

Marquess' Course Description

By Alistair Tait

Few new courses in recent times have captured the headlines in the way the new Marquess' course at Woburn has. Fewer still have been ready to test Europe's top golfers so soon after construction. The Marquess' had achieved both feats within just a year of construction.

Europe's elite were sceptical when the Victor Chandler British Masters was switched from the long established and much loved Duke's Course to the Marquess' for the 2001 tournament. Yet all it took was one practice round for the professionals to agree the Marquess' was a fantastic addition to the Woburn Golf & Country Club. Former European number one Colin Montgomerie came off the course after his first practice round and proclaimed: "This is a great course and it has got my name on it. It is perfect for my game."

Montgomerie's golf did not meet his expectations that week; the Marquess' got the better of him as Frenchman Thomas Levet took the title in a four-way playoff with England's David Howell and Swedes Robert Karlsson and Mathias Gronberg. Levet eventually won with a birdie at the 17th and then, with typical Gallic aplomb, treated the crowds to a lap of honour, high fiving all and sundry as he celebrated the biggest win of his career. Montgomerie finished a distant 27th, but even that poor showing did not dent his enthusiasm for the golf course.

"It's a fabulous venue," Montgomerie said. "I have heard praise from caddies, spectators and players alike. It is a very, very good golf course. I think we have a real jewel, a real gem. It is a big tournament venue, exceptional with big finish - driver, 4-iron at 16, 5-iron at 17, and driver 4-iron at 18."

Europe's top players echoed Montgomerie feelings. Sandy Lyle called it "fantastic." While playoff loser Karlsson said: "It is a very good and beautiful golf course. I think they have done a very good job on the design. It is one of the top new courses I have played."

Montgomerie came closer in 2002 when he finished fourth, five shots shy of Justin Rose's winning total of 269, 19-under-par, as the Marquess' played host to Rose's first professional win on British soil. The 21-year-old narrowly defeated friend and local boy Ian Poulter by a stroke to take the title. Poulter, who subsequently became attached to Woburn as Touring Professional, had a huge partisan gallery on his side as the two young guns battled it out between the pines. However, a second consecutive 65, 7-under, gave Rose the title in arguably the most exciting final day of all the tournaments held at Woburn

The Marquess' may have a big finish, but it's hard to find an easy stretch on the golf course, especially from the back markers with the course stretched to its full length of 7,213 yards. Yet compared with the Duke's and Duchess' layouts, the Marquess' looks the easiest of the three courses at first glance. Stand on the first tee and there seems to be acres of space to drive the ball. True, the fairways are wider than the two established courses, but finding the right spot on the fairway is just one of many keys to playing the Marquess' well.

Where the layout differs most from the other two courses is in the construction and siting of the putting surfaces. Great imagination is called for around the Marquess' greens. Big undulations combined with subtle borrows and lightening fast surfaces are the order of the day. Get the ball above the hole on many greens and getting down in two putts is going to take a supreme effort. Suffice it to say that of the three Woburn layouts this is the one that will yield the most three putts. This is not the sort of course to play if you suffer from the yips.

It's precisely because of the sloping surfaces that a premium is placed on the tee shot. Given the variety of pin positions the greens offer, it is important to hit the right spot on the fairway to leave an easier shot into the flag. Hit the wrong spot and getting the ball close to the hole is going to present something of a challenge.

While putting and driving are important, good iron play is not to be ignored either. The greens are such that of the three courses this is the one where if you miss the green then you need to know which side you can most afford to miss it on. Around every green there will be one spot from where getting up and down for par will be well nigh impossible. Needless to say, aiming for the centre of every green would not be a bad plan.

The Marquess' may only have opened for play in 2000, but its construction was foreshadowed years before. Not content to sit on their laurels with two of the best inland tracks in the British Isles, Woburn had plans for a third course long before the first seed was planted. BBC TV commentator Alex Hay, the club's first professional, and the late Marquess' of Tavistock spent many hours looking over the land the course now sits on, convinced that they could build a course that would be considered one of the finest in Europe. Built to an original design by Peter Alliss, Clive Clark, European Tour Design (Ross McMurray) and Hay, the Marquess' has more than lived up to expectations.

Spread over 200 acres of mature woodland featuring tall pines, oak, beech and birch trees is a collection of tree lined holes unrivalled anywhere in the United Kingdom. If it's variety you are after then you'll find it here.

The par-4s are a mixture of long and short holes, offering everything from a drive and a long iron to a short iron or wedge second. For example, the 473-yard third hole calls for a drive and a long iron or fairway wood to a long green set down in a valley. As with many holes on the Marquess', fortune favours the brave. Those who can hit it straight enough to keep on the right hand side of the two large trees on the left hand side of fairway will leave themselves with a shorter iron into the green. The same is true of the 467-yard, 13th hole. Keep the tee shot just to the right of the large tree on the left of the fairway and the second shot is shortened. Of course the risk on both holes is a pull or hooked shot into the trees. Play too far to the right on both holes and the second shot becomes longer and more demanding.

In contrast to these two monsters are the more gentler but beguiling 10th and 12th holes. The former only measures 374 yards in length, but the premium is on the second shot. Anything played too short and either the left-hand greenside bunker or a dip on the right comes into play, leaving the delicate task of getting up and down. However, any ball played too long leaves a devilish putt back down the green.

The 12th is not as straightforward as the 10th, and calls for some strategic planning off the tee. Although it's the shortest par four on the golf course at just 343 yards, it's probably the hole where the biggest numbers will be made.

The hole features something of an island fairway. A pond dissects the fairway about 200 yards from the tee, another pond fronts the green, and a small stream connects both on the left side of the fairway. Throw in a large bunker to the right of the fairway and all of a sudden you have a very demanding tee shot. From forward tees there is no problem finding the island fairway, but a carry of around 240 yards is required from the back blocks leaving a short iron second to a well-guarded green. Birdies are a rare species indeed on this hole, while pars are not exactly common either.

The par-3s are as varied as the fours. These holes require a variety of clubs through the bag, everything from a short iron at the 159-yard 6th, to mid irons at the 188-yard 8th and 176-yard 17th, to a full blown long iron or fairway wood at the 219-yard 14th. Anyone who plays the threes in level par can count themselves very fortunate indeed, since all four call for tough up and downs for anyone who misses the putting surfaces.

Although the par-3s and par-4s are not exactly benevolent creatures, at least the par-5s are a little more generous. The dogleg left 506-yard 2nd and 579-yard 11th holes can be reached in two by the those big hitters brave enough to attempt to cut the dogleg. That isn't an option at the 575-yard 15th. It is a straightaway hole played from a high tee generally into the prevailing wind, calling for three good shots.

If those par-5s seem straightforward enough, the same can't be said for the Marquess' signature hole, the 538-yard 7th. This hole offers you the choice of a split fairway. Take the longer route down the left from the back tee and it is a genuine three shot exercise for most players. Play down the right hand side and a good long tee shot will leave just over 200 yards to find the raised putting surface. Hit a drive straight down the middle and there is a good chance it will rebound off one of several giant pines standing like sentinels in the middle of the fairway. It's a classic risk and reward hole.

That phrase, risk and reward, characterises the Marquess' course. Hit good golf shots and you will be rewarded. Be slightly off your game and you will pay the ultimate penalty. Never mind, though, even if you do play poorly, the course is so stunning that you'll be rewarded with a glorious walk over 18 of the best holes in the United Kingdom.