



## THE AILSA CHAMPIONSHIP COURSE AT TURNBERRY

*Sam Baker takes you round the course as it has been revised and extended for the 2009 Open Championship.*

I've played the Ailsa course for a quarter century, at first with a handicap in the mid single digits and more recently in the low teens as age and a gimpy back take their toll. In fact, there were several years during the 90s when I played Ailsa more than my home club in Cincinnati.

I've played Ailsa three times since the alterations were completed for the 138<sup>th</sup> Open Championship, most recently in mid June with nearly all the spectator stands in place and the primary rough knee high. The course is longer, tighter and, if the wind blows, much more challenging than on the three previous occasions in which Turnberry hosted the Open. The 60 of us who were invited to take the challenge in June played on a fairly decent day with the temperature hovering around 60, no rain and the wind constant at about two clubs. Even in those somewhat favorable conditions, no one equaled his handicap. The competition winner was 4 over net! One poor soul lost 23 golf balls.

During the telecast of the Open, you'll hear plenty about the length of the holes and how the pros should play it. The only problem for the golfer who has or will play Ailsa is the Open set up and the pros' games in no way resemble theirs. So here's my description of what the golf course looks like to those of us who drive the ball 250 at best and hit 150 yard 7 irons on a good day. I invite you to print this out and, as you watch the Open, let me serve as your caddy (no fee, generous tip gladly accepted).

### **Hole #1: Ailsa Craig**

This is the only par four on the course where the Open tees and the visitor tees are virtually the same, about 355 yards usually played into the prevailing wind. Two new bunkers long on the left and one short on the right have been added to pinch the drive and force a shot over the bunker which guards the right front. Since the first bunkers come into play about 225 off the tee, hitting a 200 yard shot to the left edge of the fairway short of the bunkers isn't a bad choice. It leaves about 150 into the green on a line which doesn't have to cross over a bunker. Fairly flat green which slopes slightly right towards the sea.

### **Hole #2: Mak Siccar (Make Sure)**

Slight right to left dogleg played in the opposite direction of #1 and therefore usually downwind. It stretches 428 for the pros but only 381 for us with 4 fairway bunkers pinching the tee shot. Off the tee, take it along the left edge just short of the first bunker which leaves a mid iron into a rather longish green that slopes away and to the left towards the sea. (Seeing a pattern here?)

### **Hole #3: Blaw Wearie (Out of Breath)**

Back into the wind again with a slight left to right dogleg—monstrous 489 for them; just 416 for us with loads of downhill chase on the hard links. The two new bunkers on the left edge of the fairway take away what was once a simple tee shot. Play as close to them as you dare to allow a running shot into a green with no bunkers on its left.

### **Hole #4: Woe-Be-Tide**

This begins a lovely stretch of 6 seaside holes normally played downwind. It's only 165 for them and us but it is elevated with a deep pot bunker short right and steep embankment down to the beach left of the green. The bunker comes into play only for the very poorly struck shot. While I usually keep my caddy advice positive, on this hole the message is: DON'T GO LEFT!!!

### **Hole #5: Fin Me Oot**

My favorite par four in the world, bar none. Completely natural dogleg left between high sand dunes. The Open tees are a full 60 yards back of ours at 416 but then the pros average drives are more than 60 yards longer than mine ever were so advantage them. The smart play used to be to bust the ball as far as possible down the right side of the fairway even into the semi-rough to open the green for your approach but that plan is now thwarted by 2 new bunkers and knee deep rough. Plan B: right side short of the bunkers leaves a mid to long iron through the opening to a long green which slopes back to front left.

### **Hole #6: Tappie Toorie (Hit the Top)**

Elevated par three which is 231 for them, 221 for us and brutal for everyone. (We all hit driver here into the wind in June and no one came close.) I've played every course on the Open Rota several times and if there's not a tougher par three amongst them, I haven't spotted it. Long, guarded by 4 bunkers, green sloping radically from back to front. My caddy advice: play to avoid a double bogey.

### **Hole #7: Roon the Ben**

This hole really gets my goat. It's a downhill tee shot to a fairway which sits diagonally to the tee then runs uphill between the dunes to the green. For reasons I don't understand, we mere mortals have to play this as a 475 par four, the hardest on the course by far, while the best golfers in the world get it as a 538 yard par five birdie hole, the easiest hole on the course for them. Where's the love for those who actually pay to play the course?

### **Hole #8: Goat Fell**

Back to reality. Par four at 454 for them and 431 for us. The two new bunkers on the right really pinch the tee shot because the fairway slopes to the right. Land your drive as close to the rough on the left as possible and let it run down to the middle of the fairway for your shot to the two tiered green which is protected left and right by deep pot bunkers. Getting your approach on the right tier is critical as the difference in the tiers is at least 4 feet.

### **Hole #9: Bruce's Castle**

I don't share Peter Alliss's disdain for the 9<sup>th</sup> although I do recognize his ability to spot a bad hole. He's designed several of them. Part of my personal affection for the 9<sup>th</sup> may be because we get such a break here over the pros. They play it at 449 from a tee well below that require a carry of nearly 225 yards to make the hogback fairway. For us, the tee is almost level with the fairway and play is often less than the 411 yards listed on the scorecard. Keeping your drive down the right hand side gives the best approach to a green which slopes severely left to right and front to back. A running approach shot which lands short of the left front usually works.

### **Hole #10: Dinna Fouter (Don't Mess About)**

Radical changes to this hole. A new tee back and left near the lighthouse, fairway extended closer to the sea and two new bunkers which split the fairway give the pros a choice at 456 yards. They can leave themselves a mere flick of a wedge if they bite off loads of the dogleg but coming up short leaves them in deep doo doo where they may not even find their ball. Staying right of the bunkers that split the fairway leaves a mid iron to the green. Our choices are not so pronounced as our tee is right and 30 yards short of the championship tee. No need for us to take on the treacherous left side of the fairway.

### **Hole #11: Maidens**

This is the easiest par three on the course for them and us. We normally play it 30 to 40 yards shorter than their 175 yards. Just hit the ball to the right center of the green and it will run left towards the sea.

### **Hole #12: Monument**

Here's another one of those holes which plays harder for the pros than for us. There is a new bunker on the left 320 yards from the championship tees, which means coupled with the bunkers on the left it pinches their drives even though the hole is normally played into the wind. Except for those of us who can hit it 260 into the wind, we simply put our drive somewhere right of the nest of bunkers on the left and hit a long iron into the green. Wait! Maybe they should keep the driver in their bag here, stay short of the new bunker and accept a slightly longer shot into a fairly large green. You know. Think your way around the course like Sergio should have at Hoylake.

### **Hole #13: Tickly Tap**

For us, this hole is all about an elevated, two tiered green that sits diagonal to the fairway and is very difficult to hold with all be the most elevated approach shot. All three of the bunkers down the left come into play for us because most of us can't carry the gorse and high rough in the neck of the right hand dogleg. We end up trying to hit a low running, linksy shot onto the green. The pros? They cut the dogleg with a fairway metal or even a long iron then hit a high, spinning full wedge into the green. If you don't see a lot of birdies here, then the wind is really blowing.

### **Hole #14: Risk-an-Hope**

Most folks who remember Nick Price's final round at the 1994 Open remember his 20 yard eagle putt at 17. I remember the tricky lightning fast downhill chip he hit stiff from behind this green. That's really the shot that won the championship. The hole is about 400 yards for us, uphill with our drive pinched by two new bunkers on the right. For them, the hole is 50 yards longer and the bunkers come into play at nearly 300 yards off the tee. The green slopes severely back to front and right to left.

### **Hole #15: Ca' Canny (Take Care)**

At 160 to 170, this is a really fun hole for us as it sits on one of the highest points of the course exposed to the wind. Over the years, my correct club on this hole has been everything from a 3 wood to an 8 iron, depending upon the force and direction of the wind. Keep it left and avoid the steep drop off to the right of the green. You can make par even from the 3 bunkers that guard the left side but not from the rubbish in the chasm on the right. The pros? They simply hit a 200 yard shot center front and walk on.

### **Hole #16: Wee Burn**

Another radically altered hole—and I don't think for the best for us mortals. This formerly was a straight hole where the green was guarded by a burn (creek) in front and right, and left by mounding and a bunker. The front third of the green is false. Any shot landing there inevitably rolls back into the burn. In the old days, if we hit a drive which avoided the fairway bunker left and the mounding right, we were rewarded with 140 to 160 yards home with a long left bailout to avoid the burn. It was judged too easy for the big hitters so they've moved the fairway 40 yards right making the hole a right hand dogleg and the approach shot angular to the green. Now for us the approach is 170 to 190. Thus far I've put two 4 irons plus a 3 iron in the drink. Let me finish the hole just once and I'll let you know what I think.

### **Hole #17: Lang Whang (Good Whack)**

No new tees for us. It remains a short par five of less than 500 yards which we can reach in two with a good drive, a long second shot and a favorable wind. The long hitters have been moved back more than 60 yards. Now we both suffer from the two new bunkers added right and short of the green which prevent us from running the ball on from well short. This was an easy birdie hole in the three previous Opens but not likely any more.

### **Hole #18: Duel in the Sun**

The hole we play off the tee looks nothing like the one the pros play. Theirs is a splendid finishing hole—a 461 yard dogleg left with a nasty nest of bunkers in the crook and a new bunker long. Ours is a 375 yard straight away hole where good tee shot down the right side leaves a fairly simple short iron to the green. For us, a boring finish to a wonderful course. For them, well ask Englishman Carl Mason who made double bogey here to fall into first place tie and lose the 2003 British Senior Open to Tom Watson in a playoff.

*Your faithful caddy,  
Sam Baker*

