



Old Town Club

WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA

A bundle of tobacco profits and advice from Augusta National boss Cliff Roberts jumpstarted one of the Southeast's classiest golf institutions

by Dunlop White III • photography by L.C. Lambrecht

Unless you happen to live in the Piedmont Triad of North Carolina or follow Wake Forest University's golf program, you've probably not heard of the Old Town Club. Quietly traditional down to its very name, this 66-year-old Perry Maxwell design is anonymous to most but revered by all who know it.

Certainly, Old Town is not a name one would expect to find mentioned alongside such classics as Cypress Point, Pine Valley, Fishers Island, Seminole and Chicago Golf Club. But that's exactly where architect Tom Doak put it in his cult classic, "The Confidential Guide to Golf Courses," calling Old Town one of the top 10 "worth groveling to play."

Old Town is also an historical artifact. If the 1967 Austin Morris Traveler was the last "woodie" station wagon made with real wood and the New York Palace, which went dark in 1932, was the last of the big-time Vaudeville houses, the Old Town Club—argues Maxwell historian Chris Clouser—represents the closing of the so-called Golden Age of golf architecture. That era "probably ended with Old Town Club," Clouser writes, "because it remains the last significant design by any architect prior to [World War II]."

The club is located off Winston-Salem's beaten path, tucked between the Wake Forest campus and an affluent neighborhood known as Buena Vista.

Old Town's rolling 443-yard ninth hole demands an uphill approach from an awkward downhill-sidehill lie.



Its entrance is subtly marked and, for that matter, so is its first tee, situated just steps from the clubhouse door. “If it weren’t for these two tee markers, golfers would never know this was a tee,” says Kris Spence, a golf course restoration specialist from nearby Greensboro.

The club’s spirit of tradition continues to reveal itself throughout the 6,907-yard layout. Wooden flagsticks and cast-iron cups are throwbacks to yesteryear. Old stone walls—relics from the property’s previous incarnation as a horse farm—rise here and there on the course like ancient ruins. No tee times are required and groups “typically comprise five or six players,” says Jim Holt, Old Town’s gregarious club professional.

This relaxed, golf-for-golf’s-sake atmosphere has been in place since the club’s beginnings in 1938. That year a handful of Winston-Salem business leaders, all members at Forsyth Country Club, met to vent about the rapidly expanding membership that was crowding their beloved Donald Ross design. The movement for a new facility was led by Charlie Babcock, who managed the investment firm Reynolds & Company. Babcock and his wife, Mary Reynolds Babcock of the R.J. Reynolds tobacco family, donated 170 acres adjacent to their historic estate. (The estate, by the way, is now showcased as

Reynolda House, an art museum that’s listed on the National Register of Historic Places).

Clifford Roberts, co-founder of Augusta National Golf Club, played a significant role in Old Town’s early history. A skilled investment banker, Roberts was working for Babcock’s firm at the time. He had just employed Maxwell to toughen up holes 7 and 10 at ANGC and, delighted with the results, recommended that Babcock commission Maxwell to design his employer’s new course.

Roberts once accompanied Maxwell and Babcock around the construction site and encouraged them to merge adjacent greens at what would be the eighth and 17th holes. According to Blake Clarke, a long-time Augusta member, Roberts believed “a double green would make for interesting barroom discussions.” Maxwell, who harbored an undying affection for the Old Course at St. Andrews—home to seven double greens—readily embraced the concept.

Old Town quickly generated a buzz, at least locally, when it opened in November 1939: “It will immediately take rank as one of the South’s three great courses and as one of the nation’s 10 best,” the *Winston-Salem Journal* exclaimed. Maxwell had even higher expectations, pronouncing his newest design “one of the seven finest in the nation.”

The Babcocks had allowed Maxwell the luxury of

Old Town Club
WINSTON-SALEM, N.C.

Par: 70
Yards: 6,907
Year founded: 1938
Architect:
Perry Maxwell



essentially hand-picking the site from a vast expanse of fallow farmland. The landforms Maxwell found he left undisturbed, incorporating the site’s natural ridges, knolls, swales and ravines into his design. “Many an acre of magnificent land has been utterly destroyed by the steam shovel throwing up billows of earth,” Maxwell said of his minimalist approach.

Old Town turned out to have an open, linksland feel, and Clouser points out that Maxwell himself repeatedly identified the course as a links design. “[He] never labeled any of his other courses as a links,” says Clouser, “including Prairie Dunes, even though it’s possibly the closest course to fit that description today outside of Long Island.”

Old Town’s broad fairways are marked by varying degrees of slope, which generate many an awkward lie on approach shots. But it’s the green undulations, affectionately known as “Maxwell’s rolls,” that typically wreak the most havoc on scorecards. Architect Bill Coore says these greens are the most intricate in the Maxwell repertoire: “It was the artistic little bumps and rises here and there, which looked like someone just pushed them up from underneath with an air hose, that created their intimacy.”

In 2002 Old Town engaged Bobby Weed to restore the integrity of Maxwell’s design. The Florida-based architect implemented a modest tree-management program, expanded fairways back to their original widths and regrassed them with a Bermuda strain called TifSport. Weed associate Scot Sherman says TifSport permits a lower fairway cut, allowing balls to roll more as they do on the great U.K. courses. Native fescue grasses were re-established in peripheral locations, contributing to Old Town’s Early American look.

Weed lengthened nine holes to bring their intended

landing areas and shot values back into play. Case in point: the 422-yard, par-4 seventh, where golfers once again challenge three cross-bunkers—now located 245 yards from the tee—to gain the ideal approach angle. Likewise, Weed extended the 448-yard 18th to recapture a distinct upslope in the landing zone. Today this muscular finishing hole effectively plays 60 yards longer than in its original form, reviving the long-iron approach envisioned by Maxwell.

The par-70 configuration includes only two par-5s, but both are strong, particularly No. 17. Stretching 605 yards, it demands three full swings to clear a creek fronting the double green.

Thanks to its proximity to Wake Forest, Old Town has been an ideal proving ground for the Demon Deacons’ storied golf program. In fact, it was the Babcocks who were instrumental in relocating the school to Winston-Salem from the eastern part of North Carolina in the mid-1950s, donating a portion of their estate for a new campus just north of the golf course.

The course groomed a distinguished list of Wake golfers and future tour pros, including Curtis Strange, Lanny Wadkins, Scott Hoch, Jay Haas, Billy Andrade, Jay Sigel, Len Mattiace and Laura Diaz. “Old Town offers so many varied challenges,” says Wadkins, “it is the best course for training serious young golfers.”

Over the years, Old Town has mostly avoided hosting non-member events. The Purvis Ferree Cup, an annual fourball competition that boasts a national field, is the main exception, and in recent years the club has hosted a U.S. Open qualifier and a USGA Senior Amateur qualifier. But that’s about as high-profile as it gets for an institution that’s perfectly secure in its legacy as a bastion of tradition and subtlety. ●

Opposite page: The penalty is evident for a too-short approach into the 407-yard eighth. Above: A more expansive look at No. 8 (left flagstick) and the green it shares with the par-5 17th.