

Teeing up *for* Open success

As Sandwich prepares to welcome the world's leading golfers, we look at what goes on at Royal St George's

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore



LEFT: The Claret Jug is everyone's to play for at Royal St George's Golf Club

RIGHT: Ireland's Shane Lowry won the 148th Open Championship, held at Royal Portrush, in 2019. Can he defend his title this year?



Photo: Richard Heathcote/R&A via Getty

The eyes of the golf world fall on Kent this July as the leading men's players compete for the prestigious Claret Jug in The 149th Open, the sport's crown jewel event at Royal St George's in Sandwich.

The world's oldest golf tournament returns to the club for the first time since 2011, when an emotional Darren Clarke fulfilled his boyhood dream of becoming Champion Golfer. It will be the 15th time the event will have taken place on the historic links course in Kent.

Shane Lowry will be defending the title he won at the 148th Open at Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland two years ago and will be joined by a host of other global superstars of the game.

While attention will be firmly on what happens on the links, behind the scenes is a hive of activity. It's an operation that requires military precision. So much so that planning for this year's event got underway almost five years ago.

An experienced team comprising the sport's governing body the R&A, Royal St George's and hundreds of local contractors will be working around the clock to prepare the venue ready to welcome golf's superstars,

thousands of fans and the world's media.

Overseeing operations on behalf of Royal St George's is Club Secretary Tim Checketts, who explained what the event means for Kent.

"The Open is one of the four major golf events held annually. It will attract the best golfers in the world. So, it's very much a showpiece event.

"It will be seen around the world by a television audience measured in the hundreds of millions. It's a showcase for golf, it's a showcase for Kent and a showcase for Royal St George's.

"As a club, we're privileged to host it. It's going to be a tremendous event post-lockdown for our members to get out and show off the club."

Crowds would usually exceed 200,000 but organisers are still awaiting an update from the government on lockdown restrictions in order to finalise ticket numbers. Despite this, the event will still bring substantial benefits for Kent.

An Open Championship attracts approximately £300 million to the local economy and puts the area firmly on the international map.

"It's a huge commercial boost for the local area," says Tim. "It brings visitors and revenue. ▶

“St George’s has been a building site since Easter, so lots of local contractors have been coming down and spending money locally. It’s a focal point for visiting golfers, so it benefits the local economy as well. People want to come and play the Open venue course because of the publicity it gets.

“They will hopefully stay locally and go to other golf courses. We’re fortunate here that we’ve got Prince’s and Royal Cinque Ports on either side of us, so there’s a great golfing journey you can do up and down the coast.”

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Indeed, both neighbouring courses have also hosted the Open in the past, Royal Cinque Ports in 1909 and 1920 and Prince’s in 1932.

This year’s Open is the result of a huge planning effort, not only by Royal St George’s and the R&A, but also Kent County Council, Dover District Council and Sandwich Town Council. All parties are working together to ensure infrastructure gets built and the event operates smoothly, all while keeping the impact on the local area to a minimum.

That involves complex and detailed traffic management plans. Organisers hope as many fans as possible will travel by rail and to make access easier, a

major £4 million improvement programme has been carried out at Sandwich Station. As part of that, platforms have been extended to accommodate 12-carriage trains, which will boost the station’s capacity. These rail works have also been a partnership effort with financial contributions coming from local authorities, the South East Local Enterprise Partnership, the Department for Transport and the R&A.

Tim adds that the town of Sandwich is also gearing up for a festival-style week, with local traders hoping to attract crowds returning from the Open who want to dine, shop and take in all that the town has to offer.

But what of the course itself? Links courses like Royal St George’s are found alongside the sea and consist of sandy soil and coastal vegetation. The course at Royal St George’s is still very close to the original as laid out by the club’s founder, Dr Laidlaw Purves, in 1887.

Tim says: “It’s changed a little. But ultimately, the layout is the same. If Dr Purves walked it today, he’d still recognise most of it from the original design. It’s a fast, rolling links course and there’s springy turf, firm under foot.

“We hope for a bit of sunshine to burn it down, so that the ball bounces well on fast undulating greens. It’s a challenge to play and being on the coast, there’s always the wind factor to challenge the golfer.” ♦



Photo: Life's Like That / Alamy Stock Photo

Photo: Royal St George's



A bird's-eye view of the course

Photo: Royal St George's



Royal St George's course is a challenge to play



The Open 2021 will see a real boost to Sandwich as a town

SANDWICH'S GOLFING CHAMPIONS

Sandwich has always produced drama and boasts an impressive list of Champion Golfers over the past 127 years:

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| <p>2011 Darren Clarke (Northern Ireland) won the Open on his 20th attempt</p> <p>2003 Ben Curtis (United States) won the Open on his debut, the first golfer to do so since 1975</p> <p>1993 Greg Norman (Australia) shot a record final round to win his second Open, two strokes ahead of runner-up Nick Faldo</p> | <p>1985 Sandy Lyle (Scotland) won his only Open Championship, one stroke ahead of runner-up Payne Stewart</p> <p>1981 Bill Rogers (United States) won his only major championship, four strokes ahead of runner-up Bernhard Langer</p> <p>1949 Bobby Locke (South Africa) beat Harry Bradshaw by 12 strokes in a 36-hole play-off</p> <p>1938 Reg Whitcombe (England) weathered</p> | <p>severe storms to win out by two strokes over runner-up Jimmy Adams to secure his only major title</p> <p>1934 Henry Cotton (England) dominated the Championship to claim the first of three Open titles</p> <p>1928 Walter Hagen (United States) won the third of his four Open titles, two strokes ahead of runner-up Gene Sarazen</p> <p>1922 Walter Hagen (United States) claimed the first</p> | <p>of his four Open titles</p> <p>1911 Harry Vardon (Jersey) – his eventual record of six Open titles remains unbeaten</p> <p>1904 Jack White (Scotland) won the title at the first three-day Open event</p> <p>1899 Harry Vardon (Jersey) captured his third Open title</p> <p>1894 John Henry Taylor (England) won the first Open Championship to take place outside of Scotland</p> |
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