



THE ROYAL DORNOCH GOLF CLUB

INTRODUCTION

The remoteness of Royal Dornoch has helped create a mystique about this magnificent golfing outpost in the far north of Scotland, fifty miles north of Loch Ness. Situated just four degrees below the Arctic circle, it is possible on a June evening to play golf until almost midnight. Thanks to the moderating influence of the Gulf Stream, it is also possible to golf on the gentle undulating dunes throughout the winter months.

The world's greatest golfers and golf writers have been lavish in their praise of Royal Dornoch. In a letter to the club, Tom Watson thanked the members for the privilege of

playing one of the world's truly great golf courses. He described the three rounds that he played during his 24-hour stay in Dornoch, 'as the most fun he had ever had playing golf.'

Ben Crenshaw, that keen student of the game, who took time off from his preparations for the 1980 British Open at Muirfield to visit Royal Dornoch, was not disappointed either. When he returned to Muirfield, he was asked by the Secretary of the Royal and Ancient, how he had enjoyed Dornoch. Ben replied, "Let me put it this way. I nearly did not come back."

Herbert Warren Wind, writing in the 'New Yorker' was fulsome in his praise. "It is the



Left and right: Tom Watson, one of the Club's Honorary Members, during his visit to Dornoch



Below: 10th green and sunlit Dornoch bay

most natural course in the world. We in America are just beginning to appreciate that no golfer has completed his education until he has played and studied Royal Dornoch. It conveys to the modern golfer the evocation of golf at its best."

Those who are knowledgeable about the game have not been surprised that in recent times Royal Dornoch, with its panoramic

views and gorse-lined fairways, has been regularly ranked by illustrious golf panels among the world's top twelve courses.



GOLFER'S TALE

*Mighty Dornoch, it was played
When New World settlements were first made
Its grand procession of hump and ridge
Of geologic lineage.
Its broad expanse of fairway turf
Responds in contour to the nearby surf.
One seldom gets a level lie
The earth's eternally atrey.
The tilts are subtler on the green
The ball drifts off on slants unseen
And on each side is the varied rough,
Some dry, some dank, and some that aceful stuff.
Then too there are the man-made things
Deep sandy holes built up of soddy rings
Roll into these and it's goodbye
Just you, the sand, the sod and the sky.*

*How shall we characterise DORNOCH?
It's a work of Art like those of Bach.
It's trying, it's hard, it's tough . . . it's fun!
It's all the aces ever won at Wimbledon!
It's like that great course in the sky
Where good golfers go when they die.
But oh God, when you build that course,
Please go easy on the celestial gorse.*



EARLY HISTORY

The Dornoch links, as W. C. Childs has reminded us in his 'Golfer's Tale', is not only one of the most spectacular stretches of links land to be found anywhere, it is also one of the oldest places where the game was played. Prior

to the Reformation in the 16th century, some of the clergy who had been trained for the priesthood at St Andrews, played golf on the Dornoch links. Some time later, in the early 17th century, Sir Robert Gordon, the early

The bare-footed caddy. Above: Greg Norman narrowly escaping the gorse

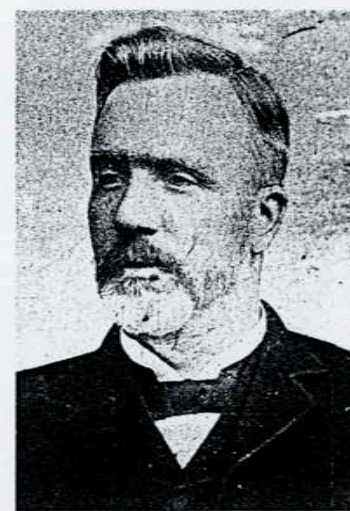


historian of Sutherland described the Dornoch links as 'the fairest of any pair of Scotland.' He also tells how the young 13th Earl of Sutherland spent £10 on bows, arrows, golf-clubs and balls. We know also that Bishop Robert Stewart a former bishop of Caithness and Sutherland was rebuked in 1570 for "spending the kirk's rents at the golf, and guid chier."

Golf then was a very different game from the game we know today. The links were used by the local people for grazing cattle, drying clothes and practising archery. The sparse early records that there are of golf on the East Coast of Scotland, provide a charming picture of little boys and dignified citizens playing on the same strip of ground. There were no fees, no rule books, no specified designs for clubs and balls. The barefoot youngster with the bent stick from the hedgerow, and any missile he could find, was as much a user of the links, as those with better fashioned clubs and much more expensive feather balls.

The arrival on the scene of the gutta-percha ball in the middle of the 19th century, began a major transformation in the game of golf. It was much cheaper to produce and buy. It made golf

*Chief
Constable
McHardy,
the Club's
Secretary
in 1877*



*Below:
15th hole
with its
inverted
saucer
green*

a more fascinating game.

It was in 1877 that the Dornoch Golf Club was founded. It grew out of the Sutherland Golfing Society whose members played at Dornoch and Golspie. Mr McHardy, the Chief Constable of Sutherland became the Club's secretary and treasurer.



JOHN SUTHERLAND

In the late 19th century proud aristocratic Dornoch had fallen on hard times. According to one commentator it had become 'an old-fashioned, outlying, outlandish gray nest, to which no stranger ever thinks of going except the sheriff of the County'. Being ten miles from the nearest railway station at Tain, many were leaving Dornoch because of its isolation. The sad decline in Dornoch's fortunes so upset John Sutherland, the young golf club secretary, that he resolved to do what he could to stem the ebbing tide and put the Royal Burgh back on the map.

He began by inviting Old Tom Morris to come North, survey the glorious links land, and lay out a course of superior design – "9 proper golf holes". For several decades thereafter, Sutherland himself continued to make improvements, enlarging the course to 18 holes and later lengthening it, to compensate for the new rubber-cored ball which travelled much faster and further. He also introduced some very telling bunkers, including the one at the 18th, now known as 'Sutherland's Kidney'. Fortunately the 12th hole was also named after him, for to

Left: John Sutherland

Below: cutting the fairways with horse-power

remember such a faithful servant of the Club solely by an infamous bunker, would be akin to the dubious honour a scientist once bestowed on his wife, by naming a virus after her.

Concerned about the quality of the greens, John Sutherland hired several local women to remove by hand the daisies and other extraneous growth. The result was large putting surfaces of exceptional quality.

John Sutherland also started writing, golf-articles for the London Daily News, and Golf Illustrated. These articles helped make Dornoch a household word among English readers, for in them he would often comment on the glories of the County and the Dornoch Links. Many were tempted by these articles to make the long journey North. They quickly fell in love with the quaint Cathedral town. The luxury of the Station Hotel (now the Dornoch Hotel), the quality of the golf course and the ozone laden air caused them to return year after year.

The trip which John Sutherland and another local golfer Tommy Grant, made to compete in the Amateur at Muirfield, added further lustre to the name of Royal Dornoch. On that occasion John Sutherland beat the Open Champion Harold Hilton, and Tommy Grant beat the former Amateur champion John Ball. Hilton and Ball were so impressed by the calibre of their opponents that they decided they must visit the course which could produce such quality golfers. They were not disappointed.

A number of the regular visitors finally decided to buy or build stone villas in Dornoch. Lord Rothermere, the newspaper magnate purchased what is now the Burghfield hotel. About the same time Arthur Ryle built Bishopcote, overlooking the first green on the championship course. Many of the finest English golfers of the era enjoyed his hospitality there. The most famous was J. H. Taylor, the 5-times Open Champion, who

Massey v Herd. The Open Champion driving off the first tee 1907





Left: seated – James Braid and Harry Vardon. The Club Captain, A. J. Ryle is standing on right



J. H. Taylor, 5-times Open Champion

Below: 17th green with Sutherland hills in the distance



came for a fortnight's holiday each year. His love for Dornoch was infectious. Other golfing greats like Vardon and Braid, Herd and Massey soon came to find out whether all Taylor's superlatives about Dornoch were justified.

Ernest Holderness the amateur champion and Joyce and Roger Wethered were also regular visitors. In the opinion of Bobby Jones, Joyce Wethered was the finest golfer with whom he had ever played. Roger, who lost the 'Open' in a play-off, might have won but for inadvertently standing on his ball. Both names appear on the Clubhouse Winners Boards.

DONALD AND ALEC ROSS

Donald and Alec were both born in St Gilbert Street, close to the Cathedral, Donald in 1872, Alec a few years later. Both learned their golf on the Dornoch links. Donald was finally urged by

some of the members to go to St Andrews and learn from old Tom Morris the business of club-making and green-keeping. The members promised that if he did this, he could

Right: Donald and Alec Ross



Overleaf: the treacherous 6th green

later come back to Dornoch as professional and green-keeper. When he did return in the mid 1890's, Alec joined him as his assistant in the club-maker's shop. Later Donald and Alec were persuaded to emigrate to America where the game of golf was rapidly growing.

For fifty years the North-South tournament was one of the major professional tournaments in America. On the winners board in the Pinehurst clubhouse are such illustrious names as Walter Hagen, Ben Hogan and Sam Snead. The fact that Donald Ross won the tournament three times, and Alec won it five times, gives some indication of the quality golfers they were. *Alec also won the American Open in 1907.* Donald became one of the greatest golf architects of all time, designing more than 500 American golf-courses

including the famous Pinehurst No 2 course and the Seminole Course in Florida. To American golf-course design he was what Telford was to Scottish roads and bridges. About the Donald Ross courses there are many features reminiscent of Royal Dornoch. He had learned much about the art of golf course design by studying Royal Dornoch, and by working closely in his early days with John Sutherland, who was an acknowledged expert in greenkeeping and golf-course design. As well as laying out the second nine holes at Dornoch, John Sutherland designed the nine-hole course at Lairg with its magnificent views of the river Shin. He also supervised the laying out of a private golf-course at Skibo for Andrew Carnegie the American steel magnate and philanthropist.

THE CARNEGIE CONNECTION

Shortly after building the castle of his dreams at Skibo, four miles along the Firth, Carnegie

decided to take up golf. He invited J. H. Taylor to come and stay at the castle and teach him

and his wife Louise the royal and ancient game. Later as vice-President of the golf club, he presented to the members the magnificent Carnegie Shield for open competition. The Shield which is on display in the clubhouse is unquestionably one of the most beautiful golf trophies in the world. It is fitting that there is

engraved on it two pictures of the local Cathedral, for not only did Dornoch grow up round the mediaeval Cathedral but it was the Cathedral clergy who first introduced golf to Dornoch. Mr and Mrs Carnegie were both present at the opening of the new clubhouse in 1909.



LADIES' GOLF AT DORNOCH

*The game is ancient, manly and employs
In its departments women, men and boys
Men play the game, the boys the clubs convey
And lovely woman gives the prizes away*

Unlike many other golfing communities, women in Dornoch were not relegated to prizegiving roles. Dornoch was in fact, one of the earliest clubs to encourage ladies to play. They had their own Ladies' 18 hole course, and their own clubhouse in Littleton. Old photographs reveal that many ladies did play at the turn of the century. The difficulties caused by the female fashions of the day must have been immense, even in calm conditions. Sleeves were so full that elastic bands were worn to enable the lady golfers to see the ball as they swung. The ankle length skirts required a restraining band round the knees. The caps and scarves used in motor cars were also popular golf attire. In the 1920s the coming of Joyce Wethered to Dornoch each summer on holiday aroused in many of the local ladies a great interest in the Royal and Ancient game.

During the Second World war many of the dunes on the ladies' course were flattened to

*Above: sketch of the
new clubhouse in
1909*

*Opposite: Andrew
Carnegie golfing.
Inset: the
Carnegie Shield*

*Right: Joyce
Wethered, later
Lady Heathcote
Amory*





Above: ladies golfing about 1900

Right: Don Sutherland in a exhibition match with Bobby Jones 1934

make an aerodrome. A restricted 9-hole course was formed. In the early '90s, thanks to a very generous legacy from Don Sutherland, one of the finest golfers to come out of Dornoch, the second course, now known as 'The Struie' was remodelled and upgraded. The result is a very fine and testing alternative 18 hole course.

THE WITCH'S POOL

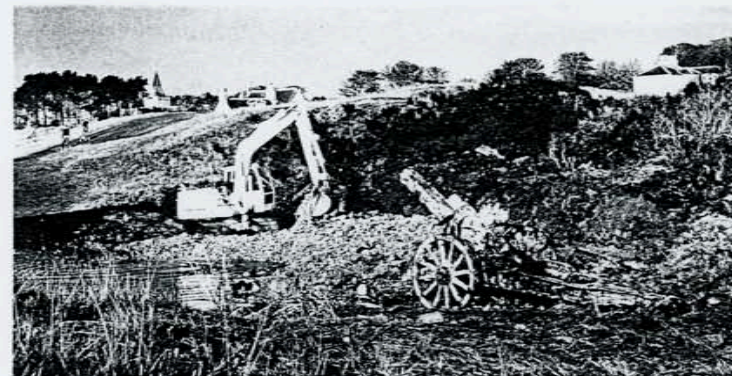
This has long been a feature not only of the Dornoch golfing scene, but of the Dornoch story. Today golfers at the end of their round on the Struie, play over the pool. This was originally the 17th hole on the Championship course. The pool is so named because it is adjacent to where Janet Horne, the last witch in Scotland was burned in the early 18th century.

In 1991 a German field gun was removed from the pool nearly 70 years after it was deposited there by the people of Dornoch. For some inexplicable reason this gun had been presented to Dornoch Burgh by the War Department. The locals, upset that this symbol

of German militarism should have been sited on the Cathedral green, took it into their own hands to remove and drown it in the Witch's Pool.



Witch's Pool with German gun



Below: Looking back over 5th green to Dornoch

CHAMPIONSHIP COURSE LAY-OUT

In the late 1940s several alterations were made to the championship course, six new holes being added at the North end and the last six original holes omitted. The final result is what Peter Alliss describes as a 'jewel of a course'.

The spectacular terrain, with the panoramic views of the North Sea and the Sutherland and Ross-shire hills, makes Royal Dornoch very special. The curving bay with its magnificent broad beach is backed by a narrow strip of

softly contoured duneland, rising in two distinct levels, providing just enough room for parallel fairways. The first eight holes are played out along the upper level, before you retrace your route at beach level. The gorse lined fairways, which bloom yellow in the late Spring, severely punish all transgressors.

Tom Watson's favourite hole was the fifth, played from a high level tee down to a plateau green, but probably the best and most testing





Above: Bob Charles with some junior girl golfers



Left: Chip Beck and Andy North on the first tee

hole is the fourteenth, a -459 par four called 'Foxy'. It is a double dog-leg, first swinging left, then around a huge dune up to an elevated green. 'Foxy' was described by Harry Vardon, six-time Open Champion, 'as the finest natural hole in the world.' A four here is a real bonus.

The lay-out includes four very testing short holes and a high proportion of long par fours. These quickly become par 5's when the wind blows. Architecturally Dornoch's greens are its soul. Their uniqueness lies in their size and their inverted saucer shape. The shot that is not perfectly hit rolls off the edge into a deep bunker or down a ten-foot bank.

Royal Dornoch's remote location has prevented it being chosen as the site of an Open Championship. But the British Amateur, never designed as a profit-making venture, was played over the centuries old links in 1985. Its fame is such that the world's greatest golfers still make the long journey north to enjoy and study the course. Recent golfing celebrities have included Nick Faldo, Greg Norman, Bob Charles, Andy North and Chip Beck.



A deep faced bunker so typical of Dornoch

Nick Faldo with Ian Walker, Club Secretary





Above: 16th green with beach in background. Below: Bing Crosby with past-Captain, Dr. Alford

A FINAL ACCOLADE

In 1980 the American Society of Golf Architects visited Dornoch to honour Donald Ross. Seeing the course at its finest in the late spring with the gorse-lined fairways in full bloom, they waxed eloquent about it. "Glorious. Mind-blowing. Easily the best we have seen." So did the golf-writer Peter Dobereiner. In an article which he later wrote, entitled: "*I Dream by a Scottish Shore*", he quoted one of the architects who was adamant about the stature of Royal Dornoch:

"Forget Cypress Point and the others. This is easily the finest course in the world. The absolute number one. I am not going to tell anyone about Dornoch. I want to keep it to myself, the way it is, and come back every year until I die."

Overstated? Perhaps, but few would deny that Royal Dornoch is one of the truly great courses of the world.



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Plan of the Royal Dornoch Golf Course - 1992

1. First	332
2. Ord	182
3. Earls Cross	413
4. Achinchanter	418
5. Hilton	357
6. Whinny Brae	164
7. Pier	463
8. Dunrobin	437
9. Craigliath	497
10. Fuaran	150
11. A'chlach	445
12. Sutherland	516
13. Bents	168
14. Foxy	445
15. Stulaig	323
16. High Hole	400
17. Valley	410
18. Home	461

