Walter Woods maintains ancient St. Andrews as a continuing challenge for today’s golfer. He does it with style.

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Walter Woods breathes the salty air of two worlds. He’s greenkeeper of St. Andrews. Golf entrusts him (and it has for the past 11 years) with the double-edged task of preserving its most sacred turf and, simultaneously, meeting the demands of today’s game. Golf is believed to be 900 years old here. Yet, more than 40,000 rounds are played annually on some of this same wavey duneland.

His challenge: to preserve the very character of Scottish golf.

“How else are we able to measure the records of golfers of 100 years ago against the golfers of today?” he asks.

This job assumes almost religious overtones with the ghost of Old Tom Morris, hole-cutter in hand, prowling the Old Course. How else characterize a course with the “Valley of Sin” or “Hell Bunker?”

Legend has it that St. Regulus spirited the relics of St. Andrews from a Greek island to these shores in 763. Hence the name of this city of 11,000.

A part of history

Greenkeeper Woods works under the weight of this history. Enjoyably too.

This ruddy-faced Scot has a penchant for lively conversation and, its reported, aged malt whiskey, the kind that’s found here and few other places in the world. The smooth island whiskey that warms a soul in the dank gloaming. He’s a colorful, handsome man, wispy haired, his eyes a steel gray.

American friends smile at the remembrance of a tipsy and grinning Woods, kilts and all, trundled into a waiting taxi last February in Washington D.C. This to admiring whistles of passerby after an evening of trading stories at the GCSAA Conference.

Called to help supervise construction of a course in Japan this past year, Woods insisted the bunkers be deep and dangerous.

“They want to play world class golf, then they’d better play on world class courses,” he bites off with a mischievous smile.

Firing up another of his endless cigarettes, he looks you in the eyes with his square-jawed grin, and talks St. Andrews. His aging land rover grunts through soaked swale, up gorse-covered boils. This is linksland golf.

A sodden afternoon...Reach up
and grab a chunk of the sagging sky
the color of a dirty ceiling. The only
stirring, in addition to a solitary
wind-surfer plying the sweeping
breakers of nearby St. Andrews Bay,
are knots of American golfers
determined to meet tee-off times.

The destination, one of St.
Andrews' unique double greens.
There are seven on the Old Course.
The largest, containing the 5th and
13th holes, is an acre.

"We double cut these in the
evening and once in the morning for
an Open," Woods says. "The boys've
got blisters on their feet, I'll tell
you." A triplex can mow this 5,555-
square yard monster in  a half hour.
It takes a pair of workmen, pushing
20-inch mowers, 3/4 hour each.

The greens are mowed just three
times weekly for non-tournament
play.

A battle of grasses
These giant greens, found only at St.
Andrews, are not Woods' biggest
challenge. That's preserving the
nature of a turf
surface that often
calls for low driving shots under sea
winds, hoping the shot approaches
the greens on a roll. The fairways are
hard, but not as hard as they were.
Woods sees it as a battle of grasses.

"We must control the spread of
competing grasses," he explains.
Inland grasses must not be allowed
to dominate the fescue-bentgrass
character of St. Andrews. "These
courses must remain in seaside links
condition."

This means rigorous aeration
each winter, minimum levels of
fertilizer and infrequent irrigation
each summer.

Woods enlists nature's help also.
"The more sand I use with a high
salt content in it, the more beneficial
it is to me. I don't worry about the
salt in the beach sand. The only
grass it affects is poa (annua)."

The secret of St. Andrews'
greens? Alternate layers of sand and
seaweed. Says Woods: "One time I
used to do it with soil, seaweed, and
sand. But the soil brings in weeds."

Change, however, is inevitable.
Even at St. Andrews. But it's
monitored by a Links Management
Committee made up of
representatives of the town council
and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club.
This committee directs Woods in the
care of the one 9-hole and four 18-
hole (the Old, New, Jubilee, and
Eden) courses at the site.

Irrigation came to tees and greens
at the Old Course 20 years ago, to
the fairways in 1977. "They just
couldn't play golf under those
conditions," Woods says.

"It's our intentions within the
next two or three years to irrigate
the other courses as well. We'll be
doing everything wall to wall," he
explains. "Sometimes we can get
terrible droughts in the summer."

Major fairway renovations are
under way on the Jubilee Course,
also, the first major changes on that
course which opened in 1897, the
year of Queen Victoria's Diamond
Jubilee.

Woods and his men refurbished
two fairways this summer. Nine
others get work this summer. Jubilee
suffered devastating compaction
during World War II as an an army
equipment parking lot.

The 'perfect' green
Of note, Woods considers the 8th
green of the Jubilee his "perfect"
green. "The hungrier I keep it, the
better it gets," he says.

Two mechanics and 23 other
grounds personnel help Woods.
Summer sees the addition of 10
additional men. Some, including
Americans, see it as an excellent
training ground.

Says Woods, "I'm putting young
lads out to be head keepers all
over," an indication of the open-
door policy which remains here in
the Kingdom of Fife. "Interviews,
that's one thing I don't refuse to
do," he adds.

The ghosts of golf's rich heritage
surround this genial Scot. It's a safe
bet they're smiling at the way he
keeps their memories alive for
today's player.  WT&T
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LANDSCAPE PROFILE continued

keeping the courses from turning inland." That means preserving St. Andrews "in seaside links condition," a delicate balance of fescues and bentgrasses.

That's a task; this can tankerous stretch of greensward. It's this cussed wind-whipped sand and grass that's also its glory.

In the beginning.

Take a long stretch of sand. Let the gales play it until it's an incomprehensible pattern of swales and low sweeping dunes. And cover the whole with a rich cover of turf, whin, and heather. No trees.

Now you've got something. Oh, don't forget the sheep. Let 'em wander where they will. When that wind blows though you'll find 'em huddled behind a rise. Not likely you'll be able to grow much there. Bunkers they'll be.

This sandy linksland abandoned by a retreating sea attracted strikers of the ball as early as 1100 A.D. This is the Old Course. They've been playing golf here ever since. Disregard a 1457 edict by the Scots Parliament forbidding gowf and demanding archery practice. The Scots did.

But, sure, some things have changed. The game itself changed in the 15th century when Scots started hitting the ball to holes and not objects. The ball? It evolved in 1600 to the feather-stuffed "featherie" again in 1848 to the gutta percha, and finally to today's dimpled compression.

And wooden ships filled with rock were sunk as a barrier to the sea. Captured sand allowed the manmade shaping of the New Course in 1895. Ever-increasing numbers of golfers justified construction of the Jubilee Course on even more recently claimed dune land, and finally the flat Eden Course came into play in 1912.

They're all part of St. Andrews, but the Old Course remains. Change there is so uncommon as to be marked in centuries.

In 1764 the Old Course was reduced from 22 holes ("the number of shots in a bottle of whiskey," says a proud local) to 18. The doubling of the size of the greens in 1832 speeded play. It was about this time also that fairways on the Old Course grew to their present size.