

This is LONDON CALLING

A treasure trove of heathland golf across Greater London awaits tourists and locals who are prepared to search a little wider than the region's more obvious and world-renowned layouts.

WORDS PAUL PRENERGAST

As a 20-year-old who had barely left Australia, several months spent travelling in the United Kingdom and Europe continue to evoke fond memories many years on, bookended by a glut of golf at a variety of courses in conditions which were largely foreign to me at that time.

Brandishing letters of introduction from

home, a friend and I eagerly snuck in rounds at a treasure trove of links and parkland tracks such as St Mellion in Cornwall, Longcliffe in Loughborough on our way north to Scotland where we scattered in rounds on a pilgrimage St Andrews, Old and New, along with Carnoustie and Ladybank.

Ditching the clubs for a few months' travelling around Europe, we later returned

to London to take advantage of fabulous, unlimited golf green fees and extended daylight, spending days playing to near exhaustion primarily at the Sonning and Reading Golf Clubs in rural Berkshire. This was many years before I discovered that the course with squirrels scampering merrily in the tranquil, heathland setting at Sonning was the creation of five-time Open champion J.H. ►





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the pursuit of golf, first next door at Woking and eventually at West Hill, which opened in 1909.

At the height of the women’s suffrage movement, wealthy golf-lover Marguerite Lubbock purchased the lease to allow for the creation of West Hill, seemingly out of necessity, as she and other women golfers had been denied opportunities to play elsewhere. The Necropolis company would be the official landlord to the golf club, with some of the club’s earliest presidents and captains coming from within the company’s ranks.

Cricket fans will also appreciate West Hill as the home club of the Bedser twins, Alec and Eric, who were stalwarts of Test and first-class cricket in England for many years. A feared fast bowler, Alec played 51 Tests for England, dating back to the Bradman era, and took 246 wickets at an average of just under 25. He later served as chairman of selectors for England and was a president at West Hill.

The superbly conditioned West Hill is a

delightful walk among the pines and colourful heather. Like her neighbour, West Hill tumbles across land which gently rises and falls with fairways lined by heather, which is charming to the eye but for many reasons, not the least your score, is to be avoided at all costs.

Several semi-blind tee shots soon reveal majestic green settings and exquisite bunkering, rimmed with the regionally synonymous heather “eyebrows”. Holes such as the 8th and 10th through the middle of the course were pointed out by the professional staff as being some of the more prominent examples of the great fairway and greenside bunkering which are a feature at West Hill.

Additionally, the par-four 18th, which plays uphill and can stretch to some 460 yards from the back tees, is also an amazing hole. Dramatic cross bunkers obscure a deep green which appears from back in the fairway and is set right up against the clubhouse veranda.

Like many courses in this area, it’s easy to see at first glance why people like the ▶

Taylor. The legendary course designer Harry Colt had also gotten his hands dirty in the development of the golf course.

Open champion of 1951 Max Faulkner spent some of his formative years there as an assistant professional. As well, the club’s first professional, Abe Mitchell, was Samuel Ryder’s golf coach. He must have worked some magic for Ryder, as that is Mitchell’s figure commemorated in gold atop the Ryder Cup trophy, last held aloft by the European team in 2023.

Not to be outdone, Reading was also laid out in the early 20th Century by another five-time Open champion who went on to have a prolific course design career: James Braid.

The plethora of world-class golf around the London area would only start to dawn on me as the years ticked by. The magnificent heathland belt which lies primarily to the south and west of the city shares some similarities with the Melbourne Sandbelt cluster of world-renown courses, headlined by such names as Sunningdale, Swinley

Forest, St George’s Hill and Walton Heath. Wentworth too, which for many years was the only English golf course outside The Open venues we ever saw on TV back in Australia, via the old World Matchplay Championship.

The fingerprints of Colt and others from the so-called “Golden Age” of course design in the early 20th century can be found on golf courses scattered across the Greater London area, many with lower profiles than they deserve, given their quality and history.

Often overlooked by many making haste for a date with more prominent “bucket list” layouts around the UK, astute golfers with a sense of history and an appreciation for course architecture are not among those making the same mistake.

On a recent visit, I was fortunate to be welcomed at two courses which pre-date the Golden Age and served as key sources of inspiration for the groundswell of strategic golf course architecture which was to envelope the golfing world a hundred years ago.

WEST HILL GC

One of the outstanding “W” triumvirate of courses located nearby, alongside Woking and Worplesdon, the design for the course was the product of a collaboration of early Open champions Jack White and Willie Park Jr. Pre-dating the creation of the golf course, however, there is a story to tell about the site at West Hill which has a twist like few others.

West Hill and Woking were established on land originally earmarked for the largest burial project ever conceived to house the dearly departed of London. With serious burial ground shortages gripping the capital, over 2000 acres of land was set aside for the “London Necropolis” project in the mid-19th century.

The aim was to see this patch of land developed as the city’s lone cemetery and indeed, some 350 acres (the current Brookwood Cemetery) nearby is dedicated to that purpose. Community sentiment for the Necropolis project would wane, however and tracts of the remaining land were leased for



THE 8TH HOLE AT WEST HILL, AN EXAMPLE OF THE COURSE’S GREAT FAIRWAY AND GREENSIDE BUNKERING.



WOKING GOLF CLUB IS A BEACON FOR STUDENTS OF GOLF COURSE ARCHITECTURE AND AN INSPIRATION FOR COURSE ARCHITECTS THEMSELVES.

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Bedsers would have been happy to settle comfortably into long-term memberships at this club, without so much as a pang of desire to look elsewhere.

WOKING GC

Less than a mile from West Hill, the fabulous Woking Golf Club has long been regarded as one of Britain’s finest and is a beacon for students of golf course architecture and an inspiration for course architects themselves.

Woking was the first heathland course ever constructed and dates back to the 1890s, although the golf course itself today bears little resemblance to its original Tom Dunn design. In fact, the course’s evolution points to arguably “the” singular anomaly to the argument that local members and greens committees should not take carriage for developing their golf course without the oversight of an acknowledged course designer.

Over many decades of constant refinement, members Stuart Paton and John Low – who served as club captains from 1901-03 – deserve most of the credit for weaving so many interesting and strategic features into the layout. Whilst Dunn’s original routing remains largely untouched, Paton and Low’s installation of contour and undulation to the green complexes are not only beguiling to take in, they create so many different options and angles of approach.

In many cases, the relative simplicity of the location of a single bunker can create doubt in the mind before a shot is struck. Back in the day, many of these introduced features were among the first of their kind on inland courses which, at the time, were viewed as somewhat “lesser” in interest and stature to those by the sea.

The great Bernard Darwin, also a former captain at the club, once wrote of Paton’s influence and modus operandi at Woking:

“Unconscious of their doom, the members disperse for their summer holidays and when they return, they find that the most revolutionary things have been done.

“Upon greens that were formerly flat and easy have sprouted plateaus and domes and

hollows. Hillocks have risen as if by magic in the middle of the fairway; ‘floral’ hazards bloom at the side and bunkers have been dug at that precise spot where members have for years complacently watched their ball come to rest at the end of their finest shots.”

Ah yes, those Woking greens. The humps, hollows, tiers, shelves, slopes, ledges and swales – some subtle and others far more pronounced – which Low and Paton instituted over time are mesmerising to behold. The sprawling 5th green seems to contain most of these features on its own.

Like a child at Christmas, you press on with your round, anxiously wondering what will be waiting under the tree for you at each hole. These are a set of greens providing an astonishing array of potential pin positions which inspire a diversity of strategies on how to play the hole, each that would take time and many rounds to fully appreciate and understand.

When firm and fast, pitch a yard too far or too short in these conditions and you could see your ball propelled forward or spin ever further away to where a difficult two-putt or even a chip back onto the surface would be your next challenge.

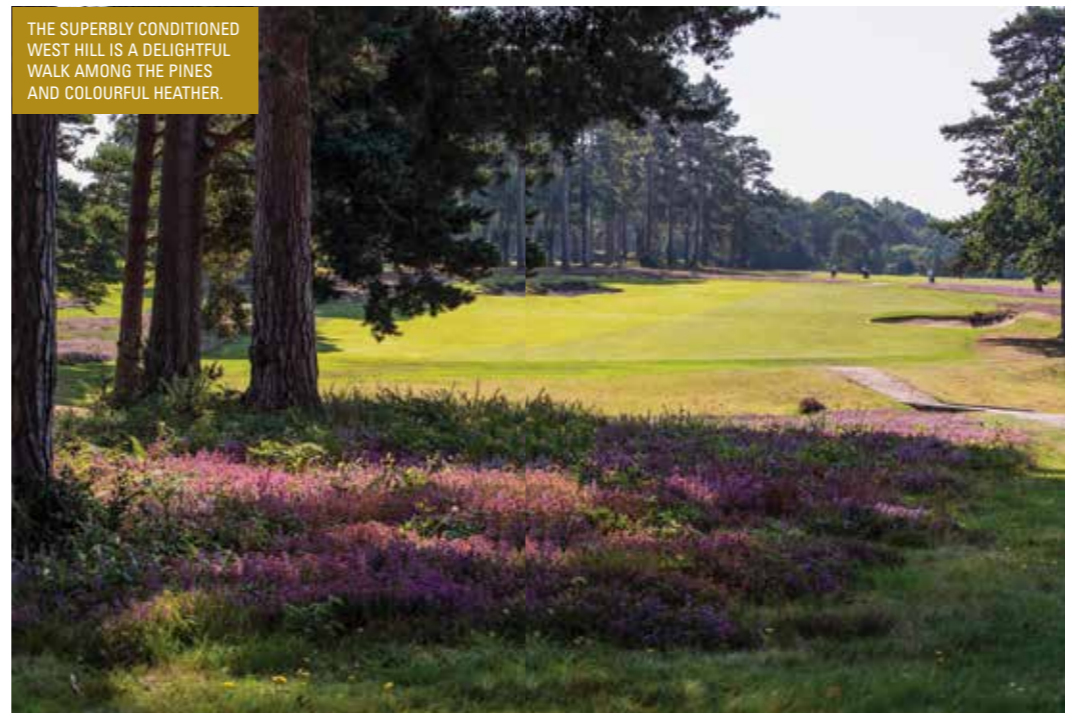
No more famous examples of the transformation inspired by Paton and Low sits innocuously at the fourth hole, once a straightaway medium-length par-four, with a boundary fence and train line running parallel along the right presenting the most obvious danger.

In a classic rogue member moment in 1901, Paton and Low ventured out on a wet day and installed two bunkers in the middle of the fairway, instantly creating doubt in the mind and multiple “new” considerations from the tee. Inspired by the famed Principal’s Nose centreline bunkers on the 16th hole at St Andrews, the bunkers created not only a stir among the members, but also in the broader circles of the burgeoning design “industry” of the day.

Tom Simpson, who went on to create many revered layouts, including the French masterpiece Morfontaine, Cruden Bay and ►



THE WEST HILL COURSE IS RIMMED WITH REGIONALLY SYNONYMOUS HEATHER.



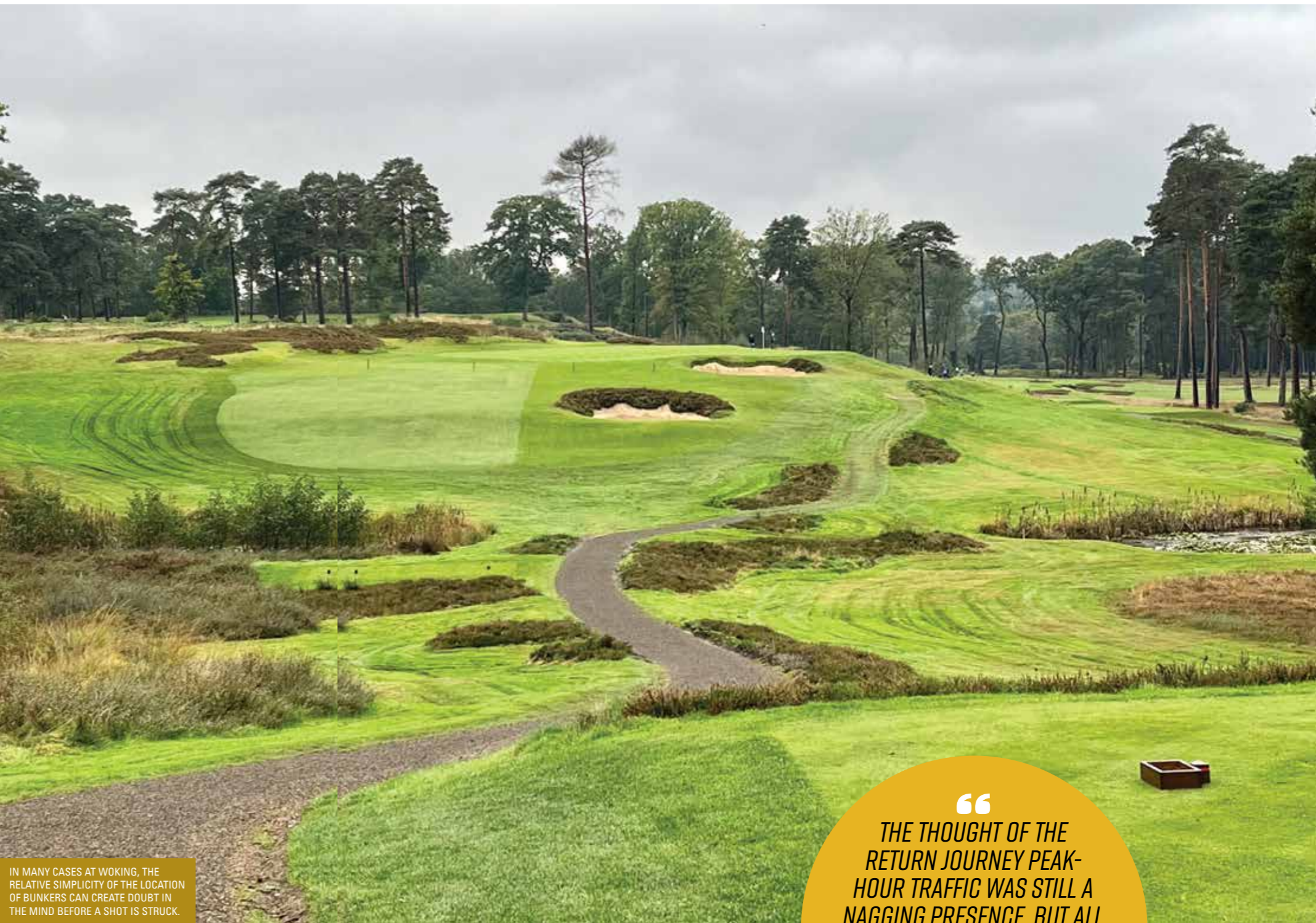
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“THE THOUGHT OF THE RETURN JOURNEY PEAK-HOUR TRAFFIC WAS STILL A NAGGING PRESENCE, BUT ALL CONCERNS OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD QUICKLY DISSIPATED WHEN ON THE TRANQUIL GROUNDS AT WOKING.”

Ballybunion Old, reportedly sat at the fourth hole for hours studying the experiences of golfers of all shapes and sizes as they tackled the new challenges posed by these relatively innocuous sandy pits.

A plaque leading up to the tee reveals the following quote from Simpson: “This hole led me to see the importance of golf architecture as an art as well as a science.”

The introduction of the rubber-core Haskell golf ball the very next year provided the first of many technological advancements to challenge the merits of the positioning of these bunkers, but it’s safe to say the integrity of the hole and its challenges have survived. Even with the distances the ball can be propelled today, these 120-year-old traps still

engage players, who may consider blowing their tee shot over them to leave a mere pitch to the green, in a battle of wits.

No matter where your tee shot comes to rest, the front left greenside bunker and front-to-back pitch of the putting surface – a feature of many of the greens at Woking – continue to pose as much of a mental challenge as physical.

Taking what most would think is the imminently more sensible line left of the bunkers away from the boundary fence introduced the concept of the “delayed penalty”, as you discover you have a considerably more difficult approach over the bunker with much of the green sloping away from you. Like many holes on the Old

Course, the bolder the tee shot played nearest danger – in this case, to the right of the bunkers – the greater the reward of a far less difficult approach.

Woking’s 4th played no small part in inspiring the age of “strategic” course design, replacing the more “penal” thinking and approach which had existed prior to this and that would be driven by the seminal work of Messrs Simpson, Colt, Alister MacKenzie, Donald Ross, et al in the first half of the 20th Century.

Low’s own writings about golf were also a critical element in this evolution and some of his thoughts on emerging “technology” and change in the game retain as much relevance today – with new advanced equipment

released annually like vintages of wine – as they did in 1903:

“The one aim of inventors is to reduce the skill required for golf. Golf architects must wage a battle against inventors by designing courses that emphasise golfing skills over equipment.”

In the early years, passionate golfers often travelled by train to Woking and stampeded in their cleats with clubs in tow to get the first of the available horse-drawn cabs to catch a favourable tee time. I procrastinated on the merits of attempting to replicate this commute (save for the equine element), but the relative safety of a hire car and Google Maps directions from the north side of London won out.

The thought of the return journey peak-hour traffic was still a nagging presence, but all concerns of the outside world quickly dissipated when on the tranquil grounds at Woking.

Strategic elements aside, there are few more satisfying experiences to be had than a round on a pleasant autumn day, with the leaves beginning to turn and the heather retaining some of the colourful blooms of summer.

Tom Watson once described the opening hole here as “a warm handshake from an

old friend”, a sentiment which applies equally to the entire experience and the warm embrace you receive on the patio and in the charming clubhouse thereafter. And the same can

equally be said of West Hill – two classic golf courses among many in this area that take you back to another time and place.

To not seek out golf courses of this stature and calibre at least once when in London should be an ongoing source of regret for those who play the game.