

Naturally inviting

Woodlands Golf Club, Melbourne, Victoria

//// By Paul Prendergast

Stepping into the expansive clubhouse at the private Woodlands Golf Club was like walking into your own club at home; a welcoming, relaxing atmosphere with the main communal area a busy hub of members eating lunch and having a cool drink after their rounds. Conversation and laughter filled the air and the friendly staff hustled about providing service with a smile - stopping briefly for a chat before returning to their business.

As a visitor to any private club, much less a club like Woodlands situated in the heart of the world famous 'Sandbelt' of Melbourne, pre-conceptions of how you might be greeted and treated upon arrival might not have been of this. With time to spare, I willingly accepted the offer of General Manager, John Stamp, to make myself comfortable in the clubhouse and enjoy lunch - which seemed a fine idea as everyone else was having such a good time!

From my table, first impressions of the

course from the view down the dogleg first hole, the rolling nature of the land and density of established eucalypts were that this would be a special experience and a contrast from another of the famous Sandbelt layouts just down the road - Royal Melbourne - that was playing host to the Presidents Cup.

Golf was first played at the site way back in 1913 when it was known as Mayfield. Upgrading to 18 holes in the late 1920s, the club also changed its name to Woodlands and sought famed Royal Melbourne's greenkeeper Mick Morcom to consult on a number of occasions on course conditions, including the bunker configurations and fairway grasses.

Woodlands is laid out over a smaller tract of land than her famous near neighbour and carved between denser thickets of low level tea tree, natural grasses and towering eucalypts. By the time my tee time arrived, I was keen to explore a golf course that by reputation might sit in the shadow of a Royal Melbourne or Kingston Heath, but has a

unique charm and character of its own.

Woodlands certainly did not disappoint on this front. The tranquil nature of the bushland setting is enough to have you wanting to come back for more, each hole beautifully constructed with a wide and interesting diversity of holes. The course stretches to a little over 6100 metres and a look at the card would indicate the time to strike is early in the round, with two par 5s and two short par 4s in the first 6 holes. And that would be a true enough statement for the golfer who brings his 'A' game, but this is a golf course where brute force alone will not reap the anticipated rewards.

Of the many features that makes Melbourne Sandbelt golf such a joyous experience, the clutch of classic, 'risk reward' short par 4s on these golf courses demonstrate that power is not the be all and end all to good scoring. Woodlands has a collection of short fours that compare favourably with anything else on the Sandbelt - starting with back to back holes 3 and 4, which total 551 metres in length combined!



Tom Doak at Woodlands

Had Dr Alister MacKenzie set foot at Woodlands, I suspect it would outrank Metropolitan and Victoria as the third-best course in the Sandbelt, but any course without the famous pedigree suffers in international renown.

The par-3 holes rival Melbourne's best—and thereby some of the best in the world—but I found most interesting the short par-4 3rd and 4th holes, each slightly under 300 yards, and the 550-yard 15th. On all three, the approach shot should be a short one, but the greens are so small and firm and hemmed in by trouble at the sides that the wise player will opt to play a running approach instead of a pitch.

I can't remember the last time I saw a hole in America that really cried out for a run-up shot—and here are three on one course! *Tom Doak*

The members of Woodlands Golf club are eagerly anticipating the arrival of Tom Doak and his team from Renaissance Golf Design, who will consult on the golf

course and design a 19th hole. When opened in 2013, the introduction of the new hole will help commemorate the Centenary of the Club.

Before being appointed to consult at nearby Royal Melbourne in 2011, Doak's design company had not been involved with established golf clubs in Australia - although many golfers will know of his design work at Barnbougle Dunes in Tasmania and St Andrews Beach on the Mornington Peninsula.

Following the announcement by Woodlands of his appointment, Doak was quoted as saying "There is not much that needs doing there," which no doubt pleased members and reinforced Woodlands' status as one of the best courses on the Melbourne Sandbelt and in Australia.

Club Captain, Lindsay Brown, is delighted to have one of the world's most highly respected golf course architects advising the club on matters of course architecture. It is well known

that Tom advises visitors to Australia to play Woodlands, Royal Melbourne and Kingston Heath when playing golf in Melbourne," he said.

Well known for the quality of the presentation of the greens, the new 19th hole will in time, enable Woodlands to undertake a program of taking specific holes out of play to remove the organic layer that has accumulated.

The exercise would take many years and be completed without significant cost. The program will require the greens to be GPS mapped before removing the top profile of the greens containing the organic layer, following which new soil will be added to achieve the same contours that previously existed.

General Manager, John Stamp was quick to point out that such a program would be strategically planned to minimise disruption to play and would further enhance the status and conditioning of the magnificent green complexes at Woodlands.



The 3rd hole at 300 metres can be played in a straightforward layout to the corner of the dogleg and wedge approach or a brave, semi blind line over the corner of thick tea tree and sand towards the green. The green is ringed by deep, beautifully contoured bunkers and slopes dropping over the back.

Number 4 is a mere 251 metres from the back tees - a straightaway hole with a wide fairway leading to small, bunkerless green. This hole is seen as a definite birdie opportunity but the green's angle and the surrounding slopes and undulations do play some tricks and allow you to conjure up a variety of approach shots.

The third of a great triumvirate of short par 4s comes later in the round at the 13th where at 295 metres, brawn can be rewarded but invariably plenty of thought needs to go into determining the strategy to play this hole depending on the wind conditions and pin placement. Fairway bunkers need to be avoided before deep traps to the right and closely mown green surrounds and slopes to the left of the green come into play on the 2nd shot.

The narrow entrance to the green demands nothing but the most accurate of drivers if going for the green, as the margin for error is slim. Put simply, a beautiful hole and a wonderful

advertisement for Sandbelt golf.

The spine of the golf course, holes eight through ten, do require some 'grunt' in contrast to the short, classic holes described earlier. The 197 metre 8th hole is a par 3 that plays its entire yardage over flat land, with the entrance to the green left open but protected on the left by deep bunkers. The ninth hole, a par four, can play up to 409m in length with the tee shot played over a rise to a wide fairway leading to a long green - before a different challenge at the 10th.

At 400 metres, the 10th is only slightly shorter than the previous hole but the similarities end there. The tee shot on this Number 1 index hole is a far more daunting proposition with trees either side and a trap to avoid on the brow of the hill. The approach shot over bunkers around 40 metres short on the eye line needs to be very precise as the green is small and with contoured slopes kicking the ball away to the right.

The closing stretch of holes from the 15th begins with a par 5 described by acclaimed American course architect and author, Tom Doak, as one of the best in the world. The hole has everything: length, a 'claustrophobic' challenge on the tee shot, the need for careful placement of the second and third shots, well positioned and penal bunkering

coming into play along the hole and a firm, table top, undulating green.

Playing to 511 metres from the back tee, it is a long enough hole to prove difficult for the bigger hitters with the uphill approach to the green impacting on the judgement of your shot.

A strong 403 metre par four with another tight tee shot hemmed by trees on either side follows before the challenge of the penultimate hole, a 154 metre par three to an elevated green closely guarded by bunkers and collection areas. As with all of the par threes at Woodlands, a precise tee shot is required or your short game skills will be severely tested by deep bunkers and undulating green surrounds.

Woodlands concludes with a short par five by modern standards and a chance to finish the round with a birdie and a

smile. It's a hole that flies in the face of the modern course design trend of a difficult back breaker to finish but fits in nicely with the charm of Woodlands and the design ethos of the 1920s in Australian golf course architecture.

Woodlands' beautifully manicured couch fairways, exquisite bunkering and bent greens are a delight and the course easily justifies its ranking in the Top 25 courses in Australia. It recently earned high praise from competitors in a rich pro-am tournament and from golf writers from around the world, who faced off in an 'Internationals V United States' matchup at Woodlands in the Presidents Cup week.

Others making a pilgrimage to appreciate the Melbourne Sandbelt layouts would be remiss to not pencil in a round (or two) at Woodlands.

