

Heart and

Old Tom Morris, it is recorded, was the archetypal public relations expert, practiced at telling folk what folk most wanted to hear. Called upon to inspect a tract of land – any tract of land – on which he may be asked to design a course, he would ponder awhile, sucking on his old clay pipe, before uttering words that would be recorded for posterity: “God and nature”, he would growl in his unmistakable Scottish brogue, “must surely have conspired together and decreed that this place was intended only for a golf course.” He is known to have said this of 40 different locations, and whilst it was sometimes uttered with tongue firmly in cheek, on the occasion of his visit to Tain, Ross-shire, he must clearly have felt the spirit move, for Tain’s mixture of linksland and inland terrain was then, and remains today, a truly outstanding expanse of God’s Own Country.

Earth-moving equipment in 1890 was little more than a horse and drag-scoop, and architects relied heavily upon nature’s own flowing contours to achieve their creations. Old Tom’s Tain is a masterpiece, albeit a wee one when he began, and at first he designing just 15 holes, though with ample room for expansion. Times must have been hard, for the committee resolved to confine ‘improvements’ (for ‘improvements’, read grass cutting), initially to those nine holes nearest to home, then twelve, and it was four years before a gorgeous and fulsome eighteen came to maturity.

What was it like in those days? The ‘Golfing Annual’ of 1898-89 described the course as ‘simply bristling with hazards in the shape of the River Tain, whins, broom, rushes, bents, ditches and bunkers. Although the strict par is 75, 83 or thereabouts represents first-class play. For variety, we know of no better course and, as the putting greens are for the most part natural and of excellent quality, visitors to Tain will be loath to leave. St Duthus Club (the old club name) members are proud of their ‘home’ hole, Thrice does the sinuous stream come into calculations, and there is no dodging it. The hole is indeed a beau ideal one, a terror for the topper or slicer.’

Iain MacLeod, head greenkeeper at Tain some eighteen years, will tell you that nothing much has changed, the

course (now par 70) still holds terror for the topper and it’s a grand player indeed who can match Tain at anything approaching his handicap. Meeting Iain was a humbling experience for this self-confessed hacker. He’s a splendid golfer with a smooth, leisurely swing, a category one player who has honed his game on these links for many a year. Granted he’s a golfer of considerable merit, but more than that, he’s blessed with the consummate spirit of an artist when it comes to caring for Tain’s blessed acres – his golf course. Marked with his particular brand of artistry, it is best shown on Tain’s quite exquisite putting surfaces; fast, firm and abundantly blessed with fescue, finished with numerous bunkers, each one properly and expertly revetted in the time honoured manner. I swear it, I’ve seldom seen a course with so many delicious examples of the revetter’s craft; it would almost be a pleasure to have one’s Titleist settle into the sand, if only to admire Iain’s canny skill.

I like the Scots, especially those many Scottish greenkeepers who I’m proud to call my friends. For a start, I’ve never come across a greenkeeper in Scotland who didn’t, honestly, love his golf course and adore the game, exhibiting true pride in achieving often miraculous results, invariably with budgets that would make the average head man in Surrey foam at the mouth with disgust. It’s probably true to say that Iain’s budget falls into the minuscule category and though you’ll find a gorgeous golf course, there’s no luxury clubhouse, (membership fees, can you believe it, are only £130 a year), certainly no high-tech maintenance facility. Tain is not a wealthy club, though wealth is relative and they are blessed with those acres of golfing magnificence, believed to resemble St Andrews in many ways, even in the views of spires and the town’s public buildings.

Fate played a hand in Iain’s pedigree: Scottish father, English mother, born in Southampton, schooled in Coventry, nurtured in the Highlands. Holidays were usually spent at nearby Nairn, and as a youth Iain fell in love with golf. He praised the Nairn links, was offered an apprenticeship under Murd Livingstone, the rest is history. In the event, his apprenticeship didn’t materialise and he went south to take up the job of assistant professional cum assistant greenkeeper at the GEC owned Grange GC in Coventry. He went to college, married Barbara, (a Nairn native), found the lure of Scotland altogether too great and returned again, this time as an assistant greenkeeper at Tain. I’d call him a dual-national: Scottish when he’s in England, English when he’s in Scotland – though a Scot in every respect save his quirk of fate birthplace.

Setting aside Iain the golfer for a moment, it’s easy to understand why Iain the greenkeeper came to be selected as a candidate for the ICI Premier Greenkeeper award last year. He demonstrates such solid authority, without so much as an ounce of negativity when it comes to executing his programme. He’s been through the highs and lows of club finances, has known what it is to struggle, sans watering system, sans adequate staff (as low as one other on occasions, though now blessed with four absolute stalwarts in Gordon McKie,

Tain: a masterpiece from the days when architects relied heavily on nature's own flowing contours to achieve their creations



soul

John Urquhart, Gordon Fraser and Stuart Griffiths), but the love he has for Tain comes shining through. It's his course, he extracts the best from it, anticipates difficulties before they become crises, he's thoroughly 'on the ball' and knows exactly how to deliver.

Delivering quality has never been an easy task, but Iain's low fertiliser, minimal water regime delivers in grand style. He dresses his greens in May and July with a basic organic granular fertiliser (8% N, 2% Iron, no phosphates or potash) and likes to apply Agrimaster liquid feed three times a year, finding the resultant colour, healthy plant structure and strong roots pleasing. Slit tining every month keep surfaces open, whilst a tractor-mounted fairway spiker thumping down to 12 inches every four months or so prevents any pan formation. He last Vertidraind in 1986, and sees no need to repeat in the foreseeable future. Drainage is not a great problem (bless Tain's sandy loam for that) and now that he has a Watermation TW1 his tees also are both handsome and vigorous. He's become quite an irrigation expert, gradually replacing old and inadequate PK41s with modern heads, a few each month, whilst becoming a dab hand at all but really major irrigation problems, talking through his faults over the 'phone with John Peace, Watermation's expert in Stirling.

It's hard not to admire Tain and it comes as no surprise to learn that visitor green fees, the club's financial mainstay, were up some 42% in 1992, rising still higher in 1993. Word gets around that Iain keeps a mean course and it's hugely popular. Once smitten, those visitors keep coming back!

So, a century or more after its founding, Tain maintains itself as a monument to Old Tom, its committee fending off temptation to call in some johnny-cum-lately to bring the old girl 'up to date.' Granted, Iain will start soon to relocate the ninth green, the only bottle-neck in an otherwise smooth round, the approach crossing another fairway, but ever conscious of the magnitude of altering Tom's legacy, even slightly, Iain has made meticulous plans to re-create the green and famous 'U' shaped bunker.

Tain's the better for maintaining old world integrity, and in another hundred or so years I don't doubt there'll still be something mystical about the old place - What is it, then, this mysticism? Dare I suggest; it's a reflection of one old man's architectural genius and one young man's dedication?

DAVID WHITE

Major machinery in the Tain stable

- 2 Toro GM 3s
- 1 Cushman Turf Truckster
- 1 Allman 300 litre sprayer
- 1 Ford 1910 Compact tractor
- 1 Massey-ferguson 550 Tractor
- 1 Sisis Hydrocore with 3" hollow core and solid tines
- 1 Sisis TDS Fairway spiker
- 2 Ransomes Marquis 20" tee mowers
- 1 Ransomes 214 gang set
- 1 Charterhouse backlapping machine
- 1 Lewis front loader
- 1 Evenspread fertiliser distributor
- 1 Vari-spread top dresser



Above: 'A monument to Old Tom Morris'

Below: Current custodians - the greenkeeping crew

