

Stone-walled Approach



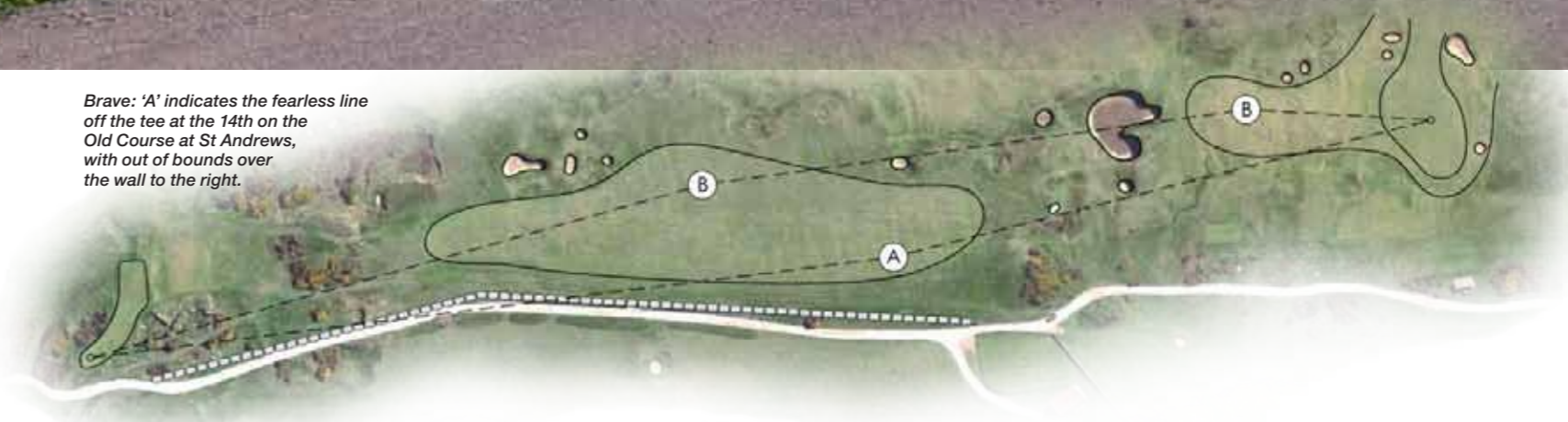
Long ago when golf began in Britain and before the advent of bulldozers, the courses occupied natural and attractive landscapes in most cases. Within these landscapes, however, they often inherited man-made features which added to the charm of both the scenery and the course. Many of these courses were adjacent to railway lines, and notable holes include the 11th at Royal Troon and the 16th on the Old Course at St Andrews. This is hardly surprising in an age when golf hotels were linked to the population by rail.

Public pathways were often a feature, and in this case the most notable example is Granny Clarks Wynd, which crosses the 18th hole of the Old Course at what was once the length of a good drive – the road was in play, and still is. I once witnessed a very strange game which evolved around the fact that the road is indeed in play. The contestants and friends from the British Amateur Women's Championship were sitting in the St Rule Club endeavouring to

determine (progressively easier as the pints flowed) which players were American. They watched the road keenly to observe who lifted and dropped, rather than playing from it.

Animals such as sheep were common on courses in these times, and the greens were often enclosed by fences – sometimes in the most extreme manner, such as the steel fences at Mulraney on the west coast of Ireland.

Brave: 'A' indicates the fearless line off the tee at the 14th on the Old Course at St Andrews, with out of bounds over the wall to the right.





Above: The wall dividing fairway and green at North Berwick's unusual 13th hole.

But perhaps the most charming of all these constructed features – partly because they often played such an integral role with the strategy of the golf holes – were stone walls. These still appear on British courses, and are so well regarded that many are Heritage-listed. Among the most famous in this group are the 13th at North Berwick, the 9th at Muirfield, the 14th at the Old Course, and the wall on the far side of the road behind the green on the 17th at the Old Course – the Road Hole – where it is possible for the ball to come to rest against the wall, as happened to Tom Watson when he narrowly lost to Seve Ballesteros in the 1984 Open Championship. The fantastic 1st hole at



Prestwick has both a stone wall and a railway line. Not only that, but a railway station adjacent to the tee, where it is not uncommon for errant drives to finish.

Prestwick's 1st is a short par-4 and is perhaps driveable, although this aspect would perhaps be improved if the right-hand bunker of the two in the fairway short of the green was removed. It's a brave shot to play along the line of the wall, particularly if you choose to play long, but the angle of approach is more favourable, and a very safe shot short and to the left leaves a much more difficult approach.

On the short par-4 13th at North Berwick, known as Pit, the wall follows the left side of the fairway from tee to green, and the green itself lies across the wall and below it in a natural dell. How you play your tee shot often depends on what type of approach you are comfortable with. Some prefer to be close to the wall and don't mind an elevated chip directly across it if necessary – while others prefer an approach from the right. Some play deliberately short from the tee, and others are prepared to chance the driver.

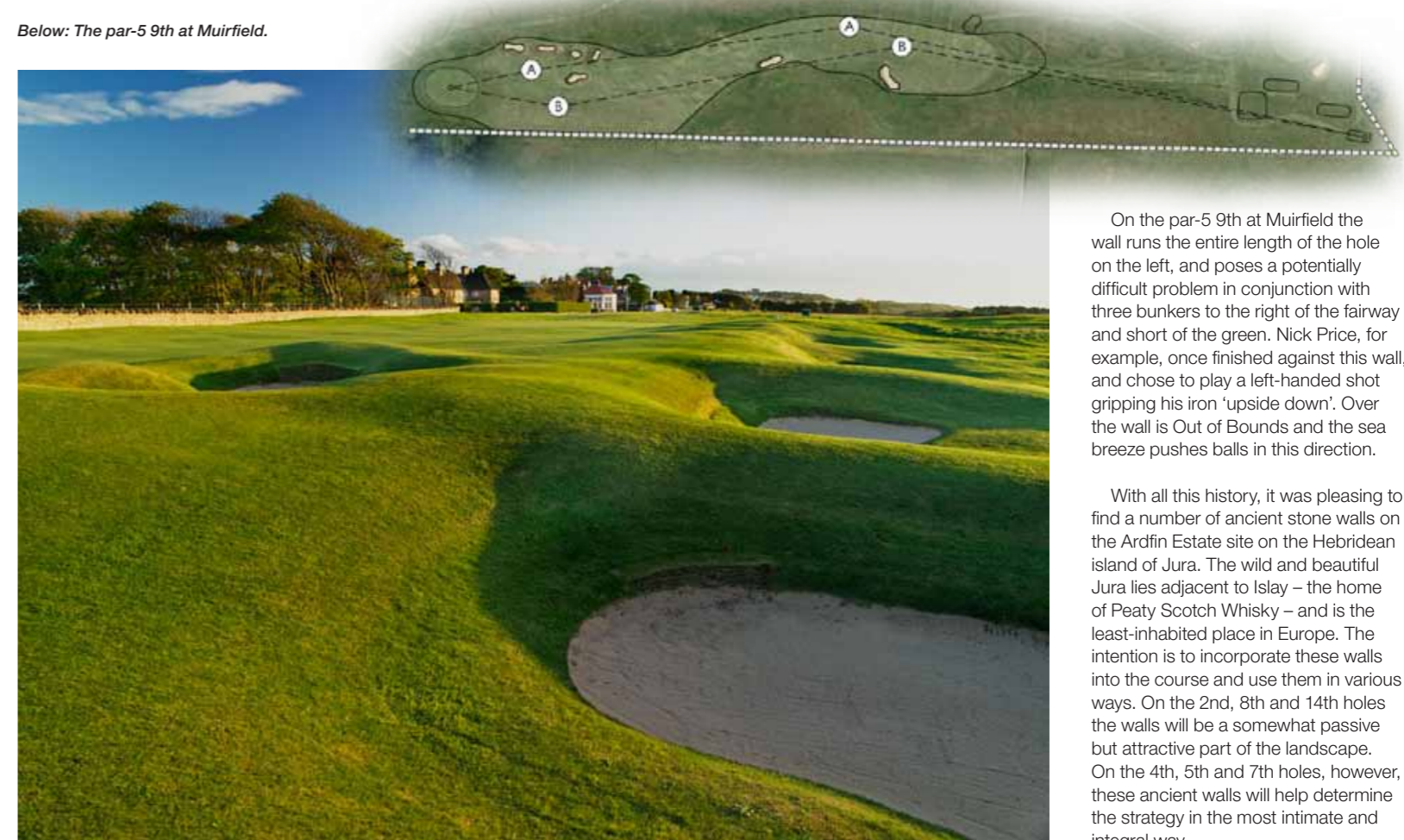
The 14th (named Long) at the Old Course is a par-5 where anything can happen. The tee sits against a stone wall which moves to the left for a little before bending back diagonally to the right, and asks the golfer how much of the wall he is prepared to risk, or how close to it he will go, for a possible chance at reaching the green in two shots. This strategy is further reinforced by a group of three deadly bunkers on the left of the fairway known as the Beardies. Playing too far from the wall can often put you into one of these, where a sideways recovery shot is almost always the result.



The championship tee on this hole has been moved back considerably in recent times. This is a common trend on many modern courses to accommodate the modern drivers and, in particular, the balls. In many cases additional length detracts from the basic intent of a hole. In this case, however, it makes sense because the essence of the drive is the balance of risk between the wall and the Beardies.

Right: 'A' indicates the brave driving line close to the wall at Prestwick's opening hole.

Below: The par-5 9th at Muirfield.



On the par-5 9th at Muirfield the wall runs the entire length of the hole on the left, and poses a potentially difficult problem in conjunction with three bunkers to the right of the fairway and short of the green. Nick Price, for example, once finished against this wall, and chose to play a left-handed shot gripping his iron 'upside down'. Over the wall is Out of Bounds and the sea breeze pushes balls in this direction.

With all this history, it was pleasing to find a number of ancient stone walls on the Ardfin Estate site on the Hebridean island of Jura. The wild and beautiful Jura lies adjacent to Islay – the home of Peaty Scotch Whisky – and is the least-inhabited place in Europe. The intention is to incorporate these walls into the course and use them in various ways. On the 2nd, 8th and 14th holes the walls will be a somewhat passive but attractive part of the landscape. On the 4th, 5th and 7th holes, however, these ancient walls will help determine the strategy in the most intimate and integral way.

'Old World charm for Ardfin

The uphill, driveable par-4 5th hole runs inland from the sea, with the existing wall hugging the right side of the fairway, and eventually the green. This hole will have a fairway which is effectively 100 yards wide in conjunction with the 6th, and it will certainly be possible to play the safest tee shot far to the left. The problem then becomes the bunker on the left edge of the green, with a downhill slope beyond it leading to the green and the stone wall immediately beyond. Approaches from this direction will be difficult indeed, with the possible exception of a pin spot at the front of the green.



Main: Ardfin holes stretch along the coast on both sides of Jura House.

Above Left: The drive across the corner of the sheep building on the 12th.

Left: The view to Islay?? from the 15th greensite.

Right: The view towards the 9th and 10th holes from the first fairway.





Above: Looking from the fairway to the green at the short par-4 5th hole.

Right: Existing and proposed stone walls.

On the other hand, if you play up the line of the wall, the approach is far simpler and can be played low and running, even to the most difficult pin spots. However, this shot is made even more demanding by the prevailing left-to-right wind and unplayable vegetation in the fields beyond the wall to the right. At 320 yards the hole will be occasionally driveable, even though it's uphill. But this choice is an even bigger risk.

While the strategy of the 5th is determined by an existing wall, the idea on the 6th is to hang the strategy around the construction of a completely new wall – and to build this wall in such a way that it looks like the others, and can be mistaken as ancient. This hole is an intermediate length par-4 which plays from an elevated tee directly at the ocean, with the island of Islay in the background. The green is slightly elevated and will form the horizon for the approach shot. It will be bunkered on the left, and these bunkers and the shape

of the green will make an approach from the right of the fairway much more attractive. To reach this position on the fairway you will have to gamble with the proposed wall, which will run diagonally across the fairway so that the further right you drive the longer you will need to carry. In this case the bail-out shot to the left is once again very safe on the shared fairway with the 5th, but from this position the approach to the green is much more imposing.

To make this wall feel like it is a natural part of the landscape, it will then be extended along the full length of the 7th hole on the right-hand side, where it will be an interesting part of the hole's appearance, and influence the approach to the green – which is played across a deep burn through a gap in the forest.

The art of 'stone walling' is almost lost. But there are still a few skilled artisans in Scotland – which is a good thing, because it is a specialised process, and a costly one, but well worth the effort. And the walls are part of an overall ambition for the course to be low-key with an 'old world' approach to its finishing and the landscape. ●

