

OPEN VENUE

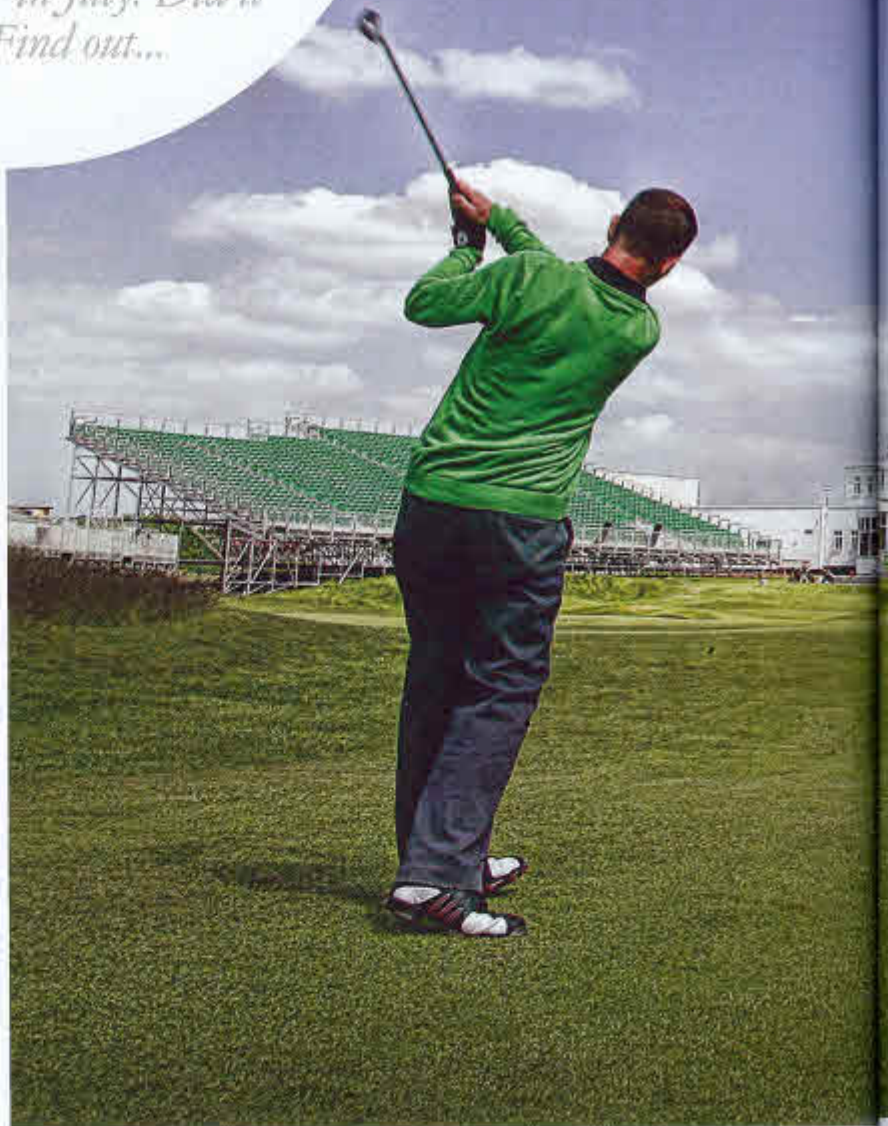
BELTING IT ROUND BIRKDALE

TG previews the course where The Open will be won – and lost – in July. Did it live up to expectations? Find out...

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PHOTOGRAPHY ANGUS MURRAY

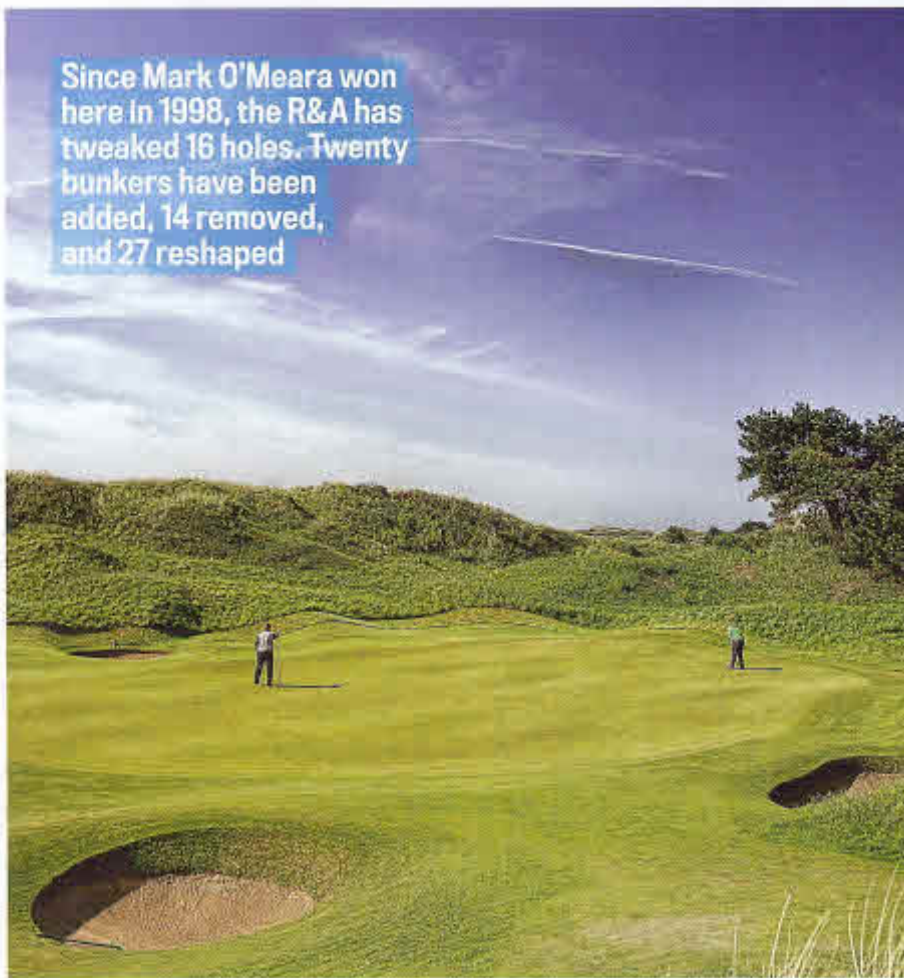
Justin Rose, Adam Scott, Jack Nicklaus, Brian Randall, Luke Donald. All the great names were checking out Royal Birkdale in the third week of May playing practice rounds ahead of July's Open Championship.

Wait a second. Something doesn't sound right. Ah yes, Nicklaus doesn't play any more. Must have been passing through on a caravan holiday with Mrs Golden Bear. Oh, and one more thing: who the heck is Brian Randall? Well, Randall is not playing in the 137th Open either and there is jolly good reason for that. He's a 73-year-old retired bank manager with a handicap of 24. Randall has been a member of Royal Birkdale for 28 years and there is not a hump or a hollow or slope, ditch, dune, hillock or sod that he doesn't know as well as his own children. Rose had his caddie and coach with him on his crafty visit but he would have discovered even more hidden secrets of the links had he, like *Today's Golfer*, employed the inside knowledge of Randall – price for the day: steak torpedo, plate of chips and a pint of lager with a lemonade top. Randall's high handicap disguises a pro's touch with a putter not only on the greens but also from 25 yards down the fairways and probably from along the A565 to Southport promenade, too. Local knowledge that ensured that your 18 handicapper from *Today's Golfer* was dispatched 5&3 – by the fittest ➤



COURSES

Since Mark O'Meara won here in 1998, the R&A has tweaked 16 holes. Twenty bunkers have been added, 14 removed, and 27 reshaped



Sand trouble
Birkdale's trademark bunkers can wreck a scorecard.



All right Royal
There's nothing stuffy about Birkdale.

septuagenarian not called Gary Player. Nine weeks before the Open, the course is already in fabulous condition. The graduated rough gives definition to the fairways, nipping and tucking and snaking all the way to the greens. Randall reckons he hasn't played the course in such a regal state on such a cloudless 24°C day in years. For high handicappers, it is perfect. What little breeze there is to test us must have been puffed by an out-of-shape asthmatic dragon. But what if the dragon enrolls in a get fit quick regime? "If the wind gets up to 50mph in the Open, you could see players hit four shots just to reach the 15th green," Randall laughs.

Since Mark O'Meara won here in 1998, the R&A has tweaked 16 holes, which seems like they bought a job lot of spades and lawnmowers and, well, simply had to do something with them. But R&A secretary Peter Dawson assures us that it's merely cosmetic rather than major surgery. Twenty bunkers have been added, 14 removed, and 27 reshaped. Seven



Heroes of '98 Justin Rose

Then a 17-year-old amateur, Rose was the other hero of '98. His pitch in at the 18th to secure fourth is one of The Open's greatest moments. But Rose says: "It's all rather a blur now. I am curious to see how the course has changed. Prior to this year, I'd only been back once, when I played a Challenge Tour event at nearby Formby Hall. I can't picture the holes easily any more. To finish like that... It's one of those magic moments."

fairways have been nudged this way or that and many of the greens have been recontoured and extended. But there is one change on each nine that will make the world's finest golfer stand to attention.

Ten years ago, Tiger Woods humbled the old 9th and the R&A has waited a decade to exact its revenge. "Tiger stood on the elevated tee and drove straight over that blind corner," Randall points out into the wild blue yonder. "He got a lucky kick off a mound and his ball shot forward and ended up at the bottom of the green 380 yards away. This year, they've added more hills and rough and placed a nice big bunker exactly where his ball landed, waiting for him to have another go this year."

Er, he won't. He'll hit a long iron to the corner of the dogleg, which has been moved 25 yards left of where it was the last time Tiger was here. Then he'll fire in a mid-iron and make birdie anyway. Just like *Today's Golfer* did!

Okay, driver into light left rough, rescue club short of the green, chip on

and two putts for a bogey.

But the kick up the back nine (or back side, as the Americans say) will be the new raised, sloping green at the end of the par-5 17th. "It will be the talking point of the Open," Randall says. It looks like a Yorkshire pudding that has collapsed in the middle. If players find their ball on the wrong tier, it will be like playing crazy golf on Southport pier. All that will be missing is the clown's mouth and a windmill. "We are aware it's controversial," Dawson says. "And we are aware that it's a green that could get away from us if we're not careful, so we will be using conservative pin positions." So that's a relief. No windmill; just the clown's mouth then.

"There are going to be some hair-raising moments around that green, I tell you," Randall says, beaming like a Roman looking forward to Sunday Afternoon at the Coliseum — not to be confused with *Sunday Night at the Palladium*. "We don't want it to be boring with everyone being able to make birdie," he continues. "You want



Crowd-pleaser
The galleries will be spilling over come The Open.

risk and reward." There will be a lot more thumbs down than thumbs up at the 17th come the end of the championship. The Open will be won or lost on this green.

Royal Birkdale is regarded as England's finest course and there is no one at *Today's Golfer* who will argue with that. If (when) you are inspired to ring up to book a tee time after watching the Open on TV, you will be greeted by a helpful secretary and pro, and greeted onto the 1st tee by the World's Most Cheerful Starter. Just don't hit into the bunkers. Some of the greenside sand traps have clearly been dug around a mould of an upturned Volkswagen Beetle. The sand is like porridge and if you try to get cure, you'll get the same result as you would if you tried the same approach, apparently, on Southport's guesthouse landladies.

You'll dig yourself into a very big hole and be buried alive.

The iconic clubhouse is straight off a Hollywood movie set. With its curves and turrets all painted white and floor



Heroes of '98 Mark O'Meara

A decade ago veteran American O'Meara - best known for being Tiger's best mate - secured a surprise US Masters and Open double. He admits he had a lucky third-round break: "On the 6th hole on Saturday I hit my ball right off the fairway. We looked for it for about three or four minutes and I abandoned it. But as I walked back to replay the shot, they yelled out that they'd found it. I played it and made bogey."

to ceiling windows giving awe-inspiring views of the 18th green and fairway, this 1930s art deco masterpiece looks like the Titanic - before it bumped into the iceberg. Inside it feels like any other established club. There's a friendly mixed bar but also corridors and coded entrances that make you feel there are some areas you shouldn't be snooping around.

Hey, not that we were snooping around the Ladies Section with its own lounge filled with comfy chairs and a sofa and decorated in soft blue and cream with pink cushions, lamp shades and vases of flowers. It looks like your auntie's front room. Nice, but slightly scary.

Members and staff are eager to hear if you enjoyed their links and everyone says hello and makes you feel welcome. So don't come with any preconceived prejudices about stuffy old Royal clubs. Birkdale even welcomes societies. Embrace the history and enhance the enjoyment of your visit. There's a glass cabinet in the entrance hall displaying O'Meara's putter and Rose's lob wedge

Northern lights

Nine more tracks to try

Lytham Green Drive, Lytham St Annes

Par 70, 6,159 yards Rating: ★★★★★ Location: Lytham St Annes, M55 J4 exit. Green fees: £38 Mon-Fri; £45 weekends. 2-FORE-I-1: Any time. Tel. 01253 737390.

2-FORE-I-1 COURSE

Hillside, Southport

Par 72, 6,204 yards Rating: ★★★★★ Location: Waterloo Rd, south of Southport town centre. Green fees: £75 Mon-Fri; £95 Sunday. Tel. 01704 567169.

Formby Hall, Formby

Par 72, 6,409 yards Rating: ★★★ Location: Off Formby by-pass. Green fees: £45 Mon-Thurs; £55 Fri-Sun. Tel. 01704 675699.

Knott End, Lancs

Par 69, 5,849 yards Rating: ★★ Location: 12 miles north east of Blackpool. Green fees: £32 Mon-Fri; £40 at weekends. 2-FORE-I-1: Any time. Tel. 01253 810576.

2-FORE-I-1 COURSE

Selby, North Yorks

Par 71, 6,176 yards Rating: ★★★★★ Location: 3 miles south west of Selby. Green fees: Mon-Fri £33 a round, £37 a day. Tel. 01757 226622.

Leigh, Cheshire

Par 69, 5,626 yards Rating: ★★ Location: 5 miles north east of Warrington. Green fees: £30 Mon-Fri; £40 at weekends. Tel. 01925 762013.

Rotherham, South Yorks

Par 70, 6,327 yards Rating: ★★★★★ Location: 4 miles east of Rotherham. Green fees: Mon-Fri £34 a round, £48 a day. Check for weekend availability. Tel. 01709 850480.

Luffness New, East Lothian

Par 70, 6,328 yards Rating: ★★★ Location: 1 mile west of Gullane. Green fees: £70 a round or £90 per day. Tel. 01620 843114.

Hillsborough, South Yorks

Par 71, 6,254 yards Rating: ★★★ Location: Wadsley, Sheffield. Green fees: £30 Mon-Fri, £35 weekends. Tel. 0114 234 9151.

17th hole
Where many think
The Open will be
won or lost.



Ditched
Miss the fairway
and the hazards
abound.

Rough Justice
Put it in the rough
at Birkdale and
consider it lost.



Birkdale facts

A few things you probably didn't know...

- The best round at Royal Birkdale in an Open was a 63 carded by little-known American Jodie Mudd in 1991.
- It will be the ninth Open at Birkdale. Aussie Peter Thomson won the first and last of his five Claret Jugs here.
- The elusive, spectacularly-coloured Sand Lizard lives in Birkdale Sandhills Nature Reserve which is on the right side of the 17th fairway.
- The Ryder Cup was halved for the first time at Birkdale in 1969 after Jack Nicklaus sportingly and famously conceded a very missable putt on the last green.
- The 100th Open was held at Birkdale in 1971 and was won by Lee Trevino who eventually won a titanic battle against unknown Mr Lu from Taiwan. The latter's cause wasn't helped after his wayward drive on the 18th struck spectator Mrs Lillian Tipping on the head, leaving her concussed and in need of hospital treatment.

from 1998, Ian Baker-Finch's 3-wood from 1991 and Arnold Palmer's sand wedge from 1961. Around the corner there is another glass case full of memorabilia from the Ryder Cups held here in 1965 and 1969: team caps, pairings sheets, even a programme-seller's silk sash. And on the wall going up the stairs to the dining room, there are photographs of all Birkdale's Open champions receiving the Claret Jug. Peter Thomson in 1965 was the last one to change into a suit for the ceremony. From Lee Trevino in 1971, standards sadly slipped, old boy, and became far too slack and casual. Whatever happened to discipline and decent manners? They'll be growing their hair next, and wearing jeans.

It wouldn't have happened in Theodore Lord's day, club president, 1943-44, or when chaps had proper names like IG Staveley-Dick and BM Eckersley Hope, winners of the Captain's Prize in 1967 and 1968 respectively. That's another wonderful thing about old clubs. They have such fabulous Honours Boards. And there's

a rogues gallery, too, of captains' portraits in cheap oblong frames from the first in 1890, when clearly an essential requisite for the job was owning a tuxedo and possessing greased back hair with a side parting. Sadly, comedy facial hair, handlebar moustaches, and Moses beards seemed to become unfashionable during the ever so sensible 1930s.

Ten years ago, Brian Randall left his bank in charge of somebody else and went to watch the golf. "Entertaining customers, of course," Randall remembers. "I found myself sitting next to a lady [as you do], on the patio in front of the clubhouse. And she jumped up and squealed when Mark O'Meara won. Turns out it was Mrs O'Meara. She seemed very nice." His winning scorecard (O'Meara's, not Randall's) hangs on the wall in the spike bar, now.

Don't be surprised if Randall finds himself sitting next to another nice lady on Sunday again this year. A nice Swedish former nanny, perhaps. "Care for a steak torpedo, Mrs Woods?"

Thousands of course reviews @ www.todaysgolfer.co.uk

Tour pro versus hacker

Where eagles are rare, head pro Brian Hodgkinson tells how pros and hackers tackle Birkdale's longest hole.

15TH
HOLE
PAR 5
544YD



Them (the pros)

"It is reachable in two but it's tight all the way down there. And the rough's not fully grown yet! I won't be surprised to see guys hitting irons off the tee. It's a very difficult hole when played into the wind and doesn't give itself up that easily.

"In normal conditions, pros will be looking to find the fairway about 280 yards down leaving around 260 yards in with a fairway wood. But if

they find the fairway bunkers they'll be forced to chip out sideways. It's tempting to pick up shots but if you take it on you've got to 'button' it; there's a shoulder running down the middle of the green so it's still not over when you reach it. Eagles are rare on hole 15."

Us (average golfers)

"Even though the normal tee is 40 yards ahead, this is a potential nightmare hole

for mid to high handicappers who have to hit everything spot-on otherwise they're in big trouble. There's rough right and left and bunkers seemingly everywhere you want to hit the ball. The smart move is to blast a 5-wood into the 30-yard gap between two sets of bunkers, leaving an 8-iron in. It's a big ask, though and few get it right very often. But try to play the hole too cautiously and you've no chance of making par."

Coming down the stretch

Where The Open will be won... and lost



16th hole

Par 4, 439 yards

Once you've driven straight and long over rough, rolling terrain and found the short stuff, the hard part is still to come: the critical second shot is played to a raised green protected by four deep bunkers and hollows. If you fail to find the 'dancefloor', getting up and down is likely to prove mission impossible.

17th hole

Par 5, 572 yards

The 17th hole was vulnerable once - not any more. The new tee makes the hole 20 yards longer and tougher. The drive must fly between two towering sand hills and avoid the two new bunkers right of the fairway. Greenside bunkers now narrow access to the two-tier green - pushed back 30 yards and well protected.

18th hole

Par 4, 473 yards

This tough finale did for Tom Watson in 1991, it's one of the hardest finishing holes in golf. Off the tee there's out-of-bounds on the right, while for the second shot there's a narrow gap between two mounds to aim at. There are three bunkers guarding the green, giving a tight entrance to the putting surface.

THE
LAST
THREE
HOLES

Mere mortals play Birkdale

TG readers give their verdict on the Open venue



Michael Schoafer

Age: 44
Handicap: 28

It was very exciting but it was tough for my skill level. I lost about eight balls but I found as many, too, so I don't feel so bad. Once you hit wide of the fairways, it's almost impossible to find your ball.

Rating: ★★★★★



Andrew Mooney

Age: 42
Handicap: 4

It's fantastic to play the course just a few months before the pros are going to in the Open. They'll find it tough. There is a lot of trouble waiting for your drives. One of the best seaside courses I have ever played.

Rating: ★★★★★



Dave Williams

Age: 44
Handicap: 23

It's so tricky. You just have to look back and enjoy the good shots. Even off the front tees, there were simply no safe shots to play. Whatever club you have in your hands, there is something waiting to catch you out.

Rating: ★★★★★



Mark Caldwell

Age: 32
Handicap: 21

This was my first round on a links course. I wasn't expecting anything like this and I actually played alright. I had to work out how to play different shots. I used longer irons to get into play rather than my driver.

Rating: ★★★★★