

# Dornoch Days



ROYAL DORNOCH

# Welcome

It has been quite a year for Royal Dornoch Golf Club, as members and our many visitors will testify.

It has been wonderful to glance out my office window and see the structure of our eagerly awaited new clubhouse rising behind the first tee on the Championship Course.

I am delighted to report that the Morrison Construction team are making excellent progress since the ground-breaking ceremony teed-up a January start to the building work and hopefully the winter in this part of the world won't interrupt the timetable.

It was a major landmark in the history of this golf club – which is counting down to our 150th anniversary celebrations in 2027 – when members gave the green light to the project.

When completed next year, we will have a fabulous five-star clubhouse to equal the rest of the "Royal Dornoch Experience," with the prestigious American publication "Golf Digest" acclaiming us as the number two course in world golf outside the USA in their latest rankings.

Recently, the club was delighted to announce that negotiations to secure a 50-acre land package adjacent to the Struie Course had been successful. With a much-needed £1.5 million irrigation system being installed over the winter, and a new hole coming into play for the start of next season, the reputation of the course is already being enhanced.



With the additional land now in our possession, thoughts will be turning to how we can make the most of this opportunity going forward.

We were delighted when The R&A announced in August that we had been selected to host the 2028 Curtis Cup. What an honour it is for Royal Dornoch!

We have worked closely with the teams at The R&A and Scottish Golf in hosting events here in recent years and our members have played a valuable role in ensuring high-profile tournaments have been successful, on and off the golf course.

It will be an honour to welcome the biennial contest between Great Britain and Ireland and the USA. It promises to be a great week for Dornoch and the Highlands.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the success enjoyed by our Junior Section teams this season. All the travelling up and down the A9 has been worthwhile as they have brought back silverware galore and done the club proud.

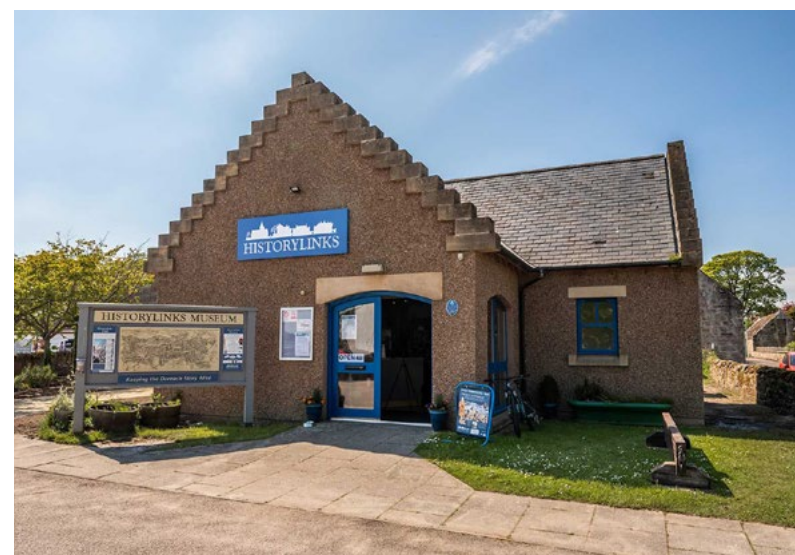
Coaches Gary Dingwall and Ally McNaughton (pictured left with Nick Dougherty), ably assisted by enthusiastic member David Diracles, are doing a splendid job with the next generation of local golfers and their work with the schools has been recognised by the Golf Foundation, which acclaimed Royal Dornoch as "Junior Club of the Year."

Yours in Sport

NEIL HAMPTON, GENERAL MANAGER



## Exciting projects to enhance the visitor experience



The Dornoch economy is heavily weighted towards welcoming golf tourists to this wonderful part of the world.

The countdown has already begun to the opening of the new clubhouse at Royal Dornoch Golf Club.

While it is the most ambitious ever investment in the golf club's infrastructure, Dornoch is no stranger to change, despite preserving the historic heart of a town which entices all manner of tourists to visit.

Several of our lovely hotels were once spacious summer retreats for well-to-do Edwardian era families who headed north by rail to make the most of their summers.

One former home and hotel is now the beating heart of the acclaimed University of the Highlands and Islands' golf degree and post-grad programmes, producing the next generation of golf course managers and club professionals.

Naturally, Royal Dornoch Golf Club enjoys close ties with the campus team, to the benefit of members and visitors alike.

The golf club's integral role in the life of the community has paved the way to closer ties with the Village of Pinehurst to promote our bonds with celebrated course architect and son of Dornoch, Donald Ross.

2025 will also see the official opening of an extension to the award-winning HistoryLinks Museum, which is well worth a visit.

For whisky lovers, there is a wide selection of distilleries within easy striking distance of Dornoch and tours and transport can be arranged for visitors.

In addition, the Thompson brothers at the Dornoch Castle Hotel are pressing ahead with ambitious plans to turn the site of an old gasworks into an eco-friendly distillery, shop and visitor centre which will further enhance the experience for tourists.

*Pictured above: The award winning HistoryLinks Museum and the Dornoch Castle*

# Older members recall tougher times at Royal Dornoch

With a new clubhouse rising behind the first tee of the Championship Course and aspirations to develop the Struie Course, these are exciting times.

teenager when his parents, who had handled the stewarding roles at Haggs Castle in Glasgow, bought the Eagle Hotel.

"There was no waiting list. Membership was six guineas, with another guinea to play on Sundays to get around the Free Church," he said.

"It was a different kettle of fish. You put a ball in the chute on the first tee for the order of play and there were hardly any visitors."

As a nine-year-old, her parents took over the stewarding, caretaking and catering roles. Among her own tasks was winding up the tower clock on a weekly basis. "I could hear it ticking from my bedroom," said Christine, who remembers pocketing 3/6d a round caddying during the summer.

The interviews also provide an intriguing social history of a tight-knit Highland community.



But, as a series of fascinating interviews being conducted with long-standing local members is revealing, everything in the garden hasn't always been so rosy.

With the club preparing to move into the new building next year, it was decided to begin compiling an oral history to complement the written records which track the rich history of a golf club which will be toasting its 150th anniversary in 2027.

This season, the celebrated Championship Course – listed at number two among the world's finest courses outwith the USA by "Golf Digest" – hosted 30,000 rounds, with Struie growing in popularity among members and visitors alike.

Given the challenge in securing tee times, many of those golfers from around the world encouraged to make the trip to Dornoch by the reputation of the golf course and perhaps to see the birthplace of Donald Ross will find it hard to believe it hasn't always been like this.

Ex-captain and long-time champion of golf in the Highlands, Willie MacKay, is just one of the older members who recalls a hand to mouth existence back in the 1960s.

"The club was struggling financially. One of our presidents even put his hand in his own pocket and bought a tractor for the golf club," he said. Willie believes the town is still benefiting from "the Madonna effect."

"That raised the profile of the town. Tour operators coming into the Cathedral tell groups this is where she got married. I don't bother correcting them, but it was where her son Rocco was christened."

Ian MacDonald and his wife Nell, a two times ladies champion, have been amazed at the transformation over the years of their membership.

"When we joined, the club was running on empty, holding sales of work to keep it going. Members were going door to door with flyers and collecting bric-a-brac," explained Ian.

Bingo proved to be a controversial source of additional income, with debate raging over whether it should be played in the clubhouse.

Ex-captain and four times champion Jim Seatter, who was in post as Dornoch celebrated 400 years of golf, arrived in town in 1966 as a

Jim enjoyed the honour of caddying for Tom Watson on his two trips to Dornoch – visits which older members agree helped turn around the fortunes of the golf club, in tandem with publicity generated by Ben Crenshaw's journey in advance of a Muirfield Open.

Margaret Ross, who won the first ladies' championship in 1972 and added another six in her heyday, and retired banker husband Alastair believe the golf courses are in finer shape than ever. Alastair, who as a young lad would sneak onto the course when the greenkeeper was otherwise engaged, was present for the official opening of the extended course towards Embo in 1948.

"I still remember ex Ryder Cup player Charlie Ward in his black and white brogues and dressed all in grey. He was very dapper. It was the first time I had seen a professional."

Former ladies captain Christine Murray, whose uncle Bob MacDonald famously won the first ever Texas Open in 1921 and recalls his Buick making quite an impression on a return trip in the 1930s, grew up in the clubhouse.

Part of the building was occupied by the Air Ministry, with the Struie or "Bottom Course" requisitioned for a wartime airstrip.

Former finance convener Sandy Morrison may have been born in Golspie but he filled a variety of community roles, including serving as an Honorary Sheriff.

"That could be very awkward at times," he admitted. "But the golf club has always been very welcoming. We used to sign up visitors for membership after a round.

"That has all changed but we are happy to share, and we're delighted that people from all over come here to play. I have been lucky enough to golf around the world, but I am always amazed by how good this course is."

Hamish Macrae, who has been golfing at Dornoch since his days as a junior in the 1960s, has welcomed investment plans for the Struie Course.

"I have seen it evolve over the years and remember it as a nine-hole course. The old second hole was one of my favourites, but it had to be realigned when the caravan site came along. People were battering golf balls into it and the town council wasn't too happy about that!

"It is a wonderful course now and hopefully the development that is being planned will bring it up to a standard similar to the Championship Course."

Above from left: Christine Murray, Hamish Macrae, Jim Seatter, Margaret & Alistair Ross, Sandy Morrison, Willie MacKay, Nell & Ian Macdonald

# Oakley Country Club's Ross legacy

The story of Donald Ross's extraordinary journey from modest beginnings in a small town in the Scottish Highlands to designing some of the greatest golf courses in North America reads like a movie script.

Along the way, he became one of the most influential figures in the history of US golf and has become woven into the fabric of the game Scotland gave to the world.

Growing up in Dornoch, Ross had the good fortune to live close by one of the purest links golf courses in the world, caddying and golfing from the age of 10.

After serving an apprenticeship in St Andrews, his life was to change on August 23, 1898, when, as the club's first professional, Ross gave a lesson to Robert Willson, a Harvard University professor holidaying with his wife in the land of his ancestors.

Willson was a founding member of the Oakley Country Club near Boston, Massachusetts. He explained how the golf business economics worked in America, observing that a young Ross could triple his salary in this land of opportunity.

Willson returned to Oakley, where he persuaded the Board to extend an offer of employment to this young Scot.

Quite rightly, Oakley Country Club is proud of the key role it played in luring Ross out of his comfort zone in pursuit of a new life on the other side of the Atlantic. His brother Alec was to join him soon after.



Club historian Dan Mee explained: "Oakley was established in 1895 as the Cambridge Golf Club on a nine-hole course. Three years later, the club moved across the street, when it acquired a larger property and changed its name in honour of the estate that once occupied the land."

That year, Scotland's Willie Campbell, the most prominent golf course designer in the region, laid out the first 18-hole golf course in Massachusetts at Oakley.

Ross arrived in Watertown in March 1899, initially hired as a club maker and to give lessons. The Campbell course was still growing in at that stage and Ross was quickly given the additional task of greenskeeper with the mission to get the new course in shape.

Later that year, Oakley acquired more land. They initially approached Campbell, but Willie was seriously ill and sadly died the following year.

"Ross had so impressed management during his first months with his knowledge, skill and work ethic, that the untested golf course architect was entrusted with redesigning the Oakley course," explained Mee.

In the autumn of 1900, the first Donald Ross designed golf course was duly delivered – to much acclaim. Harry Varden, on a nationwide tour, played Oakley and proclaimed that the new Ross course was one of the best in the country.

Ross was able to send \$2,000 home to his mother, who added a second floor to the family home at No. 3 St Gilbert Street. She called her expanded home "The Oakley Cottage."

During his first year at Oakley, Ross gave a lesson to member Samuel Smith, an attorney for James W. Tufts, the founder of Pinehurst Resort.

Mee observed: "Smith arranged a dinner meeting at Tufts' nearby home. Ross so impressed his host that Tufts offered him the position of Winter Pro at Pinehurst."

Starting in 1900/01, Ross began spending his winters at Pinehurst in North Carolina. The resort became a mecca for wealthy Americans seeking to escape harsh winters in the north. The Scot's reputation grew every season as more Pinehurst visitors played his outstanding courses.

Mee noted: "Ross was an outstanding golfer in his own right. He won the first Massachusetts Open in 1905 and claimed three top ten US Open finishes.

*Pictured above left from top: Donald and Alec Ross and their wives pose at Donald's home near Oakley Country Club; The clubhouse, so familiar to Donald Ross, pictured in 1906. Pictured right: Oakley Country Club historian Dan Mee*  
Photos courtesy of Oakley Country Club Archives

"He continued as Summer Pro at Oakley through the 1910 season where he forged a reputation as an innovator. He installed pipework to water greens and tees, rolled out indoor lessons at the club's squash courts, and in 1907 installed one of the earliest practice ranges on a US golf course."

From 1911 through 1913 Ross was the Summer Pro and expanded Essex County Club to 18 holes. After 1913, Ross devoted three quarters of each year to designing golf courses.

He established Donald J. Ross and Associates in 1916 and assembled a team of quality draftsmen, engineers and men who knew golf, including brothers Alec and Aeneas.

This group worked from offices in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and North Carolina.

Before his death in 1948, more than 400 courses were laid out which can proudly claim to bear the imprint of Donald Ross, including his masterpiece, Pinehurst No.2.

The Ross name has become synonymous with the "Cradle of Golf" in the USA and the quality of his work is reflected in 175 USGA Championships being contested on Ross designed courses.

Nowadays, every summer American visitors come to Royal Dornoch Golf Club to walk the historic links where a young Donald Ross first fell in love with the game of golf.



# Chart the clubhouse project on our webcam



## 2025 promises to be a momentous year in the history of Royal Dornoch Golf Club.

Members and visitors can look forward to experiencing the comfort and views from the new clubhouse, which has been under construction since January.

This major project will further enhance the experience for our members and the many golfers who make the journey to the Highlands from around the world. It is an exciting development, not just for the golf club and the town but for the wider region.

The Morrison Construction team has ensured that it has been business as usual on the Championship Course as the impressive clubhouse takes shape on a site near the first tee. With winter closing in, it's good to see the work progressing on schedule.

The new eco-friendly building will provide luxurious facilities to match the reputation of our Championship Course and replace an oft-extended building which has served us well but which has been showing signs of its age.



No matter where you call home, you can follow how work on the clubhouse is progressing by checking out the live construction site webcam on the [club website](#). It has been proving very popular since joining the webcams looking out over the first tee and the second green.

Golfers can also look forward to the benefits of investment aimed at the Struie Course. The greenkeeping team has been busy creating a new Par 3 hole with an infinity green beside the Dornoch Firth, along with new tees for the 10th. We are sure the changes will meet with a positive response in the spring.

In addition to a new £1.5 million irrigation system, the acquisition of adjacent land provides the club with a chance to explore design opportunities aimed at further enhancing the reputation of the Struie Course and also our practice facilities.

These are exciting times for a golf club which will toast a landmark 150th anniversary in 2027 and welcome the 45th Curtis Cup the following year.

*Aerial photo above (and on cover): Matthew Harris*

## News Board



ROYAL DORNOCH

### UK accolade for juniors

Congratulations to everyone involved in Royal Dornoch winning the Golf Foundation's "UK Junior Club of the Year" award at a Wentworth ceremony.



Our coaches Gary Dingwall and Ally McNaughton, and member David Diracles, deserve huge credit for the many hours they have committed to coaching local youngsters.

More than 50% of primary school age children in the town are regularly taking part in the club's development programme and our teams enjoyed unprecedented success in national competitions this year.

They secured a hat-trick of National Junior Flag Championships and won the Scottish Golf National GolfSixes.

Our team also posted a victory on home soil in the Morcott Challenge and it was great to see our young American visitors enjoying their visit to Dornoch.

### Curtis Cup confirmed for 2028

Royal Dornoch can look forward to welcoming the 2028 Curtis Cup.



CURTIS CUP

The event pits the best women amateur golfers from GB&I against the USA and the announcement by The R&A is another feather in our cap.

Having successfully hosted the Scottish Men's Championship, The R&A Women's and Men's Senior Amateur Championships and the Vagliano and Junior Vagliano trophy matches in recent times, it will be nice to add the Curtis Cup to that impressive list.

### More recognition comes our way

We are no strangers to being highly rated in lists of Scotland's finest links courses.



But it was particularly nice to see our Championship Course rising to second place, behind only Royal County Down, in the prestigious "Golf Digest World's Greatest Courses outside the USA."

The same publication, which has an unrivalled distribution, also rated the course as the best in Scotland.

Royal Dornoch was hailed Scotland's Best Course (green fee over £250) at the 2024 Scottish Golf Tourism Awards and shortlisted for the Best Sustainability Project (the Struie saltmarshes initiative), having won a similar accolade at the Golf Environment Awards.

Congratulations to Eoin Riddell, Scott Aitchison and our greenkeeping team for the role they have played in bringing recognition to the club.

### In the mix for more awards

The Golf Course Awards 2024 sees Royal Dornoch shortlisted for the "Scotland: Course of the Year" and the "Sustainability" categories.



The winners will be unveiled at a December 5 ceremony at The Shard in London hosted by Sky Sports commentator and Golf Course Awards ambassador Nick Dougherty.

The Championship Course has been nominated along with Dumbarnie Links, The Old Course, The Championship Course at Carnoustie and The Machrie.



ROYAL DORNOCH

Royal Dornoch Golf

*Merry Christmas and best wishes for a Happy,  
Healthy and Prosperous New Year.  
We look forward to giving you a warm Highland welcome in 2025*



Phone: +44 (0)1862 810219

[www.royaldornoch.com](http://www.royaldornoch.com)