



Kent Coast

WORDS & PICTURES
BY DAVID J WHYTE



I don't know this part of England very well, that cheeky little hump that sticks out into the English Channel. Ten thousand years ago there was no English Channel, just a wide expanse they now refer to as Doggerland. Eight thousand years ago the end of the Ice Age put an end to Doggerland. But all was not lost! In a single stroke this geological event gave Brits continental holidays ... and the game of golf! As the ice melted, water poured into low-lying Doggerland dividing Britain from the rest of Europe. And as the enormous ice pressure lifted, shorelines rose leaving the long stretches of sandy beach we now know and love as seaside links. Along Kent's coast, stretches of sandy shoreline proved ideal for the new-fangled game of golf. London's earliest courses quickly became congested leaving the golfing gentry looking for their nearest point of relief. Only a short train ride away, they could play on unfettered links almost as good as any North of the Border! The Kent Coast to this day remains the nearest genuine links to England's capital.



Royal St George's Golf Club

A Good Deal

I drove towards the town of Deal where I was staying. 'Sandwich' and 'Deal' read the road signs. I wondered if a local Subway outlet had on a special offer! I arrived in Deal, located my hotel, checked in and went for a walk. On the shingle beach an exhausted looking old fellow came wading out of the water with snorkel & flippers in hand as if he'd been blown off course from a cross-channel attempt. If he'd ended up this far north, he'd certainly set a new record. When the Open Championship comes to nearby Royal St Georges, the small town of Deal gets invaded from all sides with enthusiasts looking for room and board. Deal's hotels are small, attractively quaint and cordial – and booked up solid months in advance of the Open.

Open Sandwich

I drove up to Royal St Georges knowing that I couldn't get a game; the Duke of York's 'Young Champions Trophy' was on for the rest of the week! But it was worth going for a look. The course is set upon an expanse of links occupied by three highly respected golf clubs, St Georges, the Princes Course and Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club. Royal St Georges seems to have purloined the best real estate! This rollicking square of rucked-up links has hosted the Open Championship 13 times (its 14th this summer). It was the first English course to host the Open outwith Scotland. A Scot, Dr William Laidlaw Purves laid out the course initially in 1887 and the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII – he who abdicated for his American divorcee lover – for those of you who have recently viewed 'The King's Speech') gave the club its Royal status in 1902. I always feel a bit uncomfortable at such posh English golf clubs. There's a snooty air about them as opposed to Scotland's more artisan ambience. Wandering about looking for the secretary's office, I spotted a sign near the clubhouse entrance to the effect 'Motors Waiting must not remain on the drive by the Clubhouse - By Order of the Committee.' I'd



heard a story and I wondered if this sign related to it. Walter Hagan, the flamboyant champion of the 20's & 30's did not take well to British class pretences. At that time golf professionals were not allowed inside clubhouses, the hallowed domain of club Members Only! On arriving at Royal St Georges to take part in the 1922 Open Championship, Hagen was frostily informed he would have to use the rear door to find his way to the professionals' changing facilities. Colourful 'Hage' - with a footman and driver in tow decided that his rented limo would serve him as his changing parlour, parked it in front of the members' entrance and steadfastly refused to move it until after the event. To add insult to injury, he went and won the event, the first American to win the British Open. The story doesn't end there – though this bit is a tad more spurious and I can't reveal my source as I can't remember who told me it! Anyhow, after the final round, Hagen was



Royal St George's Golf Course



(with the secretary's permission) to see what this year's competitors would be up against. The tournament was last held here in 2003 when the course had just been lengthened and considerably toughened up; you may recall the television coverage! A very dry summer had produced baked-hard fairways almost devoid of grass, which is what naturally happens to a links course during the summer - unless it is incessantly watered. The conditions exaggerated the humps and bumps and fiery-fast greens - much to more pampered parkland players' frustrations. Ben Curtis, also from Kent, (Kent, Ohio) won the tournament much to everyone's surprise - including his own!

invited into the clubhouse by the Prince of Wales to take tea and tell tales of victory. On witnessing this contravention of the club's etiquette, the steward anxiously informed Mr Hagen "his presence was not permitted within the clubhouse which was reserved exclusively for members". The Royal patron quietly leant forward and informed the distressed steward that the word 'Royal' could just as easily be removed as bestowed! Hagen won at Sandwich twice in 1922 and 1928 and at the same time irrevocably realigned the English establishments thinking towards professional golfers. I don't know if St George's members will ever forgive him.

Seeing this glorious links, I was more than a bit peeved I wasn't getting to play them but it was fun spending the evening walking the course. It was in late Fall lush green but give it another dry spell, St Georges will become a wild, out-of-control roller coaster, just the way us spectators like it.

With no chance of a game, I had a stroll round the course

The Deal at Dunkerley's

I was having an interesting night at Dunkerley's, my pied-à-terre for the duration sampling real ales. Kent is renowned as the hop-growing capital of England and offers a tour de



Prince's Golf Course



Royal Cinque Ports Golf Course

force of beers - Spitfire, Canterbury Jack and Bishops Finger to name but a few. But the brew I found most palatable was a Cornish concoction called Tribute, first brewed, so the barman told me to commemorate the 1999 solar eclipse. It certainly had me in a heavenly spin. Dunkerley's is famed for seafood and not at all expensive! I became friendly with Ian Dunkerley, the boss man/chef. "There are hundreds of shipwrecks out there," Ian told me pointing past Deal's rather ugly concrete pier. His grandfather was a signalman on the local lifeboat for 36 years - so Ian knew about such things. "Through the summer months they're pulling me in 20-30 lobsters - three times a week. You also get 6 or 8 months of sea bass." "What about Dover Sole?" I asked. "They're caught off the banks of Holland or Belgium," Ian told me. "From here, that's just a good cast away".

Prince's Golf Club

Across the fence from Royal St Georges, Princes Golf Club has hosted the Open Championship - once! Now I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing! It's certainly good that in 1932 they had had the honour. But...how come it didn't come back? By way of research I played the three 9-hole sections. Princes is laid out on marginally level ground certainly compared to its Royal neighbour. It's more subtle in its fairway movement but still very linksy. I enjoyed the course for its natural feel but have to say, at the time of my round, the Prince was in need of some TLC. It was getting it! As I played, the thick, tangled, overgrown rough was being thinned on an industrial scale allowing the wispy natural fescues to breath again. Bunkers were being



Royal Cinque Ports Golf Course



Walmer & Kingsdown Golf Course

rebuilt and revetted. A major revamp was underway in time for the Open. The Shore and the Dunes sections (which together make up Princes championship course) can play over 7200 yards! In a breeze this is no slouch and I'm sure it will soon be in tip-top condition - complete with a new Dormie House to be opened later in the year.

Royal Cinque Ports

The next morning I set out for Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club, from my hotel about 3 minutes drive away. The name 'Cinque Ports' (pronounced "sink") refers to a series of coastal towns in Kent & Sussex brought together back in the mists of time for purposes of military defence and trade. Royal Cinque Ports clubhouse casts an eye over some great golf land, a traditional links, terrifying and tantalising at the same time. As I stood on the 1st, a fair old gust behind me, the contours on the ground seemed to reflect a turbulent sky above with my fragile game and I in between. The breeze had picked up – as it does! 'Deal' as it's locally called, proved to be a real force of nature, a genuine blow-by-blow battle. Many of the tees are elevated to increase your exposure to the sea winds; the turf is tight, dry and unforgiving. There are a lot of extra elements to factor in here. I wouldn't say it was as good as Scottish links (I wouldn't, would I) but this was pretty close to the 'real deal'. Deal staged the 7th Open Championship to be held outside Scotland and the club assumed its Royal title in 1920 when King George V was a frequent visitor. You'd need to play Deal two or three times to find its measure but there were some great holes. The 3rd, 4th,



15th, 17th and 18th were to my mind the best covering more undulating ground. The wind will always be a significant factor though; I doubt if there's a round goes by without a stiff breeze.

The Bond Connection

Today was moving day! I had arranged an early round with Ian Dunkerely, my new best mate at his club, Walmer & Kingsdown. Walmer & Kingsdown is a headland course atop the famous White Cliffs of Dover. In golfing terms it's no luminary, just a pleasant add-on if you have the time, with excellent views. I had heard that Ian Fleming, author and wartime British Naval Intelligence officer lived in these parts in the 1950's and made numerous references to the area in his 'Bond' books. Being a child of the 60's and at the time a big Bond fan, this was of great interest. "You'll remember the book 'Moonraker'?" Ian asked. I had read them all! "This is where Sir Hugo Drax's rocket installation was supposed to be." Drax, the bounder! A delightful, rolling, headland golf course wasn't quite what I had in mind while reading the book!



Littlestone Golf Course

Fleming was himself a keen golfer and regularly played at both Sandwich and Deal. In the book *Goldfinger*, Bond plays a round with the villainous golf cheat 'Goldfinger' at Royal St Georges (in the movie they used Stoke Park in Buckinghamshire) with Oddjob caddying for both. There is also a local legend that Fleming took his 'Licensed to Kill' agent's number from the bus service from London to Deal. However, the secretary at Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club more reliably informed me that the club's telephone number at the time was Deal 007...a number Fleming would have dialled regularly.

I continued south and next morning, bright and breezy arrived at Littlestone Golf Club. Trapped between Romney Marshes and English Channel, Littlestone is one of the unsung English golf heroes. This wide-open, rippling links has enjoyed the attention of great names such as James Braid and Dr Alister Mackenzie, brought in to try and find improvement. They clearly had a fine canvas to work with. Littlestone is a genuine, wide-open seaside spread with



little artifice. Off the tee it isn't arduous; it's around the greens you find more typical links scenarios where it's difficult to deliver approach shots and make them stick!

Scotch & Rye

I crossed the border from Kent into East Sussex. The difference in the landscape and disposition of these two counties is conspicuous. East Sussex is quintessentially quaint Old England. I had arranged to meet with golf-writing buddy, Clive 'Silky Swing' Agran who lives in these parts with the intention of a round at Rye Golf Club. It's not





Rye Golf Course

an easy club to get a game. You have to write a letter in advance and if fortunate slot in with their limited number of visitor tee times. There are lots of little rules and regulations, like wearing a jacket and tie for lunch. Rye exists for its members first & foremost, mainly barristers from London. They like to keep the place to themselves and who can blame them! There's nothing fancy about the clubhouse, a utilitarian cacophony of buildings with a comfy, casual atmosphere. The routine for members is brisk, alternate-shot foursomes in the morning, then a 3-course lunch with a bottle of something fruity to wash it down with followed by another bracing race around the links to work it off. I could live with that!

Feeling somewhat privileged to be taking to this rarefied turf; Clive and I marched into the bright morning. Rye is a piece of work from early on. The first three holes are reasonably wide and forgiving. The 4th not so, a remarkable hogback with steep drops down either side. It's a nerve-wracking tee shot. But apart from such tight tests, getting

up & down around the greens was Rye's underlying challenge. If you go at them like a bull in a china shop, you inevitably get evicted for causing an affray. Pitch and run is the greenside game here! It gets to be fun - usually by about the 17th. The pro told us 'the most difficult shots are the second shots on the Par 3's'.

Hobbit Home

I spent my last night in England's southeast corner at Strand House, a 15th century guesthouse complete with wildly slanting floors, awkward angle doors and 'mind your head' signs everywhere. When you finally find your sea legs, it's a fascinating place, almost organic, like living in a Hobbit hole. Once I got the 15th century shower heated up, it worked extremely well as did the early 17th century digital television. Actually, this is a great place to stay, highly recommendable and they do wonderful home-cooked dinners and magnificent, keep-you-going-all-day breakfasts.





North Foreland Golf Course

The town of Rye is equally enchanting. Ancient cobbled streets whisk you back to the time of Charles Dickens. East Sussex is full of such historic fascination and an area I look forward to exploring some more. But I had a flight to catch back to Edinburgh and there was another round of golf to fit in before then.



North Foreland

I had wrongfully assumed North Foreland was a links course. It's downland, in other words a parkland course atop the white cliffs. Tony, the club manager came out to play with me. Tony lived in a thatched cottage overlooking the course. "It came with the job!" he wistfully murmured trying to play down his good fortune. We hacked out a few holes but in spite of looking forward to my last round of the trip,

after the elation of playing Rye, I just couldn't find form. It wasn't North Foreland's fault – it's a nice enough track. Tony and I battled round to the back 9 and then I made the excuse of taking some photographs before the clouds came in. By 2pm we were back in the clubhouse enjoying a nice piece of rump steak. If I were visiting again, I'd start with North Foreland, only minutes from Kent International Airport where in a few minutes time I would be catching a flight that would have me back in Edinburgh by teatime.

Where To Stay:

Dunkerley's Restaurant and Hotel

19 Beach Street, Deal, Kent, CT14 7AH
Tel: 01304 375016
Web: www.dunkerleys.co.uk
Email: info@dunkerleys.co.uk

Strand House Boutique Guesthouse

Tanyards Lane, Winchelsea nr. Rye,
East Sussex, TN36 4JT
Tel: 01797 226276
Web: www.thestrandhouse.co.uk
Email: info@thestrandhouse.co.uk

Getting There

David Whyte flew Flybe from Edinburgh to Manston Airport Flybe operates daily flights from Edinburgh to Manston, with fares available from £30.99 each way including taxes and charges. Book via www.flybe.com.

Car Hire

There is an Avis office at Manston (Kent International) Airport – www.avis.co.uk