

Duchess' Course Description

By Alistair Tait

The Duchess' Course is sometimes considered to be the least challenging of the three Woburn courses, the junior sibling lying in the shadow of well respected and much heralded family members. However, like many younger siblings, it's not a charge the Duchess' takes lying down. Nor is it one recognised by true aficionados. Anyone who has played the course knows this is a layout that demands as much respect as the adjacent Duke's and Marquess' courses.

The Duchess' may not measure the same length as the Dukes' and Marquess', but it has pride of place in the Woburn set-up. Rather than act as the "third course," it's a layout that fully complements the other two. The Duchess' has its own unique features, its own history. And lest anyone be in any doubt as to its place in the Woburn ethos, here's a telling sign: whenever the members fancy a few holes on their own on a quiet summer's evening, usually it's the Duchess' they turn to.

Woburn is renowned for holes that play through avenues of pines. Nowhere is this truer than on the Duchess'. This layout may only play to 6,651 yards in length, 322 and 562-yards shorter respectively than the Duke's and Marquess', but Charles Lawrie created a course that calls for a different sort of challenge to the one he presented when he laid out the Duke's.

One of the reasons the members play this course so often on their own is that they know anyone who can play this layout well has a good chance of handling the other two. Of the three Woburn courses, the Duchess' is the one that puts a premium on that most elusive of golf talents: the ability to hit the ball consistently straight.

The first hole gives the game away. At 435 yards from the back markers, this is a hole that requires an arrow straight tee shot to have any chance of finding the green with the approach. Consider, too, that it is the stroke index four hole on the score card, and its not hard to see why a lot of medal rounds have ended well before they began for many Woburn members.

Yet like all great golf courses, the Duchess' can be conquered. This layout demands more forethought than the other two courses. The golfer who pulls driver from the bag on every par-4 or 5 is in for a big shock. The Duchess' is a layout that demands strategy, creativity and, most of all, patience. Everyone who plays the course will find the trees sooner or later. The player who can least let that affect them is the one who will best handle the challenge the Duchess' presents.

Although the Duchess' is not a course that favours big hitters, that is not to say those types of players cannot do well here. They can and do. After all, Laura Davies is known as the longest hitter in women's golf, yet she won the Ford Ladies Classic over the Duchess' when the tournament was held there in 1988.

Indeed, the Duchess' has played host to Europe's best female golfers more than the Duke's has. The Ford was held on this layout from 1982 until 1994, and for most of those years was seen as the Ladies European Tour's (LET) season opener. It's for this reason, and the Weetabix Women's British Open, that Woburn has such an important place in LET history. Woburn has been a staunch supporter of the women's game over the years.

Besides Davies, Catrin Nilsmark, Dale Reid, Kitrina Douglas, and Marie Laure de Lorenzi, to name a few, have all conquered the Duchess' at one time or another. De Lorenzi made history at Woburn in 1990 when she successfully defended her Ford Ladies Classic over the Duchess'. The French woman remains the only professional golfer to win back to back titles at Woburn.

If the Duchess' proves anything at all, it is that courses do not need a succession of 450-yard par-4s to be challenging. The course features six holes under 400 yards. Accuracy and placement are important on these holes rather than brute strength. However, these holes will still reward a well-struck tee shot with a driver.

Nowhere is this more true than on the 386-yard closing hole. A left to right dogleg, the hole can be played with a 3-wood to the corner of the dogleg and a medium iron to the green. Those players keen to finish with a flourish face the challenge of a faded driver around the huge tree that sits on the corner of the dogleg, leaving nothing more than a wedge shot to the green. The risk of this play is obvious though: hit through the dogleg or fade it too much and a chip from the trees is required, resulting in an almost definite bogey.

The course has its share of tough two shotters, too, besides the aforementioned 1st. Anyone who finds the green at the 462-yard 14th, the stroke index one hole, will have hit two superb shots. The same is true of the 423-yard, 12th, a dogleg left hole calling for a tee shot to be played through a funnel of trees and then a medium iron to a split level green.

The par-5s call for as much forethought on the tee as the par-4s. All can be reached in two shots after a good tee shot, but the drive has to be hit long and straight at the 6th, 10th and 15th, while the 4th calls for a precisely hit draw round the corner of a right to left dogleg. Yet of the four only the 15th lets the golfer open the shoulders. The other three encourage the golfer to try to steer the ball between the pines, resulting in a chip sideways from the trees back to the fairway more often than not.

Trying to steer the ball is a common faux pas on the Duchess'. The trees tower over you from the tee and fairways seem narrower than they actually are. Golfers who would normally open their shoulders and belt away, suddenly find themselves tensing up, shortening the backswing and swinging at the ball rather than through it.

If the par-4s and 5s are elusive to find then the same can be said of the one-shot holes. Take the 188-yard 2nd. The distance isn't too long in the grand scheme of things. The problem lies in hitting a medium or long iron straight enough. The two level green sits in a natural little amphitheatre surrounded by pines and protected by two large bunkers fronting the green. From the tee the green looks half its normal size. Miss the green left and you either catch another bunker or find yourself down a slope towards the 4th fairway with a near impossible chip back. Miss right and you have to pray that the grand old Duchess lets you have a clear route through the pines to the green.

At least the 7th hole has a bit more room on the tee shot. Just as well, for at 203 yards in length you need it. A new, raised tee built in 2003 has made the view from the tee much more welcoming. Yet this is another green that looks smaller than it actually is. A small ridge circles around the left-hand side of the green. The problem is that a huge bunker fronts the right hand side of the green, forcing tee shots left. Hit the ridge and the ball will be shed over towards the 8th tee, leaving a tricky up and down.

Of the four par-3s the 16th is by far the prettiest; it also calls for the shortest iron. Measuring only 155 yards, the hole calls for a shot played over a natural valley to a raised green. The trick here is to give yourself enough club. Anything hit short can run back down into the valley, or end up in two nasty pot bunkers just short of the right hand side of the green.

Like the adjacent Duke's, the Duchess' sits atop sandy subsoil which is just perfect for golf. Even in the dead of winter when other courses are sodden from too much rain, the Duchess' is generally quite dry underfoot. The flip side of that, though, is that in the dead of summer the ground can become quite firm and bouncy. Tee shots need to be hit with more precision, because anything that catches one of the many humps and hollows that abound the course could result in the ball being thrown into the nearby pines.

So remember, the Duchess' is not just the third course, but a championship layout in its own right. The Marquess' may be the jewel in the Woburn crown, the Duke's the course that has made Woburn its name, but the Duchess' is the little gem, the one that will strike fear into you on more tees than the other two combined. A word of advice: give it as much respect as you would the other two.