

Dornoch Days



ISSUE 11 MARCH 2026

ROYAL DORNOCH

Warm welcome assured at Royal Dornoch

It's shaping up as yet another exciting year ahead for everyone at Royal Dornoch.

The team here is looking forward to welcoming visitors from around the world to our wonderful new clubhouse.

The stream of compliments coming our way since the building opened in December has confirmed the wisdom of the club's decision to invest for the future - and I'd like to convey my personal thanks to everyone involved in bringing the project to fruition.

Finally, after many years of discussions and false starts, we now have a clubhouse for members, our many visiting golfers – and staff – which is worthy of our treasured reputation as one of the finest links golfing experiences to be found anywhere in the world.

At heart, we are a community golf club which is charged with the guardianship of the courses, and we have always been eager to give a warm Highland welcome to golfers travelling here from home and abroad.

In the months and years ahead, we are confident first-time visitors and golfers already familiar with the delights of Royal Dornoch will appreciate our new surroundings; the hospitality; and level of comfort afforded in the locker rooms, bar and restaurant area, and our spacious pro shop.

During your visit, do spare some time to savour the spectacular views across the links and reflect on the heritage of Royal Dornoch and the town, whether it's by lingering on the stairway leading up from the entrance hall, enjoying a close-up look at the club's much loved Carnegie Shield or taking a peek at the artefacts and silverware displayed in other areas of the building.



A bronze statue of two men integrally linked with Dornoch and the golf club was commissioned to greet golfers arriving at the clubhouse.

Donald Ross, a “keeper of the green” and our first ever professional, took the golfing gospel and his architectural skills across the Atlantic as a young man, and he enjoys enduring fame in North America.

Not so well known further afield is John Sutherland who served for nearly 60 years from 1883 in the post as club secretary and put the Championship Course firmly on the map.

Now the roles of both these gentlemen are celebrated in the statue crafted by Scots sculptor David Annand, whose work includes the tribute to Old Tom Morris at St Andrews.

Looking ahead, the club is firming-up plans to celebrate our 150th anniversary in 2027 and liaising closely with US based golf course architects King Collins Dormer on the ambitious blueprint to enhance the Struie Course, create a third course and offer more extensive practice and warm-up facilities.

Yours in Sport

NEIL HAMPTON, GENERAL MANAGER

Cover photo of clubhouse © Matthew Harris.

Making the most of any visit to Dornoch

Strange as it might seem to golfers, not everyone visiting the Dornoch area has clubs amongst the luggage.



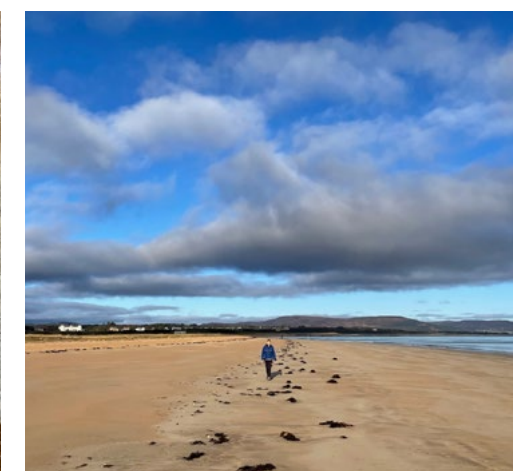
The picturesque town, just a few miles off the popular North Coast 500 – hailed as one of the world's great scenic road trips – has much to offer as a tourist destination beyond the famous links, where golf has been played for more than 400 years.

A vast, award-winning sandy beach is perfect for families and bathers, while the streets around the Cathedral – dating to the 13th Century - are ideal for exploring, enjoying retail therapy or taking a break in the various cafes, bars and restaurants.

The accommodation on offer ranges from caravans to welcoming Bed and Breakfasts and top-notch hotels. But be warned, with the golfing season in full swing, it's advisable to book well in advance.

The town enjoys a busy social calendar and visitors are warmly welcomed to join in with the locals, and whether it's taking in the weekly Saturday evening parades by the Dornoch Pipe Band and other musical treats, joining in with the pickleballers or attending showpiece events like the Dornoch Highland Games, The Sutherland Agricultural Show and whisky, beer and food festivals, this is a community which rolls out the welcome mat.

Anyone wanting to learn more about the history of the one-time Royal Burgh, which has been attracting



tourists in droves since the Edwardian era when the railway arrived – a link sadly lost in 1960 – should not miss either the Cathedral or the five star Historylinks and Heritage Museum.

The latter makes for the ideal start, or finish, to a series of self-guided walking trails, with leaflets available from the centre and online.

Stroll through the town, stepping back in time with the help of interpretation boards, or venture further afield to Embo's rows of fishermen's cottages, the expansive dunes at Coul beyond or, to the south, the location of the Meikle Ferry landing, where 99 lives were lost in an 1809 maritime disaster.

Golfers from around the world, from the USA and Canada in particular, make a point of seeking out the childhood family home of Donald Ross, the legendary golf course architect and first ever professional at his hometown golf club.

The town's at times grisly past is hinted at with halts at Gallows Hill, the Cholera Stone and the Witch's Stone, and no trip to Dornoch is complete without a look inside the Cathedral, where Madonna and Guy Ritchie, and the world's media, celebrated the baptism of their son Rocco in 2000.

Pictured above from left: A glimpse inside the historic Cathedral (© Andy Kirby); The beach at Dornoch; Dornoch Pipe Band is a summer attraction (both © Bannerman Media).

Showcasing Royal Dornoch's heritage in style



Golfers enticed to Royal Dornoch make the pilgrimage because the Championship Course has been hailed among the most memorable links experiences to be found anywhere on the planet.

But this season, their journey will be enhanced by luxuriating in the comfort of a new clubhouse designed to match the status of the golf course it overlooks.

The near 150-year history and heritage of a golf club which has tempted golfing greats from Old Tom Morris and Donald Ross to Ben Crenshaw and Tom Watson to savour a landscape crafted patiently by Mother Nature over thousands of years is celebrated throughout the building.

Venturing up the stairway, visitors and members alike are encouraged to linger and appreciate the Royal Dornoch story on the heritage wall designed by

award-winning Cheshire-based experience specialists Mather and Co.

Chris Mather's team of specialists, working hand in (golf) glove with club archivists Eileen Macrae and Christine Callingham, faced a race against time to ensure the project was completed in time for the start of the 2026 season.

"We are thrilled with the feedback from the golf club, members and visitors since the clubhouse opened in December," said Chris, whose firm has amassed nearly 30 years' experience across the heritage, sport and entertainment sectors.

Chris revealed an invitation to play the Championship Course from club general manager Neil Hampton's wife Fiona introduced the possibility of playing a key role in showcasing Royal Dornoch's heritage and artefacts when the new clubhouse project was given the green light.

"One of the 'full experience' commissions we completed recently was at Inverness Castle," explained Chris. "I had been working with Castle project director Fiona and within the first few weeks she asked if I was a golfer. I had never played Royal Dornoch before so that was amazing. It was only then I discovered Fiona's husband was the general manager and the club was working towards a new clubhouse.

"Neil was aware of our work at Carnoustie, The R&A and for Prince Moulay Rashid's golf club in Morocco so he invited us to join other companies bidding for a project bringing Royal Dornoch's amazing heritage to life.

"Our team worked closely with the Eileen and Christine, who did a marvellous job in bringing together the material to go on display from the attic and cupboards in the old building.

"We decided the central staircase spine wall would be perfect for telling the story of the club, bringing it all together with some of the characters from the club's history, with the background provided by a Lancelot Speed illustration from the 19th Century.

"This wasn't a museum we were dealing with, it was a clubhouse and some of the members use it every day. But right from the off we wanted visitors to immerse themselves in Royal Dornoch from the start of their journey through the clubhouse.

"When golfers are making for the first tee, they are passing an old fire surround taken from the old clubhouse, with the painting of the club's legendary secretary John Sutherland enjoying pride of place above it.

"In addition to some lovely old clubs and golf balls, we have used photographs and illustrations reflecting the development of the town and golf, with innovative cabinet lighting designed to make the most of the club's collection of trophies.

Pictured left. The new clubhouse stairway adorned with pictures and an illustration called "The Golf Tournament at Royal Dornoch, Sutherlandshire" dating to an 1893 edition of "The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News." The figures include club secretary John Sutherland, golfers, caddies and spectators, set against the background of the Cathedral, Castle and clubhouse of the day (photos © Matthew Harris).



"The famous Carnegie Shield has been brought to life using close-up videos of the wonderful craftsmanship and it provides an impressive focal point in the restaurant area.

"We were guided through the key touchpoints of the building by Neil, the captains and the archivists. It was a very good collaboration. Working with a blank canvas gave us an opportunity to go far beyond the traditional, 'trophies on glass shelves look' which most clubhouses have, and people just walk past them.

"We have introduced an element of theatre and info entertainment storytelling to the collection. What you are seeing at Royal Dornoch is unique and the new clubhouse is worthy of the famous golf course, making the most of those gorgeous views over the links.

"The Championship Course is what brings golfers from all over the world to the Highlands of Scotland. Our aim was simply to enhance the overall experience for members and the many visitors to Royal Dornoch from around the world.

"I am delighted to say the feedback has been very positive, and we have been having conversations with a few high-profile clubs to see if we can work on heritage installations for them.

"Neil and the club put their faith in us to deliver after seeing our work in St Andrews and hopefully our team has met their expectations, and perhaps even surpassed them."

Flying the flag to welcome our visitors

It's a rite of passage enjoyed by first-time visitors taking to the first tee on the Championship Course.

Having checked in, enjoyed a warm welcome and tucked away the tartan scorecard holder and course guide, it's time for the photograph in front of the iconic flagpoles and sign declaring Royal Dornoch Golf Club.

This season, golfers will gather for the photo op with the stunning new clubhouse providing an impressive backdrop.

Look closely this season, and you'll see the club flag fluttering from the central flagpole – when there's a breeze across the links – alongside the distinctive

Scottish Saltire and the Stars and Stripes. The other two flags, however, can change daily.

"The club flag is the constant centrepiece," explained Gary Dingwall, head PGA coach at Royal Dornoch.

"Alongside it, the Scottish and United States flags are flown almost all the time, reflecting both our heritage and the significant number of American visitors we welcome to Dornoch each year.

"The remaining flagpoles rotate, depending on the nationality of visitors on the tee sheet.

"Our starters take great care to check the day's bookings and will often raise the appropriate national flags to recognise the countries represented. It is a small gesture, but one that we have found means a great deal to visiting golfers.

"The 1st tee beneath the flags is probably one of the most photographed spots on the course. Very few visitors begin their round without pausing for a photograph beneath the national colours.

"Our starters take great care to check the day's bookings and will often raise the appropriate national flags to recognise the countries represented."

"For many, seeing their country's flag flying above the tee creates an immediate sense of connection and belonging.

"It reinforces what Royal Dornoch represents: a traditional Scottish club with a truly international membership and visitor base."

So what is the history behind this tradition?

"It can be traced back nearly 50 years," explained Gary. "Flying national flags beside the 1st tee began in 1980 when the club hosted the Home Internationals. The R&A brought official flags representing the competing golf unions, and they were flown during the event. The visual impact was striking and created a wonderful sense of occasion.

"Following the championship, the club decided to continue the practice. What began as a practical addition for an international team event quickly evolved into a permanent and much-loved tradition.

"Over time, it has become a focal point of the 1st tee experience and a symbol of Royal Dornoch's global reach and welcoming spirit."

Gary revealed the club can call upon over 70 different national flags from their collection.

"As you might expect here in the north of Scotland, the flags are occasionally tested by the elements," he laughed.

"From time to time, ropes need to be repaired and the odd flag reaches the end of its natural life. However, the flags themselves are robust and made to withstand coastal conditions.

"At the start of each season, we carry out a full inspection of all our flags and rigging to check for any wear and tear, replacing or repairing as necessary to ensure they continue to present well.

"The flags are traditionally raised in time for the first Club Medal of the season and they remain flying throughout the playing season until our final visitors depart in the autumn.

"The club flag is lowered to half-mast on the day of a member's funeral. It is a simple but meaningful mark of respect within the club community."

Pictured from left: The flags flying next to the new clubhouse (© Bannerman Media) with inset pic from a Home International event where the tradition began (© Historylinks Museum); Gary Dingwall with the national flags collection (© Matthew Harris).





Dornoch inspires the write stuff

Ever since celebrated American writer Herbert Warren Wind took to the typewriter for his 1964 essay “North to the Links of Dornoch” for the pages of the “New Yorker” magazine, wordsmiths with a passion for golf have been inspired to follow in his footsteps.

The eloquent New Englander, who coined the enduring term “Amen Corner” for the string of holes which invariably hold the key to the wardrobe containing the Green Jacket awaiting the winner of The Masters, is credited for restoring the reputation and international profile of the Championship Course, later tempting the likes of Ben Crenshaw and Tom Watson to experience the near mystical linklands for themselves.

Herb, who observed he had played “a thoroughly modern old links with that rare equipoise of charm and character that only the great courses possess,” is also credited with declaring “no golfer has completed his education until he has played and studied Royal Dornoch.”

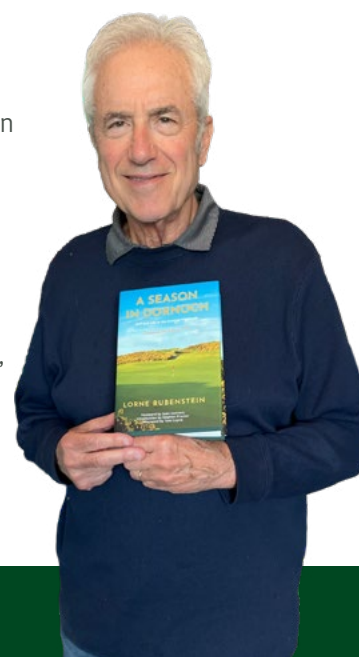
Inspired by Warren Wind’s “New Yorker” article, Canadian golf writer Lorne Rubenstein set his sights on the Highlands in 2000, with his classic, “A Season in Dornoch,” capturing not only the allure of the Championship Course but the characters, culture and history of the ancient Cathedral town which had been

home to prolific North American “Golden Age” golf architect Donald Ross.

Like Warren Wind, Rubenstein’s literary legacy has encouraged countless adventurous travellers to include Royal Dornoch, and other Highland gems, on their golfing itineraries. Fortunately, a combination of various bridges, an improved road network and the airport at Inverness has made access to the area much easier for visitors than it was for either Warren Wind or Rubenstein all those years ago.

These days, bewitched bloggers and beguiled podcasters are among the throng teeing-up on the course which inspired many of the design features favoured by Ross as he went to work across North America.

Among those which have caught the eye of members, at home and abroad, are warm reflections on their “Royal Dornoch Experience” from far-travelled English golf author Richard Pennell and US based Will Bardwell.



One-time greenkeeper and club manager Pennell’s online essay “The Chapel in the Wilderness” for Pitchmarks confesses “So much has been written of the links at Royal Dornoch that it feels almost improper to comment, for what could we ever say that is new, or different, or worthy of the simple splendour of those holes, tumbling over hillocks and hollows as it has always done?”

Undaunted, Richard, who has followed up “Grass Routes” with his latest publication “Common Ground,” reflects on a personal pilgrimage to Sutherland, observing the more adventurous are rewarded with “a glimpse of the essence of the ancient game; a string of holes that exist above and beyond the whims of fashion.

“It is a time-tested route, the work of centuries, of a slow and deliberate evolution that dares the modern golfer to dismiss it. If the Old Course is the Home of Golf, perhaps Dornoch is Golf’s Soul, the captivating, confusing cousin from the north.”

Meanwhile, the joys of golf in the Highlands of Scotland captivated American blogger and Mississippi civil rights attorney Will Bardwell for February’s “Lying Four” essay, “A Day in Dornoch Among Too Few,” eight years after an all too brief flirtation with the town’s charms.

“Even by Scotland’s standards, Dornoch is a place where you could spend a lifetime and not see everything worth seeing,” observed Will.

“When I visited Dornoch in 2016, the only time I’d left Cathedral Square had been to play golf. So after briefly walking uphill to lay eyes on the clubhouse, I wandered back down to the bottom of Golf Road.

“You can learn a lot about links land on that walk. I stood there for a long time, staring east, with the morning sun and wind in my face. Off to my left, golfers had been chasing balls and rocks around the links for 400 of those years. How many of them knew that they were walking on perhaps the greatest site for golf on Earth?

With his tee-time looming large, Will found himself lured into an old cemetery en route.

“I’d walked past it eight years earlier, too. This time, though, something gripped me. How many souls walk past this cemetery on their ways to and from the links?

“Henry Duff, a postman who died in 1922. Lieutenant Corporal Peter Gordon, either 21 or 22 years old, killed by Germans in northern France in 1917. Janet MacKay, born 1886, died 1890. Margaret MacKay Taylor, born 1896 with no electricity, died 1981, less than three months before MTV premiered.

Before them all, there had been Royal Dornoch. After, too. One day, it’ll be us, and Royal Dornoch will still stand. There is comfort in that, but also disappointment — Royal Dornoch will still be there, but just out of our reach forever.

“If you wandered onto Royal Dornoch’s first tee by accident, you wouldn’t guess that one of the planet’s greatest golf courses lies ahead of you. Between the second green and the third tee, though, something magical happens.

“The full links opens in front of you. On a clear day, with the sun shining down from the sapphire-blue sky touching the Dornoch Firth on the horizon, it’s like seeing the world for the first time.



“For all Royal Dornoch’s accolades, it is ultimately a design that champions classic design principles without getting in the way of the land’s natural features. Nearly every hole presents options that are aggressive, conservative, and something in between: choices between danger and safety, with rewards and consequences for whatever choice the player makes.

“Lord knows it’s not the only course in Scotland that accomplishes that, but I’ve yet to find another that shows so emphatically that minimalism doesn’t have to be boring.”

Pictured from left: Richard Pennell driving on the Championship Course (© Simon Pope); Lorne with his classic book; Blogger Will Bardwell on the 7th tee.

Tracking Tom on the links at Dornoch

Tom Watson's 1981 visit to Royal Dornoch has become the stuff of legend. The multiple Majors winner, along with compatriot Ben Crenshaw, is credited with blazing the trail for fellow Americans eager to follow in their footsteps to the Highlands and tee-up on the Championship Course.

Among those who followed Watson and close friend Sandy Tatum, president of the USGA, across the links was retired Inverness baker Fraser Morrison. And it is an experience ingrained in the 81-year-old's memory bank.

In a 2015 interview for "Golf Digest" marking his final bow in The Open, at St Andrews, five times Claret Jug winner Watson recalled how Royal Dornoch completely transformed his views of links golf.

Having arrived in town by helicopter after playing Ballybunion, Prestwick and Troon, Watson and Tatum leapt at the chance to venture out onto the rain lashed course for a second round after a couple of beers over lunch arranged by club historian Donald Grant, with locals Dennis Bethune and Jim Seatter on their bags.

Playing in the wind and rain after "a beautiful, wind free morning round," Watson recalled: "That's when I fell in love with links golf."

Fraser, who has been a member of Inverness Golf Club for more than 60 years, recalls getting a call from friends in Dornoch to alert him to Watson's visit.

In those days, it was a 90-minute drive from the Highland capital, but even then Fraser was a huge admirer of Watson and his swing. He wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to watch the American at close quarters on the Sunday in the company of a couple of chums.

"The jungle drums had been beating as word got round that Tom Watson was in Dornoch, so we went up on the Sunday," said Fraser.

"When they started there maybe a few dozen of us but it slowly built up and eventually there were hundreds following them. It was a magical experience for me.

"Tom had a lovely turn and swing. On the Par 5 12th he hit his drive and a three wood to the back of the green. I had never seen anyone do that.

"I remember Tom standing on the second tee and declaring 'it's a bit early for this.' In my experience it's always a bit early on that tough Par 3!"

"He was never short. He would ask Dennis what club he would hit at any hole. If Dennis said a five, Tom would take a six iron and it worked a treat. He was always behind the stick.

"I knew Dennis quite well and he gave us a close look at Tom's clubs. I remember his Hogan Persimmon driver was huge – I'd never seen anything like it – and he had a Ping Pal putter. Maybe there were Hogan irons in the bag but I wouldn't swear to it.



"For that particular round it was the most beautiful day after a wet start and maybe not the conditions Tom was looking for with The Open in mind. But it was perfect for the spectators.

"There were no barriers, and no selfies in those days, of course. It was great to get so close to a legend.

"I remember Tom standing on the second tee and declaring 'it's a bit early for this.' In my experience it's always a bit early on that tough Par 3!

"I think his favourite holes were the 5th and the 17th. I don't think he particularly liked the 16th. It got to him a wee bit. He may have reloaded there. He had pushed his drive and it was annoying him."

Fraser has played golf with friends any number of times at Royal Dornoch and has witnessed the club's transformation over the years.

Pictured above: Fraser Morrison (with brolly) and friends George Ewing and Ian Watson following Tom Watson on his 1981 visit to Royal Dornoch (© Historylinks Museum); inset picture of Fraser today.

"The first time I played it I was blown away, looking down from the third tee.

"It was a Bank Holiday, in 1963 or '64, and there was no one else there. We drove up from Inverness and paid our green fees. We had lunch cooked by current club captain Gary Bethune's gran Bunnie and played another round in the afternoon.

"It's all very different today and it was men like Tom Watson and Ben Crenshaw who helped put the Championship Course back on the map."

Thank you for reading and we look
forward to providing you more
Dornoch Days in the near future.

In the meantime, stay safe and we
hope to see you here soon!



ROYAL DORNOCH

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