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## True Links



Courtesy of Barnboughe Dunes

### **Tom Doak, America's finest globe-trotting architect picks his fourteen favorites around the world**

From [March - April 2007](#)

One of the great appeals of links courses is that no two are alike. Sand dunes are like snowflakes, each created by a natural process that leaves a slightly different shape, so a hundred acres of ground with wave after wave of dunes is bound to have a character of its own. Indeed, on many links, the nature of the topography changes completely from one end of the course to the other—Royal St. George's has towering dunes at its far end and shoulder-high ridges near the clubhouse. You never know what might be around the next corner, and that's part of the fascination of links golf.

For years when golf writers asked me how many true links courses existed in America, I had to bite my lip. By the strictest definition—sandy ground that had formerly been part of the sea—only a handful of holes at Maidstone on the east end of Long Island and the public course at Truro on Cape Cod would have passed muster in the eyes of a visiting Scotsman. There are perhaps 250 true links in the world today, and I've walked around the better half of them in learning the craft of designing and building golf courses. I've found that even the simplest of links has been worth a look (or a game), and picking favorites is not an easy task, because once you start it's hard to stop. But I've selected fourteen that together give a sense of the variety that links golf provides. Some are older than Turnberry or even Hoylake and some are brand new, but each has the kind of character that will brighten your eyes after you've crossed several time zones on an overnight flight to get there.

## The Old Course, St. Andrews

St. Andrews, Scotland. Nature, fifteenth century. The home of golf has not one links course but four of them, running parallel. The granddaddy of them all isn't in the biggest dunes but set back a bit where the ground was slightly more fertile and less likely to be buried under sand drifts in the early days of golf course maintenance. The Old Course was originally a narrow out-and-back strip, but as the game grew in popularity, the native whins (prickly, impenetrable shrubs also known as gorse) were cut back to widen the fairways so golfers going out and coming home would not do battle head-on.

The difference between the lowest point of the Old Course and the highest is less than twenty-five feet, but there are few pieces of ground anywhere with a greater range and frequency of small undulations. Players steering away from the deeper bunkers in the middle of the course find their shots being turned away from the hole by contours at the front of the greens, as if the hand of God were part of each hole's defenses. The result is the most complicated course in the world—and the only one I know of where your plan of attack must be reconsidered after every shot. 011-44/1334-466-666, [standrews.org.uk](http://standrews.org.uk)

## West Links at North Berwick

North Berwick, Scotland. David Strath, 1878. The West Links at North Berwick has never been considered a true "championship" course: Just after significant additions were made in the first years of the twentieth century, the advent of the Haskell ball and then of steel shafts relegated it again to the second tier of difficulty. But Bernard Darwin wrote a hundred years ago that it is "an exceptionally good school in which to learn the art of approaching," and this aspect proved to be very popular in the early 1900s, when the town became a summer-home retreat from the city.

The scenic layout hugs a very narrow strip along the coast, with fabulous views of the Firth of Forth and various small, rocky islands—the beach and the water are more in play at North Berwick than on any other famous links. There are also some terrific golf holes. The short par-four thirteenth (pictured), with its green nestled in a hollow on the far side of a low stone wall, is one of a kind, and the famous par-three fifteenth, the original Redan, was used as a model by early architects on scores of great courses around the world. 011-44/1620-892-135, [northberwickgolfclub.com](http://northberwickgolfclub.com)

## Machrihanish

Campbeltown, Scotland. Old Tom Morris, 1879; J. H. Taylor, 1914; Sir Guy Campbell, c. 1946. Machrihanish is the one great Scottish links that has stayed under the radar of golfers visiting from overseas. Thanks to its remote location at the southern end of the Mull of Kintyre, it's just too far off the beaten path for most people to venture there. Its members log perhaps ten thousand rounds per year, and at that level of play, nature does a fine job of sorting out good golf shots from bad. The fairways and greens are well-trafficked enough to present a fast surface without becoming compacted. The areas of the rough that get a fair amount of play from the golfers' most common misses are thinned out by foot traffic, so the lies are not too bad. But if a good player hits way off-line past where the average player would normally go, he will find himself in very thick grass with a difficult shot—if he finds his ball at all.

Most of the links courses in the United Kingdom are greener, softer and more manicured than when I first saw them twenty-five years ago, not just because they are now catering to overseas visitors, but also because the turf has to be maintained differently to withstand all the traffic. Machrihanish has not changed one bit, and I hope it never does. 011-44/1586-810-277, [machgolf.com](http://machgolf.com)

## Royal Dornoch

Dornoch, Scotland. Old Tom Morris, 1886; Donald Ross, c. 1895; John Sutherland, 1890-1910. Not all links are fortunate enough to have eighteen holes among the dunes. For many, there isn't enough acreage of the right stuff, and the course must include several holes on less

than ideal ground. Dornoch, the boyhood home of Donald Ross, is one of the few Scottish links to turn the situation to its advantage. Just after the Second World War, the club split the course that Ross had known to form two separate eighteens, extending the golf at each end. The course used to turn back toward the clubhouse after today's par-three sixth hole, but building the par-four seventh and half of the par-four eighth up on the bluff away from the dunes enabled the club to add the ninth, tenth and eleventh holes coming back in along the narrower strip of links at the base of the bluff, and that lends today's championship course its unique visual character. 011-44/1862-810-219, [royaldornoch.com](http://royaldornoch.com)

## Royal West Norfolk

Brancaster, England. Horace Hutchinson, 1892. All coastal links must deal with wind and water erosion, but today the most threatened of them is Royal West Norfolk Golf Club (aka Brancaster), built on a narrow strip of dunes three hours northeast of London. The higher tides along this coastline surround the golf course, so the access road from the town across the marsh is cut off for three hours at a time—conveniently, just long enough to play eighteen holes. The wind erosion is so strong that nearly all the bunkers are banked up with railroad ties to prevent the sand from overtaking the greens—the whole course looks like it was built by a demented uncle of Pete Dye. Sadly, if sea levels continue their slow rise, Brancaster will probably be the first great links to be lost back to the sea, and any who have played it will mourn its loss. 011-44/1485-210-223

## Royal North Devon

Westward Ho!, England. Old Tom Morris, 1864. It was General Moncrieffe of St. Andrews, upon visiting the town of Westward Ho! in 1863, who coined the phrase, "Providence obviously designed this for a golf links," to be used by seven generations of golf course architects thereafter. First-time visitors to Royal North Devon may initially struggle to see what the general had in mind. The ground near the clubhouse is the flattest stretch of linksland possible, and the dunes along the shore scarcely seem tall enough to keep the Atlantic from flooding the course on a windy day. Set entirely on common land, horses, cattle and sheep graze in such profusion that sometimes it seems impossible to miss them all with your tee shot. Yet with a minimum of bunkers and a four-hole intervention by the spiky great sea rushes at the start of the back nine, Westward Ho! remains perhaps the ultimate reminder of how a simple game can be so much tougher than it looks. 011-44/1237-477-598, [royalnorthdevongolfclub.co.uk](http://royalnorthdevongolfclub.co.uk)

## Old Course, Ballybunion

Ballybunion, Ireland. Patrick Murphy, 1906; Tom Simpson and Molly Gourlay, 1936. There are lots of links set among large sandhills, but none are more dramatic than Ballybunion, where you play along a sandy bluff falling into the ocean and then up narrow valleys between the towering dunes. The roughs are so perfect that it's difficult to lose a ball no matter where you hit it, but if you don't keep on the straight and narrow, it's just as difficult to get your next shot to stay on the greens, many of which have steep banks of short grass falling away on both sides. The size and placement of the dunes required some unusual routing choices—there are back-to-back par fives on the front and four par threes from the eighth to the fifteenth—but no one ever seems to be bothered by it, because the quality of golf is so high. Tom Watson's pilgrimages here in the 1980s put the course firmly on the tourist map, and in the summer it is overrun with overseas visitors. 011-353/682-7146, [ballybuniongolfclub.ie](http://ballybuniongolfclub.ie)

## Royal County Down

Newcastle, Northern Ireland. Old Tom Morris, 1891. County Down is unquestionably the most scenic golf course in the world—even though golfers frequently cannot see where they're going, thanks to several blind tee shots. On the outward holes you play toward monstrous dunes at the far end of the course, then at the fourth tee you turn back to admire a picture-postcard view: the beach and town, the gorse-covered dunes that bloom bright yellow in the spring, the spire of the Slieve Donard Hotel behind the clubhouse and the Mountains of Mourne just beyond. The front nine is closer to the sea and often cited as perhaps the best front nine in the world of golf; naturally, the finishing holes struggle a bit to hold up this level of quality. On a calm day,

when you're hitting your drives straight over the marker posts, the course can be had—Tiger Woods shot a sixty-four here—but with the wind blowing, Royal County Down may be the toughest course in existence, as Tiger's round of eighty-three on another occasion might suggest. 011-44/2843-723-314, [royalcountydown.org](http://royalcountydown.org)

## **Kenemer**

Zandvoort, Netherlands. H. S. Colt, 1929. One of the best-kept secrets in golf is that continental Europe also has its share of fine links courses. Kenemer, in a setting reminiscent of Shinnecock Hills close to the North Sea in the suburbs of Amsterdam, has perhaps the finest pedigree. The original eighteen holes were laid out by Harry Colt and his partner John Morrison, so its greens and bunkers are more thoughtful than many of the older U.K. links. The course was expanded to twenty-seven holes in the mid-1980s, with the newer holes specifically designed to add difficulty for the Dutch Open, which the club has hosted on many occasions and will again this year.

Yet there is much disagreement about whether Kenemer or Haagsche or Noordwijk is preeminent among the links on the Dutch coast, and I have heard that Royal Zoute just across the border in Belgium may be even better. True links also exist along Denmark's North Sea coast, on the Baltic Sea in Sweden, on the Atlantic coast of Portugal and on the English Channel at Le Touquet in France. But alas, there are none along the Mediterranean, where sand dunes are rare and where the warmer temperatures do not support the fine grasses most suitable to links golf. 011-23/571-2836, [kenemergolf.nl](http://kenemergolf.nl)

## **Humewood**

Port Elizabeth, South Africa. S. V. Hotchkin, 1929. South Africa is five times the size of Great Britain, and with 1,800 miles of coastline, you'd think there would be a plethora of links, but there are only a handful. The most famous seaside course in the country is Durban Country Club, and although it is undeniably set among sand dunes—several holes run on top of them—the playing surface isn't as hard and fast as a British links.

Farther south, however, the grasses start to change and the winds are more prevalent, and on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth, the links of Humewood are indeed the real thing. Much of the routing is a series of parallel holes—several of them run up and down a low hill at the back of the property—but the winds are so forceful that you'll hit a driver and wedge on one hole then turn around and hit two woods to a green right alongside the previous tee. Surely, there are many links in the U.K. with more fascinating terrain, but there aren't many you can play in shirtsleeves nine months of the year. 011-27/41-583-2137, [humewoodgolf.co.za](http://humewoodgolf.co.za)

## **Barnbogle Dunes**

Bridport, Tasmania. Tom Doak and Michael Clayton, 2004. Paraparaumu's singular supremacy among the links of the Southern Hemisphere (see below) rested in part on the fact that most of Australia's best courses are in the Melbourne Sandbelt and its one great seaside track, New South Wales, is more a cliff-top course like Pebble Beach than it is a true links. But five years ago I visited Tasmania for the first time to see the ground that is now Barnbogle Dunes, and I could see the handwriting on the wall. Tasmania, the island state off Australia's southeastern tip, is very reminiscent of Britain: Most of the towns are laid out around the coast, there are sand dunes aplenty thanks to the windy climate of the "roaring forties," and the air is cool enough that the fescues that dominate the links will thrive. The only question was whether anyone would come to play; Tasmania's population is quite small, so golfers from Melbourne and Sydney must adopt the course as a regular holiday spot if it is to succeed. I hope it does: It includes some of the best holes I've ever built, like the fourth, seventh and thirteenth, which may make my career "eclectic eighteen" someday. 011-61/363-560-094, [barnbogledunes.com.au](http://barnbogledunes.com.au)

## **Paraparaumu Beach**

Paraparaumu Beach, New Zealand. Alex Russell, 1949. For many years, this compact links in a beach-town suburb of Wellington had the reputation of being the best links in the Southern Hemisphere—and deservedly so. Modern development came to this part of the world before golf did, so the dunes along the shoreline are covered with beach homes and the golf course is behind them. Architect Alex Russell, who worked with Dr. Alister MacKenzie at Royal Melbourne, made the very most out of a tight rectangular property with small dunes and small trees throughout. The best holes are the par threes, where missing the green always leaves a difficult recovery, but most memorable is the long par-four thirteenth (pictured), its green set high in dunes framed against the rugged coastal mountains. 011-64/4902-8200, [paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz](http://paraparaumubeachgolfclub.co.nz)

## Bandon and Pacific Dunes

Bandon, Oregon. David McLay Kidd, 1999; Tom Doak, 2001. Some strict constructionists do not consider the courses at Bandon true links because they sit on cliff tops a hundred feet above the ocean. But just like the courses on Gullane Hill, their sandy and undulating character derives from the beach below, and they play more like links than some real links do.

It was the success of Sand Hills, a course a thousand miles from the ocean with linkslike playing characteristics in its own right, that inspired Mike Keiser to look for a spot of secluded sandy coastline to build his own dream course. He found it just north of Bandon, Oregon, where alluvial deposits from the Coquille River are blown back ashore to create a sandy paradise for American golfers. David Kidd's Bandon Dunes and the lucky thirteenth course on my own résumé, Pacific Dunes, don't just play like links—with the maritime climate, a healthy maintenance budget and a lot of TLC, they might well provide the finest playing surface in all of links golf. You can sometimes putt from fifty yards off the green if it suits you.

Best of all, the success of Bandon Dunes has turned others into believers: Developers from Tasmania and South Africa to Iceland and Canada and Argentina are starting to think links golf could work there, too. I hope that when someone else writes this article fifty years from now, there will be a number of worthy new candidates for inclusion—a possibility that seemed quite unlikely not so long ago. 888-345-6008, [bandondunesgolf.com](http://bandondunesgolf.com)

The information in this story was accurate at the time it was published in March 2007 but we suggest you confirm all details and prices directly with any establishments mentioned. The quality of offerings and services tends to change over time.

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