



CASTLE STUART

A SCOTTISH RENAISSANCE

DAVID J WHYTE REFLECTS ON A REGAL RENAISSANCE THAT HAS TAKEN PLACE IN THE HOME OF GOLF OVER THE PAST DECADE, CULMINATING IN THE LATEST INVENTION, CASTLE STUART GOLF LINKS. **STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID J WHYTE**

Finding a site for a new golf course anywhere on Scotland's coast must be like finding a golf ball in the middle of a thick gorse bush. Surely, over the past 600 years of developing the game, any likely location will have long been occupied?

It appears not. Over the past decade, a number of new developments have sprung up, both coastal and inland, and before the recent recession, planning applications for golf course developments were falling like wedding confetti on the desks of Scotland's Local Council planning offices, mostly from cash-rich Americans looking to make their mark in the land where the game began. This was an invasion almost tantamount to that of the Vikings a thousand years before and Scotland's east coast, once a'feared at the sight of a longboat on the horizon, was now being set upon by private jet or helicopter.

This current trend kicked off back in the 90's when money wasn't just a distant memory. On behalf of Crail Golfing Society, the 7th oldest club in existence, Pennsylvanian native, Gil Hanse was asked to build the Craighead course. The club's existing Balcomie Links had been created by Old Tom Morris more than 100 years before, fashioned simply from the ready, rippling linksland and with only a wheel barrow, a couple of shovels and the occasional helper.

The new Craighead was a bit more of a challenge, a links course to be 'materialised' from a headland that was once the undistinguished domain of beef cattle and barley. Hanse jumped at the opportunity but had been criticised for its over-exuberant bunkering and perilous rough. Craighead may have gotten off to a bumpy start, but it nevertheless provided the impetus for future investment.

Emboldened by Crail's effort, America-based pharmaceutical billionaire, (inventor of the nicotine patch), race-team sponsor, vineyard owner and resort developer, Dr. Donald Panoz and his wife Nancy set about creating an opulent palace overlooking the grey seal and eider duck infested waters of St Andrews Bay.

The St Andrews Bay Golf Resort & Spa proffered a gargantuan hotel along with two 18-hole courses, again built on upper-level headland with nary a natural sand dune to be seen. Initially, St Andrews Bay fell short of the good doctor's dream and has only recently, after much modification under the Fairmont flag, been accepted into the Scottish golfing scene.

Around the same time, another project was emerging from the 'haar' (Scots mist) about 6 miles south of the 'Auld Grey Toon'. Surprisingly, with such seeming fad for creating 'faux' links, this was one that actually played down to the sea. Kingsbarns Links was created by two Californians, Art Dunkley and Mark Parsinen who moved heaven and huge amounts of earth to create their Rubenesque interpretation of a proper Scottish coastal course. Using state-of-the-art ground-shaping equipment, they sculpted this once pedestrian pastureland into a flowing tapestry of links holes, a makeover that was little short of miraculous.

Then, as if crafting a visionary links course from indifferent farmland was not enough, they did the unthinkable and set their green fee above that of the Old Course at £125.00 a round (A.D. 2,000) while the Old Course was only asking for £90. The 'Auld Grey Toon' worthies were black-affronted (Scots for highly offended) but Parsinen and Dunkley knew what they were doing, knew they had a unique product and most of all knew their market, mainly affluent, fellow Americans on a

pilgrimage to play the venerable Scottish links. Within a year, Kingsbarns was an unmitigated success. There was clearly gold in them there sandhills - even if they had to be manufactured!

St Andrews Links Trust, long-time keepers of the Old Course and traditionally a sleepy sub-section of the local town council, saw the success of Kingsbarns and decided to get its commercial act together. They flew in Scotland-born architect David McLay Kidd, who was doing big things in Oregon, to create The Castle, otherwise known as St. Andrews' 7th course. At the same time on Scotland's west coast, Kyle Philips had created Dundonald Links and McLay Kidd was moulding Machrihanish Dunes. There were planning applications for a new Jack Nicklaus course near Aberdeen, a Paul Lawrie course also in the Aberdeen area and back on the west near the town of Irvine, 'The Ayrshire' was being conceived. The floodgates had opened. Scotland hadn't seen such a welter of golf course construction since the early 1900's when literally hundreds of new golf courses appeared.

Donald Trump, that flip-topped American property billionaire

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had to get in on the action. As is his style, he was causing ructions and public protests just north of the city of Aberdeen with his proposal for the 'best golf course in the world', a £750 million megalith resort consisting of 5-star hotel, housing estates and time-share units - as well as two 18-hole courses covering one of the finest stretches of pure dune-land in the country. There is still fierce debate on all sides of the fence whether a luxury Trump enclave will in actual fact add to the sum of Scottish golf. Until it's up and open, we shall have to wait and see.

Castle Stuart Golf Links

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After 5 years in the making, the resulting Castle Stuart Golf



OPENING PAGE: Castle Stuart Golf Links 10th hole. **LEFT:** Castle Stuart Golf Links 13th hole. **BEHIND:** Castle Stuart Golf Links 14th hole.



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 FEES: Weekdays and Weekends at £150 per round
 36-hole ticket at £225, playable by the same golfer over any consecutive 4-day period.
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ranging from sandy seashore to raised headland with banks of gorse separating the two. Liberal amounts of sand has been pushed, moulded and cajoled into this multiform landscape to create a seamless, seemingly innate golfing terrain.

Does it work? Has Parsinen done it again? Stepping onto the golf course, you are immediately struck with visual exuberance. From the clubhouse and its high promontory, it is difficult to decide which way to look; there are so many striking golf landscapes to behold.

The opening holes on both the front and back subtly swoop, swoon and rise again toward their respective greens always with a backdrop of the Moray Firth and the surrounding mountains along with the Kessock Bridge and Fort George protruding out into the Firth. It is certainly a visual delight in every direction.

Links has just closed for the winter, finishing its first full season to great acclaim. Co-designed by Parsinen and Gil Hanse, the American who had a significant hand in this current course building renaissance, the track covers an extraordinary combination of topography

Does it play as well as it looks? Before venturing onto the course, it is worth understanding the philosophy behind Castle Stuart's construction. Courses of recent decades in many instances have been built to host tournament events and therefore, are designed with the abilities of top tour players in mind.

Mark Parsinen is himself a passionate golfer but like the majority of us, does not possess divine golfing gifts. The result is a course that, besides stirring the heart with its grand views, also sets out to treat the golfer as its honoured guest. While one might leak a little left off the tee or pull an approach shot away from its intended target, the course never sets out to embarrass or leave its proponent lost without a shot to play. It has a generous disposition and that, I have gleaned during several conversations with Mark and his veteran team, is very much what was desired.

One might be forgiven to not believe the fairness prescribed here when looking down the narrow runway of the 1st with Moray Firth hard right and an impregnable bank of thorny gorse on the left. But, in practice it is not so daunting. The gorse has been cut back and the fairway banked to gather the ball into safe territory. You soon realise Castle Stuart is there to be enjoyed, not endured.

At the 4th you turn towards Castle Stuart itself, a regal 17th century citadel perched on a knoll as if to appreciate the golf course and not the other way around. The remaining front half climbs onto upwards, offering a stratagem of holes and vistas.

The term, 'infinity greens', was new to me until I visited Castle Stuart. In the spirit of infinity pools in upmarket spas overlooking the Indian Ocean, these infinity greens are at higher level holes such as the 7th and 16th that capitalise on this feature of creating putting surfaces seemingly etched on the edge of outer space. Sending a well-struck approach shot towards such a target with no visible means of stopping the ball can cause a certain tingling sensation in the nether regions. Mark and his team have made the most of it.

If you fail to hit and hold the greens here, which is easier than it sounds, getting up and down is almost as exciting as plying a perfect iron shot straight up to the pin. There is thought and excitement built into every corner and crevice of this course with an attention to detail that is quite remarkable. It seems that every scenario has been considered and set up to give the golfer an exciting, albeit fair round.

The back nine mirrors the front in that it plays along the foreshore for three holes before turning up and in. There are no two holes the same or even similar so you are indulged to a new surprise on every occasion. My favourite for playing purposes is the 13th, a hole that might have been less interesting being furthest from the shore and airy prospects. It doglegs away from a natural sandy cleft inhabited by swooping sand martins and rises to a burly, undulating green perched on a high point that

overlooks the closing holes with one of the best views of the course and its surrounds.

The 18th is also to be savoured, a gradually descending Par 5 where you are encouraged to give your all, although reaching the green in two is far from easy especially into a prevailing westerly wind.

Getting back to the clubhouse, the art deco design calls attention to its wondrous views once again from each of its three floors. The second floor locker rooms have added, as well as a wrap-around balcony, a 'loo with a view' looking over the 9th. The third floor comprises a lounge and dining area with balcony. There are plans to include a small 7-bedroom luxury hotel and spa along with resort-ownership lodges and apartments and in the fullness of time, a second 18-hole seaside course.

Parsinen is a known lover of links courses especially the Old Course in St Andrews. At Castle Stuart, he has blended links characteristics with modern aesthetics to construct a golf experience that is at the same time thrilling and inspiring. But most of all, he has shown that it possible to create a contemporary world-class golf course that makes the average golfer feel good as well as tasking better players to present their very best game. 📍

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Where Else to Play

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