

The great British golf course architect, Mackenzie Ross, famously said that a great golf hole is one which ‘puts a question mark into the player’s mind when he arrives on the tee to play it’. I can’t think of a course which has more question marks than Prestwick Golf Club.

As if to illustrate this point, it is a childish but hugely enjoyable exercise to witness a group of Americans, who have never played Prestwick before, arrive for the first time on the tee of the 3rd, otherwise known as Cardinal. This is that extraordinarily eccentric par 5, which bends around to the right, following the line of the Pow Burn, and features the devilish, sleeper-faced Cardinal bunker. A lot of observation, discussion and contemplation ensues; but it soon becomes abundantly apparent that none of them have the remotest idea of where they should be hitting. The outspoken American player-turned-commentator, Johnny Miller, was thinking along similar lines to Mackenzie Ross when he – slightly less delicately – suggested that every great course needs a hole which “puckers your rear end”.

In case you didn’t know, Mr Miller, Prestwick has a bunch of these; and they start rather early in your round.

The Course

There can be few more intimidating places to stand than on the first tee at Prestwick. A couple of yards behind you, you can feel the gaze of the Secretary, boring into the back of your head from his office; and however hard you try to ignore it, you cannot help but see the Ayr-Glasgow railway line, running tight (very tightly) all the way down the right side of the hole.

If you are going to build a stone wall to stop golf balls shooting out of bounds onto a railway line, then you need to build it 33 feet high rather than three-and-a-half feet. The latter construction provides little obstacle to the nervy first-shot-of-the-day-played-when-you’re-a-touch-stiff slice. From the first tee, the fairway is only just visible and looks



‘Prestwick is the prototype from which everything else originated...’

impossibly narrow; and a bail out left seems suicidal due to thick heather.

A man has enough trouble striking it straight and true in such circumstances, without the added threat of the public address system at Prestwick station (no more than a mashie niblick from the tee) announcing that the 10.19 to Glasgow Central has been delayed because of leaves on the line!

Despite the difficulties, I once heard Bernard Darwin witness a two at this glorious 346-yard par-4 opener (not surprisingly called ‘Railway’) by someone who hit the railway line twice, his first shot rebounding into the middle of the fairway, and his second rebounding into the hole! The romantic in me wants to believe this is a true story, but the fact that Darwin never wrote about it may suggest it is more folklore than reality.

Darwin loved Prestwick, probably more than any other course in the world. “A man is probably less likely to be contradicted in

lauding Prestwick than in singing the praises of any other course in Christendom,” he wrote. “One might almost say that Prestwick has no enemies. To say of a human being that he has no enemies is almost to insinuate that he is just a little bit colourless and insipid; but those adjectives have certainly no application to Prestwick, which has a very decided character of its own.”

In many ways, Prestwick is the most classic of all the classic courses in the British Isles. It is old-fashioned, eccentric, traditional links golf at its very best, with all the inherent quirks and characteristics which this implies. Many of the fairways look like moonscapes; with humps, bumps and hollows all over the place. At 6,910 yards, it is certainly not long when compared with modern behemoths; and yet if you stray from the straight and narrow, the penalties are very severe; as the myriads of golf balls in the formidable, coarse rough, heather and briars will testify. There are also blind shots galore; a particular problem for modern-day professionals apparently, who regard these as ‘unfair’. Poor diddums! A century-and-a-half ago, blind shots were all part of the ‘challenge’ of the game.

The greens on many of the holes are the size of thumb-nails and have slopes on them which are knock-me-over-with-a-feather astonishing. “The greens at Prestwick are there all right,” comments the great American writer, Dan Jenkins, “but you never see them until you are on them, which is usually eight or 10 strokes after leaving the tee”.

For those who know about golf courses and golf course architecture, Prestwick is the prototype from which everything else originated. I happened to be playing golf at Prestwick (where I am a member) the day after Brenna Cepelak took exception to being dumped by Nick Faldo, attacking his Porsche 959 with a 9-iron and causing £10,000 of damage. The story was all over the front page of the tabloids, which I had glanced at over breakfast. As I climbed the hill to the 2nd tee, I spotted a figure with a camera, taking pictures of the huge bunker in front of

‘Lunch at Prestwick is arguably the finest golf lunch in the world’



the 17th green and then noticed it was Faldo (who I knew a bit having ghost-written his column in *Golf World* for several years). He saw me and made it plain he'd rather not talk; perhaps nervous I wanted a quote from him. This was not the first time I had been shown a cold shoulder by Faldo, so I persevered and asked him what he was up to. He replied that he was doing research for some big design jobs, trying to get some ideas about bunkering.

Faldo, in my opinion, designs golf courses nearly as well as he used to play them. He told me that if you wanted to get some original design ideas, there was nowhere better to go than Prestwick – better even than the Old Course at St Andrews. This was only a couple of years after he had won his sixth Major. Can you imagine Jack Nicklaus, or Greg Norman, traipsing around some dunes, with a camera and no golf clubs, a couple of years after they had won a Major?

Looking back, it is not that surprising Faldo sees Prestwick as a breeding ground for original design ideas; and yet a modern architect would never dare build the greens at the 13th or 15th holes, for example, for fear of being rushed off to the funny farm! And there are whole holes which fit into the same category. The 5th (the original 'Himalayas' from which so many other courses have borrowed the name for one of their holes) is a blind 205-yard par 3, played over a massive dune, to a well-bunkered green.

At the 15th, 'Narrows', (the first hole of the final 'loop', often used in after-dinner matches) you can split the pencil-thin fairway with your tee shot, and still find yourself about eight yards from rough on either side, and then you are faced with a blind approach to another heavily sloping and treacherous green.

The 17th was described by six-time Open Champion, Harry Vardon, as "the finest hole to be found on any links". It is called 'Alps', and is unlike any hole anywhere in the world. Your drive has to be long enough to convince you that you can carry the enormous dune ahead, with your second shot. Only a well-



'Prestwick is an incredibly special Club, quite unlike any other'

stuck mid-iron will suffice; and more often than not you scamper up the dune, full of hope at seeing your ball on the green, only to discover it has been devoured by the horribly deep and deeply horrible Sahara bunker.

Like all the hazards at Prestwick, this bunker has seen a lot of history, and it was from here that Freddie Tait played his miraculous 'water' shot in the final of the 1899 Amateur Championship, when his ball was floating in the flooded bunker, and he somehow clipped it onto the green.

The History

You can, of course, play and enjoy Prestwick without knowing anything about any of the history; but to do so is a bit like wandering into the Sistine Chapel and gazing up at Michelangelo's 'The Creation of Adam' without knowing who the hell Adam is.

Prestwick is the birthplace of the Open Championship. It held the first 12 Opens. It has held 24 Opens in all, the first in 1860 and the last in 1925.

"The first Open, which took place on October 17, 1860, was arranged to tie in with the Autumn meeting," says Andrew Lochhead, the Club archivist. "Eight Scottish professionals played three rounds of 12 holes in a single day, and Willie Park Snr beat Old Tom [Morris] by two strokes. A year later, it was open to amateurs as well; and two of them joined 10 professionals. There was no prize money in the first three Opens, and then in 1863 a prize fund of £10 was raised, and shared between the second, third and fourth players. The winner, of course, won the famous red leather Belt with the silver buckle."

Quite what Willie Park and those seven professionals who teed it up in 1860 would make of this year's Open at Royal Lytham, with its huge tented village and £5 million prize fund, is open to conjecture. The fact remains that for a small Club of gentlemen to start something such as the Open Championship is quite an achievement. At this point, the R&A of course, had no involvement at all with the Open.

Young Tom won the Belt for the third year running in 1870, and so was allowed to keep it forever. That meant there was no prize to be played for in 1871, and so no Championship took place. This sparked an alliance between Prestwick, Musselburgh and the Royal & Ancient, who agreed to commission a Claret Jug, and start a rotation system to host the Open. In 1882, Old Tom was called back from St Andrews, to extend the course at Prestwick, from 12 to 18 holes. The rest, as they say, is history. And at Prestwick, it is everywhere you look.

"Prestwick has, I fancy, been the scene of more disasters that have passed into history than any other course," writes Darwin. "The Road Hole at St Andrews may possibly hold the individual record, but surely Prestwick comes first in point of collective devilry; Willie Park's catastrophe at the Alps, James Braid's celebrated eight at the Cardinal in 1908 (I can still in nightmares see his ball glancing off the sleepers and into the burn) Mr Hilton's eight at the Himalayas in 1898.

Above left: Prestwick's ties – the one on the left is the touring tie, and has green (for the course) red (for the house Claret) and white (for the Club's favourite tippie, Kummel). Below left: Just look at the bumps and borrows on Prestwick's first hole, which has the Ayr-Glasgow line as OB all the way down the right.



I do not know how many shots Willie Campbell took when he sliced at the 16th, but General Whigham says the bunker is still known as Willie Campbell's grave. Holes and bunkers that can bring down great men with so terrible a crash deserve great names and in these Prestwick is rich; the Slough of Despond, Purgatory, the Goose Dubs, Lion's Den, the Pill Box, the Precentor's Desk and Sandy Neuk."

Some of these, it is true, were on the original 12-hole course which measured 3,799 yards and had a first hole which measured 578 yards. When you look at it, it is staggering that more people weren't hit playing this original 12-hole layout, because the number of 'crossovers' is quite extraordinary (five at one hole!) with holes crisscrossing and sharing fairways all over the place. But, what you have to remember is this was quite normal over a century ago; when blind shots were numerous and shouts of 'Fore!' filled the air.

"It's not practical to let the 12-hole course be played nowadays," says Lochhead, "because of the extra work it creates for the greenkeeping staff. Our 18-hole course still uses six of the original greens; and our 3rd, 13th and 17th holes replicate the originals." When you play Prestwick it is impossible not to come away with a fuller appreciation of just how good the early professionals were.

The Club

The Prestwick Club had been founded for nine years when the first Open was played, and much of the initiative behind both the foundation of the Club and the start of the Open Championship must go to a chap called James Ogilvy Fairlie of Coodham.

Fairlie was a Scottish landowner, and organised a meeting on July 2, 1851, of potential members of the club at the Red Lion Hotel in Prestwick. Fifty-seven of them turned out, and they elected the 13th Earl of Eglinton as their first Captain. Well before the Royal & Ancient saw the need to appoint a professional in St Andrews, Fairlie had the

Left: The mahogany table in the dining room is overlooked by portraits of the Club's past Captains, including the club's first Captain, the 13th Earl of Eglinton (large picture).



‘History at Prestwick Golf Club is everywhere you look’

foresight to hire (Old) Tom Morris (who was at the time based in St Andrews) and organised for him to come to Prestwick in 1851. Young Tom (later to become a legend in Open history) had not yet had his first birthday; and he came to Prestwick with his father, and learnt how to play the game over the hallowed links.

Amazingly, there have only been seven professionals in the 161 years of the Club’s history. Old Tom was the first, from 1851 until 1864, when he left to go back to St Andrews after being appointed to be the first professional at The Royal & Ancient; and David Fleming – who became the professional in 2004 - is the latest incumbent.

In the excellent book “Legendary Golf Clubs of Scotland, England, Wales & Ireland” Anthony Edgeworth captures what makes the Club so special. “A visit to the Smoke Room at Prestwick reinforces the point about friendliness and fun. Members are drinking their beer out of elegant silver-

plated tankards donated to the Club by devotees over the years. There is much coming-and-going and frequent bursts of laughter. The clarity and euphony of the English language as spoken by educated Scots is a joy to the ear. There are Glasgow bankers, industrialists, lawyers, accountants, Ayrshire farmers, and a few local doctors. Ages span half a century from 30 to 80.

‘Will you have another whisky before lunch?’ asks one member to another.

‘Certainly I will.’

‘Would you like a drop of water with it?’

‘Only if there’s room.’

It is impossible not to feel the warmth and the camaraderie when you walk into the Smoke Room [still called the Smoke Room, but now without smoke, though the ash trays have survived] and talk to the boys in front of the big window.

‘Because the membership is small [there are only about 300 Scottish members] everyone knows everyone else,’ says Ian Bunch, the

former Secretary. “It is an incredibly special Club, quite unlike any other.”

A doctor friend of my family, Percy Walker, dines out on stories about the Club Dinners. Percy (now aged 95) can often be found in front of the big window on a Thursday and has a favourite anecdote, which involved a Major Galloway, who also happened to be one of Percy’s patients.

As was his won’t, Galloway had a touch too much to drink, and had slipped unintentionally under the table, while having a quick 50 winks before the arrival of the Kummel. “The Captain turned to me,” says Percy, “and instructed me to find out how my patient was. So I went under the table and found the Major lying there looking content, and returned to my seat. ‘Well, how is he?’ demanded the Captain gruffly. ‘Drunk sir,’ I replied. At which point, a voice from under the table boomed, ‘And you sir, are fired!’”

“I am obviously biased,” says the present Secretary, Ken Goodwin, “but I think that

Top left: The cheeseboard at Prestwick is legendary, as is the lunch. Bottom left: The silver tankards used by the members could tell many a story. Above: The Club has the original receipt for the famous Moroccan red leather Open Championship Belt, together with an 1864 card from Old Tom Morris.

Prestwick is unquestionably the best Club in the world. The whole ethos in the Club is to have fun, and that certainly extends to our visitors. Some may think the course is quirky, but golfers do tend to come off the 18th green with a smile on their face. Add to that our history, and you have a truly unique experience.”

Lunch

Lunch in the main dining room at Prestwick (for which you will need a jacket and tie) is one of those experiences which is not to be missed; and which (as long as you don't imbibe too much House Claret or Kummel) you may well remember for longer than your par at the 17th.

It is, in my opinion, a work of art; arguably the best golf lunch in the world. In the main dining room there is one vast, polished, mahogany table; and this is where you will sit, whether you are a party of two or twenty-two. Indeed, if you are a single, you just add yourself to the nearest chap, much as they do at the big table at the Garrick Club.

The wood-panelled room provides a very special intimacy, and soon a bonny Ayrshire waitress arrives and whispers in your ear, what is on offer.

“To start with Sir, would you like West Coast Crab on a toasted Brioche, Field Mushroom Rarebit or Bloody Mary Soup?”

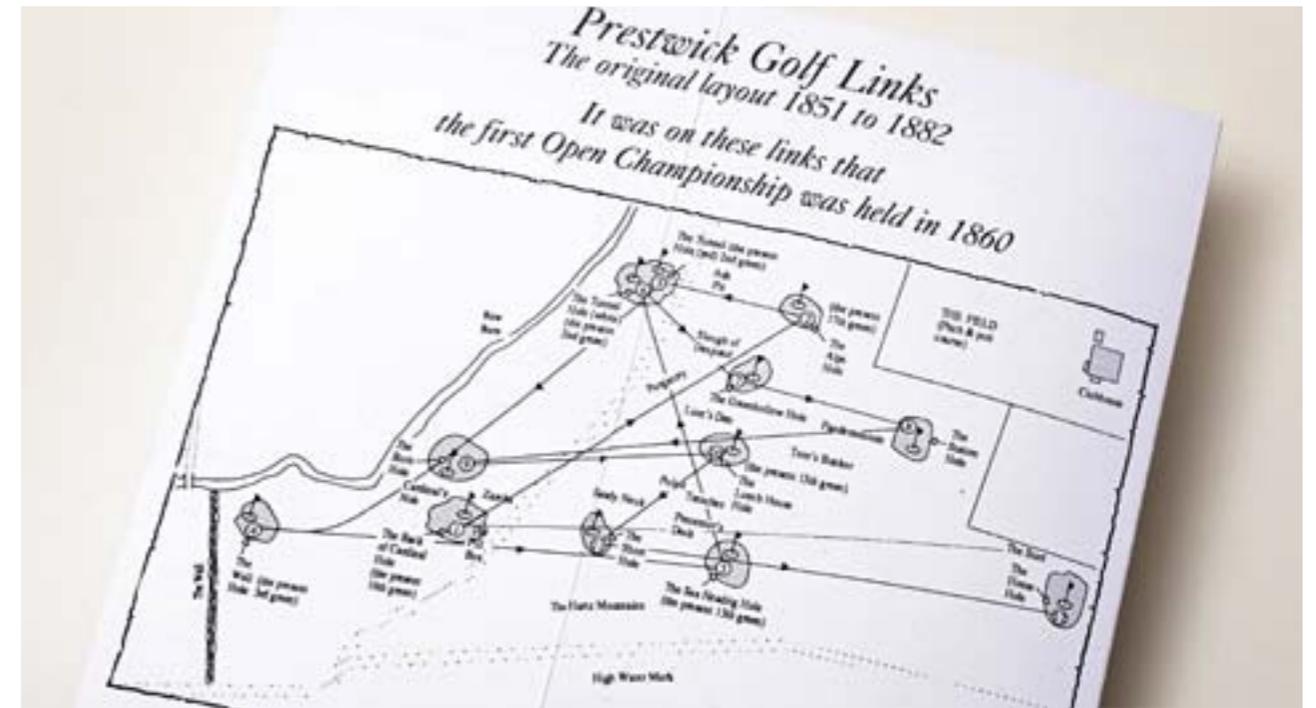
“And, for your main course Sir, would you like Roast Aberdeen Angus Beef with a Red Wine Jus and Yorkshire Pudding, Line Caught Halibut with a Seafood Biryani, Sauteed Lambs Kidneys, Corn Fed Chicken Supreme Stuffed with Haggis and Resting on Creamed Savoy Cabbage or the Cold Table?”

And as yet, the legendary Prestwick Cheeseboard, laid out on an oak sideboard, complete with Stilton, wrapped in a starched white napkin, celery, oat cakes and Ryvita crackers has not been mentioned.

Suffice to say that the lunch is renowned at Prestwick, and has obviously been so for a very long time. To illustrate this, allow me a personal anecdote. My Grandfather was

Right: The view from the Sahara dune in front of the 17th green hasn't changed much in the past 150 years.





‘The whole ethos at Prestwick is to have fun, and lots of it’

made an Honorary Life Member of the Club on his 21st birthday in the 1900s. In addition (spoilt brat!) he was given a snooker table and a full-sized tennis court. It is perhaps a comment on the sporting prowess of our family that he never played golf, snooker or tennis in his life! He did, however, enjoy lunch at Prestwick on numerous occasions.

And, no visit to Prestwick is complete without a glass of the club’s adopted drink, Kummel – ‘pronounced ‘kimmel’; but probably best you try this after a round, rather than before, because it is very strong. An aniseed-tasting liquor, it is flavoured with cumin, fennel and caraway seed, and consumed in vast quantities at the club (indeed, the white line in the club tie is said to represent the liquor). On average, well over 700 bottles are drunk every year, which works out as roughly two bottles a day!

The members tend to drink it after lunch.

It is poured right to the top of the glass, so that a meniscus goes above the brim. Ideally, some of it then topples over the side, and ends up on your fingers. Tradition dictates you should not wash this off; but rather use the sticky effect to help with gripping your club.

Prestwick Golf Club is a museum piece, but no less enjoyable because of that. Critics will point to the airport, which is close by; but I almost think this adds to the splendour of the course; reinforcing the history, with the old and the new rubbing shoulders in such close proximity to each other.

I play in an annual Ryder Cup match against 12 guys from Atlanta. Despite the fact that they have played on all of Ayrshire’s other classic layouts (Royal Troon, Western Gailes and the Ailsa at Turnberry) it’s Prestwick where almost all of them want to return. “There is,” they say in a Southern drawl, “nothing like this,

anywhere else in the world.”

So much in golf (from the grey, dull robotic touring pro to the long, difficult, American-style ‘championship’ course) has become homogenous. As Darwin noted, dull and dreary are adjectives, which you simply can’t use at Prestwick.

Modern golf is saturated by GPS range finders and pole position technology, by swing-weights and biomechanics, by seven-and-a-half-thousand-yard courses and five-and-a-half-hour rounds.

It does our souls no end of good to occasionally visit a Club like Prestwick, and step back onto a course where manipulation and inspiration are more important than precision and calculation; and where the Kummel and ginger cake leave a warm and indelible imprint on the heart and mind, long after you have put your clubs in the car, and said goodbye to the Steward.



Top left: The Recorder announces the foursomes pairings after the formal dinner, in the Club match against Portmarnock. Bottom left: The original Young Tom card, when he won the Open for the third time. Above: The original 12-hole course is not short of a few crossovers... imagine that in today’s Open.