

## AUSTRALIA

# THE ROYAL MELBOURNE GOLF CLUB

## *West Course*

The West Course at The Royal Melbourne Golf Club is generally acknowledged as the best golf course in Australia and the finest design of Dr. Alister Mackenzie despite the fact that he never saw it in its completed form and never referred to it in his published writings. Born of that productive two months in 1926 when Royal Melbourne had commissioned the Doctor on the advice of the R&A, it was completed in 1931.

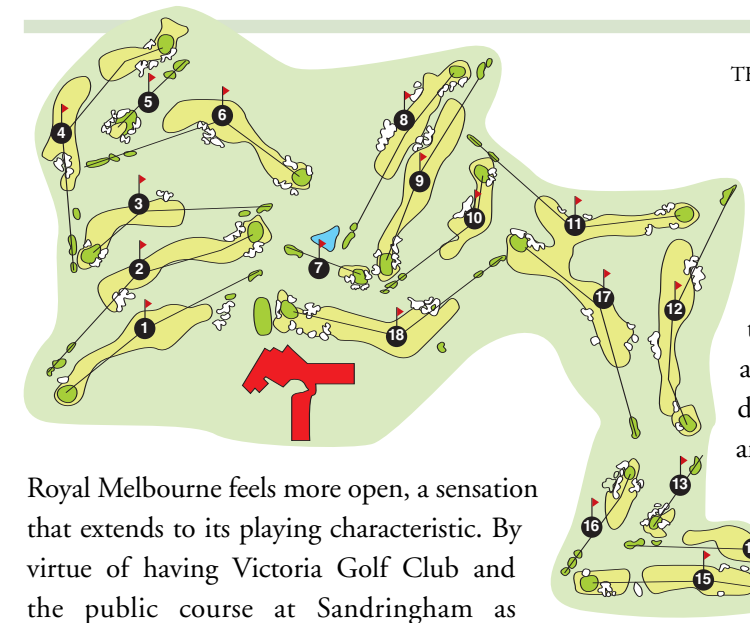
The club that has for more than 70 years nurtured their gift from Mackenzie & Morcom, was in fact formed 45 years before his visit. In May 1881 The Melbourne Golf Club cabled the Royal Eastbourne Club in England for 30 sets of clubs with which to equip their founder members. By 1895 the club received the Royal appendage and the heaths of Sandringham were selected for the club's new

|                 |                                     |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Par             | 72                                  |
| Designer        | Dr. Alister Mackenzie & Mick Morcom |
| Opened          | 1931                                |
| Length (Metres) | Men's: 6,030<br>Ladies: 5,246       |

site on 1898 with play commencing in July 1901. Royal Melbourne therefore became the first golf club in what has come to be known as Melbourne's Sandbelt. Precisely which courses constitute membership of the Sandbelt clubs is traditionally a matter of debate but the core consists of seven: Royal Melbourne, Kingston Heath, Metropolitan, Commonwealth, Victoria, Yarra Yarra and Huntingdale.

Mackenzie was a famously quick thinker and worker. His biographers (Tom Doak, Dr James S. Scott and Raymond M. Haddock<sup>1</sup>) relate that he presented the committee with his layout within 23 days of arrival and within that time he had made a five day trip to Adelaide (see Royal Adelaide within this volume) and had visited five other putative courses in the Melbourne area. In his favour, the Sandringham heath was the most suitable land for golf in the area. It is easy to see why today even though the lands that separate the Sandbelt courses have been comprehensively filled in with suburban housing. The gradation between fairway and heath is natural and obviates the necessity for heavy tree planting characteristic of some of the other Sandbelt courses (for example Yarra Yarra and Woodlands). As a consequence





Royal Melbourne feels more open, a sensation that extends to its playing characteristic. By virtue of having Victoria Golf Club and the public course at Sandringham as neighbours, this is the most intensively golfed contiguous strip of land in the Melbourne area.

The routing of the holes makes the most of two large hills and two smaller hills on the property. After two par fours on flat ground, the hills begin to impinge from the par 4 3rd which skirts its base. While Mackenzie was no fan of blind shots, to make the most of the layout he had to incorporate one from the tee of the par 5 5th. That said, this tee shot is one of the more memorable tee shots in golf, despite being uphill to a blind landing area and over bunkers. The dividend is distributed quickly at the 6th - in my opinion one of the finest par 4s in golf. A 391 meter dog-leg right, you play as close to the complex of bunkers that interrupt the shortest path as you dare. From that point you are rewarded with a better angle to the green (especially if the flag is on the better protected left side) which is mounted part way up the second of the four hills. The front part of the green takes the contour of the hill so a shot that lands there is often rejected, and tumbles down the slope in

front of the green. It is possible to play the hole more conservatively: extend the angle of the dog-leg from the tee, play a long iron to the green and hope to get down in two from a fair distance. Being an easy five and a tough four, the hole is very much in tune with Mackenzie's philosophy which was to advance the enjoyment of the average golfer: "the course should be arranged that the long handicap player; or even the absolute beginner, should be able to enjoy his round in spite of the fact that he is piling up a big score" he wrote in his book, *Golf Architecture*, published in 1920.

From this point the golfer plays uphill to the highpoint on the course which is the exposed green of the par 3 7th where the course guide advises you to play to the centre of the green "at all times". After a back-and-fro movement to complete the medium lengthed par 4s at the 8th and 9th, a little more drama is incorporated with the short uphill par 4 10th. The land draws you to a large gathering bunker below the green so it is imperative to hit away from the green in a purposeful fashion. The 11th is a long par 4 every bit as good as the 6th. Again visual computation and calculation is required from the tee as the longer hitter will find himself short of fairway on a conservative line. The bolder line is across rough ground and bunkers towards the out of bounds to a fairway that dog legs left. You are rewarded by a better line to a green that is

heavily contoured from centre to left. Too safe a tee shot and the second will probably be from rough across a bunker to a green that slopes away from the golfer. The 13th to the 16th are not used on the composite course which consists of twelve holes from the West and six from the East to obviate the requirement to cross a public road. Tournament golfers therefore miss out on this tricky 3-4-5-3 loop. The 13th is a shortish par 3 to a very well protected green, small errors are punished here. 14th is a short par 4 which is relatively easy provided you play for the fat of the fairway. The tree line that marks the out of bounds is oppressive at the 15th even though there is plenty of room to the right. But the most difficult hole of the quartet must surely be the 202 meter par 3 16th. Five bunkers protect the left side and the green has a pronounced ridge which greatly reduces the effective green area. A 3 here is sufficient cause for back slapping and perhaps even some internal gloating.

Royal Melbourne's West Course stands as the apotheosis of the Sandbelt. It was of these courses that Tom Doak was thinking about when he wrote: "If only Melbourne were not so far removed from America, the standard of American golf architecture might well be higher. Were both countries closer, however, it is just as likely that America would have dragged Australian standards down to its level."

<sup>1</sup> Refer to *The Life and Work of Dr. Alister Mackenzie* published by *The Sleeping Bear Press*

| West Course (Metres) |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|----------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Hole                 | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 9   | 10  | 11  | 12  | 13  | 14  | 15  | 16  | 17  | 18  |
| Par                  | 4   | 5   | 4   | 5   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 4   | 4   | 4   | 4   | 5   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 3   | 4   | 4   |
| Stroke Index         | 8   | 16  | 14  | 18  | 6   | 2   | 9   | 11  | 4   | 12  | 1   | 15  | 13  | 10  | 17  | 3   | 5   | 7   |
| Men                  | 392 | 439 | 324 | 430 | 161 | 391 | 135 | 346 | 380 | 279 | 416 | 435 | 134 | 335 | 434 | 202 | 401 | 396 |