

Storming THE CASTLE

Joe Lancaster, avid travelling journalist and always looking for that new, empowering golfing experience, finds himself literally overwhelmed when he arrived at St Andrew's latest addition, The Castle Course. He tells the story of how a young course stands tall in the midst of historical giants.

BY JOE LANCASTER PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID J. WHYTE



Building a seventh course at the home of golf was a task as monumental as recording an eighth Beatles album. But even after racking up probably the finest back catalogue in the history of recorded music, the Fab Four released 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' and it was brilliant. Could David McLay Kidd have built a worthy addition to one of the world's finest back catalogues of golf courses?

When people talk about 'building' golf courses, it's often taken lightly. "How much 'building' goes into mowing fairways, sticking a few tee boxes in and digging out some bunkers?" they might quip. To any doubters though, the Castle Course is the ultimate justification of the term's use.

Not only did Kidd have to build a golf course here, he had to build the land to put it on. If you'd never seen it before, you wouldn't believe that this site was previously a pancake-flat piece of farmland that sloped gently towards the sea. In over four years of hard work and brute force, the 220-acre landscape (110 of which are now wild rough) has been transformed into a stretch of rugged terrain that looks so ancient you can imagine William Wallace battling the English on it.

The advantage of starting from scratch was that Kidd had the chance to get things perfect and also obscure unsightly things from view. As a result the course has a private feel in



St Andrews 17th hole



17th hole



4th hole



17th hole



places, yet opens up glorious views of St Andrews and across to Carnoustie in others.

It turns out that arriving at the last second for the final tee time of the day, hungover, having played 18 holes in the morning after just three hours sleep isn't big or clever. In fact I was worse prepared than Frodo would have been if he'd made it into Mordor to find he'd forgotten the ring.

"I'm a 16, but I played well this morning so I'll go off 14." Clearly I'm still under the influence. While this may be a stupid thing to say at the best of times, if anything, I've been told is true about

how hard the Castle Course is, I might as well have jumped on the rack and asked for a good stretch.

PLAYING THE LINKS

You begin scaling the Castle's walls with an uphill opening shot. Strictly speaking the first hole isn't a dogleg but it's best played as one. Driving into the large fairway area on the left leaves a much less dangerous angle into the green than the treacherous right hand side, where you face large knolls and mounds. It's an early example of how this track often offers more than one route to the green, catering for the brave, conservative and stupid. It's also a sign of intent from the course, one that says; hit good, sensible

shots and you'll be treated fairly, anything else and it's off with your head.

By the time you reach the fourth you'll have settled down and started to get a feel for the course. It's a cleverly designed par-five measuring 540-yards, but with a burn far back enough that it forces most to lay up, leaving a full shot in.

The par 4 6th is your first chance to rip one at the North Sea on the horizon, before turning right and engaging with the three holes that lead to the halfway point, all of which hug the cliffs and make up around half of the mile of coastline the course occupies.

the clubhouse) before lashing a drive as hard as you dare, down towards the enormous, enchanting double green shared with the 18th.

The Castle is brand new and yes, the course itself feels new. It needs time to bed in and it definitely has a new feel, a new atmosphere. There is still a sense of majesty and tradition about the place though, mostly due to the attention to detail, from naming the holes after ancient local landmarks, to selecting a suitable logo.

The Moneypennys were a prominent local family who owned the land for centuries and at the centre of their coat of arms was a Scottish Peer's helmet, now the symbol of the Castle Course. Then there's the name, a tribute to Kinkell Castle, which stood here in the Middle Ages.

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This stretch includes the shortest hole on the course, the Par 3 8th, at just 141-yards. It may sound like a simple flick, but even here you can't lose focus, distance control being key. The ninth tee is where you order your hotdog via a Batphone-like installation, (it will be waiting for you at the halfway hatch at

THE CLOSING HOLES

The back nine kicks off with an uphill Par 3 to a two-tiered green, 167-yards away. Then you're onto the eleventh, a par-four at just over 400 yards, it doesn't look particularly daunting from the tee, but it's the green that makes it really tricky.

I'm told that the one complaint people have with the Castle Course, is the greens. It doesn't surprise me. Instead of calling them gimmicky though, why not call them quirky, challenging or unique? After all it definitely makes things more interesting, necessitates concentration and, if you're playing golf everyday for a week in St Andrews, surely you want something a bit different at least once? In my opinion, they're great fun and although extremely difficult at times, the fact that many of them sit in bowls or at least have slopes feeding down to them from certain angles compensates by making finding the green a little easier.

Rumour has it that Kidd made shapes in buckets of sand for each green and simply said, "Something like that" to his builders. It might sound a bit blasé, but he obviously trusted his ground staff

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and naturally they would trust the man who designed the acclaimed Bandon Dunes at the age of 27.

If he can create a Scottish links in the States, there was no doubt he could do it in St Andrews. But it's not just the greens that make this track difficult. The aforementioned rough

terrain, whose deep, wild rough can make balls disappear in the blink of an eye means that hitting the fairways isn't enough to stay out of it. Thanks to their rock hard constitution and random undulations, your ball can run into trouble faster than Usain Bolt on his way to the chip shop.

The 14th is probably the most



6th hole



16th hole

extreme of all the greens. The yardage book states that, "Distance is the key to this approach: get the club wrong and you will need your best short game to salvage a par." Make sure you take this advice onboard or you'll be running backwards and forwards across the dancefloor like Benny Hill doing the Conga.

If you're playing as badly as I am, the long Par 5 15th feels more like an expedition than a stroll, especially if you're unlucky enough to end up digging your ball out of the rough on top of one of the many large knolls scattered around. Still, it's a nice view from up here.

There are no boring holes within these 18, but the 17th is going to be known as one of the finest in Britain, and is undoubtedly among the greatest par-threes in the world. As close as you will get to the 16th at Cypress Point without going to California, it is both beauty and beast.

A 200-yard carry over the cliffs is required to hit the green if the pin is at the right, though landing on the gentle slope to the left is enough for the ball to feed into the middle for all other pin positions. There's a drop zone if you don't make it with your first attempt, though I can't imagine anyone resisting the opportunity to go for it again as I do. Unfortunately my second attempt falls just short of safety and joins its predecessor on the beach below.

The Castle Course
reopens on 31 March 2009. Tee times can be booked separately or as part of the two-course policy operating when booking the Old Course. There is no handicap restriction on The Castle Course but it's not possible to book as a single golfer.

Green Fees
Adults (single round) £82 / £117.50
Under 16yrs £41 / £59

Trolleys are permitted. Buggies may be taken on The Castle Course by senior citizens and golfers with a medical certificate but must be driven by a qualified caddie at a cost of £40 plus gratuity. Buggies are subject to availability and suitable ground conditions.

Despite my awful form it was a magnificent feeling attacking the final green. A classic finishing hole, there's nothing like watching a sweetly struck iron shot descend to the green below you, pitch in front and release up to the flag. I was lucky enough to see my partners do this.

Ending your round on the 9th/18th double green, with the North Sea providing a perfect backdrop, you'll either be proud or disappointed with your performance, just as you would after any round. What's different

here though, is that you'll want to do it again, because now you know a little of the layout, though I imagine it would take countless rounds to master this track. But that's not for today, this isn't a course you can squeeze in to an afternoon as I tried to do, instead have a beer on the terrace and watch the likes of me knock putts past the final hole like they're trying to get their money's worth.

I didn't play the Castle Course, the Castle Course played me. I didn't respect it enough before I arrived and it punished me. This isn't a course you can turn up to and expect to do well. Also, don't expect to play a track like the other six in the St Andrews back catalogue. Remember, 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' wasn't just brilliant, it was radical, it broke the mould, it was different, but it wasn't gimmicky. Even when you play it now, over 40 years later, it still sounds fantastic. The Castle Course is unique and when people are playing here in 40 years' time, trust me, it will still be the magnificent seventh. 📍