

DUMBARNIE LINKS

SCOTTISH COURSE MAKES INAUGURAL IMPACT

BY TIM CRONIN



Dumbarnie Links 4th Hole

The golf architect has a difficult job. He must satisfy several constituencies: the owner from the start, the regulatory bodies during construction, the members or customers as they play it, and finally, himself.

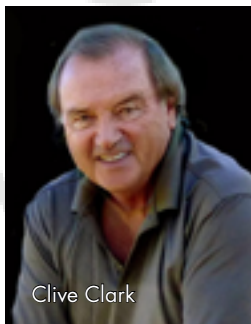
He has to take what nature gives him and improve upon it, accentuating the features present and adding those necessary to make a journey from first tee to 18th green feel challenging, entertaining, and, for casual play, relaxing, all at the same time.

And he has to meet the budget.

Ideally, the property is in an accessible location – though Chicago-based developer Mike Keiser, master of the far-away getaway, will tell you otherwise. If there's something of a view, so much the better.

Architect Clive Clark, born in England, more recently anchored in La Quinta, Calif., but always with an eye to the roots of the game, found an accessible property with a view of the Firth of Forth in Scotland, scant miles from St. Andrews.

"I had always wanted to do a links course, and you very seldom find a genuine links site," said Clark, his voice and accent from working several Masters telecasts in the 1980s still familiar. He sat behind the 16th hole after Henry Longhurst and before Jim Nantz.



Clive Clark

The property, suggested to him by friend Malcolm Campbell, who lived a mile away and happened to walk to it one day, would be the site of Clark's first venture into designing a links course.

Dumbarnie Links, he would call it, and, open only since May 27, it has received considerable acclaim as a course the golf tourist besotted with playing The Old Course must add to his list to go with nearby Kingsbarns as well as the other St. Andrews links.

Clark, working with a split-level property that gently tumbles from the clubhouse 90 feet above sea level to within a flip wedge of a mile-long beach, has taken slanted ground where cows had grazed for hundreds of years and turned it into a lively rumpled carpet of golf. Holes sit between dunes both natural and conjured up by his mind while living at the site for the best part of four months.

The result is that most welcome of golf creations, a new links to go with the some 246 worldwide that Campbell and fellow author George Peper identified in their 2010 book, "True Links."

The property itself is unusual, in that it was created on 345 acres of the 5,000-acre Balcarres Estate, lovingly tended by one family since the 1500s, about when golf itself began.

"There was an air of uncertainty when my family was first approached about building a golf course on our land," said Lord Anthony Balniel, leader of the family. "Fast forward several years and we simply could not be more pleased. What Clive Clark and his team have done is nothing short of outstanding. I have been struck not only by the beauty of what

has been created with the dune landscape being so significantly enhanced, but also by the focus on the wildlife, plants and birds.

"It has been a joy to see the project unfold."

Balniel is the rare Scot who does not play golf, but he recognizes excellence when he sees it. Putting his faith in Clark, who assembled a group of investors to finance the project, was a wise move.

Clark, 75 and anything but retired, was a successful amateur and professional player who had studied art and architecture – building architecture, that is – in college for a time before deciding he wanted a club in his hand rather than a triangular ruler.

"I realized it was it wasn't quite the same as playing golf, which I loved," Clark recalled. "It was a seven-year course."

He escaped into the



world of amateur golf and won four important tournaments that summer, landing on the 1965 Walker Cup team, where he went 2-0-2 at Baltimore Five Farms, and was a threat from then on.

Fast-forward a couple of decades, and Clark, by now the head professional at Sunningdale while moonlighting on BBC's golf telecasts, slid into golf architecture by working with Peter Alliss, a broadcasting colleague. Clark coaxed Alliss back into the business, and their partnership lasted through 22 course designs. Then the market in the U.K. dried up and Clark moved here to ply his trade.

His great asset in entering the business?

"Because I'd studied architecture and been to art school, I can draw," Clark said. "If you're designing anything, whether a fashion designer or golf architect, it's very helpful. I'd learned to do grading plans when studying architecture. It's very similar to being a golf course architect."

The former Walker and Ryder Cupper could also use his imagination. Beyond the beauty — five holes play toward the Firth, across which on the rare exceptionally clear day it is said one can see Edinburgh — Dumbarnie Links is filled with imaginative shots.

There are three short par-4 holes which dare the bold player to attempt driving the green, a particular favorite of Clark's, as it gives everyone a chance at a birdie. He compares it to "shopping at Harrod's when there's a 60-percent sale. You're getting something for nothing. It's a bargain." The drivable third, a shade over 300 yards, has already recorded that rarest of golf birds, the albatross ace on a par 4. On the 17th, one must contend with a 300-year-old stone wall that you can drive over if you dare, at the risk of finding one of the seven "gnarly pot bunkers," to use Clark's term. There's a safer route, but what fun is that?

There are two holes, one a par 5, that emulate the double-fairway hole of Charles Blair Macdonald's long-gone Lido, where the narrower fairway, harder to hit, offers a several-club lesser approach to the green in comparison to the safer but longer route. Several holes are bisected by small streams, while dunes are everywhere, guiding the golfer about.

"It's a constructed golf course but it looks very natural," Clark said in a recent telephone conversation. "If you went there today and looked out across it, you'd probably think it had been there for 100 years. The holes are very secluded. On the high part of the site, there are some holes you can look over the whole golf course."

The black tees — the back tees on the scorecard — play to about 6,900 yards, not long in this era, but surely long enough for 99.5 percent of Dumbarnie's clientele. That's especially true when one remembers the wind has a tendency to blow in Scotland.

But, Clark revealed, and a close look at the course map confirmed, there are 13 holes with unlisted tees. Those, if used in a championship, would stretch the layout to some 7,600 yards, likely long enough for even the biggest hitters to take a deep breath.

Clark calls himself "a chameleon" when it comes to course design, preferring to enhance the features of the land rather than impose a single style upon it. That brings in imagination even more. A Clive Clark course isn't cookie-cutter golf.

"It's a thinking man's golf course, and I think that's also been a factor in the popularity," Clark said. "And it's a thinking man's course where you see everything."

Clark is too modest to say this is his best design, but allowed, "It will be the best-known one, since it's a links."

Because of coronavirus-induced travel restrictions, almost nobody outside of Scottish and United Kingdom residents have seen Dumbarnie Links. That makes the acclaim from those who have all the more legitimate, for links golf is in the blood of the Scottish golfer.

"I'm absolutely thrilled," Clark said. "We've had a lot of days with full tee sheets."

One can only imagine the trumpets will sound tenfold when the rest of us get to visit the land that started it all.

DUMBARNIE AT A GLANCE
Dumbarnie Links
Upper Largo, Fife, Scotland
U.S. phone: 1 (833) 691-0403
www.dumbarnielinks.com
Green fee: U.S. \$371 (as of September 11, 2020); resident rate lower



Dumbarnie Links 10th Hole



Dumbarnie Links 16th Hole



Dumbarnie Links 3rd Hole

