

Royal Melbourne Refresh The East Course

The members of Royal Melbourne, one of the world's most esteemed golf clubs, are at last savouring the opportunity to enjoy their golf courses after periods of interruption that have lasted the better part of the past decade.

The tumultuous recent history has tested their patience as at first, a state-wide drought brought their revered parcels of turf, the Alister Mackenzie-designed West Course and the East Course, to their knees with course conditions suffering badly.

Significant investment and repair was required to address these issues but also, to prepare for the Presidents Cup matches in 2011. The investment paid off handsomely with the Presidents Cup matches being played in pristine conditions. The course rotation for the Cup was not quite the Composite layout, but still featured twelve holes from the West and six from the East, and was lauded by many of the competitors as one of, if not, their favourite course in the world.

However, the members did not get their highly ranked courses back for very long once the Cup was over. While the 'home paddock' holes – the entire West Course and those on the East within the perimeter of the main parcel of land – had received the necessary upgrades for the Cup, the club still needed to renovate the remaining holes on the East, which opened a few years after the West in 1931 from a design by club member and 1924 Australian Open champion, Alex Russell.

Royal Melbourne CEO Paul Rak explains "As you know, we've changed our turf on most of the playing surfaces here: Legends couch into the fairways, fescue into the surrounds and Suttons Mix (bent grass) on the greens. We had to have all of the West Course and the holes on the East within the main paddock done about 18 months before the Presidents Cup."

"We still had holes 5 – 15 out in the back paddock of

the East Course to complete. Starting in early 2012, our superintendent Richard Forsyth overplanted the fairways with Legends Couch but then rather than re-seed the greens, which would have had them out of play for between 12 to 16 weeks, he lifted them, got rid of the thatch and put the old surfaces back down."

"This was a procedure Mr (longstanding Royal Melbourne greenkeeper Claude) Crockford performed many, many years ago and we find they respond a lot more quickly to that approach. The results turned out to be really good."

Consultant architect to Royal Melbourne, Tom Doak of Renaissance Golf Design, was also approached to consult on possible changes to the golf course which would be completed in conjunction with the work on the playing surfaces.

"We employed Tom about two years ago because we felt we needed some fresh eyes." Rak explained. "Being a Mackenzie fan as Tom is, we felt he could give us that."

Tom Doak is one of the most highly regarded course designers of modern times and when approached to consult to Royal Melbourne, could not pass up the offer despite being stretched in various directions with other projects around the globe. "I first played Royal Melbourne 25 years ago and I've visited more than a dozen times since then." Doak said. "I loved Royal Melbourne too much to turn down the assignment."

Doak recalls on his first visit to the icon of the Melbourne sand belt that he played both the West and East courses in the same day. "Of course, I knew what to expect of the West course and of the seven holes from the East course that are part of the main paddock, since they've all been used as part of

the Composite course. I really had no idea what lay across the road(s)."

"I found it to be an interesting mix."

Doak's suggestions resulted in a series of minor and more significant changes to the East with only a few of the holes remaining unchanged. The club was particularly keen to act on one of the biggest golf course problems of the modern era - boundary roads - especially at the short par four 15th which Rak described as being 'our nemesis for a long time'.

Doak explains "Unfortunately, having a golf hole that flirts with a property boundary is out-of-bounds in our more litigious modern society, and the East course had several such holes. The club started years ago to address boundary issues at the 6th, 7th, 10th, 12th, 15th, and 17th holes on the East but weren't entirely happy with some of the solutions they'd come up with."

"The feeling was that they had gotten too far away from Alex Russell's original design." Doak completed alterations to these holes to address concerns, including the addition and removal of bunkers, inverting sections of some greens to allow for more strategic lines of play and pin locations, but it was the 15th that attracted the most attention.

"In the end, we decided that Alex Russell's original hole just couldn't be preserved because of the boundary issues, so we came up with a new design for the hole that would encourage approaches from the left side, though the tee and green remain in the same positions in the very corners of the paddock." Doak said.

"We changed the orientation of the green, deepened the bunker at the front right and tilted the green away from it, and built up the left side of the

fairway so that you get a better look at the green if you lay up to that side."

"The hole now plays a bit more like the 10th at Riviera in California instead of Russell's original 15th, but we think everything is in keeping with the style of Royal Melbourne."

Rak said that since completion, the overwhelming response from the members has been very positive. "We're pretty excited as the East has always been considered the poorer relation here but we (now) feel we have 36 very good holes."

"We have a few things in our mind to do in the future on the West. The 15th on the West we consider is probably the weakest hole on the course, not quite a par five but probably too long to be a par four. The 14th probably needs a bit of a tee re-alignment too."

"Over the years though, with the drought and the changes to the grass, the members have put up with about seven or eight years of change so we thought we've reached the maximum for the amount of work we want to put them through. We'll keep planning but we'll give the members a bit of a break for now to enjoy the golf courses."

"We have 2300 members here and if you get your base product right, which is your golf course, everything else falls into place. We're here to please the members and if they can enjoy their golf and their club, it makes life a lot better. It's turning into a very good environment."

Doak summarised that the goal for the East Course from the outset was for outsiders not to recognize that anything's been done and for even the members to have a hard time remembering what has changed.

"Royal Melbourne is one of the great places in the world of golf, and we are doing our best to preserve it rather than change it."

Clubhouse and 18th green of the East Course. Photo by: Mark Wilson.



5-time British Open champion Peter Thomson at Royal Melbourne, 2011.
Photo by: Mark Wilson.



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