



Magnetic North

GOLFERS have much to thank the railways for. In 1886 there were 171 clubs in this country yet by 1914, at the outbreak of war, that number had rocketed to 2,844 and most of them hard by recently opened stations. Just think of all those old links next to a railway track.

It is the London and North Eastern Railway Company we must thank for opening up the Aberdeenshire coast line and giving us some wonderful courses to play, although we must also doff our caps to a most splendid country house hotel where we are staying on this month's journey.

The railway station at Old Meldrum closed to passengers in 1931 so now we must make our way to luxurious Meldrum House hotel by car; it is a journey well worth taking.

It is the ideal venue for a golfing holiday – an historic old house with its resident ghost, brought bang up to date providing comfort, fine food and wines with a friendly staff who cannot do enough to help you enjoy yourself.

And right on your doorstep, an excellent parkland, which is a test when the wind blows, and some of Scotland's best teaching facilities.

Designer Graeme Webster has created some cracking holes with triple-tiered greens, subtle run-offs and any number of ponds that are at once perfectly positioned and downright sneaky.

For me, the par-5 11th was the most memorable, an uphill 564-yard dog-leg where the corner into another sloping green can be cut off by flying the ball over no fewer

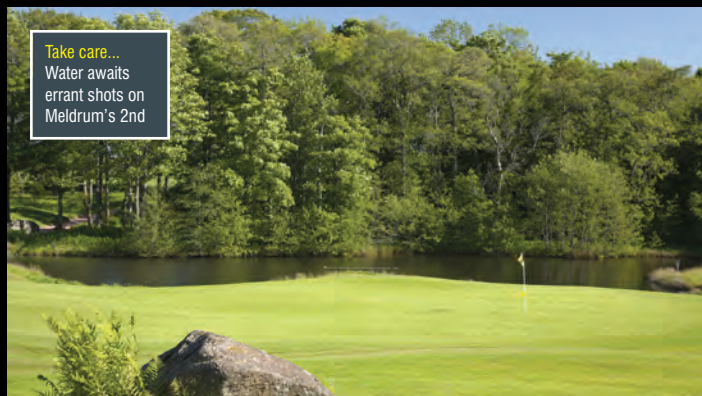
than 13 cavernous pot bunkers. All five of the par 3s are a stern test of shot-making, none more so than the last where a lake lies in front of the green and a mature oak tree hard on the left. To the right is rubbish and out of bounds.

Meldrum House is the perfect place to play between taking on the rigours of three superb nearby courses, Cruden Bay, Murcar Links and Royal Aberdeen.

Our trip only allows us to take in two of these great clubs, but it is worth noting discounted green fees are available at both Cruden and Murcar when you book a two-night stay for two at Meldrum.

Cruden Bay takes one's breath away, and not just when making the climb from the 8th green up onto the 9th tee. This is a course of stunning beauty with some of the finest views in Scottish golf.

American author John Updike



Take care...
Water awaits
errant shots on
Meldrum's 2nd



Steve Killick says that the north-east of Scotland has all the ingredients for a break to remember

says in one of his essays on the game: "For all its sober, relentless numerical aspect, golf affords the player magical sensations, under the skies, amid the magnitudes of space and chance" and nowhere does this hold more true than at Cruden Bay.

There was once a grand hotel that sat above the course providing other attractions including tennis, croquet and bowls as well as a separate ladies' nine-hole course.

It was known as the palace in the sandhills and it opened in 1899 so the wealthy could travel from London and Edinburgh by rail to enjoy the wonders of Tom Morris and Archie Simpson's creation.

The Colmans of Norwich who made mustard; the Crawfords who baked biscuits; the McEwans who brewed beer; the Gilbeys who distilled gin and the Wills from Bristol who made cigarettes all

came to play and stay. Up to 100 schoolboys would be queuing outside the caddymaster's hut begging him for employment.

Sadly the season was too short



Factfile

Steve Killick was a guest at Meldrum House which offers a variety of golfing packages for its guests

(www.meldrumhouse.co.uk).

He flew Flybe airlines from London Gatwick to Aberdeen

(www.flybe.com) and

played at Meldrum House, Cruden Bay

(crudenbaygolfclub.co.uk)

and Murcar Links

(www.murcarlinks.com).

For general information, go to

<http://surprise.visitscotland.com>

and in 1932 the branch railway line to Cruden closed. The palace in the sandhills followed suit in 1945. Some fine old railway posters are on display in the small green timber starter's hut that was once the clubhouse to remind us of greater days in Cruden, but the course is still there to delight us.

Bernard Darwin wrote of it: "The ball sits up just asking to be hit and so deludes the player into a belief that he has permanently improved with his brassie."

The turf is still wonderful, even if you will not be hitting a brassie, and the new clubhouse, that sits on the former site of the hotel, friendly and welcoming.

With much of the original design still intact, this is a course any true lover of golf must play.

After this, one almost expects to be disappointed with Murcar. One is not.

The course, if anything, is slightly tougher and certainly less quirky than Cruden and a textbook work of compelling links design.

Murcar has no dashing blind tee shots over giant dunes into par 3 holes or great climbs over sandhills, but in terms of golfing excellence this Simpson design cannot be faulted.

Like so many of Scotland's greatest links it starts benignly before gently baring its teeth and, if the wind is against you on the back nine, then those teeth can most certainly bite.

When the course is dry approach shots must be played to the very front of the greens as anything hit even to the middle will fire off into the gorse behind.

There is such great golf to be had in Aberdeenshire with Meldrum House the ideal base to enjoy it. Just go!