

# **GOLF'S KEEPER OF LEGENDS**

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

by Ron Hall, associate editor



St. Andrews greenkeeper Walter Woods on one of the courses's huge greens.

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 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 passerbys 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

## LANDSCAPE PROFILE

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,  $\frac{3}{4}$  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 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**



Today's golfer still finds challenge on these ancient seaside links at St. Andrews.

## St. Andrews: golf's cussed shrine

by Ron Hall, associate editor

Delicious orneriness lolls in a crooked swath of linksland off Scotland's wind-swept North Sea.

Golf's home. St. Andrews. The "auld grey toun." Time-stained buildings. Sand. It all began here more than 900 years

ago on this sloping tip off the Fife Peninsula.

"The most important work we do is keeping the course as it has been for hundreds of years," says greenkeeper Walter Woods. "Our biggest fear is





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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 at this cantankerous 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 golf 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 dunes, 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.

Previously, they'd been narrow, no more than 40 yards wide.

This century, irrigation was introduced to the course, tees and greens in 1964, fairways in '77.

Sheep don't graze on the links. Townsfolk don't bleach their linen along the fairways anymore, but the Old Course retains its stubborn personality.

"We went past some acreage that was so raggedy and beat up that I was surprised to see what looked like a fairway amongst the weeds," Sam Snead once said of St. Andrews. "Down home we wouldn't plant cow beets on land like that. Until you play it, St. Andrews looks like the sort of real estate you couldn't give away."

Today's golfer can be surprised by St. Andrews' appearance. It's only because golf courses are designed, built, and manicured with such precision now. Prior to 1800, golf courses weren't constructed. They were discovered. Then they were played on.

Golf's popularity spread anyway, first into neighboring England and Ireland, finally worldwide. Even so, rulemakers continued to look to St. Andrews for guidance and inspiration.

That guidance comes from St. Andrews Royal and Ancient Golf Club, not the first club (that honor goes to the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers), but the best known. The R. and A. dates from 1754 when 22 noblemen and gentlemen joined as the Society of St. Andrews Golfers. Today membership in the R. and A. numbers 1800, about a third of them overseas.

Said the late Bobby Jones, the most beloved American to have played St. Andrews and well known in the R. and A.: "I began to see her as a wise old lady, whimsically tolerant of my impatience, but all the while ready to reveal to me the secrets of her complex being, if I would only take the trouble to study and to learn."

Jones knew St. Andrews well. In 1930 he put together his unequalled "Grand Slam." One leg, the "Amateur" was played on the Old Course, and that a few years after a frustrated and embittered Jones stalked off the same course in midround. □