

# JEWEL OF AUCKLAND

*For over a century, New Zealand's Royal Auckland and Grange Golf Club has been a cornerstone of the country's golf history. Once divided by the Tamaki Estuary, two prestigious clubs merged in 2015 to forge an exciting new future.*

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**S**ince the turn of the 20th Century and beyond – well before the rise of the highly acclaimed courses which the country has become renowned for on the international stage in more recent years – the bulk of quality golf in New Zealand was found in or close to the major towns and cities on both the North and South Islands.

In the city of Auckland, both the Auckland Golf Club (1894) and The Grange Golf Club (then the Otahuhu Golf Club, 1924) were among the originals, sharing a history with others, including the Titirangi Golf Club, which took over the site vacated by Auckland Golf Club's move south in 1909.

From 1931 onwards, the members of Auckland and The Grange clubs had been able to stare at each other from across the Tamaki Estuary in Papatoetoe, which

bisected the two courses, watching on as each played host at different times to national Opens. A slew of Open Championship winners – including Peter Thomson, Nick Price, Ian Baker-Finch and New Zealand's greatest male player, Bob Charles – have won NZ and Air NZ Opens on these grounds, along with other important championships.

In early 2015, the Royal Auckland and The Grange Golf Clubs made the decision to amalgamate, bringing together two clubs with over 100 years of history, to forge a new and sustainable future.

Making the decision to merge in the first place was an admirable and momentous step, as other merged clubs could attest, but the building of a new culture and entity may have been the tougher challenge. However, it appears that Royal Auckland

and The Grange have gotten it right, with a thriving membership, a brilliant selection of holes, and clubhouse and practice facilities the envy of many.

Following the decision to merge, senior design associate at Nicklaus Design, Chris Cochran, submitted proposals for the redevelopment of 27 holes. This was a reduction from the 36 which previously existed, as nine holes of the old Grange layout, closer to main roads and other amenities, were identified for sale as part of a real estate development.

The project entailed two phases of activity. The first phase included the completion of 18 holes, the construction of a new clubhouse, and bridges across the estuary. The first holes of the new golf course opened in October 2019, with the final nine – the Middlemore nine – opening ►

PHOTO: GARY LISBON (SUPPLIED BY ROYAL AUCKLAND AND GRANGE GOLF CLUB)





HOLE 1 IS A DRIVABLE PAR-FOUR WHICH TESTS PLAYERS' STRATEGIC THINKING FROM THEIR FIRST TEE-SHOT.

in 2022 to complement the Tamaki and Grange nines.

The Middlemore and Tamaki nines combine for the longest 18-hole round, playing up to 6600 metres. Tamaki and The Grange combine for the shortest, which can play between 4200 and 6300 metres.

However, the club can also employ two composite routes for tournament play, as they did for the Ryan Fox Invitational Pro-Am last December, using a selection of holes from across the three nines. For example, the Nicklaus Design route, created by designer Chris Cochran, includes the Middlemore nine, Grange 1 and 2, Tamaki 3 and 4, Grange 8 and 9, and then Tamaki 7, 8 and 9 to finish off.

Off the back tees, this composite layout packs a punch, as Michael Hendry's Pro-Am winning score of even par attests – one stroke ahead of a group that included Fox.

The 3rd hole on the Middlemore nine is the old Royal Auckland 18th played in reverse, with the tee grounds in front of Royal Auckland's impressive former clubhouse building, which now forms part of the Kings College school. The fourth and fifth holes of the Middlemore are examples of just a few holes on the entire property remain largely within the same corridors as they always have.

Of the three nines, the Middlemore

would be considered more of a parkland setting, as it winds its way through corridors of established trees. The Tamaki and Grange nines provide interesting contrasts, with the former being less wooded and integrating the estuary – an element Cochran was keen to incorporate more prominently during the rebuild. The undulating terrain presents both visual and strategic challenges across a mixture of short, medium and longer holes.

As an example, you'd be excused for thinking hole No.1 on the Tamaki could be on a completely different property compared to the more tree-lined holes like numbers 3 and 4 on the Middlemore.

A drivable short par-four, Tamaki 1 is one of the more obvious examples at Royal Auckland and The Grange where checking the pin placement before executing a tee shot is crucial. Longer hitters can reach the green with a fairway wood in the right conditions, but with a star picket-shaped green featuring distinct sections protected by slopes, bunkers and a drop-off into the estuary at the green's right edge, thinking about the second shot before playing the first is critical.

My tee shot cleared the centerline bunkers and finished almost level with the front of the surface on the left, leaving a short pitch. However, faced with a pin in

the tiny rear section beyond a bunker – with the hazard lurking beyond – playing well away from the pin was the only prudent option.

In hindsight, laying well back and to the right of the fairway might have been the more strategic play, and there are many other examples across the golf course where carefully weighing "risk-reward" scenarios with some forward thinking would pay dividends.

Hole 9 on the Middlemore is another short par-four which could be drivable for longer hitters, but with bunkering along each side of the fairway and at the green, it resembles a shorter version of the 18th hole at Bethpage Black – site of this year's Ryder Cup matches.

Tamaki 7 is arguably the best and most visually appealing of the new holes that make use of the estuary. A lengthy par-four (and an occasional par-five for women from the back tees), the fairway is split into two by a central bunker, before the dogleg turns right across the vegetated estuary to an undulating, well-guarded green.

The most daring line off the tee, closest to the estuary on the right, rewards players with the shortest and most direct approach to the green, though it requires the longest carry over the penalty area and a gaping bunker guarding the front entrance.

A drive over the middle bunker to the "safer" left side of the fairway requires a longer approach from a more awkward angle, as the green has a pronounced tilt from left to right, making for an extremely challenging up-and-down if you miss left.

Pristine fairways and consistently firm, fast putting surfaces sown with Pure Distinction bentgrass are standout features of the experience and can be expected virtually all year long at Royal Auckland and The Grange.

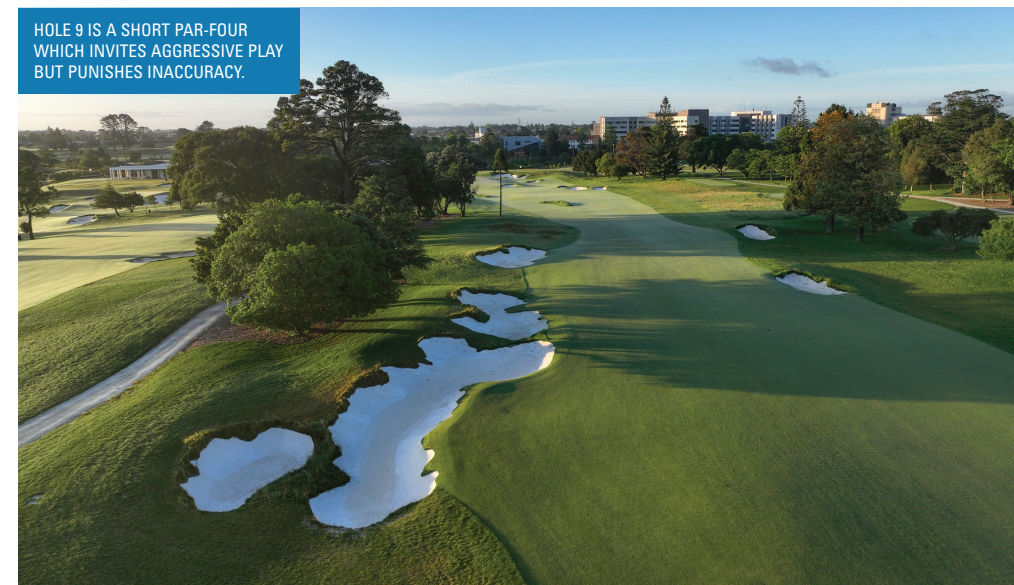
Director of Golf James Betts noted Auckland's high annual rainfall patterns, but sand-capped fairways and the introduction of the same SubAir system under each green – initially implemented at Augusta National to combat issues with their famous 12th green – ensure consistently elevated course conditions.

A series of pipes and air vents under each green keeps the moisture content consistent year-round. Betts noted that this has kept the greens nearly "poa-free" and has reduced the need for chemical treatments. The SubAir system aids turf quality and root growth, while also reducing the incidence of pitch marks, which is certainly evident.

There was a consistent firmness to the greens underfoot across the entire golf course, and despite their healthy green



THE SECOND IS A BEAUTIFULLY DESIGNED HOLE WHICH BEGINS TO SHOWCASE THE ESTUARY'S INTEGRATION INTO THE COURSE.



HOLE 9 IS A SHORT PAR-FOUR WHICH INVITES AGGRESSIVE PLAY BUT PUNISHES INACCURACY.

appearance, hearing the ball land from back in the fairway was an experience reminiscent of Augusta National or Melbourne's Sandbelt courses.

With the course changes now bedded in, the club continues to focus on vegetation renewal. Betts noted that many members donate toward this endeavour and are heavily invested in the property's maturation post-construction.

To date, over 23,000 trees, shrubs and wetland plants have been planted – an effort that Royal Auckland and Grange Chief Executive Ed Chapman identifies as one of the many aspects contributing to the club's environment and culture, creating a true "sanctuary" for both members and guests.

"The conditioning of the courses is amazing, and our members are loving getting out there. We have something like 2000 members, with around 1500 playing, and of all the courses I've worked at, this is the one where the members have commented the most about needing to learn how to play the course and its nuances."

"Speaking to Ryan Fox, who's a member here, he finds it challenging because of those nuances and needing to understand the angles of play, depending on where the flag is located. Even our high handicappers have really enjoyed that, as it makes them

think, and they never get bored with it."

Chapman noted that the club's private status and the "Royal" prefix do not automatically equate to a closed shop for prospective visitors to the club and golf courses. Far from it.

Royal Auckland and Grange are very welcoming to Australian and other international visitors, not only to showcase their golf club and courses, but to embed Auckland in broader consciousness as a desirable destination alongside other acclaimed courses within driving distance.

"Te Arai coming on board recently has provided a destination that you can drive to from Auckland, rather than having to fly up to Kauri Cliffs or further south on the North Island," Chapman said.

"It's only been in the last couple of years that we have permitted international guests to come and play, and I think that's really exciting for the club – to showcase Royal Auckland and Grange to the world and have us on people's bucket lists when they come to New Zealand.

"We're only 20 minutes from the airport, so if you've had a long flight to get here or want to get a round in before you leave, being so close to a world-class course you can play before heading off elsewhere is certainly attractive." ●