

STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

Combining traditional charm with up-to-the-minute facilities, **Wollongong Golf Club** is a southern links that never gets old. And a full 117 years since it opened, there may be no better time to play Wollongong than now.

By Paul Prendergast





'PROUD OF THEIR tradition and history but looking forward to a rich and exciting future' may just be the mantra that best describes the seaside Wollongong Golf Club, one of the oldest golf courses and clubs in Australia.

Wollongong's standing in Australian golf is largely underestimated, perhaps even by the vast majority of club members themselves. In December, the club passed a milestone of 117 years of continuous existence on largely the same tract of land, adjacent to the sand dunes and coast near the city's centre.

A brief look back to their past reveals the first nine-hole course opened for play in 1897 on land that stretched up to Burelli Street to the north, where WIN Stadium and towering apartments now stand.

Machinery to help clear the land for the course was actually transported the 90 kilometres or so by bicycle courtesy of a hardy bunch from the Royal Sydney Golf Club, establishing a tradition of 'mateship' that thrives at the club to this day.

Today, Wollongong Golf Club fully embraces these traditions and has the welcome mat out to all. Despite its age and status, the club is as far from 'stuffy' and 'old school' as you can find.

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The links course is partially separated into two 'paddocks'—a north and south—at a point where golfers for generations have shared a narrow thoroughfare with surfers heading to the beach in search of a wave.

Many golf courses have had to adjust to advances of time and modern considerations that their founders could never have anticipated. Royal Melbourne East and Royal Queensland are examples of two high-profile courses where changes were required to minimise risks associated with boundary roads or because of the acquisition of lands, in RQ's case, to construct a second Gateway Bridge over the Brisbane River.

Wollongong Golf Club has been no exception to this phenomena with today's course an interesting hybrid of the old and new, with the most recent alterations focused on a substantial portion of the course's 'North paddock' and clubhouse over the past decade.

A redesign of four existing holes, including two of the most iconic holes from the oldest remaining section of the course along the dunal areas, opened for play in April 2014.

Many great players in the game's history have graced the fairways at Wollongong, including Gene Sarazen, Kel Nagle, Bobby Locke, Gary Player and Peter Thomson. To boot, 1995 PGA champion and Champions Tour member Steve Elkington joined Wollongong as a member in 1980 when his family moved to the region from Wagga, and current Texas Open winner Steve Bowditch won the 2010 NSW PGA at Wollongong prior to establishing himself on the PGA Tour.

Former Australian Open champion and runner-up in two major championships, Jack Newton, won the Wollongong Open Amateur as an 18-year-old and has been returning for decades when tournaments are staged at the course as part of his junior foundation.

"The course has changed a lot in those years but they're doing a pretty good job with the club," Newton said. "What they've done with the clubhouse with the members' lounge downstairs, the bars, convention rooms and Foreshore Brasserie upstairs, plus accommodation on the top floor, is commendable."

Jack Newton Junior Golf CEO Peter Van Wegen said "We've had the Junior Masters at Wollongong for a number of years, which is always very well subscribed.

"We approached Wollongong and Links Shell Cove with the opportunity to host our 2014 State Championships and they were only too keen to help us out. We probably had one of the best weeks of golf we've had in a long time there.

"The course was great and being a coastal course, the weather was great for us in July."

The links at Wollongong itself is easy walking with a balance of short, medium



The coastline is an attractive feature at Wollongong.

and long holes that take full advantage of the glorious views of the ocean or the escarpment to the west.

As you would expect of any classic links, the coastal location almost guarantees a salty sea breeze to contribute to the challenge and significantly alter the course's character depending on the wind's strength and direction.

The holes along the dunes are examples of an older architectural style, with small greens guarded by deep bunkering and in the case of the short 2nd (formerly the 16th), a rare blind second shot over a ridge to a small, sloping and well-bunkered green.

The 3rd hole (formerly the 17th) remains one of the most demanding par-3s in NSW, if not the country. At 209 metres from the tips into a prevailing north-east wind, reaching the green is one matter, avoiding the pot bunker and the bush and sandy lies to the right are another.

Thankfully, ample room short and left of the putting surface provides options for players of all levels to tackle the hole with an opportunity of a pitch and putt to save par, which is a great score on this hole every day of the week.

South Africa's former British Open champion Bobby Locke once rated this one the best par-3s he had encountered; and one can only imagine how tough the hole must have been with the equipment of his era.

The construction of Wollongong's current clubhouse in 2005, complete with restaurants, bars, conference and function spaces and 20 well-appointed apartments, has been a boon for the club, the tourism and corporate sector and local community in general.

"There aren't too many clubs that can boast one of Australia's oldest golf courses still in its original location in close proximity to the ocean, along with ready access to the amenities of the city, the boat harbour and the stunning beaches we enjoy here in Wollongong," said Leigh Hingston.

Ninety minutes from the centre of Sydney, the club provides a perfect destination for a golf or weekend escape, corporate function or wedding—all within a few minutes' stroll of South Beach and the heart of the city's shopping, café, dining, sporting and nightlife precincts.

"Our house guests have appreciated not only the quality of the golf course but the value for money and hospitality we've been able to afford them. They

also enthuse about the array of facilities they have at their doorstep as a house guest," Hingston said.

"These extend beyond the dining and bar experiences in either the clubhouse or on the deck overlooking the golf course and ocean."

Each of the one- or two-bedroom apartments in the 4-star Best Western City Sands overlook the golf course and ocean to the east and the Illawarra Escarpment and cityscape to the north and west. Private balconies, spacious living areas and en-suite bathrooms provide very comfortable accommodations and the club have a range of packages on offer year round that incorporate golf and other local attractions and activities.

The Wollongong Golf Club of today is a far cry from its origins in the late 19th century, years before electricity was introduced to the city. The early founders would scarcely believe how much the club and surrounding city have matured over the years.

In the face of progress, remaining unchanged from a century ago are some of golf's, and life in general, simple pleasures that the early pioneers of the club would have enjoyed as much as we do now—the clean air and pristine conditions that greet you with an early-morning tee time at Wollongong, with the comforting sound of waves crashing on the shore nearby.

There's a lot about playing golf by the sea that never gets old despite the passage of time. ■



Wollongong has undergone some significant development.