

# Birdies, bicycles & Betjeman

A golf course odyssey in south-west England... on two wheels.





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**D**espite considerable shoving and squeezing, the buckle on one of the bicycle panniers won't close – something has to go. I empty both for a third time and spread the contents over the hall carpet. Seven shirts, seven pairs of socks and pants, golf trousers, two maps (one of Cornwall and the other of Devon and Somerset West), inner tube, pump, toilet bag, laptop, mobile phone, a dozen golf balls and assorted tee pegs. No shoes you notice, that's because I'm wearing a pair of legitimate golf shoes that multitask as all-purpose shoes and can be worn around the house, in hotels, restaurants, etc. Reluctantly, I jettison six of the golf balls and the buckle eventually snaps shut.

How on earth can I play the six tough courses that comprise the Atlantic Links with just half-a-dozen balls? I could buy more as I go but, thanks to my

unimaginative friends and family for whom golf balls are my default birthday/Christmas present, I have hundreds and purchasing yet more would really hurt. Perceptive readers will have noticed the glaring omission – golf clubs. Don't worry, I've arranged with all five courses – Trevose, St Enodoc, Royal North Devon, Saunton and Burnham and Berrow – to borrow a set of theirs.

With my wife's cautionary reminder that I'm nearly 64 and a promise that I'll get off and walk if too tired, I pedal the seven miles to Etchingham station in deepest East Sussex and catch a train to Charing Cross at the start of the most environmentally friendly, carbon neutral golf trip of all time.

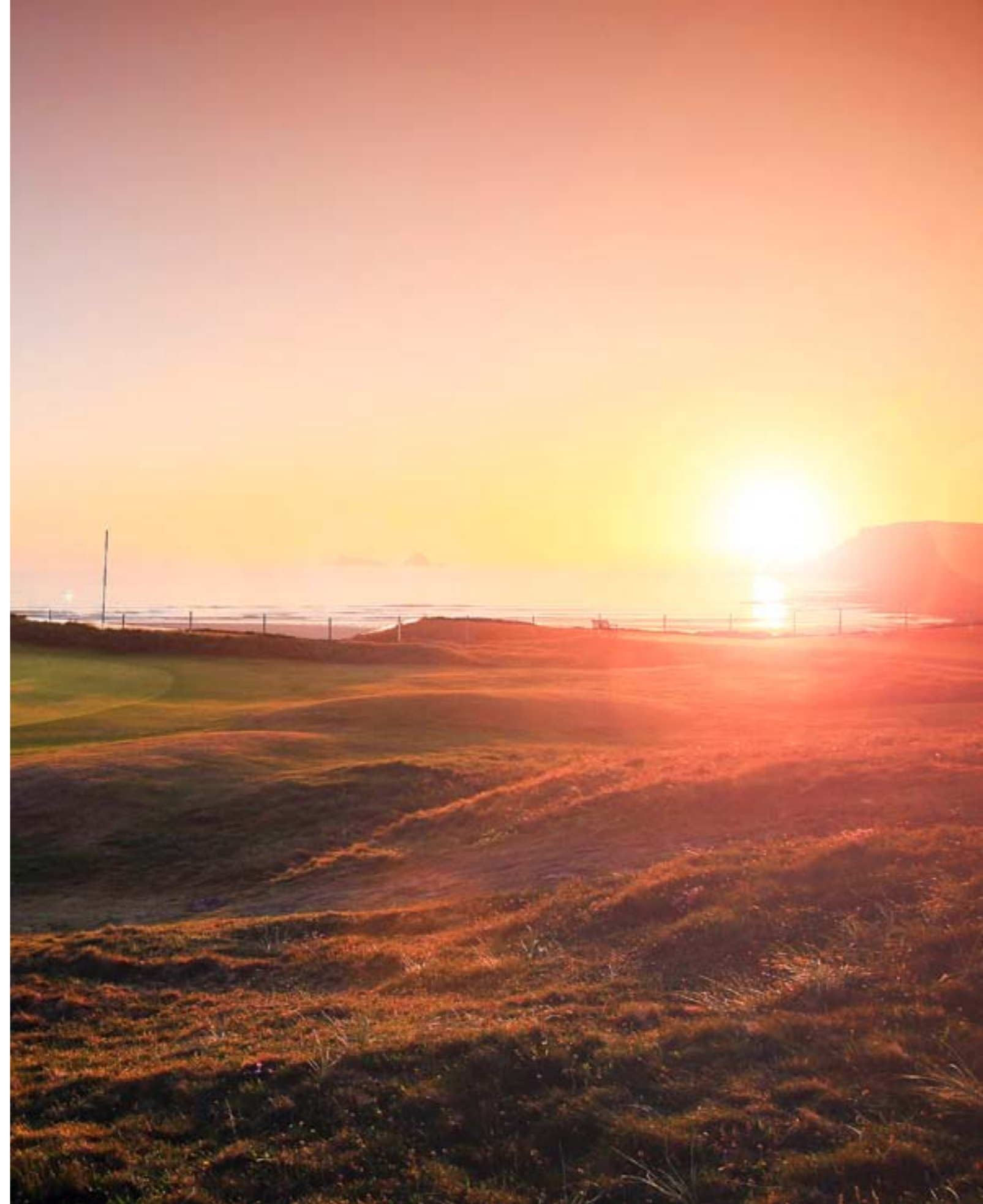
The next leg of the journey to Paddington is both the shortest and most hazardous as I have to negotiate both Marble Arch and Hyde Park Corner. Apart from two recent training runs, this is the first time I've sat in a saddle for at least 20 years but, unlike golf, cycling is a skill that, once acquired, doesn't appear to desert you.

Since my bike travels for free on the

speedy First Great Western train, I've decided to luxuriate in first class. It's not so much an indulgence as a necessity since I need the extra space to study my map of Cornwall and plot a path from Bodmin Parkway to my first stop, Trevose.

Perhaps I didn't study the map as carefully as I should have done because I'm uncertain as I exit the station as to whether to turn left or right onto the A38. This is embarrassing, 250 yards into my adventure and I'm lost. To add to my woes, it's raining and "left", which is looking favourite, is steeply uphill. It's an unpleasant, busy, single-lane carriageway, but holding up a caravan for the best part of half-a-mile keeps me cheerful.

At the top of a long hill I turn off, head for Bodmin and eventually find a delightful cycle path on a disused railway line. My initial theory that it's called the "Camel Trail" because of two large humps at the beginning proves well wide of the mark when I discover the pretty stretch of water running alongside is the River Camel.



Above: The author prepares for his epic journey. Right: The sunset view from the green on the par 5, 4th hole on Trevose's Championship Course, designed by Harry Colt.



It has stopped raining and the next 15 or so miles are extremely enjoyable. By the time I reach pretty Padstow I've become a huge fan of Lord Beeching, who closed so many railway lines in the 1960s.

Trevose Golf and Country Club is only about eight miles to the west of Padstow and I'm soon pedalling up yet another hill, into the sunset and towards the clubhouse. Dozens of smart-looking women are lined up by the flagpoles. Possibly slightly delirious from the day's exertions, I wonder if this is the Cornish Ladies Choir booked to serenade me on my arrival. But they're giggling, not singing, and it turns out they're not choristers, but competitors in the South West Counties Women's Championship having a group photo taken. Never mind.

Most of the many apartments, lodges, bungalows and assorted self-catering accommodation here is full of female competitors, but one cosy flat has been saved for me. After a bath, dinner and a few pints, I sleep soundly.

Not only have the nice people at Trevose kept a room for me, they've also squeezed me onto the golf course in among the six counties competing this week – Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and Dorset. Alex, a work experience student from Bournemouth University helping out in the office, has kindly agreed to accompany me and we tee off at 10.40am. "Cornwall's the best-looking team," he informs me as we walk down the first. What a pleasure it is not to be cycling and what a beautiful course this is. With very fast greens, deep bunkers and stunning sea views, it provides a glorious introduction to the Atlantic Links. An eight handicapper who belts the ball much too far, Alex goes round in five over par and would have won our match comfortably had I not prudently decided after studying his practice swing to opt for just a "warm-up" round.

Though I have the afternoon off and am therefore not obliged to do anything, I voluntarily go for a very gentle cycle south

Left: The par-5, 16th hole at St Enodoc, overlooking the serene Padstow harbour.



## ‘Sir John Betjeman was buried in the St Enodoc churchyard

along the north Cornish coast and marvel at its beauty.

After another night at Trevoze, I pedal into Padstow the following morning, catch a cute little ferry over the bay and then cycle a few hundred yards to St Enodoc. Nick Williams, who has been the pro here for more than 30 years, fixes me up with some great clubs. “How are you off for balls?” he asks. To my horror, I have none as I’ve left my little ball pouch at Trevoze. Damn! He shoves at least a dozen into the bag.

Having heard so much about St Enodoc, I’m rather disappointed by the first few holes. After the opening short par 4, there’s a rather dull par 3 followed by another rather ordinary par 4. The 4th is an unexceptional par 3 followed by yet another straightforward short hole. Hang on, this can’t be right. I consult the card. The 1st is supposed to be a 500-plus-yard par 5.

What’s going on? I shout across to an adjacent fairway that there would appear to be a discrepancy between the course I’m playing and the card I’m studying. “You’re on the Holywell Course,” explains a nice old man. “You probably want the Church Course.” He points me down the hill and, given the way my luck’s going, suggests I avoid walking across the driving range.

The opening hole on the Church Course runs between two sets of dunes and is breathtakingly beautiful. A friendly Dutch fourball let me through on the 2nd tee and I commiserate with them over their national team’s early exit from the European Football Championships. Spectacular hole follows spectacular hole. The 6th looks a little bewildering from the tee as you can’t see anything of the fairway, only an enormous bunker facing you head on. It’s the start of the famous “Himalayas Complex”, where

the dunes grow mightier and mightier. Even a slow fourball that holds me up for nine holes before eventually waving me through on the 16th can’t spoil my fun on this truly magnificent course.

Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman had a lifelong love of Cornwall and had a house close to the 12th hole here. A member at the club, too, he was buried in the St Enodoc churchyard in 1984, his coffin carried the length of the 10th hole in driving rain followed by an inappropriately-dressed cortege.

After taking the ferry back to Padstow, I check in at the imposing Metropole Hotel. There’s a notice in the lift explaining that the Prince of Wales used to stay here frequently when golfing at St Enodoc. If I had been him, I would have chosen the Church Course over Wallis Simpson every time, but I’m neither an incurable romantic nor next

## in 1984, his coffin carried the length of the 10th hole’

in line to the throne. If I make it all the way to Burnham & Berrow, I wonder if they’ll put another notice in the lift commemorating my achievement. Probably not.

I have a huge fish and chip dinner in Padstow without feeling in the least bit guilty. Far from eating unhealthy, I’m carbo loading before my marathon cycle in the morning to Westward Ho! Various estimates put the distance I have to travel at somewhere between 80 and 100 miles.

Studying the map next morning in the elegant dining room, I opt for kippers and the quiet, cross-country, cycle routes in preference to miserable main roads. After the ferry, I head north-east on a B-road and pick up cycle route ‘3’ just after Camelford. Everything is going pretty well until it starts raining in the late morning.

To add to my woes, I get horribly lost. I know I’m lost when I cycle through the small

town of Week St Mary twice. Then, to my absolute horror, through the pouring rain I can just about make out the Atlantic Ocean, which is on my right... How can that be when it’s supposed to be on my left all the way up the coastline? This can’t be happening to me, I’ve got A-level Geography! I consult my soggy map, which isn’t any help because I’m now in Devon, I think.

Thoroughly soaked and partially demoralised, I turn round and head back the way I’ve come. Ever flexible, in the late afternoon I change tactics and abandon the country lanes for the more reliable, if less appealing, main roads and eventually find myself on the A386 heading, I hope, north towards Great Torrington. Those of you with either a rudimentary knowledge of the south-west of England or the Ordnance Survey “Devon and Somerset West” map stretched out in front of you, will doubtless

be scratching your heads with bewilderment. How, you will be wondering, can a man with A-level Geography find himself so much further east than he wanted or needed to be? I’m too weary to answer that now as I have a metaphorical and literal mountain to climb if I’m to make my B&B in Westward Ho! before midnight.

Does the name “Torrington” translate to “mighty steep hill”, I wonder as my lungs come near to bursting. Hearing myself panting loudly at least reassures me that I’ve not died of a heart attack... yet. Eventually I reach the top of what I suspect is the highest point in the whole of south-west England and pop into a garage for a ridiculously late lunch of Yorkie bar and lemonade.

Despite dwindling daylight, I locate the Tarka Trail at the foot of whatever mountain I was on. A blissfully flat cycle route over another former railway line, it takes me

Above: A view down the par-4, 10th hole at St Enodoc and the church of the same name, the resting place of former Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman, who was a member here.



## 'If they built Royal North Devon today, there would be howls of protest'

north-west towards Bideford.

So ecstatic am I to be away from both hills and traffic and so anxious to try and reach my destination in daylight, I somehow find the energy to sort of sprint. Labouring under the misapprehension that Westward Ho! is on the same side of whatever river it is I'm cycling alongside, I overshoot by a couple of miles and have to backpedal to Bideford and cross a bridge onto the right side. God, I could have done without this extra exercise.

As it's practically dark now, I'm cycling along the pavement. At last, Westward Ho! It's 10.20pm and a worried-looking lady is waiting for me outside Culloden House B&B. After taking off my soaking wet socks and all-purpose shoes in the entrance hall, I crawl upstairs to my room, restore some feeling into my limbs by stepping into a hot shower before devouring a tagliatelli carbonara kindly cooked for me by the worried looking lady. I then sleep soundly for nine hours.

Relieved in the morning to discover that, apart from my legs, back, shoulders and

arms, there's very little stiffness in my body, I hear more good news when told that the Royal North Devon Golf Club is little more than a mile away. As a silent protest against the failure to provide a cycle rack, I park my bike in the space reserved for past presidents. This is the oldest golf course in England and, despite all the aches and pains, I'm really looking forward to playing it. First of all, I have to visit the pro shop to pick up a set of clubs. And then a black moment that made yesterday's trials and tribulations pale into insignificance by comparison – I have to buy three golf balls. Aaargghh!

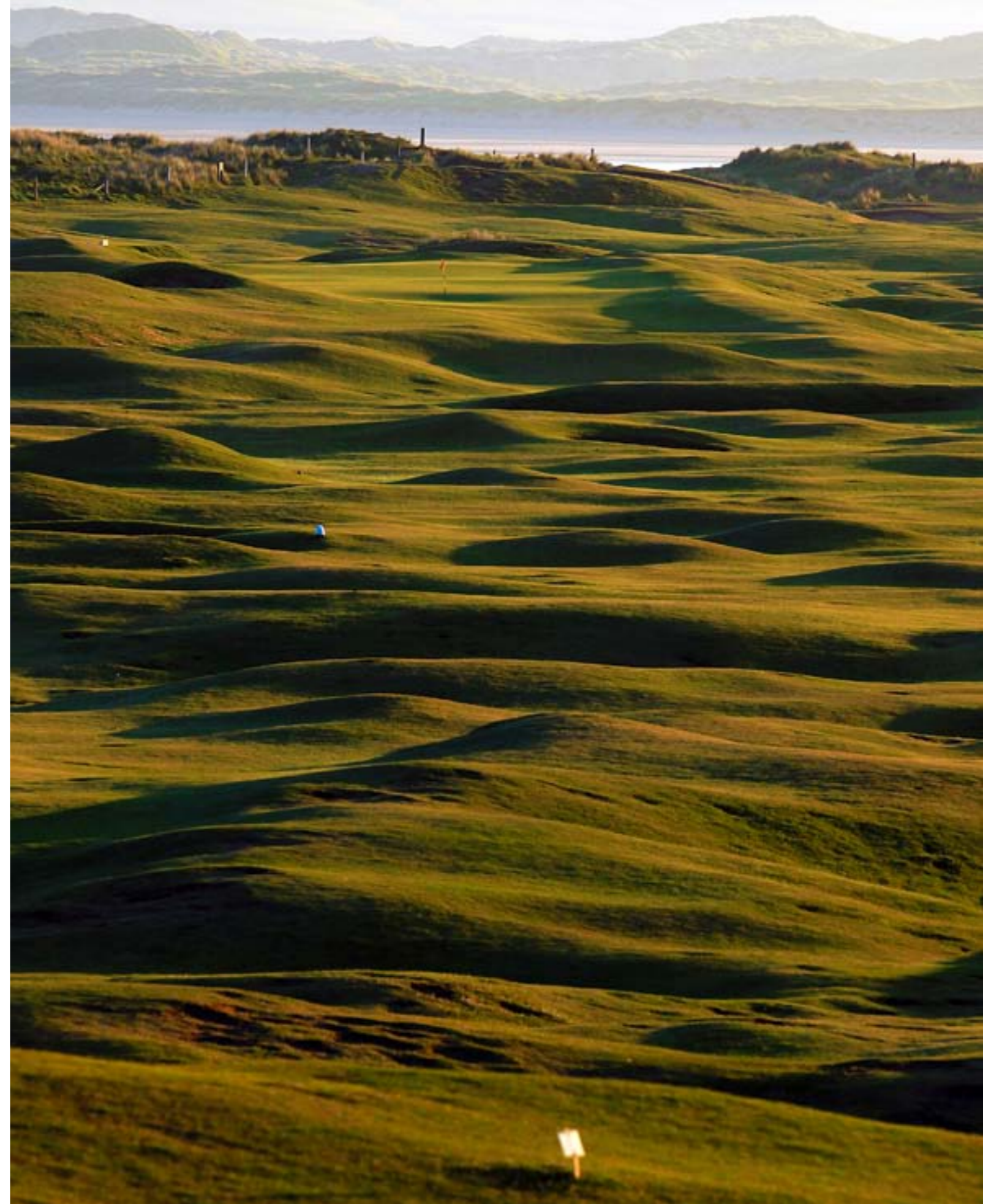
If they built Royal North Devon today, there would be howls of protest. What, no big lakes, island greens, flower beds or punishing rough? But for those with a feel for golf's great heritage and traditions, this is a huge and joyous treat. With almost endlessly wide fairways, you might naively imagine it's a bit of a pushover. But the deep bunkers and ball-gobbling clumps of Giant Sea Rushes defend its integrity with zeal. Sounding like something out of a sci-fi movie, the latter are

impenetrable to anything other than a golf ball and two of my brand new ones somehow found a way in and, despite my best endeavours, were predictably never seen again. It's such a natural course that it's a genuine pleasure to share it with the many sheep and horses grazing on it.

Don't leave without a good look round the brilliant old-fashioned clubhouse. With its sepia prints of the pioneering days of the mid-19th century, cabinets full of seriously old balls, racks of hickory shafted clubs, a fine oil painting of local hero and five-time Open champion JH Taylor and trophies that date back to the dawn of time, it's worth the green fee on its own.

Sadly, I can't afford to dwell too long as I've a significant cycle ride to Saunton. Having said that, after yesterday's gruelling trek anything less than 75 miles will seem like a gentle pedal in the park. It's back over the bridge and along the Tarka Trail again. The first bit is familiar as I "researched" it last night. Like walking the course before a big round, it helps to know what line to take at the junctions, the hazards to avoid, etc.

Having such a pleasant run alongside the River Taw is helping to restore my faith in cycling after yesterday's traumatic episode. It starts to rain again as I cross over the river at Barnstaple and follow another cycle trail through Braunton that eventually leads me to the lovely Saunton Sands Hotel. The



Above (left): On the foot (and bicycle) ferry from Padstow. Above (right): A silent protest at the lack of a cycle rack at Royal North Devon. Right: No designer could envisage the humps and hollows created by the wind and the sea at Royal North Devon, the oldest course in England.

## ‘A good look around Royal North Devon’s old fashioned clubhouse is worth the green fee on its own’

friendly porter kindly shoves my bike in a store room that’s normally reserved for surfboards and I go to check in.

Hiding my horror, I pretend to listen attentively as the receptionist praises the virtues of the hotel’s gymnasium. “Sounds lovely,” I lie. Rather than working out, I devour the six chocolates and four biscuits in my room before even hanging my wet clothes on the heated towel rail. The view from my window over the wide sandy beach lifts my spirits again and I’m feeling cheerful by the time I sit down for dinner in the smart restaurant of this classy hotel. A delicious meal is followed by another solid night’s sleep.

Since I’m playing with the Chairman and a committee member at Saunton this morning, I put on my most sober shirt and least spectacular socks. Something of a milestone is reached when my dirty washing fills one of the panniers and everything else squeezes into the other. Because I past it the night before, for once I know where the club is and cheerfully freewheel down the hill and into the car park.

A smiling fellow called Stuart greets me with a welcome bag of balls and tees and then introduces me to Chairman Richard, who asks which course – East or West – I’d like to play? Though apparently there’s very little to choose between them, the East is the championship course which, since I parred the last at Royal North Devon, I feel ready to take on. We agree to play the perch game (win a hole to get on the perch then win another to score a point), but have to wait on the 1st because there’s a bloke in front about to drive off from the ladies’ tee. “I suspect he’s practising,” comments Richard. What for, I wonder, the Transgender Trophy? “It’s Captain’s Day tomorrow,” explains Richard, “and to celebrate the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee, we’re playing off six red tees, six whites and six blues.” I go first, hit a weak pull into the thick rough and wonder if the 15 balls Stuart has just given me are going to be enough around what is evidently a tough challenge.

This is precisely the sort of course I adore.

Left: The green on the par-3, 5th hole with the par-4, 6th behind it at Royal North Devon Golf Club.

Majestic dunes, testing without being ridiculous, super views and never dull. At the 11th, a tame fox strolls onto the tee to be fed banana. Doubtless inspired, I record my first (and probably last) birdie of the trip. There are no more foxes and no more birdies but we all par the last and the match finishes in a friendly score draw.

My next stop is Porlock Weir and in the bar afterwards the three of us discuss the best route and pore over the map. Stuart and Richard persuade me to take the A361 from Braunton rather than the A39 out of Barnstaple. "It's not so steep," is the clincher. The literal downside to the next leg of my journey is the incredibly steep hill into, and out of, Lynton. Richard and Stuart throw anxious glances at one another whenever Lynton is mentioned and I almost expect to hear an accompanying clap of thunder. Though I would like nothing more than to stay here and enjoy the warm afterglow of a terrific game of golf, I politely decline Richard's kind invitation to lunch, change back into my shorts, hop onto my bike and am away before you can say, "Beware the mighty hill at Lynton".

The recommended route is a good one. Skirting the northern edge of Exmoor, I soon make significant inroads into the anticipated 40+ miles. Eventually I reach the dreaded Lynton, which turns out not to be quite as bad as the advance warnings might have suggested. Having said that, the ridiculously steep hill out of town makes the North Wall of the Eiger look fairly gentle by comparison and I'm soon out of the saddle and pushing, as my wife would have wanted.

Though the final descent into Porlock Weir is more thrilling than any golf hole, it's also considerably more hazardous. There's a toll road at the bottom and an honesty box. Motorbikes are 50p but, since they're not mentioned, I not unreasonably assume bicycles are free.

Porlock Weir is an extraordinarily picturesque village right on the sea. As my arrival coincides with yet another downpour, I reluctantly cancel a proposed walk along

Right: A view of the green on the par-3, 17th hole on the East Course at Saunton Golf Club.





the beach to look at the marina in favour of checking in at “Millers at The Anchor”.

Delightfully quirky and supremely comfortable, the hotel is right next to Porlock Harbour and is stuffed with fascinating clutter that gives it the feel of an antique shop with accompanying accommodation.

Because it has become something of a superstitious ritual, I once again eat all the biscuits in my room before unpacking my bags. Dressing for dinner I discover to my considerable horror that I have somehow managed to leave my trousers behind at Saunton Golf Club. Because I’m so forgetful these days, I always look round my hotel room several times before checking out. Must I now do the same in locker rooms? Hoping not to be mistaken for a German tourist, I go downstairs to dinner feeling rather self-conscious in shorts. However, this is such a gloriously eccentric establishment that I don’t think anyone has even noticed, let alone minded. Nevertheless, I do my best to keep my knees hidden well under the table

## ‘Dressing for dinner I discover to my horror that I have somehow left my trousers at Saunton’

throughout yet another splendid meal.

The following morning and still in my shorts, I contemplate the prospect of the forthcoming golf-free day which will take me north-west to Burnham-on-Sea. The weather forecast is grisly and it’s pouring when I finally summon up the courage after a protracted breakfast to leave the warmth and comfort of “Millers at The Anchor”. Even the unrelenting rain can’t diminish the beauty of the superb scenery. But the realisation that the huge hills to my right are going to have to be surmounted sooner or later provides a different sort of dampener.

My morale receives a boost when I cross the county boundary into Somerset. Burnham-on-Sea is at the extreme top right-

hand corner of my soggy “Devon and West Somerset” map, which makes it a little difficult to plot the route precisely, but I’m confident that it’ll be clearly signposted on the A38. But it isn’t and I’m soon pretty certain that I’ve gone too far. It has to be somewhere over to my left and so that giant church spire way over there must surely be it.

An hour later I arrive, not in Burnham-on-Sea but in Glastonbury. I’ve overshot again, this time by the considerable margin of about 20 miles according to the lady in the corner shop where I buy my daily fix of Yorkie bar. Because it’s gloriously flat and the rain has finally stopped, I don’t really mind the consequences of my latest directional malfunction.

The Woodlands Country House Hotel lies three-quarters of the way up an extinct volcano called Brent Knoll on the edge of Burnham-on-Sea. It’s great and, best of all, my en-suite bathroom has a jacuzzi. Naturally, I eat the biscuits first before plunging in.

The bubbles induce a brainwave. I’ll give my old friend Brendan a ring. He lives nearby, is a member of Burnham and Berrow, is roughly the same size as me and doubtless has plenty of trousers. I telephone, but he’s away on a golf trip and so neither he nor his trousers are available to join me the next morning.

Though the owners are extremely relaxed, as is the dress code in the dining-room, I nevertheless would feel uncomfortable wearing my grubby cycling shorts to dinner and so enjoy a wonderful meal in the bar.

Despite being given precise directions the following morning, believe it or not I somehow manage to get lost on what should have been a short cycle ride to Burnham and

Berrow thereby transforming a gentle 15-minute pedal into something more closely resembling a time trial. The nice young assistant pro listens sympathetically as I explain how it came to pass that my trousers are in Saunton and says it’s okay to play in my non-tailored shorts and non-regulation socks. Before teeing off, I arrange for a taxi to pick me and the bike up at 3.45 and whisk us to Bristol to catch the train home.

With a number of fourballs in front, play is pretty slow and so I generously invite the two guys behind – Tony and Sean – to join me. Originally from Detroit, the latter is a member and is very helpful in giving the right line and alerting me to hazards. Though the rough is very punishing, it’s such a pleasure to walk up a hill without having to push a bike that I don’t mind it at all.

As well as delightful views over the Bristol Channel and back up to the Quantock Hills that I tamed the previous day, the course has rivetted bunkers and more water hazards than you might expect. There’s also the

occasional unmown area in the middle of the fairway left to protect the orchids and various other delightful wild flowers. With flawless greens, I now understand why Brendan raves about the course and Sean loves it. In something of a rush because of the waiting cab, I have to miss the last four holes. But, since I played five more than I needed to at St Enodoc, I’m still in credit.

I grab my bike out of the greenkeeper’s shed, my stuff out of the clubhouse, sit back in the taxi and enjoy the sensation of moving forward without having to pedal.

On the First Great Western train to Paddington, I try to ring Rose to tell her I’ve survived and to arrange for her to pick me up at Etchingham, but discover my mobile isn’t in my panniers. Damn, I’ve left it at Burnham and Berrow. My penalty for this final piece of forgetfulness is having to cycle home from the station.

Still, when you’ve cycled half-way around the world, another seven miles hardly matters.

Above: The par-3 17th hole on the Championship Course at Burnham and Berrow Golf Club, one of the more unheralded gems of the south-west.