



Sancraggs: Cruden Bay's afterthought child

Frank Pont



Tom Simpson, famously once made a remark along the lines of: It is only the mad masterpieces that remain in the memory. There is every chance, it would seem, that he had Cruden Bay in mind with this comment.

Cruden Bay is a great, charismatic and often eccentric golf course. Above all, it is sporty and fun. Many consider the sequence of holes from the third to the eighth to be among the best in golf. The starkly contrasting back nine provide some of the quirkiest holes ever built. Among them: the 'blind' approach to a bathtub green (fourteenth); a massively long and 'blind' par-3 over a hill (fifteenth); and the semi-'blind' par-3 to a steep, backward declining green (sixteenth). Not surprisingly, this back-nine collection of holes has become somewhat of a Cruden Bay trademark to its many visitors.

The course, however, has some real issues that cannot be ignored. Specifically, many

consider the back nine not to be of the same consistently high standard as the front nine. Partly, this is caused by the less than ideal turf on holes such as the tenth and thirteen—it lacks the desired sandy links quality. Even the excellent front nine concludes with a poor hole, which seems to showcase one of Simpson's eccentric design credos, namely:

A course with any pretensions to greatness must have its imperfections; care must be taken to introduce the attractive discord. We therefore intend to include one thoroughly amusing but bad hole for the sake of variety and a brief interval of mental tranquility.¹

Another issue that the club was struggling with was a polarising truth: several of the quirky holes, especially the fifteenth and sixteenth holes, are very popular with many visitors yet disliked by countless local members. It is

a simple matter to play Cruden Bay once and enjoy the thrill of hitting a 'blind' tee-shot to the hidden fifteenth green; but it doesn't take much imagination to appreciate how being subjected to repeated exposure would be tiring.

Then, commencing in 2006, a serendipitous event unfolded: the club discovered that it owned more land at the far end of the property than previously assumed—behind the twelfth and thirteen holes. This land bordered the dunes and the beach; although not a large parcel, it was of sufficient extent to incorporate a medium-length par-3.

Around the same time, I had become immersed in helping Cruden Bay to devise a long-term restoration plan. The aim, ultimately, was to orchestrate the return of Tom Simpson's various design elements that had had been 'lost' over time. When the club informed me about the exciting land 'find', the idea was mooted to build a new par-3 to replace

OPPOSITE
Sancraggs, as seen from a position slightly to the right of the current tee. Slains Castle, which formed the inspiration for Bram Stoker's famous book *Dracula*, is visible across the bay. Photograph by Stewart Paul.



The green, as seen during the construction phase from the far end of the beach—in many ways, the ideal position for a tee. Photograph by Frank Pont.



As seen from the current tee, a view towards the site where Sancraggs would be constructed. The image also shows its relative position to the twelfth green and thirteenth tees. Photograph by Frank Pont.

the existing somewhat controversial fifteenth hole. I was enthused about the prospect of a new par-3 hole; but distinctly lukewarm that it would replace the fifteenth. The reason for my stance, primarily, was that I never like surrendering original green sites of architects such as Simpson. Additionally, I was cognisant of the fact that it might create a significant backlash from the important overseas visitors—many of whom come to Cruden Bay especially to experience the type of eccentric holes that are not available at home. They flock, not infrequently, to other important British links centres such as North Berwick and Prestwick for similar reasons.

Instead, I suggested that we utilise the new par-3 hole as a spare hole for the eighteen-hole layout, allowing the club to de-commission any hole of its choice for extensive renovation works. At all times, in a similar manner to Melbourne's Kingston Heath Golf Club a few years back, eighteen holes will be fully playable for members and guests. The strategy would also allow the club to pursue its work of transforming the greens toward the desirable firm and true links-style model. This aim was to be accelerated by moving to a more fescue-based presentation.

I was very excited about the opportunity to work on such a fantastic site. Most golf-course

architects dream of the opportunity to build a green site virtually on the beach, and that prospect was on the cards. The area that was available was a corridor of about seventy yards wide and 160 yards long, running down from a bluff toward the beach of the bay that gave the golf course its name.

The location where the green of the new hole was to be built was never under discussion; it had to be as close as possible to the sea. Also, given the sensitive nature of the terrain, we decided to disturb as little soil as possible. This meant that the shape of the green would essentially have to follow the existing dunes landscape. This mandated the construction of



A detailed contour map of Sancraggs: note how the left portion of the green clearly slopes towards the player, while the right side of the green slopes away. Photograph by Frank Pont.



A view from behind the green after final, detailed shaping of the surrounds had taken place. The view clearly shows the green's proximity to the beach. Photograph by Frank Pont.

a relatively narrow green, with the long side being parallel to the beach.

The obvious idea was to position the tee at the highest point of the new land, yielding a downhill, medium-length par-3. From this location, the hole is usually negotiated with a significant side wind to a narrow green. Additional on-site time brought to light another playing angle that might be better: one along the beach. This angle would provide Cruden Bay with a lengthy par-3; one, which played

to a long, narrow green with beach along the entire right side. There was, however, a big issue with this second alternative: the club didn't own the land where the tees would have to be positioned; and there was no assurance the club would be able to use it in the future.

Nevertheless, the decision was taken to design the green complex and bunkers in such a way that it could be played effectively from both directions. That made for a very interesting design task, in that the green surface, the

surroundings and bunkers would have to fit the playing characteristics of both holes, yielding pin positions of varying difficulty.

Playing toward the sea I decided to have the left part of the green slope toward the player (albeit, guarded by deep bunkers) and leave the right side of the green less defended (but have it sloping away from the player). When playing along the sea, the player would be hitting into a green that would slope toward the golfer—helpful in stopping the ball. The entire left

This view of Sancraggs' green complex was captured in a beautiful sunset, during construction, and shows the extent of the beach at low tide. Photograph by Frank Pont.

OPPOSITE
Hopefully, one day players will be facing this difficult shot into the green of Sancraggs. The setting is memorable, with the beach lurking on the right, deep pot-bunkers stationed on the left and Cruden Bay's massive dunes as the beautiful backdrop. Photograph by Stewart Paul.



side of the green would be defended by three bunkers, making the player choose between risking going in the bunkers (on the left) or be on the beach (on the right). In both cases, a bail-out area next to the green was provided for players who don't want to take the risk of ending in a steeply faced, eight-foot deep riveted bunker.

The green is generally composed of gentle slopes, although it does house a significant step in its side bordering the sea. This is a design element present in several other Simpson greens on the course, such as the third, sixth, tenth and twelfth greens.

When playing toward the sea, the green's design creates the impression that its right

side is much narrower than the left. This is purely an illusion. A high tee-shot shaped gently to the left will, in many instances, be the one to attempt. When the hole is played along the sea, players will need advanced mental skills to block out the presence of the beach; intuitively, one feels that most golfers will adjust their aim to be more leftward—especially in that climactic, last moment while over the ball. A low, right-to-left tee-shot will be the desirable one from this angle on most occasions.

After we built the hole in 2008, grew it in during 2009 and early 2010, it opened to occasional play in the autumn of 2010. So far, the hole has proven to be a stern test,

especially when a strong side wind is blowing. This, of course, is most of the time.

So, what will happen to the new hole as time passes? Obviously no one knows, but I suspect it will always remain the nineteenth hole of the course. As such, that would afford members the option of tackling this hole instead of the fifteenth ... if the mood strikes. Visitors to Cruden Bay would still get an opportunity to play their favourite 'blind' par-3, validating the air ticket, while also locking horns with this new and exciting hole. In this manner, Cruden Bay's afterthought child, whose name is Sancraggs, will receive the love, attention and care it deserves.

