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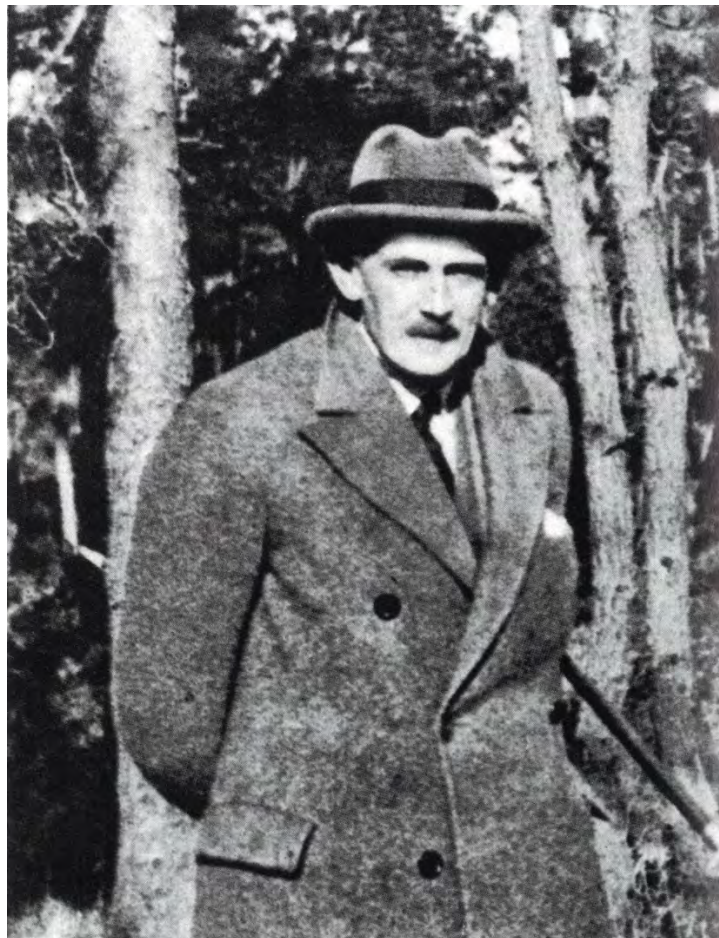
Article Regarding The Restoration Of The Golf Course Hirono Golf Club

By Martin Ebert

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If we were fortunate to be commissioned, we knew that this would be a project to relish when we first had contact with the committee at Hirono. The committee was named 'The Restoration Committee'. Nothing could be closer to our hearts, especially when we saw the plans which C.H. Alison had drawn up and also the incredible archive of photographs which the Club held from the 1930s, shortly after the course opened on 19th June 1932. Alison had been asked to design Tokyo Golf Club but, during his 3 months in Japan, he was asked to look at numerous other sites for courses and Hirono turned out to be the most famous of them.



C.H. Alison

I vividly recall looking at the layout and photos of the course in the World Atlas of Golf as a boy but could never have imagined that I would one day be asked to provide input to such a famous Club. The opportunity to view the course has revealed a wonderful layout with no weak holes at all. The topography could be described as ideal for golf, containing enough movement throughout without it producing a tough walk. There are many distinct ravines and softer valleys which feature on so many of the holes. As was usual for Colt & Alison's courses, the four par 3s really stand out as inspired although interestingly they are all odd numbered so surely Alison must have asked if there was much likelihood of foursomes golf being played on the course! The par 5 15th is regarded by the members as perhaps the best hole but this could be partly as a result of Jack Nicklaus being the first man to hit the green in two shots in the 1960s!



The par 3 7th hole

Following two visits to work up proposals and discuss the project with the Restoration Committee, we were commissioned. The strong brief was to restore the great work which Alison left although, at this point, reference should be made to the significant input of Seiichi Takahata, who found the site and was one of the founders, and Chozo Itoh, the first Course Superintendent. They were the key figures who had the task of implementing Alison's design as he spent less than a week in Kobe to study the land and draw up his design. The wonderful character of the bunkering shown in the early photos had led to the comparison with Pine Valley although Hirono is not blessed with Pine Valley's sandy soil. That shows what an amazing job was done by the construction team in those early days and we have photographs showing the workers in action creating the huge and beautifully shaped carry bunker at the 18th hole.



The 18th hole under construction



The 18th hole shortly after opening

We added to the archive by tracking down old aerial photography of the course from the 1940s and 1960s. Along with Alison's plans and the Club's photographs, these showed that the greens had become smaller, the fairways had become much narrower, the bunkers had lost their shape, character and roughness and the trees had grown significantly although the original course was cut through pine woodland. Only one hole had been significantly extended and, in fact, that had happened twice with new greens being pushed back on both occasions. That was the par 5 12th and the second extension had led to the par 3 13th hole being played from a new tee at right angles to Alison's hole. The original playing line of the par 3 was something which the Committee was very keen to restore back to its original playing line.



Alison's 13th hole

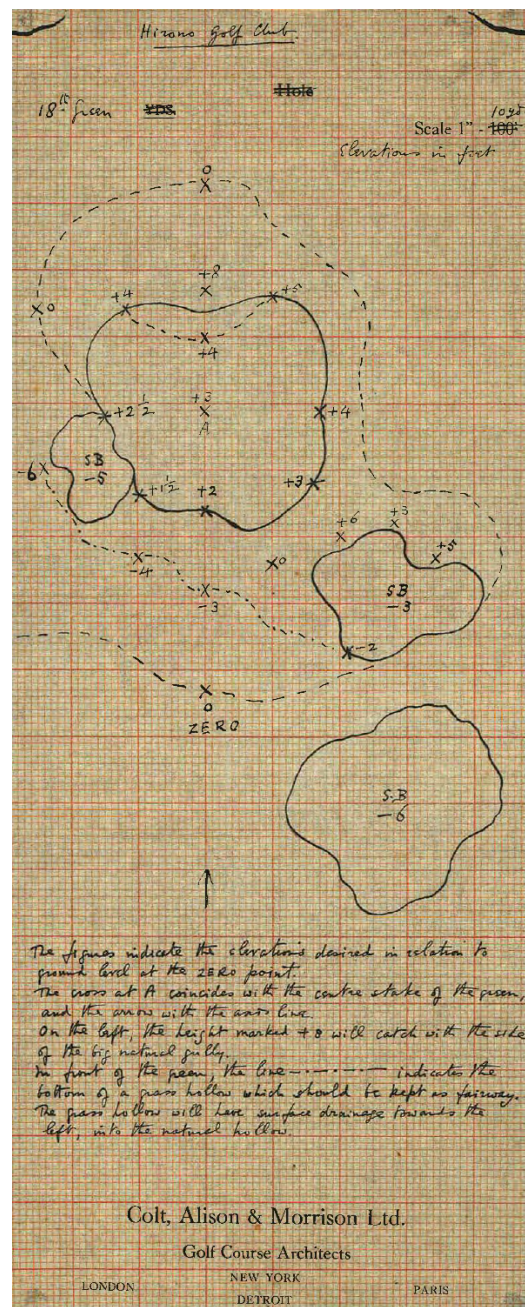
We also studied the results of the most recent elite events at the course including the Japan Open of 2005 and the Japan Amateur in 2012. It was interesting to see how the holes played in those two tournaments.

Having completed all of the research, one of our main recommendations was to restore the bunkering although we warned that this would increase the maintenance demands. The members of the Committee were in complete agreement.



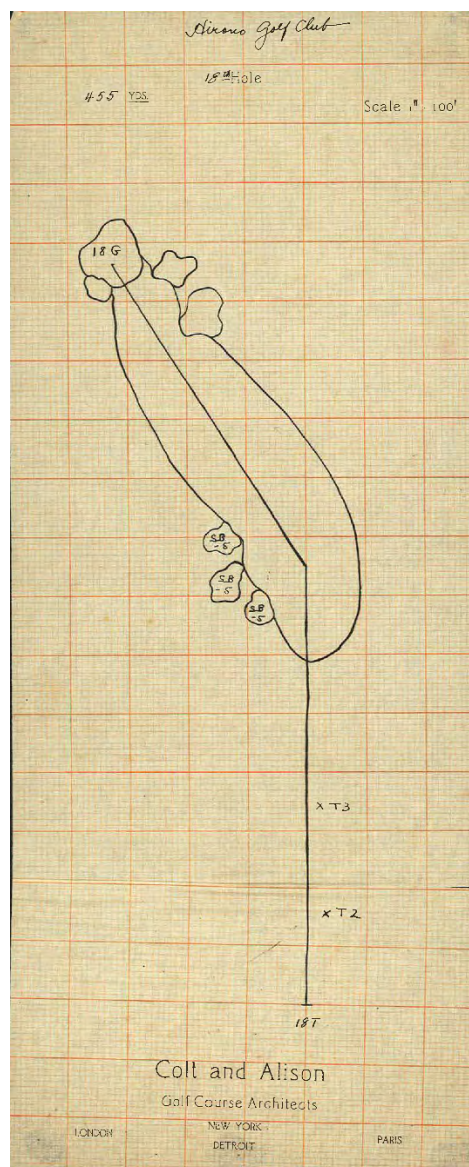
Incredible bunkering evident at the 7th hole

The Club were also keen to rebuild the greens. Alison had drawn up green plans but the greens had been rebuilt in the 1980s when they were converted to bent grass. Our belief was that the contours would have been changed in that process. It was not the easiest task to interpret Alison's plans but he defined the general elevations of the greens and the key features, often quite high mounds at the rear of the greens. Our knowledge of Colt & Alison courses led us to conclude that Alison would have wanted more artfully shaped surfaces. We invited members of the Committee to the British Isles to see and play some Colt & Alison courses and some others where their input was not so significant but where the greens were good models for Hirono. We took them to St. George's Hill, Swinley Forest, Royal Cinque Ports, Royal St. George's, Royal County Down and Royal Portrush and that was very helpful to debate the shaping of the greens.



We also recommended that the greens should be restored closer to their original sizes and to the plan shapes which Alison had drawn although his drawings showed greens meeting with bunkers as was the style at the time. Hence, we were constrained to some extent on this but the greens we have designed are much larger than those found on our initial visit.

The same applied to the fairways. They had become almost ridiculously narrow over the years. We scaled Alison's plans and overlaid them. They were enormously wide. The 1960s aerial photograph also showed much wider fairways although not as wide as Alison had drawn. Following consultation with the Committee, we settled on significant widening of the fairways although there was concern that this would make the course too easy. We have countered that by adding fairway bunkers to tighten the landing areas for the better players. While this falls out of the 'restoration' concept, we feel that this is what Alison would recommend if he had the opportunity to revisit the course today with a knowledge of how the game is now played. That same principle has been used to recommend the removal of some bunkers which are really no longer relevant, although less so than on most projects of this nature as the bunkering landscape which Alison imagined is so much a part of the character of Hirono.



Alison's hole plan for the 18th hole

The trees are an interesting subject. There is no doubt that we found too many when we made out initial visit and that significant clearance was required but the site Alison found did have a significant amount of trees and the original course was tree lined to a large degree. Also, some of the trees which have grown or been planted have added to the beauty of the course.



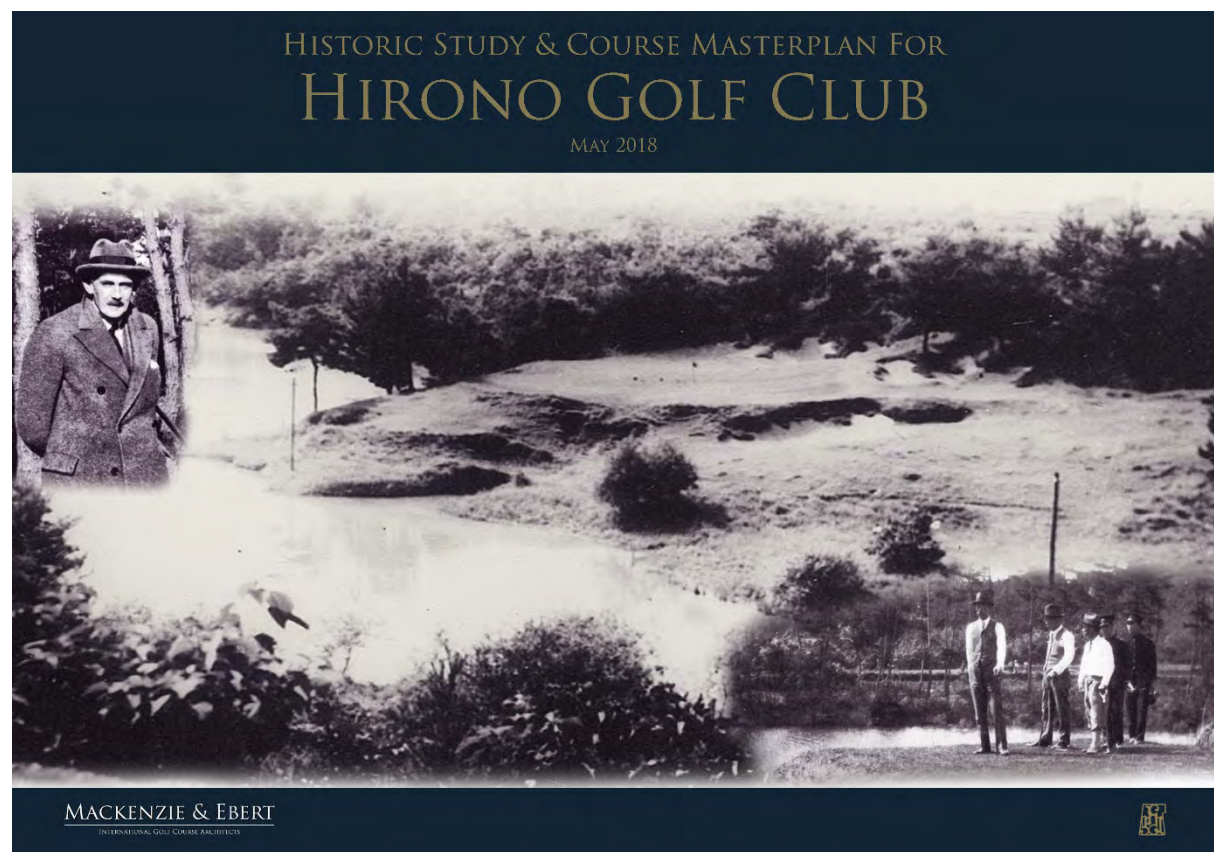
Planning the course amongst the trees



The tree lined course soon after opening

Golf courses in Japan have a wonderful diversity of character throughout the year. The spring sees the flowering trees, most notably the cherry trees, come to the fore. The summer heat and high rainfall results in a very green and vibrant course. In the autumn, the incredible colours and hues of the maple trees, which are interspersed amongst the pines, are a marvellous spectacle. Finally, winter takes hold but, in some ways, the playing conditions are the best and could be described as almost links like. The korai (zoysia) fairways turn brown but are so tight and firm running, the noshiha grass rough turns white and the bent grass greens remain green, providing a very attractive contrast of tones. The policy with the trees is to remove evergreen species such as leylandii, all imported American pines which are straight and lacking in character and to open up old vistas which have disappeared by thinning stands of woodland which have become denser over the years. As a result, the Japanese pine trees, so many of which have wonderful shapes, have been given more freedom to be admired, some cherry trees, but not all, have been removed and the maples, in general, have been retained.

The design process we have followed has been to make a thorough historical study to form a bass for our proposals. A Draft Masterplan was drawn up which was discussed with the Committee before a final set of proposals were agreed. These were illustrated with visualisations based on drone photographs. These were presented to the membership which accepted the recommendations without any complaint or concern over the nature of the proposals or losing their course while the work is carried out.





5th Hole Existing



5th Hole Visualisation



7th Hole Existing



7th Hole Visualisation



18th Hole Existing



18th Hole Visualisation

We then embarked upon the detailed design exercise producing green plans which define the levels at 6.25cm intervals and the rest of the proposals with 25cm contours. Existing vegetation, top soil stripping, earth movement, drainage, irrigation and proposed vegetation plans have been drawn up to define the works along with a detailed specification and bill of quantities with the assistance of the Club's General Manager, Katsuhisa Takatsuka, the Club's Course Manager Hiroya Kitatani and the agronomist for the project, Noriaki Aoki.

Two contractors were asked to price the work and Takenaka were awarded the contract aided by Nihon Turf Management working as a sub-contractor. The Club understood the need for specialist shaping skills and our feeling was that a shaper solely focusing on the bunkers would be important for this project as well as utilising the skills of a green shaper. Quinn Thomson from Chicago, who has a lot of experience working in Japan, is carrying out all of the detailed bunker shaping and Raf Oczkowski, from Poland but based in Scotland, is shaping up the greens and rough shaping the bunkers before Quinn gets to work. We have also enlisted the input of a specialist greens finisher, Andy Bennett, to ensure that the final touches to the green contours will maximise the potential of their surfaces.

The greens are being built with a stone carpet and an intermediate layer and the shapes are being finalised with the stone layers rather than exactly at the base stage. That has worked really well with the contractor being very diligent in setting out the levels according to the detailed plans and approvals are being given with a three-weekly visit schedule.

Construction commenced in early January of this year. The programme is very demanding with all of the greens to be seeded by mid May and all other areas turfed. This will hopefully allow establishment of the greens before the usual heavy summer rains. Assuming that all goes to plan, the opening of the course for the members will be in early October.

After less than two months of work, we are right on schedule which is a remarkable achievement given the periods of wet weather during this period.



1st Hole



7th Hole



13th Hole

Working in Japan for the first time has been a tremendous experience. The beautiful landscape has been a joy to see. The respectful nature of everyone we have met has made it very easy to operate and the efficiency and hard work of everyone involved has been remarkable. Communication was always going to be critical but excellent interpreting skills have been provided by Rina Takatsuka for the Club and by Syogo Tani on behalf of the contractor.

The Club has been excellent to deal with throughout and the General Manager, Katsuhisa Takatsuka has coordinated all of the meetings in an extremely organised way. The Committee has been led by the Club Captain, Yasunobu Morimoto and the Club's Chairman, Kazunobu Suzuki and the President, Hidefumi Inui, have been fully supportive of the proposals. The Committee has been fully engaged in the process and has taken a real interest in the progress of construction which is not always the case with projects like these.

We hope that the golfers of Hirono will be delighted with the results of the project having been so understanding of losing their course for the best part of a year. We will have succeeded in our task if there is a feeling that we have done justice to Alison's, Takahata's and Itoh's original design and work and that we have also retained the distinctly Japanese character of the course.

Drone Photos Taken By Chris Huggett Of Mackenzie & Ebert



7th Hole



7th Hole



11th Green



11th Green



13th Green



14th Green



18th Green



18th Green



10th & 15th Greens



Quinn shaping a bunker at the 6th



Raf shaping the 4th green



Martin cycling up the 12th fairway – Environmentally responsible site transport!