

GOLF IN THE NORTH.

Highland Courses for Southern Players.

SOME IDEAL RESORTS.

(By Mr J. Sutherland.)

Were it only for the omission of Machrie (Islay) in the far west, and Dornoch in the still farther north-east, Mr Bernard Darwin's beautiful book, "The Golf Courses of the British Isles," must be held to be as incomplete as its title is misleading. Not that the inclusion of these famous links would justify the title bestowed upon the book so long as at least half a dozen other Highland golf courses were excluded from its admirably written pages. The author has wisely dealt only with those courses over which he has himself played, and never having penetrated further north than the Kingdom of Fife, his golf courses of the British Isles stop there.

The English are responsible for the erroneous application of the word "links" to every open space upon which the game is played. The Americans have copied it, and, having no "natural" links of their own, fail to appreciate the absurdity of dignifying their golfing grounds with the title "golf links." Scotland is pre-eminently the land of "links," and no section of her rugged coast line is more richly endowed with great stretches of short, clean, crisp turf than the northern counties generally, and the shores of the Moray Firth in particular. Let the golf invasion proceed inland at what pace it may—the quicker the better—the true game is and always will be inseparably associated with the seashore, and with those intricate sand-blown benty dunes, from the tops of which we ever love to watch

And see the foam from the white beach flying,
And the boats leap through the waves,
And the ring of golden sea-lang lying
Strayed from Atlantis' caves.

Royal Dornoch.

Best known to the writer, and foremost amongst the so-called "natural" links of the Highlands, are those of which the trim little county town of Sutherland fortunately stands possessed. The glory of these links is not of yesterday. So long ago as 1630 Sir Robert Gordon, a great traveller, sportsman, and scholar, immortalised them in a sentence which Dornochians, with pardonable pride, like to din into the ears of the golfing world:—

"About this town (along the sea-coast) there are the fairest and largest linkes or green feildes of any part of Scotland, fitt for Archery, Golfing, Ryding, and all other exercises; they doe surpasse the feildes of Montrose or St Andrews."

When these words were penned there existed no rival schools in "green architecture," and into Sir Robert's appreciative lines must be read other concerns than golf. Area and smoothness of surface at least were before the historian's mind, and in those respects what was true 280 years ago is true to-day. Nowhere else in these isles is there such a continuous stretch of uniformly beautiful turf, a remarkable product of the purest poverty—white seaside sand. Few places can lay claim to greater golfing antiquity. In the archives of Dunrobin Castle are preserved the accounts for the golf clubs supplied to Earl John when at school in Dornoch in 1619. Two hundred years later we find the Dempsters of Dunrobin—who then owned Skibo Castle, now the Highland home of Andrew Carnegie—keeping the game alive. They and their guests frequently came into Dornoch and played "at the Club," the holes being marked with feathers! The present Club, upon which our late King conferred the distinctive title "Royal" subsequent to his visit to the town

There are two courses of 18 holes each. The Old Course is commonly regarded as one of the best holiday courses in the world. A distinguishing characteristic of the links is the large number of table holes, which involve accurate placing of the ball from the tee, so as to make less difficult the subsequent approach play. Mr Hilton and Mr Ball consider one or two holes over-tricky, notably the second. Critics whose opinions cannot be ignored lament the fact that the round finishes up with two short holes. Braid is one of these. Were these two holes weak golfing holes a change might be devised. What accentuates the difficulty is that they are in themselves ideal tests of the game, but, unhappily, they come together. Yet Harry Vardon would not have them touched. "I should think you have the finest links in Scotland," he writes. Taylor puts it high up in his list of favourite courses, and he is a frequent visitor. Mr R. H. de Montmorency, at the moment as fine an amateur as wields a club, admits that the bays and promontories of the course have quite an extraordinary fascination for him. He places the links third in his list. "There cannot be better found for golf," was dear Old Tom's verdict in 1886; but most eloquent of all tributes is that of Mr John L. Low:—

"Dornoch is a place of many virtues; beautiful in landscape and seascape; gifted most generously with golfing ground hardly to be equalled; and possessing itself in a corner of Scotland never likely to be too easily accessible. Once a golfer makes his destination he finds himself a fellow-citizen in a city of friendly fellow-golfers."

The high standard of golf at Dornoch was amply demonstrated at the championship two years ago. No fewer than five local members entered, and one, Mr Thomas E. Grant, the finest native player in the North, had the distinction of beating Mr John Ball in the first round. A more seasoned, though weaker, player found himself in the enviable position of fighting for a place in the last eight. A record in the game has been established by this Club, in that its team of four has won the Northern Counties Cup every year it has competed—that is, eight years in succession. The trophy is played successively on five greens, from Aberdeen in the South to Dornoch in the North.

Nairn and Lossiemouth.

It is difficult to think of these two fine golfing greens separately, there is so much in common between them. Situated in adjoining counties, they both lie the same way, the holes running east and west close by the waters of the Moray Firth; both have a very similar northern aspect, the ground sloping towards the north and the sea, and both can boast of a superabundance of whins, adding materially to the difficulties of the round. Again, those whose memories carry them back to the inception of the game at each centre will recollect that the pioneer work in carving out the course from a wilderness of whins and broom was practically identical. Later, as the avenues opened up disclosed the true character and conformation of the ground, alterations proceeded with equal frequency, and as, fortunately, both parries were favoured with a plentiful supply of money to pay for their schemes, a keen healthy rivalry was set up between the two Clubs, through the force of circumstances, conducting operations on distinctly similar lines. At first both courses were decidedly short, and had again and again to be stretched out as playable ground became available, and when at length came the revolution caused by the advent of the rubber-cored ball, both parties invited the aid of the highest golfing authorities, with the result that to-day both Nairn and Lossiemouth as golf greens take their places amongst the best in the country.

Thus in every detail the conditions were exactly the reverse of those originally prevailing at Dornoch, where to make golf possible all that was required to be done was to have the holes cut. The Nairn Club was instituted in 1887, ten years later than Dornoch. Fortunate in their friends, Sir Robert Finlay (who owns part of the links), and Sir A. Lawrence, with considerable support from the town itself, the Committee had little difficulty in finding the money it wanted, and, after the first few years, the Club made rapid strides. In recent years so much difficulty has been experienced in getting into the Club in the summer time that the town has now an independent course of its own, which is prosperous, and meets the needs of the situ-

As yet, Nairn has produced no outstanding local player.

Other Courses.

The demands of space forbid a continuation of writing in detail of many other links of merit, and to dismiss them with mere nominal mention would be scant courtesy. Returning to the neighbourhood of Dornoch, we find splendid links both at Brora and Tain. The texture of the turf at Brora is nearest to that of Dornoch, and yet the eye is exactly the antithesis of the other. Brora is narrow, and runs north and south, with enormous sand chasms stretching across the fairway. Dornoch is wide and circular, the hazards mainly on the wings. There is no getting round the Brora bunkers; it is do or die. To the "class" player, however, it is not nearly so terrifying a course as the 10-handicap man persistently represents it to be.

Tain at the moment is in the throes of reconstruction. It boasts of grand golfing ground. The turf is heavier and fluffier than that of its foster-neighbour across the water, but of a quality that stands play and treatment well. No man could wish for a finer hole than the second; the seventh is good, and will be improved when the tee is moved seawards; the eighth is a capital 4. But Tain needs stretching, and it must sacrifice a glorious 17th—a short hole across a burn. The long worship of this hole has robbed the Club of a far finer finishing hole on the opposite side of the burn, and has saddled the course with two iron-shot holes to complete the round. But Brora and Tain only await the assistance of a Cæsar to spring into fame and reputation.

Seven miles north of Dornoch are the links of Golspie, under the very shadow of Dunrobin Castle. Golf was started here over 50 years ago, but lack of funds and stubborn opposition from the grazing tenant set back the hands of the Golspie golf clock. Revivifying influences, however, have been active for some years with encouraging results. The links, though small for 18 holes, are of good material, but stand in need of more play to consolidate the surface, and of many more hazards to distinguish the play of the man of science from that of the mere haphazard go-as-you-please individual. The links are conveniently situated, and have made great progress during the past two years.

In process of time, with improved railway facilities, and with an ever-increasing multitude of players, there will be many who will discover with delight the unknown glories of Roiss Links, near Wick. Golf has been played there for a long time, and it is the most northerly 18-hole golf course in the British Isles. The links lie along the shore of a lovely sandy bay, from which they are shut off by a high benty ridge, just as St Andrews and Prestwick are. They are the real stuff.

With Spey Bay and Cruden Bay, important factors as they are in the golf of the Highlands, we are not in a position to deal; not with Cullen, Buckie, or Fraserburgh. At the outset mention was made of Machrie in Islay, and with it we shall close. Nature has manufactured no grander links. Long sweeping valleys interspersed with miniature mountains; wide stretching plateaux intersected by sandy ravines and benty ridges; and the turf—perpetually green by the salt-laden breeze of the Atlantic—matchless for its purity—a perfect paradise for the jaded city golfer.

PENNY-IN-THE-SLOT

