes great in the first place."

Shawn Smith, ASGCA, refused too: "The strategy is simple with an angled green protected by one small bunker and the road on the backside. It dictates that the approach comes from the right side of the fairway. Getting there requires a blind tee shot over the hotel with out-of-bounds right creating a mental conundrum that makes it difficult to commit to the proper line."

It was clear we were going to have to call in some favors. We persisted, persuaded, and eventually received some proposals. All were provided reluctantly. And not all took it seriously.

Turn the page for a quartet of Road hole redesigns.



Kevin Norby, ASGCA

“Few holes strike fear in the hearts of golfers like the Road, historically one of the most difficult on the Open rota. It starts with one of the strangest and most intimidating tee shots in golf, over the Old Course Hotel to a completely blind landing area. Although the tee shot is unnerving and challenging, the fairway, which is shared by the second hole, is generous at over 40 yards wide. The real challenge comes at the approach with a very small green set diagonally to the line of play.

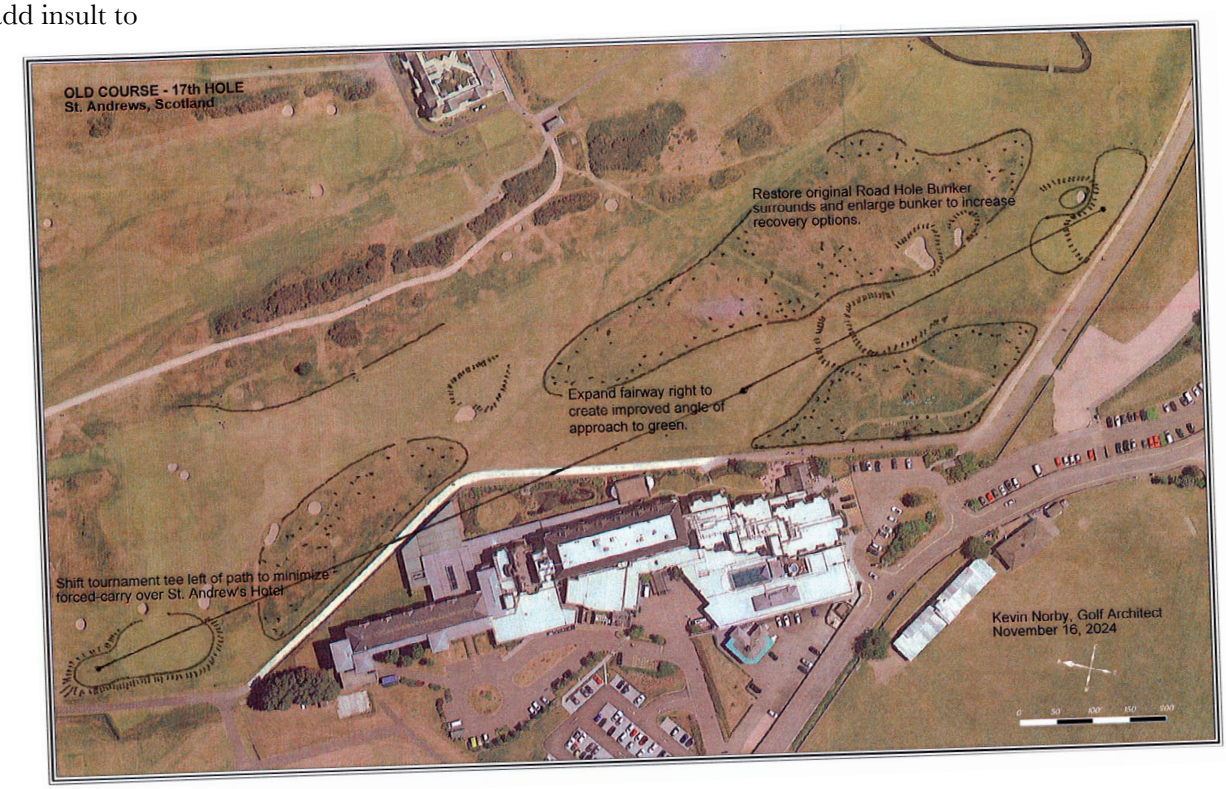
Any mishit or overly aggressive approach shots that stray over the green will end up on the road or potentially up against the adjacent stone wall. Then to add insult to injury, a small and very deep bunker is located just in front of the green and is contoured to gather any balls that come up short or spin back off the green. The result is that the margin between success and disaster on the approach is very small.

To change the hole significantly to make the hole more playable or ‘fairer’ would be considered by most to be sacrilege – me included. However, golf courses and golf holes are ever-changing and constantly evolving and the Road hole is no different. In 1910, it played as a par five at 458 yards. Some 50 years later the hole was played at 464 yards as a par four. In 2005 a new back tee at 495 yards was added and in 2015, in preparation for the Open, the bunker complex was reshaped and reconstructed to gather more balls.

The changes I might suggest would simply involve modifying the putting surface, enlarging the green slightly or widening and realigning the fairway.

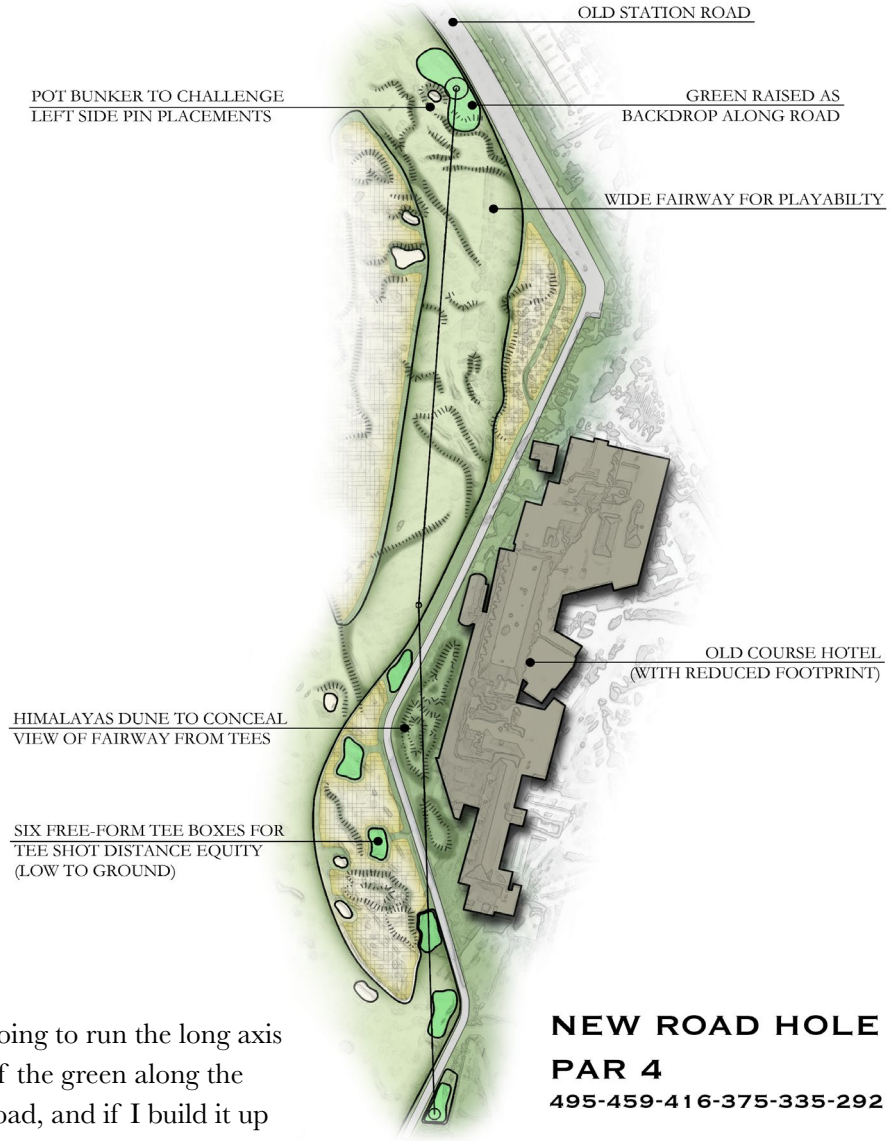
In my opinion, calls from golfers to ‘fix’ the Road hole are misguided. It may be quirky and one of the toughest holes in golf, but a complete blow-up would only serve to soften the course at a time when some might argue that the Old is no longer the best tournament course to test the best golfers in the world. One might even argue that the eighteenth should be modernized to better challenge those golfers.

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Richard Mandell, ASGCA



NEW ROAD HOLE
PAR 4
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"Apparently, MacIntyre wants a hole where he is able to "hit a golf shot into and not one where you just...try to get up and down." Well, just because it says par four on the card doesn't mean you are always entitled to two shots and two putts. When Allan Robertson designed that green, the concept of par wasn't on his radar.

Sure, I'll be glad to take the bait on a blow up. But I'll limit myself to redesigning the features within that land. As one who creates hazards that challenge rather than strictly penalize, a large dune along the line of play would be the perfect challenge to cut the corner. Now, I could take the traditional route and place it in the landing area of the hole, clearly visible from the tees and make the golfer physically carry it. But everyone does that. Since I'm a big fan of 'the principle of mystery', it's more fun to build a sizable feature blocking the view from the tee.

Now for the green: I'm stuck with a macadam road to the right and can't go much to the left because of the first green. But there's no reason that road can't act as a hazard. I'm going to run the long axis of the green along the road, and if I build it up along that side, approaches can use it as a backstop. But the green needs something on the left to challenge a back pin placement. A pot bunker would be an intriguing hazard. It would be historically appropriate, considering most man-made bunkers are revetted pots, and challenge those who overshoot a front pin placement.

I know, it's pretty similar to what is already there. That's because what's already there is great.

"I know it's pretty similar to what is already there. That's because what's already there is great"

But Robert, I'll give you something. Let's start with six tees so golfers can all have the same iron into the green rather than the same yardage. We'll keep them low and freeform, so they mimic the other landforms rather than forcing straight lines like the existing tee boxes. I'll widen the fairway to the right between the landing area and the green to help the higher handicappers. I can take or leave the left fairway bunkers because they only penalize poor shots. But because the Old course is the ultimate in historic relevance, let's keep them.

A few concessions for playability are fine, but blow it up? Not a good move in my book.



Nathan Crace, ASGCA



"For the record, I do not agree that any major changes are warranted. That said, I've always enjoyed all things hypothetical.

When the railroad line used to end near the seventeenth hole, coal sheds were built in that location so the steam-powered locomotives could restock. The blind shot disappeared for a while when the railroad station ceased operations, then was restored around the time the hotel was originally built. So, if we agree that the green is the hole's primary defense, the blind tee shot is part of the history and charm of the hole, and lengthening the hole to keep up with technology may have been detrimental, I thought, why not go in the opposite direction and make the hole shorter, yet more strategic from the tee? I therefore submit a proposal to shorten the hole by 100 yards.

The existing Scholar's and Progressing bunkers guarding the left side of the fairway remain, but I have added seven bunkers scattered around 265 yards from the championship tee to level with the front of the green (but out to the left to create an alleyway to the left of the green). At the 275-yard mark, the fairway would be three times the width it currently is to allow for any wayward shot that comes to rest within 20 feet of it. The green remains unchanged, but the player now has three different angles from different distances to play to the green and the long hitter has the option to make a bold play and thread the needle to get the ball down into the approach short left of the green. The question, however, is, given the usual pin placements, would that second shot be more difficult than playing a full wedge from farther back?

Lastly, while leaving the blind tee shot from the back tee may not allow the player to see all the new bunkers, part of the fun of links courses is finding things in one round and avoiding them the next. And as you move up the tees, you're not forced over the outbuildings and the new fairway and bunkers come into view.

Let the critical social media posts commence!

"Part of the fun of links courses is finding things in one round and avoiding them the next"

Assuming you have now climbed back into your chair, I would do this in conjunction with some additional bunkering and a considerably wider fairway – utilizing the area to the right to give more options than 'hit driver as hard as you can'. these multiple routes to the green. The as-yet unnamed bunkers would obviously resemble the bunkering throughout St Andrews, and the small bunker in the right side of the expanded fairway would mimic the Road bunker and swallow up





ASGCA Past President Forrest Richardson

"This approach to the Road hole leaves everything in place. No remodeling of tees, bunkers, fairway or green is necessary. By adding 48 bed-and-breakfast rooms among four new three-story buildings, a new dimension to strategy comes into focus. A drive placed left is still an option, but the bailout becomes a bit more complex. The drive hit right from the tee brings a new vertical hazard into the equation, although the Road bunker is still less an issue. Designed in the Scottish Baronial style, these new immovable obstructions are all part of the course – no relief.

Architectural features will include ballistic-glazed windows and dent-proof detailing. Guests will access their rooms from Old Station Road and can enjoy the entertainment from their windows as players negotiate one of the most famous holes in golf. Each building of the new hospitality operation will be named after a beloved St Andrews legend: Allan Robertson, considered the 'architect' of the Road hole; Walter Woods, St Andrews' iconic greenkeeper for 20 years; Alan McGregor, who helped to shape the Links Trust into its contemporary model; and Gordon McKie, who has left his mark on the modern links through preservation.

I admit being entertained by the idea – and its associated revenue estimated at more than £8 million per year – but gladly feel the Road hole can be left alone for another 175 years. ●

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