

Royal Dornoch Golf Club Sutherland, Scotland

Architect: Old Tom Morris, John Sutherland (1886)

Tees	Par	Yardage	Rating	Slope
Blue	70	6711	74	139
White	70	6626	73	137
Yellow	70	6265	71	135

Overview:

Royal Dornoch holds the distinction, only behind the Old Course at St. Andrews, as the second most famous links venue in Scotland. Golf in some form has been played in this Scottish Highland neighborhood for over 400 years. Rumor has it that the local clergy from the Dornoch Cathedral sanctioned playing the game in it's early years and ushered in the first period of growth in this region. The current iteration was laid out by Old Tom Morris in 1886 about 10 years after the club was officially formed. It sponsored many distinguished competitions throughout the early 1900's and in the 1940's, with the acquisition of additional ground on the north end, allowed for extension of the holes on that end and the redesign of the final six holes that we play today.

There were many hands in this development but honestly it seems like nature and the big force are most responsible for what you will experience here. Once you get into the heart of the course, as James Finegan says, "there is a strong sensation of heading toward land's end. The remoteness is total. We feel we may....penetrate the very wilds...on this journey over ancient landscape where so little is owed to the hand of man."

John Sutherland guided the affairs of the Dornoch Club for 60 years starting in 1883. A fine player in his own right, a knowledgeable contributing course designer, and a journalist is credited helping refine the original design and spreading the word about Dornoch among industrialists and people of influence in the United Kingdom at the turn of the century.

Andrew Carnegie, the rich American entrepreneur, bought the castle at Skibo down the road in 1900 and took up an interest in golf. He became Vice President of the club in 1901 and his involvement brought notoriety and interest that helped proliferate the knowledge of Dornoch among his colleagues.

Finally, Donald Ross who later became one of the premier course designers in America in the Golden Age, and his brother Alec, a talented professional who won the U.S. Open in 1907, were born and raised in Dornoch before emigrating to the United States at the turn of the century. Resultant fame of these two favorite sons added to the mystique of this place and fueled the continued growth of it's rich golf lore.

Royal Dornoch is a course that makes you use every arrow in your quiver and then some you did not know you had. It is not a brute but with only two par fives the long par fours will wear on you. Throughout

you will see plateau greens with sharp and shaven fall offs where low running approach shots are often called for. The scuttling putt or rolling fairway metal up the steep slope on a green side elevation play can be very effective as well.

The course is routed out and in on a narrow strip of sandy links land that sits between a tall, gorse covered dune wall and the beach on parallel shelves, the front eight on the higher shelf at the foot of the dune with the inward ten running lateral to the beach on a slightly lower shelf. Unlike some out and in routings like the Old Course the tiered shelving provides distinct playing areas for the parallel holes. You will not all that often find yourself playing out of another fairway by intention or just chance.

The daily wind speed and direction are the most important playing parameters at Dornoch because they will change your teeing club selection and preferred lines into the greens dramatically. Be discerning in picking your tees to play from so that you have a chance to enjoy your round each day. Prevailing wind is downwind the first eight and upwind coming home which makes the back side a much tougher scoring challenge. Having played it the opposite I can tell you that controlling your distances downwind on the back 11 is no piece of cake.

After a somewhat meek opening hole, the holes from two through six make as tough a start as anything you will every play. Your total focus is required right out of the gate if you scorecard stands a chance of not being in tatters by the time you hit the high ground. The dune wall on the left smothered in gorse dominates your view on the early holes and forces your mind to want to play safely to the right but you have to resist that temptation since the ground pitches right toward the sea and there is plenty of sand and furry mound trouble waiting below the fairways.

After putting out on the sixth you have a Machu Picchu hike up a steep dune to a balcony above the links to play the next two holes. The view off the back of the seventh tee is a Kodak moment you do not want to miss, a spectacular visual of what you have already played and what will come in the second half of the inward side. Playing the next two holes along the ridge will give you maximum effect of the day's wind. Plummeting back to the floor on the second shot on eight can provide a vertigo moment.

The ninth turns you back in the direction of the house so your wind direction will change 180 as will your attitude of how to play the rest of the way. Keep in mind as you play in this direction the beach on your left is kindly considered a lateral hazard so if you should turn your Titleist into fish food you can play next to where you cross the line to the beach with a single stroke toll payment. The trail along this lower shelf is vintage links golf with rumpled fairways and creative green complexes that will require creativity and precise shot execution to be successful.

From ten to thirteen you get two really short par threes and a par five that could give you a chance for some scorecard triage. But the four par in between is a survival moment. From fourteen to the house just grab a hold of your bootstraps and pull hard, staying atop the steed the rest of the way is a major effort in this stretch of holes. There is a symbiotic relationship between the lay of these holes and the land that is just exquisite. The designers just needed to discover the inherent lines of play and let the land dictate the challenge. Throw a little wind into the batter and this is a recipe for a sequence of some of the greatest golf holes you will ever play.

When you are done make sure to take the time amble through the clubhouse and sit in the grill for a refreshing one so you can take in the enormous cache of memorabilia that hangs on the walls throughout. The

Carnegie Silver Plate upstairs is one of the most impressive looking trophies I have ever seen. If it is late in the day and the sun is setting over the golf course below, listen carefully, you will swear the walls are whispering and sharing the secrets of Dornoch with you.

(Note: I would like to acknowledge a useful resource I purchased in the Royal Dornoch pro shop called "Experience Royal Dornoch" by Richard Goodale. This is a unique book with wonderful topographical photos and descriptive text of every hole which was invaluable in reconstructing and clarifying my impressions of the course in preparing this review. You can buy it through their website at http://www.royaldornochproshop.co.uk/shop/prodtype.asp?strPageHistory=compare&CAT_ID=60 for about 20 pounds sterling. Not sure if the shipping will be prohibitive.)

Hole-By-Hole Analysis (White/Yellow):

#1 Par 4 331/302 yards First

Simple opening hole-you could drive it if the wind is helping but that seems bold for the first stroke of the day. For the best angle of approach drive left center between the bunkers that collar the fairway about 210 out. A three metal may be enough to leave you a very short club into the green. Note that the first green side bunker you see on the right is not green side at all but a good 25 yards from the green, this creates a disorienting illusion on your approach play. The green is crowned so you need to use the ground on your approach to keep it from wandering off the surface.

#2 Par 3 177/167 Yard

Watson calls this the hardest second shot in golf, that is saying something for a par three hole. A long and narrow plateau green with deep front bunkers and a steep fall away slope of six feet or more on three sides makes keeping the ball on this green a major accomplishment. From either side the green is so narrow it is all you can do to avoid a series of Misty May Treanor volleyball actions to the other side. Honestly the best way to play this hole is to lay up in front with a couple clubs less and then hit a ground approach up the steep slope using the 40 yard length of the green to set up a two-putt bogie. The putting surface slopes sharply left to right and back to front toward the sea on your right.

#3 Par 4 413/398 Earl's Cross

Prepare to be wowed. The walk from the second green to the third tee is through shoulder high gorse and when you step up to the raised tee box you have a resplendent stretch of magnificence rolling out below your feet. What appears is an endless shoreline stretch of holes with sea, gorse laden hills, and rumpled, hummocked linksland. Refocus because this is a very precise driving hole, you need to hit a draw down the left of a mound in the middle of the fairway that would like to throw your shot right into the four pot bunkers on the right. Overcook your draw and there is unrelenting gorse waiting on the hills. The green sits on the other side of the mounds crossing the fairway at 85 yards. If you are on the left you should aim short of the green side bunker on the left and let the ground feed it sharply to center. From the ideal spot on the right next to the last

fairway pot you can aim straight up the fall line of the green from 11 to 5. Even though the green is raised all approaches are best a low running shot.

#4 Par 4 422/402 Achinchanter

As the third handicap hole this is recognized as one of the best holes at Dornoch. Like the previous hole you stand on this tee and note the hill of gorse that runs the length of the hole. Hit a draw to stay on the sloping fairway or it will run off into a group of notched gullies down the right. This triangular green is typical of the raised greens of Dornoch that enamored Donald Ross so much. In the approach, and it may be your third shot, you have to be decisive or you will get an arbitrary result. Either air a pitch onto the raised green and risk running through to the collection area on the other side or try to play through the valley in front and risk it returning to your feet or rolling off to the low bunkers on the left or right. Any up and down, even for bogie, is a successful effort.

#5 Par 4 353/312 Hilton

After the last two, you will be relieved when you look at the scorecard and see a 3 at the front of the yardage number. This is a wonderful short hole that requires restraint in picking the driving club and dexterity in execution of all shots to the hole. I like something just over 200 turning right to left to stay on the left side of the driving area avoiding the central spine in the fairway that will send it careening right toward the five hungry bunkers just off the fairway. This is a 55-yard long narrow green wearing shoulder pads set at a diagonal across the face of three bunkers up front. There are a couple more pots on the left of the green and a five foot channel that runs the length of the green on the right. Your only way in is up and over since the bunkering precludes a low running approach. Keep in mind the ball will move toward the channel once it touches down on the putting surface.

#6 Par 3 161/156 Whinny Brae

Much like the second this is a terrifying natural looking short hole that appears to be pouring out of the gorse laden sand dune on the left. The narrow kidney shaped green is set into the hill with pot bunkers between the green and the dune. A steep false front greets you onto a green with a serious ledge effect on the right with three story elevator challenge if you miss there. A deep sand pit front right is no where to end up, so the only choice is focus and hit one on the green. All approach shots need to be in the front third of the green since the it narrows considerably going back and the back right edge falls off without warning into nothingness.

#7 Par 4 479/464 Pier

The walk up the dune you have been admiring all morning is a real aerobic wake up call. The next one and a half holes are played along the balcony before you descend to the beach floor again. As mentioned in the overview walk with your camera to the back of the tee box and take in the dramatic overlook provided of the holes you just played. This is the number one handicap hole on a course that seems to have many candidates for such a designation. A long hole you need to smoke a drive to right center avoiding the nest of three bunkers on the left of the driving area to have any shot at this green. Gently heaving fairway to cross on the approach requires some thought on how to negotiate the swale between the two bunkers in front of the raised green. Even

a short approach pitch has to be dexterous because the slope of the green feeds to and off the back right corner. Donald Ross found a lot to like in this green.

#8 Par 4 434/389 Dunrobin

There are two holes at Dornoch with this upper shelf fairway, lower shelf approach and green complex and they are two of the most interesting of the day. The wind makes the options on these holes very important to consider carefully. The drive is at a directional poll at the top of a fairway that drops around 50 feet to the lower shelf. It is a long iron approach from the top of the drop and a short iron if you meander to the bottom. If you are downwind you probably can hit a 210 shot over the hill but into the wind your driver may leave you the full measure from the top shelf to the green below. From the top shelf the receptive punch bowl green sits shimmering in the distance framed against the beach on the right. From this altitude your approach will have serious hang time and be a wondrous thing to behold as it plummets back to earth. They have provided roll out room beyond the green so be aggressive here. From the lower level you are looking across some of the most undulating fairway ground you will see all day. Don't be fooled by the bunker that rises from the fairway about 30 yards short of the green, you carry this one all the way in as the bowl green should gather your approach. Man is this a cool hole to play.

#9 Par 5 529/491 Craigliath

The long sought after par five comes at the ninth as the course turns back toward home and probably into the prevailing wind. The best drive would be into the power slot on the left between the right hand bumps in the fairway and the sea grass bordering the beach. If you find this line the ball will propel forward leaving you as little as a mid-iron in. The safer line is right center letting the mounds have their way with your ball. From there you will lay up for a likely pitch and run up onto a long flatish green protected on either side by nasty bunkers. This hole is one of the best scoring opportunities of the day so be aggressive and execute your shots with purpose.

#10 Par 3 146/142 Fuaran

The short holes on the inward path are just so technical you will think you need a protractor to play them well. This first short three par is a great example of that. Downwind it is a short pitch but into the wind it might be a long iron. Either way the two tier green is an elusive target that is well protected by five bunkers across the front and the left and a deep culvet that shadows the right side and the back. Truthfully the recovery from one of those bunkers is much more likely than out of the depression on the right. Only shot that will stay on is a high one just clearing the front bunker that uses the front tier to slow down the progress of the ball. The green itself has a slight right to left cant toward the sea so read your putts carefully here. A par here is money in the savings account if you pull it off.

#11 Par 4 446/434 A'chlach

Now the challenge is ratcheting up. This is one of the hardest long fours you play all day-even if the wind is at your back. Drive is at the white house on the dune with a right to left turn to catch the power slot in the center of the fairway and end up on the left side with the preferred approach angle to the green. Be prepared for an uneven lie on your second in that the furrows in this fairway are a testimony to what a persistent wind can do to shape the topography. From there you are looking at a very long and narrow green with an insidious bunker lodged into the right side about a third of the way back. One other bunker front left so all the trouble is in the front. As you often see with links greens the 50 yard depth gives the greens keeper plenty of latitude to help you with the pin position for the daily dose of wind. The steep front slope and it's quirky side run offs would suggest your approach needs to carry on but there is plenty of run out room for a lower trajectory shot.

#12 Par 5 535/490 Sutherland

Another par five...how bout that! You better take advantage of this opportunity because it gets progressively more difficult after this. This hole is a dog ear left with plenty of moundy heather protecting the corner so do not miss left off this tee box. Drive is right center turning up the hole and could leave you in a position to go for this long green tucked to the left behind a 10 foot high dune that tapers the entrance considerably. One pot front right and an another long grassy hollow running the full left side of the green behind the dune. If you choose to lay up right center adjacent to the bunker at about 50 yards will leave you all kinds of options for a creative pitch and run up the throat of the green.

#13 Par 3 171/148 Bents

A classic links par three that you will swear you have seen elsewhere. It stands on it's own as a terrific example of how using the ground and managing your trajectory is essential on technical shots on a links course. You are backed up to the beach with the tee box protected from the wind by low dunes and hitting toward the foot of the tall dunes and a narrow punch bowl green. The elders suggest you walk to the top of the dune overlooking the beach to get a true reading on the wind. The first bunker you see is 15 yards short of the green and provides a good target line to the small access gap between the front four bunkers. The low trajectory shot skipping up the gap should find a way to remain on the putting surface. There is a deep hollow just behind the two right bunkers that will give you a full Phil thrill shot that most of us do not have in our repertoire.

#14 Par 4 445/439 Foxy

Foxy is a hole of notoriety at Dornoch-a twisting double dog ear par four that asserts the genius of finding the natural lines for the holes amidst the topography that the golf gods have provided. The hole has a spectacular naturalness to it. No bunkers but the serpentine left bend of the fairway makes staying in the pretty a challenge. You want to hit a controlled draw at the square dune on the right. If you get the curve you can find the power lane down the left and end up with a clear view of the plateau green set back to the right. From the right a series of obscuring low dunes that remind you of the close-in wakes of the sea at high tide will leave you a blind second to a wide but shallow green raised six feet above the fairway. If you choose to lay up, the run up shot into this face of the hill is the only way to keep it from running off the back as the fairway mounding is shaved as close as the green. A large bulge dominates the right side of the entry to the green and will

indiscriminately deflect well meaning approach shots. Once you are done take a second to look back down this fairway and appreciate how much this hole fits into the natural flow of the terrain.

#15 Par 4 322/300 Stulaig

This is one of those crazy links holes that will have you shaking your head. No current designer in his right mind would lay down a hole like this but it is cool in a funky sort of way and can provide for post game banter for sure. The main issue is a 15 foot furry dune that is plotzed in the center of the driving area about 220 out. The correct play is over the right edge of the dune leaving a very short shot into a green that is a raised upside-down saucer with no affection for meek approach shots. If you hit it right at the dune don't be surprised to find your ball safely on the other side because in firm and fast conditions balls do not seem to adhere to it. A couple of bunkers present a wide guard on the approach to a green that slopes right to left toward the sixteenth tee.

#16 Par 4 401/395 High Hole

The sixteenth is a relatively featureless hole to the eye as the green is on the other end of a long steep ramp up the spine of a dune. The public beach is below and to the left and the contour of the driving area has an insidious lean which will feed balls with a left proclivity into the oblivion of an old quarry down toward the beach. The two fairway bunkers on the right force you to make a very articulate play right along the right side of the fairway to have any look at the skyline green setting on top of the hill. Not a bunker protects this putting surface but there are a few furry mounds adjacent to both sides which again make it paramount to hold a line on your approach into this very deep green. This hole is proof that links golf does not always overwhelm you with intimidating features, sometimes it is just the choreography of the natures parameters that make for rigorous challenges.

#17 Par 4 405/390 Valley

To me this should be named Pine Valley because this incredible par four would feel right at home in Clementon, New Jersey. Because of the split fairway many people compare this to the eighth but I see only superficial similarity in the two holes. From the tee you see the gorse lined low dunes and three bunkers defining the left as you are tempted to hit your drive just left of the directional stake at the top edge of the upper fairway. There is gorse down the right and through the fairway on the lower level where your drive is likely to meander if it clears the top ridge. If the hole is downwind leave the driver to rest because you can easily run out of fairway on the lower level. If your drive remains on the upper fairway the green sits slightly below tucked to the left masked by the gorsed dune. As you will find out below there is more room left of this green that you cannot see. From the lower fairway the hole takes a hard left as the green is set up on top of a ridge behind a high wall of grass and a couple of well placed deep face bunkers. The key is to understand that this blind approach is into a long bowl shaped green that has plenty of room left and long, so play enough club to clear the front bunker easily. The green will feed your approach to the right into the center of the green. You make par here and there is plenty to talk about over that Guinness.

#18 Par 4 456/446 Glenmorangie

As it should be the final hole is a brutal test if you need to make a par to win the back side Nassau. Your drive is hard up the right as close to the fairway bunkers about 220 out as you can swallow. From there it is a semi-blind approach created by a ridge that crosses the fairway at about 100 yards from the green. The bunkerless green is set slightly to the right in a hollow across a three-foot dip so if you don't have sufficient air time on your approach you can see it arrested right in front. The green is a tempest of humps and hollows so getting a short pitch or lag putt close is a major chore. You make a par here it is deserving of a celebratory double Keegan undercut fist pump.

(Royal Dornoch Website: www.royaldornoch.com)