

A Delicious Doak Creation

By Paul Prendergast

When reviewing a course, it's impossible not to touch on its origins and at St Andrews Beach, there are more skeletons in the closet for a course that first opened in 2006 than many that have endured for decades.

St Andrews Beach was constructed in an area of the Mornington Peninsula south of Melbourne known as 'The Cups Country', a rolling, sandy expanse with rugged low lying vegetation not dissimilar to links land. Golf course construction in this coastal area has

thrived over the past few decades and St Andrews Beach shares a prominent locale with the three courses at The National Golf Club and near The Dunes.

The current golf course was a centrepiece of a bold plan by a consortium known as Golf Course Properties to create a private members' club with not one, but two golf courses, clubhouse, resort and on-course accommodation.

Now famed internationally as a course designer of the highest order, American Tom Doak was

commissioned to build the first course – the Gunnamatta – which opened for play in 2006 to much acclaim.

A second course to be named the Fingal, was part of future plans but alas, it was never built and when Golf Course Properties ran into financial difficulties, the entire project collapsed and private investors and contractors – including Doak – lost a good deal of money or were never paid in full.

With the company's demise, the golf course was closed and lay idle until Golf Services Management (GSM) reopened the course as a

public facility in 2009. It is to the current owners' credit that facilities and playing conditions of the golf course have been re-generated to the standards enjoyed today.

Given Doak was impacted directly by the collapse of the original project, he could have been excused for being less than magnanimous when I spoke to him about St Andrews Beach prior to my visit in November 2013. However, my presumptions were off line and I was taken aback by the generosity of his praise.

"I have always thought that St Andrews Beach was one of our

very best courses." he said, "Not as spectacular as some, but if I could have any one of my courses right out the back door of my house, it might be my first choice.

"I do think that the course has fared relatively poorly in the various rankings because of its chequered financial history. It will probably take a few more years before everyone forgets about all that.

"But, someday, I think people are going to go there and wonder how a course like that has flown under the radar for so long."

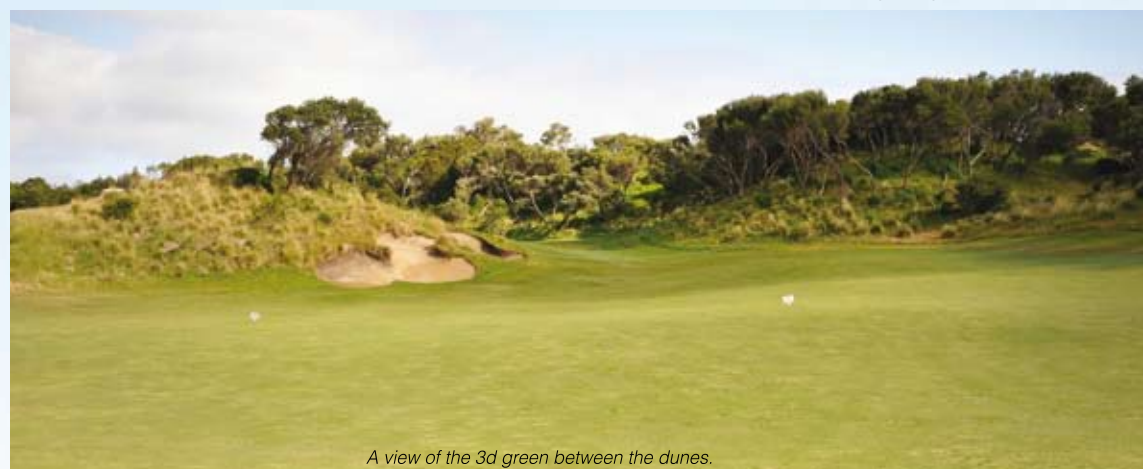
Touring the golf course for the first

time, I wholeheartedly concur with this last statement. The topography of this expansive property provides for such a variety of holes, elevated tees, full and partially blind tee and second shots, depending on your placement of tee shots to what are almost universally, very generous landing areas.

Doak has created a diverse mix of short and long par-threes and fours, reachable par-fives for longer hitters who favour more aggressive lines from the tee and an array of uphill, downhill, straightaway and dogleg holes. With the close proximity to the ocean and prevailing winds, this is a golf course that plays differently every day and maintains your interest and energy from start to finish.

Excluding the par threes for a moment, the landing areas on almost every par four and five are welcoming to a fault and only the most wayward of tee shots will fall foul in the unkempt, natural dune grasses that frame the property so well.

However, while there is a joy in being able to hit driver on most holes and finding your ball on the fairway, the real joy in my opinion comes in the strategic nature of the challenge posed on your second shots to the green.



A view of the 3d green between the dunes.

The par-4 18th. The ideal line is directly across the bunkers to the right half of the fairway.

From certain parts of some fairways, an approach can be obscured by a rise or part of a natural dune or require an approach over a carefully located bunker or false front. The undulating nature of some of the green complexes themselves are another matter, particularly on the short par fours where the likelihood of a 'standard' short iron approach shot is remote.

A 'second shot golf course' this most certainly is.

The 9th is a great example of a hole that is not long, not tight, but provides a challenging approach to a green set back from the natural contours over a piece of land starting around 100 metres from the green. Approach from the left side of the fairway and you will be firing blind over a rise with a wedge, whereas hugging the right – which risks running through the fairway into unplayable thicket – will open up more of a view of the flag, if not the putting surface itself.

The visual challenges that Doak provides in his placement of greens and bunkers are illustrated from as early as the first hole, a par-5 from an elevated tee which looks to snake to the right but in fact, doglegs sharply left behind a rise guarded by deep bunkers.



The spectacular par-3 6th.



Driving off the elevated 5th tee box.

The challenges and illusions continue and culminate with another at the final hole, where our group of four were utterly convinced we needed to hit our Sunday best to clear a wall of bunkers that cross the fairway, only to find they are much closer than they appear.

Many of the green settings chosen by Doak are most likely the envy of many course designers, set

between or adjacent to dunes like the dogleg 3rd and the slightly uphill par-3 6th, which is a thrill to play across the bracken from tee to green so long as you avoid the cavernous traps fronting the right of the green.

With the ocean breezes so prevalent, most of the green complexes are large in size and allow for bump and run golf, but a healthy 'greens in regulation' stat at this golf

course does not necessarily equate to close proximity to the hole for birdie opportunities, unless you are precise with your distances.

Building golf courses thousands of miles from home, Doak told me, was one of the 'unfortunate occupational hazards' of his profession, as rarely does he get the opportunity to play and enjoy his creations as much as he'd like. He last played St Andrews Beach in 2010, three times in fact with associate Brian Slawnik, when visiting Australia for the opening of his design at Lost Farm in Tasmania.

"I couldn't have been happier with how it was playing at that point,

but it's hard to have a lot of other observations about how the course turned out with so little experience of playing it.

"There is just a great variety of holes and it all fits together pretty seamlessly," he continued, "The only hole where we moved any dirt other than digging out the bunkers is the (par-4) 15th, where we cut a bit through a ridge to prevent short hitters from facing a blind second shot.

"For me, the heart of the routing is through holes 7 to 10, where I believe we got so much out of a small stretch of ground. I often use the topography of that part of the property to test

whether potential interns (at his design company Renaissance Golf Design) have a knack for routing golf holes or not."

The bright side of the circumstances that forced the discontinuation of this golf course as a private entity is that St Andrews Beach is now widely accessible to the public as a fascinating test of golf, an exhilarating challenge and a fine example for students and lovers of golf course strategy and architecture.

Any ongoing thought of St Andrews Beach being 'under the radar' must surely be in jeopardy. ●



The 9th – a perfect combination.



The reachable par-5 17th ... just don't go left!