

100 Years of Golf at Essex

by Jeff Mingay and Richard H. Carr

This year, Essex Golf and Country Club celebrates its 100th anniversary. The following excerpts are from a new book by local golf historian and author Jeff Mingay, and former Walkerville resident Richard H. Carr, entitled: "One Hundred Years: A History of Essex Golf & Country Club, 1902-2002" (published by The Walkerville Publishing Company, © 2002).



On the porch at Walkerville Country Club, circa 1900



Members of Oak Ridge Golf Club lounging on the front porch of the clubhouse on the Yawkey Farm in Sandwich, Ontario, circa 1909.



*Gordon MacGregor:
"the best 18-hole golf course west of Toronto"*



*Donald Ross:
Golf's first "superstar"*

Today golf is one of the most popular sports in the world. But one hundred years ago, golf in Canada was in its infancy. Recognized golf clubs had been established in Victoria, British Columbia; in Brantford, Toronto, Kingston and Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario; and Montreal and Quebec City. But there were few others. And those that did exist had a very difficult time recruiting members to sustain themselves.

Walkerville Country Club

As is the case with many seminal local historical events, this story begins in Walkerville.

Legendary American businessman Hiram Walker developed a fine reputation for the quality of his whisky. From the remarkable success of Walker's industry was born a prosperous little town bearing his name.

With success comes expendable time and monies that could be dedicated to recreation and leisure. In the late 1880s, Walker and his family established the Walkerville Country Club.

Although the game of golf was by no means a popular activity at the time, Walker laid out a rudimentary nine-hole course for members of his country club at some point prior to 1900 on the current site of Walkerville Collegiate High School and Willistead Crescent. This makes Walkerville Country Club one of the first golf courses in the Windsor-Detroit area.

For the record, the Country Club of Detroit, which is generally acknowledged as the oldest golf-related club in the area, was established with an 18-hole golf course in 1897. Two years later, Detroit Golf Club was incorporated.

Due to the absence of proper engineering, the Walkerville course drained very poorly and was unplayable for extended periods of time following rain. There was also an absence of ground contour, sand bunkers and other obstacles, which made golf in Walkerville rather bland.

George Mair and a number of other disgruntled Walkerville golfers soon decided that a more suitable course was not only desirable, but necessary.

By 1902, assisted principally by his wife and a "Mr. Greenhill," Mair had successfully solicited support from an enthusiastic group of Walkerville and Windsor area golfers – enough support to warrant the establishment of a new club, which they called Oak Ridge Golf Club. Appropriately, Mair was elected the new club's first president.

Men like Mair involved with the organization of North America's first golf clubs could not have imagined that one hundred years later historians would want to know how and when the game took root in their city. As a result, historical documents, photographs and other information regarding the establishment of many golf clubs are scarce.

Oak Ridge Golf Club

Fortunately, the establishment of Oak Ridge was chronicled, albeit briefly, in the January 1916 edition of *The Canadian Golfer* magazine.

"It was about fifteen years ago that Windsor and Walkerville had a joint club at Walkerville, but the course was not a very suitable one, becoming almost unplayable in wet weather. Through the kindness of Mr. Thos. Austin of Detroit, son-in-law of the late Mr. Yawkey, a multimillionaire, who owned a large tract of land in and adjoining Sandwich, Mr. Mair, the first President of the new club, and the members were most generously offered the use, free of charge, of a thirty-four-hundred-yard golf course on his farm."

The club was successful from its inception, and subsequently 44 acres were rented adjoining Mr. Yawkey's farm from a Mr. Freeman of Detroit. Largely through the efforts of the late Mrs. Mair, who secured subscriptions from members and friends, a small clubhouse was erected on this property and the game of golf prospered apace.

For nearly a decade, Oak Ridge Golf Club enjoyed great success on the Yawkey and Freeman Farms in Sandwich. Enthusiasm for the game of golf and the general activities of the club had grown tremendously in just eight years.



courtesy Essex Golf and Country Club

These photographs of golfers on the Prince Farm course were taken for an advertisement for Ford Motor Co. in 1919.

Besides the fact Oak Ridge directors could no longer justify the exorbitant cost of leasing the Yawkey and Freeman lands, the golf course and clubhouse were quickly being rendered incapable of accommodating the increasing demands of a growing membership.

Plans to move the club were underway in 1909 when Oak Ridge directors exercised an option to purchase a 53-acre property, located at the intersection of Centre Road (today Prince Road) and the Essex Terminal Railway line in Sandwich from the heirs of the late Colonel John Prince.

Having essentially been evicted from the Yawkey and Freeman owned lands, Oak Ridge members were granted permission to play golf on the old, hapless Walkerville course while their new layout on the Prince Farm was under construction.

During their first season spent golfing at Walkerville Country Club in 1910, Oak Ridge members exhibited a ripe, infectious enthusiasm for their ambitious plans. Soon, a significant number of Walkerville golfers opted to join Oak Ridge. The end result was a genuine amalgamation between the two clubs that warranted the creation of an entirely new club.

The Birth of Essex

In October that year, with a formidable capital of \$40,000, Essex County Golf & Country Club was incorporated under an Ontario Provincial Charter. Despite this, Essex members were forced to play on the Walkerville course for yet another season. The new Essex course opened for play on the Prince Farm in the spring of 1912, and the old Walkerville layout was happily abandoned.

It is unknown who originally laid out the Prince Farm golf course, which consisted of just nine holes during its first two years of existence.

In 1913, Essex directors secured a \$20,000 loan from a "Mr. Arthur Doumouchelle" of the Township of Sandwich West in order to purchase a 54-acre property adjoining the existing course for the sole purpose of expanding it to 18 holes. No records have been discovered indicating who laid-out the nine-hole addition. Nonetheless, an 18-hole course was in play by the spring of 1915.

And yet, many Essex members were still dissatisfied with the overall quality of the Prince Farm course. There was a definite consensus that it had too many short holes and not enough in the way of sand bunkers and contour in the putting greens.

During the club's annual meeting held on January 24, 1916, Essex director Gordon M. McGregor, suggested that more land was required if indeed Essex was to have "the best 18-hole golf course west of Toronto." But, at the time, the club could not afford to purchase more land, nor pay an expert to renovate the course.

This, however, did not discourage McGregor, a self-made millionaire who co-founded the Ford Motor Company of Canada along with Detroit industrialist Henry Ford in 1904. Shortly thereafter, McGregor personally purchased an additional seven acres of adjacent land owned by the Woollot family for \$5,000. He then agreed to sell the property to the club at cost when appropriate funds were readily available.

Unfortunately, no photographs of the Prince Farm course have been located. And its exact layout is a distant, incoherent memory.

The Move to Matchette

By 1919, there was a general feeling amongst Essex members that the club was losing its "country club" appeal to the rapidly growing City of Windsor. There was concern that the Prince Farm would soon to be engulfed by urban development, and further expansion of club facilities would be severely limited. Property taxes were steadily rising as well with the growth of the area.

Moving the club to a more rural location – where a new and improved golf course and an attractive new clubhouse could be constructed – became a popular option.

Almost immediately a tract of land in the village of St. Clair Beach along Lake St. Clair was considered. But it was not purchased. Presumably, the establishment of the St. Clair Golf Club (today Lakewood Golf Club) in 1919, and Beach Grove Golf & Country Club in 1921, deterred Essex directors from venturing east of the City of Windsor.

Essex directors purchased 14 individual farms on Matchette Road, bounded by what were

planned to be International Avenue to the north and Marcella Street to the south, Matchette Road to the east and the Essex Terminal Railway line to the west. The total land purchase amounted to exactly 125.39 acres, and a total cost of \$106,049.50.

The next step was to select an architect to design the course that would indeed be the "best course west of Toronto." As a side note, Gordon MacGregor passed away in 1922 – he never lived to play on his vaulted dream golf course.

By the time Essex directors decided to engage Donald Ross to layout the club's new "18-hole championship golf course" on Matchette Road in LaSalle, Ross had completed several notable courses in the Detroit area; fifteen in all, including the famous North and South courses at Oakland Hills Country Club, 36 holes at Detroit Golf Club, Grosse Ile, Franklin Hills, and Windsor's Roseland Park.

His talent and abilities as a golf architect were well advertised to Essex directors. They were easily convinced Ross was indeed the man for the job. In fact, there is no evidence another golf architect was considered.

Ross' remarkable reputation as a competitive golfer, a respected teacher and an accomplished greenkeeper preceded him as well. He is widely acknowledged as America's first golf superstar.

Today, he is credited with laying out some 399 golf courses across North America. According to his biographer, Bradley S. Klein, author of "Discovering Donald Ross, the Architect and his Golf Courses" (Sleeping Bear Press, 2001), Ross visited approximately 75% per cent of those courses in person. *This in an era when the principle mode of transportation was by train!*

Donald Ross designed the Matchette Road course, but it was Essex' longtime greenkeeper, John Gray, who built it. When it came time for Ross to appoint a supervisor for the construction of the new Essex course in 1928, Gray's previous ex-

perience in golf course construction was invaluable.

There are certain Ross courses, such as Essex, acknowledged to be superior to others. Some benefited from the natural topography of the given land, or a healthy construction budget. Others profited from Ross' personal time on site.

With Ross' frequent absences, however, the man charged with supervising the course construction had a significant impact on the overall quality of the finished product. Modifications to an architect's drawn plans are not out of the ordinary. Thus, an educated, experienced foreman is required to successfully execute those necessary changes in the field.

Construction of the Matchette Road course began in May 1928. It was to be the last of 16 Donald-Ross-designed golf courses constructed in the Windsor-Detroit area between 1910 and 1929.

When he arrived at Essex, Ross was arguably the busiest golf architect in the world. Based on accounts, he visited the Matchette Road site personally at least once. However, there is no evidence suggesting a second visit.

Throughout 15 months of construction and grow-in on Matchette Road, Gray supervised up to 135 men and 80 teams of horses. The Matchette Road course was completed in 1929.

It is interesting to note that Ross' original plans for the course do not denote par. According to "Pinehurst, North Carolina's Outlook" newspa-

per, Ross was "of the puritan school, a lover of the old Scotch foursome." He abhorred the lavish use of a scorecard.

When the new Essex opened for play in July 1929, it measured 6,683 total yards and played to a scorecard par of 72. Then, the 461-yard fourth hole was labelled a par 5. It was amended to par 4 in 1965 on advice from Royal Canadian Golf Association officials who rated the course that year.



courtesy John Gray

John Gray: "Mr. Essex"



An aerial photo of Essex taken in 1998. Note the water tank at centre – an Essex landmark. In 1953, the original wooden tank erected in 1929 was replaced with a new steel tank at a cost of \$7,925.

As a result, total par for the course is now a challenging 71. Its total length has changed very little in the intervening years, measuring 6,703 yards from the back tees today.

John Gray was greenkeeper at Essex until his sudden death in 1958, at the age of 73; he was simply “Mr. Essex” to all who knew him.

Essex Golf and Country has earned a deserved reputation as one of the finest courses in North America – if not the world.

The course has hosted major tournaments, including the Men’s Canadian Open Championship in 1976 and the LPGA du Maurier Championship in 1998. And in July, the club will stage the 2002 AT&T Canada Senior Open, from July 1-7 (see sidebar).



Golf legend Jack Nicklaus driving at the 1976 Canadian Open

According to golf architect Bruce A. Hepner of Renaissance Golf Design, Inc., “the original design at Essex is the perfect blend of complex putting surfaces matched with the varying lengths of tee and approach shots. It is a golf course that, throughout the years, has challenged every type of golfer from the greats of the game to your average “Sunday afternoon” member.

Remarkably, 73 years after it opened for play, the Matchette Road course continues to exemplify Ross’ brilliance as a golf architect and a labour of love that was John Gray’s.

from “One Hundred Years: A History of Essex Golf and Country Club, 1902-2002”, by Jeff Mingay and Richard H. Carr, The Walkerville Publishing Co., © 2002