

Exposed to relentless wind and sporting tight, sandy soil, the 18 holes at Royal Cinque Ports GC are a force of nature

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID J WHYTE



Channel turfing

Royal St George's might have the highest profile but there's plenty of tough golf on the south coast of England, discovers **David J Whyte**

As tens of thousands descend on Royal St George's to see who will succeed Louis Oosthuizen as Open champion – and bag a cool £900,000 – it's timely to shine a light on the courses on the Kent coast. On my travels I will find royal connections, feel the wrath of sea winds and uncover key roles played by Scots in the development of the game in southern-most England.

After landing at Kent International Airport I take my hire car on the A256 towards the town where I am staying, the road signs – Sandwich and Deal – leading my stomach to rumble. Walking on Deal's shingle beach I come across an exhausted old fellow wading out of the water, snorkel and flippers in hand. He looks like he's been blown off course from a cross-Channel attempt. Will the wind wreak similar havoc on my golfing prowess?

I drive up to Royal St George's knowing I won't get a game – the course is hosting the

Duke of York's Young Champions Trophy – but I am determined to have a look. Royal St George's is set on a long expanse of links on the south-east coast occupied by two other highly respected golf clubs, Prince's GC and Royal Cinque Ports GC. St George's purloined the best bit. In 1894 this rollicking square of rucked-up coastal ground became the first English course to host the Open outwith Scotland and, as of this week, the Open will have been held here 14 times. A Scot, Dr William Laidlaw Purves, laid out the course in 1887 and the Prince of Wales gave the club its royal status 15 years later.

I always feel uncomfortable at such establishments – they possess an uppity air you don't get at Scotland's more artisan clubs. As I search for the secretary's office I spot a sign near the clubhouse entrance prohibiting cars from dawdling on the driveway and it calls to mind a story about flamboyant US golfer Walter Hagen. A working-class pro from New York State, he



did not take well to British class pretences. Hagen's era was the early 20th century, before professionals were afforded the courtesy of entry into clubhouses, which were strictly the domain of members.

On arriving at Royal St George's to take part in the 1922 Open, Hagen was informed he would have to use a rear door and find his way to the professionals' changing facilities. In response Hagen decided that his rented limousine would serve as his changing parlour, had his driver park it in front of the members' entrance and steadfastly refused to move it until after the event, which he won, becoming the first American to win the Open. Legend has it that, after the final round, Hagen was invited into the clubhouse by the Prince of Wales to take tea. On witnessing this contravention of etiquette, the club steward informed Hagen his presence was not permitted, at which point the royal patron leant forward and quietly informed the

steward the word "royal" could be removed as easily as it had been bestowed. Hagen also won at Sandwich in 1928, and is credited with realigning the establishment's attitudes towards the professional golfer.

With the secretary's permission I stroll around the course to see what this year's competitors will be up against. It's a fine evening and I'm itching to play. What's evident is that while the course, lengthened and toughened up in preparation for the 2003 Open, will thrill spectators, the pros won't find its humps, bumps and fast greens any easier than before. Add to that the likelihood of gusty winds and fairways baked by the sun and a repeat of 2003 is feasible. Though he's not at Sandwich this time round, on the Thursday in 2003 Tiger Woods took three off the tee at the first and carded a 73 – one of the better scores that day.

Across the fence from Royal St George's lies a curious name in Open history, Prince's GC. Now home to three nine-hole courses, the original 18 holes at Prince's hosted the Open in 1932, an honour that has never been repeated. To find out why I play the club's 27 holes. The ground is less lumpy than its illustrious neighbour but its links through and through, and open to the elements. While I play, the greenkeeping staff are thinning out the thick, overgrown rough to allow the natural fescue to breathe again. They are also rebuilding bunkers ahead of the Open and its attendant fillip to courses in the area. On a breezy day Prince's is no slouch and should now be in tip-top condition, though upon my departure I am none the wiser as to why the Open visited once and never returned.

A few hundred metres farther south lies Royal Cinque Ports, named after a series of coastal towns in Kent and Sussex brought together for purposes of military defence and trade. The clubhouse casts an eye over some auspicious golf ground, a traditional links that's both terrifying and tantalising. As I stand on the first tee with a fair gust behind me, the sandy contours seem to reflect the turbulent sky above, with me and my fragile golf ability in between. Deal, as it's known locally, is a force of nature. Many of the tees are elevated to increase your exposure to the sea winds, and the turf is tight, dry and at times vindictive. Deal hosted the Open in 1909 and 1920, and has some appropriately superior holes, such as the third, fourth, 15th, 17th and 18th, but if you visit expecting a tough but calm test of skill, forget it – I doubt a round

goes by without a stiff breeze gatecrashing the party.

I continue south and, next morning, arrive at Littlestone Golf Club, which turns out to be one of the pleasant surprises of my trip. Trapped between Romney Marshes and the Channel, Littlestone is one of the unsung heroes of English golf. A wide-open, rippling links, it doesn't look like much from the road but it's surprisingly sporty, the influence of Scottish golf course designer James Braid and Alister MacKenzie, the co-designer of Augusta National, clearly to the fore. Off the tee it isn't an arduous course; it's around the greens you find more typical links scenarios where it's difficult to deliver approach shots and make them behave.

Crossing the border from Kent into East Sussex, the difference in landscape and disposition is conspicuous, East Sussex being quintessentially Old England. My first port of call is Rye Golf Club, a famously difficult course to get a game on. Here you have to write a letter in advance and, if chosen as one of the lucky few, slot in with the limited number of visitor tee times. Rye exists first and foremost for its members, most of whom seem to be barristers from London. They like to keep the place to themselves, and after a round there I can't blame them – it's a piece of work from the get-go. The first three holes are reasonably forgiving, but the fourth is the opposite. A remarkable hogback with steep drops down either side, it's a nerve-racking tee shot. Apart from such tests of accuracy, getting up and down around the greens is Rye's undeniable challenge. Go at them like a bull at a red rag and you inevitably get evicted, usually out the back door, so success is all about the bump and run.

Home to Paul McCartney and the late Spike Milligan, the town of Rye is suitably characterful, with cobbled streets that whisk you back to the time of Dickens. But I have another round of golf to play before my return flight, so my time here is curtailed.

Just minutes from the airport is North Foreland, a course I had mistakenly assumed to be links. It's actually chalk downland, or a parkland course atop white cliffs. The club manager, Tony, accompanies me. He lives in a thatched cottage overlooking the course. "It came with the job," he says, failing to play down his good fortune. We hack out a few holes but after the elation of playing Rye, I can't find my form. Tony and I battle round to the back nine and I decide to take some photographs before it clouds over. I know when I'm beaten. ■

LATE DEALS

First Choice (www.firstchoice.co.uk, 0871 2004455) has seven nights in **Rhodes** from £319pp. Price includes self-catering in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 10.

Thomson (www.thomson.co.uk, 0871 231 5595) has seven nights in **Majorca** from £469pp. Price includes half board in a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 14.

The Travel Department (www.thetraveldepartment.co.uk, 020 7099 9665) has nine nights touring **Egypt** from £999pp. Price includes accommodation, excursions and return flights from Edinburgh departing September 6.

Direct Holidays (www.directholidays.co.uk, 0844 879 8191) has seven nights in **Kos** from £354pp. Price includes B&B in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 4.

Airtours (www.airtours.co.uk, 0844 871 6636) has seven nights all inclusive in a four-star hotel in **Turkey** from £540pp. Price includes return flights from Aberdeen departing July 28.

Barrhead Travel (www.barrheadtravel.co.uk, 0871 879 8191) has seven nights all inclusive in a three-star hotel in **Rhodes** from £479pp. Price includes return flights from Glasgow departing July 27.

TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE

FlyBe has return flights from Edinburgh to Manston, Kent from £62. Visit www.flybe.com.

WHERE TO STAY

Dunkerley's Restaurant and Hotel in Deal has double rooms from £120, including breakfast. Visit www.dunkerleys.co.uk or call 01304 375016. Strand House Boutique Guesthouse in nearby Winchelsea has double rooms from £65 including breakfast. Visit

www.thestrandhouse.co.uk or call 01797 226276.

WHERE TO PLAY

Royal St George's GC charges from £150 for 18 holes (maximum men's and women's handicap 18). Visit www.royalstgeorges.com or call 01304 613090. Prince's GC charges from £75 for 18 holes. Visit www.princesgolfclub.co.uk or call 01304 611118. Royal Cinque Ports GC charges from £125 for 18 holes (maximum

handicap 22 (men) and 30 (women)). Visit www.royalcinqueports.com or call 01304 374007. Littlestone GC charges from £50 for 18 holes. Visit www.littlestonegolfclub.org.uk or call 01797 362231. To apply to play Rye GC, email links@ryegolfclub.co.uk or visit www.ryegolfclub.co.uk. North Foreland GC charges from £40 for 18 holes. Visit www.northforeland.co.uk or call 01843 862140.