

ROYAL COUNTY DOWN
Newcastle, County Down
Northern Ireland

Architect: George Combe (1900-1910)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Medal	71	6878	74	131
Stableford	71	6675	73	126

Overview:

Ireland is a country that boasts over 45 links golf courses and Royal County Down is undoubtedly the crown jewel of them all in the mind of those who have had the privilege to play it. The course camps on dramatic sand dunes above the town of Newcastle. The high vistas of the course provide some of the most majestic views in Ireland of this small rural town set at the foot of the Mountains of Mourne along the shores of Dundrum Bay and the Irish Sea.

To borrow from the English golf writer Peter Dobereiner's descriptive in the course yardage book, "The links of Newcastle are exhilarating even without a club in your hand.....As a backdrop, the Mountains of Mourne loom heavily against the sky, subtly changing color under the play of sunshine and shade just as the Irish sea switches its mood. Spice the picture with a hint of peat smoke in the wind and you have a setting which all the billions of property developers could never reproduce. The strip of dune land was 90% along the road to being a golf course before the game was ever invented. All it ever needed from the hand of man was a minimum of adjustment..... And all it needs now is restraint from the hand of man."

The original routing of Royal County Down was done in 1889 by Old Tom Morris, who erroneously gets credit for the current course design, since most of his routing was abandoned about a decade later. The course we see today was the result of the diligent work of a club member, George Combe, in the early 1900's. Much like Oakmont or Merion built around the same time, this incredible course was not the work of a famous course architect but rather an obsessive work in progress of a talented golfer and member of the club who understood the unique topography and wind conditions of this area and produced a series of holes that would take full advantage of both to create a unique tactical challenge. Subsequent modifications were done to the course by the renowned architect Harry Colt in the 1920's when he modified some green settings and created the famous 4th and 9th holes which are two of the most celebrated on the course today. In 2005 further renovations were done by English architect Donald Steel and the 16th hole got a major makeover strengthening the finish of this magnificent layout. But it is really the work of Combe that is most responsible for these championship links that have so admirably stood the test of time.

The impression most people have of this course after their first walk is that it is unfair and somewhat capricious. At 6600 yards in a howling Irish breeze with only 3 par fours under 400 yards I can understand how they would say that. The totally blind tee shots required on 2, 5, 6, 9, and 11 would never be presented by an architect building the course today. There are also a plethora of blind or semi-blind shots into the green

complexes depending on the angle from which you are approaching the green. But as a wise old Scotsman once said, they are only blind the first time you play them and they do give the course a somewhat arbitrary characteristic that you can enjoy if you embrace it.

The fairways are narrow ribbons strung among some of the most impressive sand dunes in all of Ireland. The sides of these dunes are covered with purple heather and that nasty golden gorse that you so often see in Scotland but rarely experience on the Emerald Isle. Shots hit or blown off line can suffer what seems like an arbitrary punitive fate as a result but it is just the sticky rub of the green. The landing areas off the tee and into the greens have very distinct slopes and collection areas so picking the right club and the right line to end up in a position of tactical advantage is at a premium. Hiring an experienced caddy to be on your shoulder with local knowledge is a really wise investment.

The bunkers at Royal County Down are probably it's most famous calling card. They are deep, cavernous sharply angled pits with native sea grasses growing over the top edges like intimidating Groucho eye brows. In many ways the generous bunkering is what makes this course a tactical gem. As with most links course that experience strong winds of varying directions, the positioning of a particular bunker can go from a benign visual hurdle one day to a heart stopping forced carry the next. Tactical positioning of the tee ball and the approach shots makes the game a bit of a chess match with the course and the daily elements.

The greens are the least discussed feature of the course but in some ways the most important to consider. Similar to the Pinehurst 2, many of these greens are domed with fall off shoulders that feed a shot without sufficient conviction off into grassy hollows or sand pits from which it will be a serious challenge to get up and down. The low running recovery pitch will get major use, often times beginning away from the pin letting the slope and breeze bring the ball back to your target. There is plenty of slope in these greens-some obvious and some subtle-that make reading the greens for pace and break a huge challenge. Again, an experienced caddy can be invaluable in this regard.

For all the visual shock and awe you find on this course, it remains eminently playable and a place where you can shoot a good score if you keep your wits about you. It will ruthlessly punish impatient course management especially from players trying to do play shots that are clearly out of their skill set. But it provides wonderful opportunities to recover with clever tactical options for a player with a creative imagination and sound judgment. As with all links courses the ground is your friend, especially when the wind is up, so hitting bump and run approaches on the proper line can give you scoring opportunities you would not expect. When this day is over your mind will be as exhausted as your arms and shoulders, but if you have played well and won your Nassau bet there is a very gratifying Guinness with a large head awaiting you in the bar.

Royal County Down has never hosted an Open Championship, mostly because of the obscure location and logistical challenge it would present to getting 20,000 people a day to the course. But it has had it's share of prestigious and memorable championships over the years. The Senior Open Championship was hosted here from 2000 through 2002 and it attracted the likes of Nicklaus, Palmer, Player and Watson. After playing here, Watson put the first 15 holes at Royal County Down at the tops of his favorites list. The 2007 Walker Cup was a nail biter affair between some of the strongest amateurs in the world. The U.S. team that prevailed 12.5 to 11.5 included Rickie Fowler, Dustin Johnson, and Webb Simpson all of whom are destined to become household names on the PGA Tour.

Royal County Down has the golf pedigree to provide what the famous golf writer Herbert Warren Wind once said was “the sternest examination of golf I have ever taken”. Bernard Darwin golf writer and a top line amateur in his own right wrote that the golf here is “the kind of golf that people play in their most ecstatic dreams.” If you approach playing here with an open mind and a spirited resolve, you too will come away with a scrapbook of special golf memories from playing one of the finest links courses in the world.

Hole-By-Hole:

#1 Par 5 523/503

The opening hole generally plays downwind. It is a basic three shot par five but it is important to get off to a solid start. You are not going to see another five par until the 12th so you need to take advantage here-make par and get to the second tee with a good taste in your mouth. . Drive to center and layup at the stone at 120. The green sits down in a receptive depression so simply punch one between the low dunes at 45 yards from the green and give yourself a scoring opportunity. Nice view back to the first tee with the hotel steeple behind. If there is any mist in the mountains this has a very ethereal feel to it.

#2 Par 4 424/387

The first of the five blind driving holes-drive it over the ridge in front of you into a saddle fairway on the other side. There is a small dune about 45 yards from the green that partially blinds your approach. You need an adroit iron to a teeny plateau green you get to over a saddle bunker set into the base of the dune. This green has shoulder pads so balls will fall off to either side leaving a delicate recovery pitch. Halacious bunker short and left that you need to avoid.

#3 Par 4 475/455

Now it gets interesting. This is one of the hardest par fours you will ever see-it plays the full length on the card. Lots of subtlety in this drive because the hole bends slightly right. A drive down the right leaves a shorter approach but it is blinded by a dune on the right. Driving up the left gives a wide open look but at the expense of a longer club in. Hit a two-cheeker to left center over all kinds of fechmeil in front of you and there is still have a long way to the green. Remember what I said in the overview, the course will punish impatient course management. You can try to blast a three wood to reach the green, but if you have any doubt about getting there your best play might be to lay up before the two large bunkers 40 yards short of the green. Five with a pitch and a couple of putts is no embarrassment here. This is the definition of survival golf.

#4 Par 3 215/202

This was one of the additions Harry Colt made to the course in the 1920's and it is the first of four very good par threes you will play today. He was a master of green complexes and you will see it here. From the top tee and at its full length this is one of the most magnificent looking par threes I have seen in Ireland. It is worth a hike to the top just to take in the view of this green setting against the stunning backdrop of the Mountains of Mourne. You have a long shot over an ocean of gorse between tee and green and add in a blanket of low gorse covering the dunes behind just for some accent intimidation. You just have to elevate an articulate

shot onto the grassy landing area in front of the green and let it feed on. This green is a bit narrow but amply deep.

#5 Par 4 429/418

This blind drive here on a diagonal playing angle to the hidden landing area is very disorienting. Given the length of the hole you are tempted to cut the dogleg and shorten the hole, but the five bunkers and gorse that protect the corner mitigate against that idea. A short drive or one too far left is a long way from the green so that is not a good strategy either. Drive to center to get a look around the corner at the green set among the dunes. Your approach shot in will have to carry the dune on the right to get to a green with bunkers left and hollows right. Best miss here is straight and short.

#6 Par 4 369/355

Another blind drive to center over the stone to a receptive saddle fairway landing area. The real test here is to hoist the next one over the cross bunker to a small crowned putting surface probably the smallest one on the course. This green has fall offs on both sides which gives you an even smaller effective target on your approach. Just one bunker on the right but it is a nasty.

#7 Par 3 135/125

The short yardage on the card belies the difficulty of this hole. This is severe green with its left side sloping off and toward the deepest greenside bunker on the course. If the wind is coming from the right this is one of the most difficult shots you play all day. Hit a high lawn dart to clear the front bunker and work away from the left bunker into the center of the green. There is another mound front right that can create problems as well.

#8 Par 4 424/414

Two difficult finishing holes are ahead of you on the way to the house. Drive it long to left of center at bunker. Your view in is obscured by some humps that you need to split to reach a tiny domed green. I found the putting on this one to be very quick-probably the result of the wind and exposure to the bay on the left. Again a five here is not a bad score.

#9 Par 4 427/427

This is the second memorable hole Harry Colt contributed to Royal Country Down. Launch your drive over a massive hill at the steeple you saw from number one green. Target is a 40 yard wide landing area a good 60 feet below you on the other side of the hill. Once you block and tackle your way to the top of this hill the view is breathtaking. There is an iconic photograph you have probably seen by Lawrence Lambrecht of the red steeple of the Slieve Donard Hotel and the town of Newcastle at the base of the Mountains of Mourne. Definitely a Kodak moment. Once back to reality, your tee ball should have ended up in the flat fairway below but you have as challenging of a long shot as you will have all day. The deep cross bunkers at 40 yards need to be carried. The green is fairly deep but do not be surprised if it does not hold. If you feel you are out of comfort range to reach lay up short of the bunkers and try to par with a pitch and a putt.

#10 Par 3 188/180

Open the inward nine with a nice looking par three whose green sits in a natural amphitheater of dunes framed by low furry bunkers. The green seems to sit below the tee so it might be a club less. Simple 190 shot that can be bounced in. The green banks hard to the right so you might try to squeeze a slider into the flag. This may have been one of the surviving holes from the original Old Tom routing-that would mean it has been torturing players for almost 125 years.

#11 Par 4 430/430

Last of the steeplechase blind drives-hit it over the left side of the directional rock on top of this 40 foot dune. This looks like a taller carry than it is-use your driver and have confidence in its loft. The landing area has a natural flow to the left that will feed balls from the line of the hole. Now power a wood at a pretty accessible green pinched by a couple of bunkers.

#12 Par 5 478/469

Here is your chance to make up some lost ground on the scorecard, it is probably the easiest hole on the course. Drive it hard at the right edge of the green-there is a huge crater in the left rough that must be avoided that was created when alien space ships landed here in 1847. Now you can blast a wood up a narrowing landing area smartly framed by the dunes and the gorse. If you avoid the bunkers at 100 and 50 yards respectively you can reach or have a short pitch.

#13 Par 4 423/423

Pure eye candy as this dogleg right hole winds tightly through a valley of gorse and heather. Has to be the toughest hole on the back side. Drive to center and it should provide a sneak look around the dune on the right at the left corner of the green and greenside bunker. The green complex is hidden behind a hill and protected by moguls and deep grass. Though you can't see it, your best strategy is to land it short and right and it will feed on the green that is tucked back up into a hill to the left. This green is severely sloped so putting here will be a chore.

#14 Par 3 202/202

The last three par plays one club further than number ten. This green is slightly raised-set on an angle of 5-11 and has some really bad boy bunkers on the right flank of the green, front left, and left of the green. The green follows the general slope of the ground around it from high front right to lower back left. Difficult par to make unless you hit a perfect shot in.

#15 Par 4 454/454

Another beast of a par four, this tee shot plays to a small landing area-drive to center over the directional rock-at which point it dogears right over a pinch in the fairway. From there it is a long club over some rough ground and a pair of bordering bunkers at about 60 yards. Once again if you do not think you can reach

comfortably lay up short of the green and try to save a par with a clever pitch and a putt. The green that has a fall offs on both sides so no approach shot is easy.

#16 Par 4 318/300

This short par four was redone by Donald Steel in 2005 and it has certainly stepped up the challenge a notch. Probably need to hit something from this elevated tee to about 100 yards to get a pitch you can spin to this green that slopes front left to back right. It will take a dexterous pitch into a downslope to get a scoring opportunity here so focus.

#17 Par 4 416/402

Small pond in the middle of the fairway is invisible from the tee just out of reach of a big drive-no strategic purpose-merely natures decoration. It seems out of place on a links course but nature did not ask permission. Drive to center leaving a long to mid iron to a saucer shaped green that feeds from the left. The green is necklaced by nasty pot bunkers all around.

#18 Par 5 548/528

Long, level finishing hole usually playing into the prevailing breeze. The fairway is littered with 18 pot bunkers that frame the hole from tee to green. Hole lacks topography which explains the bunker overkill. Drive to center and hit a strong wood to about 100 yards. The pitch is in to a slightly raised and crowned putting surface. If you avoid sand on this hole you should get a putt for birdie.