

LINKS TO ST ANDREWS

LOVE
LETTERS
TO THE
HOME
OF GOLF

TOM DOAK

A SUMMER AT ST ANDREWS

In the summer of 1872, when Charles Blair Macdonald came to St Andrews, he wasn't old enough to enter the clubhouse at the R&A, so his grandfather rented a locker for him in Old Tom Morris's golf shop. There was no better way to learn the game and its traditions, and thus it is not surprising that Macdonald became something of an evangelist for golf in America and one of its first great golf architects.

In the summer of 1982, I came to St Andrews as part of a postgraduate grant from Cornell University to study golf course architecture. Old Tom was long gone to his final resting place, but I was fortunate to get to know his spiritual successor—Walter Woods.

Walter was head greenkeeper at St Andrews from 1974 to 1997 and respected throughout Britain and Ireland as dean of the profession. I was lucky to have an introduction to him via an old friend of his in America, Stanley Carr, greenkeeper at Gulf Stream in Florida. With that introduction, Walter promised to take me onto his crew for the summer.

But summer of 1982 was the bottom of a bad recession, and when I arrived in St Andrews in July, Mr. Woods explained that with the course being a municipal facility, he just couldn't pass over a bunch of unemployed locals to hire an American for the crew.

Instead, he had arranged with the caddiemaster for me to work as a bag carrier, on condition that I would not show up for work until after the guys who made their living at it had already taken their first loops. In addition, Walter said, I was welcome to spend as much time as I wanted around the maintenance barn and he would answer any questions I had.

It turned out to be the perfect solution. By caddieing for someone different every day, I started to learn all the features of the Old Course, rather than just those that would affect my own game, and it was amazing to see how some features bothered the best players but were no thought for the 20-handicap, while other features that I might have ignored (such as the bunker off the tee at the third) were critical for other golfers.

And my work schedule gave me plenty of time in the mornings and evenings to photograph the course when the sun was low and the contours started to come out in the shadows.

Better still, nearly every time I was out with my camera, I would run into Walter Woods making his rounds of the Old Course. He often worked two shifts, coming back in the evening when the golfer traffic started to thin out to check conditions and set his program for the next day. Once he started to see that I was a serious student, he took

me under his wing. Occasionally we would go back to his house for a small supper with his wife, Caroline, and talk about what he was doing and why.

On my first afternoon with Walter, he introduced me to some of the differences between greenkeeping in the US and Britain. He took me out to the double green of the fourth and fourteenth and explained that the putting surface was a community of different grasses—browntop bentgrass, fine fescue, and poa annua—and that his goal was not to make it uniform visually but simply to make a good, firm, smooth surface for rolling the ball.

I asked him if golfers didn't complain about the patchwork nature of the grasses with their different textures, and he said that over longer putts it didn't matter, and on short putts a good player would see that and allow for it. (In hindsight, I understood that was the mantra for golf throughout Britain and Ireland. No matter what sort of obstacle one encountered on the course the good player should see it and allow for it.)

Walter showed me where he was transplanting little plugs of fine fescue from the outer reaches of the green to the areas where the holes were cut for championship play, trying to get the area six or eight feet around the hole to be the best part of the playing surface.

In those days the green fee was cheap—£15 Sterling!—and there were few restrictions on play. So even though the official first tee time was 6:30 A.M., by then there might be thirty or forty golfers out on the course already. The ranger would come around and collect their green fees when he arrived. The morning after I arrived in Scotland from America, I woke up very early, saw it was light, and went out to take pictures. When I got down to the clubhouse I realized that it was only 4:30 in the morning, but I went out anyway, and when I got to the far end of the course there were three Japanese golfers playing the eleventh hole!

All that unregulated golf traffic was taking its toll on the course; Walter guessed there were something on the order of 70,000 rounds a year being played, and it was just too much wear on the links turf. To combat this, Walter was mowing out the greens even bigger than they had been historically and starting to use hole locations in places never before seen, just to spread out the wear.

On the Road Hole, which took the worst of it because it's the smallest green on the course, he mowed out the putting surface thirty or forty feet in front of the plateau and started putting the hole down there. I caddied for a couple of people who made birdie to that hole location—and left wondering why everyone thought the Road Hole was so difficult!



JOSHUA C. F. SMITH. *Sunset, St Andrews*. Oil, 2014.

The weather was very droughty during the summer of 1982, so Walter was forced to irrigate the course on occasion. He had a full watering system that had been installed as a fallback leading up to Open Championships, but he never used it on its automatic settings; instead he would send out a crew member with a thick hose to water a green deeply when it really needed it. Nobody ever overwaters turf when they have to stand there with a hose to do so.

One afternoon I'd caught up to Walter while he was playing the Eden course, and after he finished he took me into the New club, where he was a paying member, to change and go to supper. While he was shaving, he mentioned that when he'd been at the golf superintendents' show in California the previous year, he had gone to shave and observed that there were no stoppers in the sinks, even though California was suffering through a drought then, as now. And they probably still don't have stoppers in those sinks.

All the traffic also necessitated that Walter fertilize the grass more than he would have preferred, to promote

growth and recovery. But he had to be careful. Too much fertilizer and the other grasses in the sward would start to overtake the fescue that produced the ideal links surface, which had happened just up the road at Carnoustie. (In fact, it was Walter's assistant that summer of 1982, John Philip, who eventually took the job at Carnoustie and got the turf back in order there.)

To make room for more fertilizer in his budget, Walter had taken to harvesting kelp off the rocks at the Bruce embankment and composting it with sand in the maintenance yard to produce a homemade fertilizer. Thirty years later, organic kelp fertilizer is all the rage, though few people make it for themselves.

Today there is a name for all of this. It's called sustainability, and most golf superintendents pay lip service to it, even as they overwater and overmedicate the turf. For Walter Woods, it wasn't marketing at all; it was just common sense. What I learned in my year overseas is that most everything in golf boils down to common sense. After all, the Scots invented the game.