

# How Ross bossed golf



Arthur Montford traces the legacy of a famous course designer

If ever there was a perfect example of a young man being in the right place at the right time, it has to be Dornoch's most famous son, Donald Ross. Born in 1872 to a family of modest means and the son of a stonemason, young Donald became a carpenter in his mid-teens. However, two critical and fortuitous decisions affected his life from this point on.

His fine play over the links of Dornoch caught the eye of the club's secretary, Donald Sutherland, who took him under his wing with a view to grooming him for the role of club professional and greenkeeper. As part of this apprenticeship, Ross was dispatched to St Andrews, the golfing capital of the world, and thanks to secretary Sutherland's reputation and contacts, he was given the opportunity to work with the famous clubmaker David Forgan and the game's highest-profile course designer, Old Tom Morris. If there was ever a 'perfect start' to a golfing life, then this was it!

The young Ross spent hours poring over Old Tom's course designs, absorbing the nuances which made his golfing architecture so highly sought-after and, in the Forgan shop, he fashioned the smooth hickories of the day, whilst learning the art of making gutta-percha golf balls.

Thus, when he returned home to Dornoch, he was well placed to take over the duties of club professional and greenkeeper, which he did in 1899. His future seemed well mapped out and secure.

However, towards the end of the same year, a remarkable opportunity to change the direction of his life came his way thanks to a visit to the Dornoch links of American golfer Professor Robert Willson. Professor Willson was impressed with the likeable young Ross and painted a seductive picture of the limitless opportunities waiting for a bright young course designer across the Atlantic. He reminded the Scot that the game had only been played there for some ten years.

And so, to the astonishment – and disappointment – of the Dornoch members, Donald Ross gave up his £300 per year salary and headed for America, where he took up the post of greenkeeper and professional at the Oakley Country Club in Watertown, Massachusetts.

His first job was to redesign the course to cope with the new 'travel-further' Haskell ball and he was quickly offered similar work at a number of other local courses.

At Oakley, Donald Ross met wealthy businessman James Tufts, who had recently purchased a large tract of land in North Carolina with a view to establishing a winter resort away from the harsh climate of the north.



Photo: Pinehurst Golf & Country Club

Pinehurst Golf & Country Club

This rural tract, accessible only by rail, was known as Pinehurst.

Ross would design no fewer than 43 courses in North Carolina alone, including five at the Pinehurst Country Club. Pinehurst No.2, finished in 1901, still regularly tops lists of America's 100 greatest courses.

Ross's reputation as a consummate golf course designer grew rapidly. He formed his company in 1916 and, during the first three decades of the 20th century, he simultaneously employed 30 building crews comprising 2,500 workers. His company was responsible for the design and construction of more than 380 courses. He solicited work only twice and, to his great disappointment, lost out to Dr Alister Mackenzie for the contract to build the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia.

Scots-born course designer David McLay Kidd, who lives in Oregon and whose company has created around 20 courses in Europe and the US, has no doubts as to why the courses of Donald Ross have stood the test of time.

"He used the natural contours of the ground at his disposal to perfection, with minimum use of heavy equipment," says McLay Kidd. "He believed the greens were the key to every hole and he worked his way back to the tee. He was also hugely fortunate that he had the pick of the sweetest land around."

Ross died in 1948 aged 75, a year after founding the American Society of Golf Course Architects, but his memory is preserved by the Donald Ross Society and its 1,700-strong membership.

Its president, Bradley Kline, told me: "Donald Ross was simply the greatest course designer of the 20th century. The Society erected a plaque in his honour on the wall of his original home in Dornoch last year. As long as golf is played, he will be remembered."

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