

# Duke's Course Description

**By Alistair Tait**

Stand on the first tee of the Duke's Course at Woburn and it's hard to believe this magnificent layout has only been in existence since 1976. It has an old world feel of maturity and tradition, as if it has been around since the early 1900s.

Mature pine trees, silver birch, chestnut and magnificent banks of rhododendron bushes provide a splendid backdrop to a course that is among the best inland tracks in all of Europe. No sooner had the Duke's opened for play than Europe's best golfers were putting it to the test. Three years after opening, the course hosted the 1979 Dunlop Masters. Australian Graham Marsh won the title that year. Two years later Greg Norman made it an antipodean double by adding his own name to the trophy.

Those two tournaments kicked off a proud tradition at Woburn, whereby the club has tested the world's best golfers, male and female, amateur and professional, on a regular basis. Marsh and Norman started a roll call that reads like a who's who of golf. Lee Trevino, Sandy Lyle, Nick Faldo, Seve Ballesteros, Ian Woosnam, Helen Alfredsson, Patty Sheehan, Liselotte Neumann, and Karrie Webb, to name a few, have all triumphed over the Duke's.

The Duke's has become indelibly inscribed in the consciousness of British golfers because of its long tradition of hosting the world's best golfers. From 1985 to 1994, the Duke's was home to the British Masters on the European Tour. After a brief hiatus of three years, the tournament returned to the Duke's in 1999 and 2000 before the event was switched to the Marquess'.

The course has also served the world's top women golfers well. The ladies first tested the Duke's in 1982, when the Dunhill Classic was held there. Then between 1990-1996, and again in 1999, the course was home to the Weetabix Women's British Open.

It is no small wonder that so many golfers throughout the British Isles and Europe have such an affinity with the Duke's. After all, this layout has provided some of the most memorable moments in tournament golf over the years. Who can forget Peter Baker's marvellous final round 63, 9-under-par, to win the 1993 British Masters? Baker set a new course record with eight birdies and an eagle to defeat Carl Mason by seven shots. A year earlier British golf fans had witnessed a veritable Houdini act by Ireland's Christy O'Connor Jnr. He defeated Tony Johnstone of Zimbabwe in a dramatic playoff. O'Connor's victory came courtesy of final round 66, which featured some of the most stunning recovery shots ever seen in tournament golf.

It's not just the men who have provided great drama over the Duke's. For example, the 1995 Weetabix Women's British Open provided a sneak preview of the future of women's golf when Australia's Karrie Webb and Annika Sorenstam of Sweden contended for the title. On that occasion Webb bettered her soon to be archrival, her clinical 14-under-par total good enough for a six shot win.

Few courses have been as right for tournament golf as the Duke's. Not only is it testing at 6,973 yards to a par of 72, but is one of the most aesthetically pleasing on the eye in all of the British Isles. There is no prettier place than the Duke's in spring when the rhododendrons are in full bloom. Nowhere is this more evident than on the par-3, 3rd hole. Played from a high tee to green just 134 yards away, golfers can be forgiven for casting golf from their minds to take in the view. All around are huge kaleidoscopes of purple rhododendron bushes, a nature lover's paradise. If any hole on the Duke's calls for you to remember Walter Hagen's plea for golfers "to stop off and smell the flowers as they go through life," then it is this hole.

However, it's not just in springtime that the Duke's is a pleasant place to engage in the Royal & Ancient game. Play the course early in the morning or late in the afternoon when the rising or setting sun illuminates the majestic pine trees and you'll feel inspired. The trees even offer warmth and protection in the dead of winter, providing a natural shield against the raging winds.

That the course is in existence is down to the tremendous foresight of the late 14th Duke of Bedford. He had the vision to realise that the combination of woodland and sandy soil which comprises this part of the Woburn estate was perfect for the game of golf. He commissioned Charles Lawrie to design not one, but two courses. Thus the Duke's and nearby Duchess' courses were created within two years of each other.

What was once dense woodland was sculpted into one of the most pleasant walks in all of Great Britain. Fairways run between huge swathes of trees. Greens are set in natural amphitheatres. The natural ravines and gullies that run through the course have been incorporated into the design as if they had been part of Lawrie's original intention. Thus the huge swale to the left of the par-5, 5th hole becomes an obstacle that has to be carried if par or better is to be achieved. Similarly, the drop off to the right of the 13th green naturally forces the player to aim left, bringing the left-hand bunker into play.

Lawrie made especially good use of the natural undulations on the par-3 holes. Three of the four par-3s call for shots carried over or into natural depressions in the land. The aforementioned 3rd may seem straightforward, but woebetide anyone who hits a shot past the pin. Land on the back or over the green and par will be a good score, because this is arguably the trickiest green on the entire course. On not many 134-yard holes can three said to be a very good score. This is one of them.

Of the remaining par-3s, the 6th is the one that strikes fear in every golfer. It measures 207 yards from the back blocks, which means a long iron or even a fairway wood for the majority of golfers. However, it's a shot that has to be full-blooded, for anything hit short will run down into a big valley from where making par is almost impossible. This is one hole where it is better to be long than short.

That adage is a not one that should be applied to par-4s on the Duke's. Bogeys or better await anyone who goes through the back of holes like the 2nd, 7th, 8th, 10th, 13th, 15th and 18th. On these holes it is better to be short and chipping for par, than long and facing and near impossible up and down.

The Duke's is known for many things, but part of its strength lies in the par-4s. Play the fours well and there is every chance you will play to your handicap. These holes are so diverse, and so well mixed, that you are forever on your toes.

The par-4s have you on tenterhooks from the beginning of the round. For example, the 385-yard 2nd hole calls for an accurate iron shot to be played downhill to green on the edge of a precipice. An unplayable lie awaits any ball hit over the green, couple that with the downhill shot and immediately you have to judge how much to underclub. Then you come to the 395-yard, 4th and all of a sudden you are playing uphill and need to overclub to get the ball on the green.

It's the same at the end of the round. The 449-yard, 16th hole calls for a tee shot to be hit with draw down the right hand side of the fairway to avoid the left hand fairway bunkers, and provide a clear shot into a green at the end of a right to left dogleg. The 17th doglegs the other way, calling for a faded tee shot with a driver to avoid the huge tree that sits at the corner of the dogleg.

The 7th, 8th and 10th holes offer something of a respite, since all three play as straightaway par-4s, before the course starts to twist through more dense pine trees. However, each presents a unique challenge, particularly the 7th, which measures 464-yards from the back markers to a two tiered green.

A church with adjoining graveyard sits behind the green. The irony is not lost on Woburn members: many a good medal round has died on the 7th.

Woburn's par-5s are where good scores can be made. The opening offers a good chance at a solid start since it measures only 514-yards, but only for those who can keep their nerve on the tee shot. Out of bounds beckons left, and Nick Faldo once ran up a nine on this hole.

The first becomes the 18th for tournament play because so much drama can happen on this hole. Lee Trevino proved as much in 1985 when he hit his 3-wood second shot to within kick-in range of the hole. Trevino duly converted the putt to take the title and become one of the most popular Woburn winners ever.

Both the 5th and 11th holes are reachable, but call for strategic tee shots. Finding the green at the latter with a long iron or fairway wood has been made tougher since this green was remodelled in 2003. Any ball struck less than perfectly will be thrown off the green, leaving a tricky up and down.

The Duke's has taken something of a backseat to its younger sibling the Marquess' since it was opened in 2000. However, it is still the course most people associate with when they think of Woburn. And for good reason: this woodland wonder is one course British golfers hold dear to their hearts, a layout fit for any championship and any handicap.