

WESTERN APPROACHES

IT'S not just the beaten track which provides the most arresting examples of courses and conditions, as we all know. The big-event circuit can pall, and it's often refreshing to look at golfing country away on its own, and known best only to those who live around it. This includes quite a number of courses of major calibre and tradition: amongst them are the Royal North Devon at Westward Ho!, and Saunton, behind Saunton Sands: only a mile or so away as the crow flies across the Taw-Torridge estuary, but an hour's drive away by road.

Here is without doubt some of the finest golfing country in the world; and of this, and in the best use of it, the two great links offer an unusual variety of contrast. The more spectacular is Saunton; for although it is cut off from an exhilarating view of the sea by one of the hugest and most mobile mountain ranges of sand dunes in the world, its own country is spectacular enough. Seen for the first time from the clubhouse, which sits on a lower shoulder of the adjoining hill, it calls to mind, if only fancifully, the landscape of the moon: it is so rolling and rugged and rough-looking, sweeping away as far as the eye can see, and well beyond the limits of the course, in green-covered sand dunes and hollows and little ridges and valleys, all churning before the eye like a rough sea. It is also a noted bird sanctuary, and set with a wide enough variety of wild flowers and other vegetation to keep a botanist happy for weeks. The turf itself is fine, springy and good to play on.

John Stobbs

In such country you could lay out a score of fine courses, all different (and indeed there is actually room for at least three); so that it is no surprise that the keenest and most loving of its members are often tempted in imagination to revise holes, change angles, resite tees and even move greens. No wonder, since alongside any hole there is always a perfect beauty of an alternative just

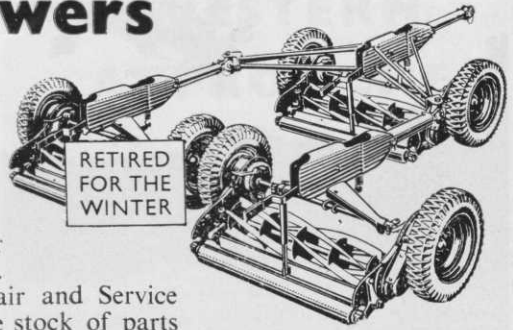
waiting to be used. One of Saunton's great attractions, too, is that there are only 26 bunkers; you could say, of course, that the whole rough is in effect a vegetation-covered bunker; but still the sparseness of formal bunkering makes the man-made ones all the more telling: often placed to hazard the drive to the shortest line by the long hitter, or lurking half or wholly hidden just about where the sloppiest sort of shot into a green might pitch.

The greens are on the whole small, and not at all easy to hold with a long shot, especially as they often seem to lie deceptively open. Their test is that they call for very exact judgment of length and line; and although the ground is clear and the turf good around and just through them (except where special hazards lurk) little chips and flips call for precise, cool judgment if they are to end by the hole.

Par 3½

Many of the holes at Saunton are of that specially testing length, a drive and a long iron to the hard hitter, two woods to the average man. There are some splendid ones amongst them. Your favourites are obviously a matter of taste: but I'd name the 10th, 13th, 14th, 16th and 17th as rather special. The 10th is a "par 3½", likely to cost 6! Its challenge lies in the pitch of the green, for the fairway is flat and acres broad. A good drive leaves you anything from a 5-iron to a half wedge to a green set slightly aslant up a steep slope on the top of a little hill. You feel you should be trying for a 3, but if you misjudge the length you end either in a bunker below the slope in front, or right over the back down a steep bank full of enthusiastic minor vegetation. Making sure of getting out, you then overhit and run back across and down the green into the bunker in front; and so on, perhaps, ad infinitum!

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The 13th is a short hole, rather into the prevailing wind, to a fairly large undulating and rising green with steep drops on the left and right and behind. Again, nearly everything lies in the choice of club and the strength of stroke. It can need anything from a 2-iron to a niblick, even for the long hitter; and to place your tee shot stiff for a 2 must be one of the most satisfying experiences in Devon.

Fourteen and 16 are both long two-shotters, but entirely contrasting. To the 14th you drive as straight as you can from an exhilarating high tee down a long, slightly narrowing but gathering fairway; but only from the right (where a bunker lies on the edge to tease the long hitter) can you get a clear sight of the green, set on rising ground between sandhills, a full wood or long iron shot away. For the shorter hitter, the second shot has to be placed in a very narrow little valley of fairway running to the green along the right. The drive to the 16th, on the contrary, is straight

over a range of sandhills, a carry of anything up to 200 yards, depending on how tightly you take the line. The wider you go to the right, the longer becomes the second shot; and this has to be a full one, close to a high range of really thick country on the left, to a green in a high hollow guarded by a little invisible bunker just where a straight but too low second shot is going to pitch. For shorter hitters, the second has to go out to the right as well, and a pitch comes up and into the green from there; a tremendously satisfying 4, this.

Desert Sand

The short 16th is a hefty shot—200 yards against the wind it can be a driver—slightly downhill over rolling country to a green set all alone in the midst of a sort of minor desert of sand country.

If you can come home in anything like the par of the holes, allowing for handicap, you have achieved something.

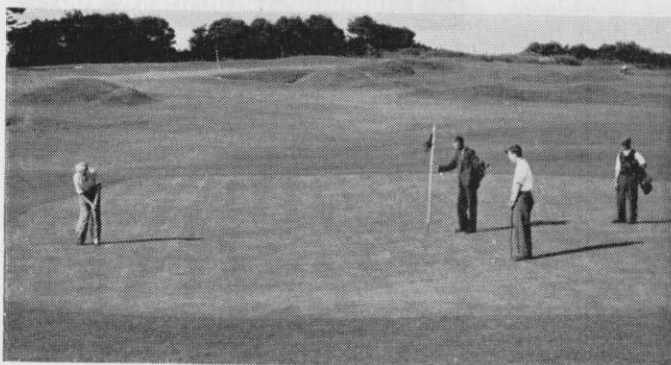
A proprietary club for all its previous history, Saunton has recently become

independent and run by its own members, who are delighted with the way things are turning out. Its green fee takings in the summer are considerable; and visitors are welcome at any time; yet it never seems to be crowded.

I've dwelt at some length on Saunton because for most golfers outside the West Country, it is not as well known as the Royal North Devon at Westward Ho! The Royal North Devon is marvellous, in quite a different way from Saunton. It lies behind a pebble ridge along the sea, partly on tall sand dune country, partly on a wide area of grazing land, with fine close turf. The whole of it is open to grazing for the potwallopers—as the local commoners are called; and hundreds of sheep and nowadays not a few horses roam free on it. Between them they crop the turf, keep it fine and close and well manured; and although the horses do nibble neatly at the choicer bits of the greens, somehow the greens remain true, fine and in every way good to play on.

Westward Ho! is famous for its peculiar hazards. The first two holes out from the clubhouse to the sea are hazarded by large patches of "fog", shortish but remarkably wiry and tenacious rough grass, and their toughness is made by it. Then from the 10th you enter the country of the Great Sea Rushes. You played over a patch indeed to the short 8th, out by the estuary, but now the real challenge of them begins. To the 10th you must simply drive straight over a vast area of them, to a fairway running doglegging left beyond them. To all intents and purposes it's the same as driving over a lake: the rushes are high, thick, tenacious and topped with spines like strong, thick needles, whose prick is apt to go nasty on you—no matter in which part of your body you get it! A local rule enables you simply to abandon any ball, for a one stroke penalty, and drop another where it disappeared.

Continued Page 8.



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For the drive to the 11th you go over them again, and then to a fairway bordered by marching hordes of them on either side; and they are still there along the long 12th, hazarding the left.

Perhaps the most lasting memory of Westward Ho!, though—apart from its magnificent situation between sea and Torridge estuary, with one of the best links views anywhere opening before you from the 6th tee perched high on the shore sandhills—is the contrast between the holes along the shore in undulating sand country; and the holes home in the flatter but still subtle grazing country. It is like two different worlds of golf, rolled into one; and where clubbing in the dune country calls for adequate judgment of runnels and bumps and drops to be avoided; clubbing on some of the later holes calls for pure judgment in almost a vacuum of easy ranging marks. If you complete this course in your own par, then you've survived a two-fold examination; three-fold if you count the special subtlety of the final two of the four short-holes: not forgetting, of course, the ditch before the green to be pitched over at the long 17th and the stream before the green at the drive-and-medium iron 18th: both doubly unnerving to a man with a medal card in his pocket!

Both Saunton and Westward Ho! lie in some of the finest—and least spoilt—summer holiday country in these islands: an area of soft beauty around the wide estuaries, and spectacular surf at Saunton Sands and Woolacombe Bay. For any reason or excuse whatsoever, they are worth visiting.

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