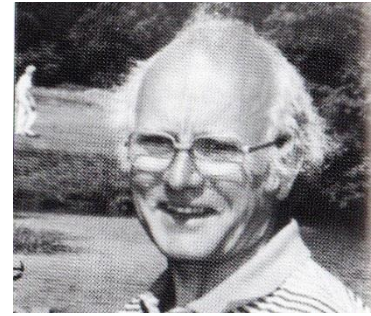


DUNSTANBURGH RESPONDS TO TEMPERED STEEL

William Sutherland



The sea would sparkle beyond as we left the hard tarmac, threw off our shoes and ran into the soft and quite amazing smell of the lush green links. Covered with flowers, harebells, cowslips and ragwort, the place was a feast of coloured butterflies and stripy caterpillars. The old war trenches made magical tunnels through the long marram grass and the golfers were beings from another world, taking part in some strange ritual quite alien to a young child.

These are some of my earliest memories of the place that would do much to shape my future life. For I grew up with Dunstanburgh Golf Course as my second garden and many is the long summer evening I would trudge home up the hill to Dunstan Steads after playing 3 or 4 rounds during the day.

Hard to believe now that golf is one of the biggest industries in the world. Names, numbers and multinational logos frequently dominate our TV screens whilst the game's gladiators vie for fame as the golfing fates watch on. But Dunstanburgh taught me that golf is much more than this. In many ways golf is almost a religion, each course with its own natural magic of place and people, each clubhouse with its own habits and traditions, with a vicar in residence in the pro shop. Above it all, the high priests of the Royal and Ancient rule the game from a small old town in Scotland.

I learned the game from Mrs Donkin and with this I learned much about life itself. One tried one's best but everyone had to suffer the "rub of the green" everyone would suffer the pain of missed shots and the desperate struggle to find that valuable golf ball. The most perfect shot could end up lying in a divot and there was no relief – this was a lesson for life itself. These were the days when my life was dominated by the supply of golf balls and to find a new Dunlop 656 was tantamount to being in heaven itself. These were the days, too, when every club had a name and a history. Woods and putters were all hand-made, each with its own magic character. Some were sweet natured and reliable, others feisty and magnificently unpredictable; clubs were passed down like treasure pets from friends and parents.

Once in secondary school, I began to work on the course during my summer holidays. "Thompson" the head greenkeeper would drive around the course in his magic chariot, some war-veteran vehicle with fabulous shiny steel spiked wheels and a moody engine that took up too much time. But the Lloyds gangmowers would burr along behind sending up a fume of green spray and cut daisies. We cut all the greens by hand after first walking the course with switch and rake. I learned to cut using the wind to blow cuttings away from the cut playing surface. I learned about leatherjackets, crow pecks and worm casts. No-one ever contemplated irrigation and if the greens were given fertiliser twice a year this was enough – and the feed was like magic itself, mixed from exotic smelling compounds of dried blood, seaweed and fish-meal.

My greatest feat at that time was learning to scythe. Each year during June and July Jock Arnott would begin his annual scything routine. In black leather waistcoat and breeches his smooth swing would effortlessly sweep away the roughest of grasses with that extra-ordinary crunching sound only made by the sharpest blade. Steep banks would be perfectly trimmed and whole areas of rough laid bare. This and the regular burning of the roughest ground would, I am sure, do much to encourage the flowers which were such a feature of my early years on Dunstanburgh. But the scything itself was a mystery. Strength and fitness had nothing to do

with it, for I had plenty of those in those days. The scythe I was given seemed to come from a different planet to that of Jock, and the process of sharpening the great blade lay at the heart of it all.

It took me at least three years of hard work to come anywhere near mastering this skill. The long grass was first to succumb and then gradually I would deal with the short wiry stuff – what magic at last. And, wonder of wonders, my supply of golf balls was truly over abundant – perhaps 100 balls in a morning from the best spot in the 80 yards of rough in front of the 14th tee. Scything remains one of my greatest therapies and I still use my ‘Northumbrian A Frame’ scythe which I bought all those years ago in the hardware store in Rothbury.

The mysteries of golf and golfers were not always popular with the rest of the family, who for many years had responsibility for running the course. Keeping the course in good trim was one thing, but keeping the golfers happy was quite another. My father frequently talked of returning the course to agricultural use, because it cost so much to subsidise its running expenses. Naturally I was keen to see the links develop rather than disappear, although I did appreciate that managing this sensitive area was a major responsibility. When I was barely out of my teens my parents passed this responsibility on to me.

The horrors of P.A.Y.E. tables and accounts were my first initiation into golf course management. Rather a long way from enjoying the fragrant dune-land and its golfing challenge I think you will agree. There were also many serious threats to the future of the course, from damage caused by horses using the dunes, and from campers and day trippers.

We also had to fight to save the bungalows from eviction by the National Trust. But despite all these distractions I was still mad keen on the game, my handicap by this time was down to 4 and I had got my golf blue for playing for Cambridge University (and winning!) against Oxford at Royal Porthcawl.

Many changes were taking place in the game at this time. It was the great boom in popularity for golf – the era of Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player. True temper shafts and the exotic import of Titleist golf balls meant that players were hitting the ball much further. Championship courses were playing at over 7000 yards and Embleton at this time was becoming almost a pitch and putt course – only suitable for holiday golfers and beginners. I can still remember the yardages on the old white tee boxes which had sand for those who wanted to tee up without a tee peg. Let me briefly talk you through the course as it was.

Hole 1 was 318 yards from the back tee (only used occasionally because it meant hitting over the footpath) – just a drive and a flick with a wedge. The second shot was always tricky because of the riggs (the fairway undulations stemming from the old field system) and if you landed on the up-slope the ball would stop dead whilst the down-slope would send you flying through the back of the green. Don't forget we had no irrigation in those days so it was mostly bump and run.

Hole 2 was the great test for macho golfers who would try to drive over Tom Ha's hill to the 269 yard green, which was tucked away invisible over the top. Otherwise we played a mid-iron to the bottom of the hill then ‘hit and hoped’ with something like a 9 iron. The small green was set in a deep little valley which posed all sorts of interesting putts.

Hole 3 was a longer affair, straight down across those pronounced field riggs towards Newton onto the present 3rd green. At probably nearly 400 yards, the hole was dominated by a string of bunkers down the middle of the fairway, and all shots would kick sharp right on the slope. The green itself was hidden behind two imposing bunkers.

Holes 4, 5 and 6 were as they are now. Hole 7 was 257 yards across the burn and almost always drivable if you didn't overdo it and get lost in the thick flowery rough over the back. Of course the green was blind from the tee and it was a constant worry that the match in front might not be clear.

Hole 8 was a trick short hole into the blind valley beside the 9th tee (now the 8th). The hole was effectively blind. It was about 157 yards and you had to hit something like a 7 iron, but 25 yards left of the flag. When the ground was dry it was virtually impossible to hit the green.

Hole 9 was as now (the 8th) but without the dramatic back tee which now makes the 8th such a great test. Again at around 280 yards this hole could have been driven by the tyros.

Hole 10 was played across the public footpath from 'The Stead' road. You could hit the green over the pillbox with a good drive and this is nearest I ever came to a hold in one (by about 1 inch!) There was a big bunker set into the slope on the right of the green so most of us took a 4 iron off the tee and chipped up. Again, the hole was just over 250 yards.

Hole 11 was played as a short hole, around 180 yards to the present 9th green. It was a good hole.

Hole 12 was as now (hole 10) – the only par 4 of over 400 yards.

Hole 13 was a strange short hole at 220 yards to the raised green over pronounced riggs. It was very difficult to hit the green in summer time. There were no bunkers on this hole at that time so there was a complete lack of definition.

Hole 14 was as now, without the championship back tee.

Hole 15 was unchanged – the little 125 howl.

Hole 16 was only played from what is now the ladies tee – again the green was blind but drivable at around 260 yards.

Hole 17 was unchanged.

Hole 18 was only played from what is now the ladies tee.

So here we had this beautiful links with a course of great charm, but the total length was barely over 5000 yards. Too many of the holes were less than 300 yards and two of the sort holes were very chancy to play. Play was also held up regularly by traffic over the footpaths crossing holes 1 and 7 and holes 10 and 17. I decided to bite the bullet, risking the disappointment of old Dunstanburgh hands, by setting out major changes to the course. The first job was to put in irrigation and obtain all the necessary licences from the river authorities. With the help of head greenkeeper, John Carss, I started on the changes that have led to the course of the present day.

All change involves compromise and all change means upsetting someone. It was exciting to imagine what could be done with this magnificent golfing terrain. I had dreamed of putting a dramatic short hole across the rocks beside the saddle rock underneath the castle cliffs. A high dune-side tee would make a wonderful driving platform for the new 8th hole. The two new holes (now the 2nd and 3rd) created a dog leg hole with real character as well as wonderful new views over the village and the North Sea. Back at the castle end of the course, we had a large area of unused land between the old 12th and 14th holes and this would allow us to create a great par 4 to the old 13th green. Here was a hole where the tyros could open their shoulders and give the ball a good belt with a huge open fairway in front of them.

The new and very dramatic short hole over the saddle rock valley would add great sparkle to the quiver of short holes on the course. It was originally intended to construct a second new tee to the north east side of the 12th green, making a championship hole of over 170 yards. But even from the present tee the hole presented a challenge with great charm, as well as an imposing view of the castle itself.

All in all, the changes had created ten new golf holes and brought the course up to date for the modern game. We managed to keep the work of the bulldozers to a minimum so as not to spoil the overall character of the links. We managed to create our new greens by grooming and cutting existing turf. By gradually reducing the height of cut over a period of months we turned areas of fairway into turf for the new greens. The change was remarkable, but it was not a job that could be done overnight. A great deal of thought and hard work went into the changes which have created the course of the present day.

Whether the makers of equipment will be allowed to continue to produce more and more hi-tech designs only the great rules gurus of the R and A can say. But, in line with many other old courses, Embleton had had its major face lift.

There were other bonuses too from the changes. We had got rid of some dangerous and chancy blind shots. We had greatly extended the range of shots required by the average golfer. We had eliminated the drives over heavily used footpaths at the 1st, the 7th and the 9th. And now the course would be up to the standards necessary for County events. No longer would the power of the true tempered shaft hold sway over the old links – the age of modern golf had arrived.