

EXPERIENCE MUIRFIELD

# KÜMMEL YE FAITHFUL

Muirfield is widely acknowledged as one of the toughest challenges in links golf. Nicklaus rates it the best course in Britain. What's it like for the average club player? Gi's **Peter Swain** found out

Let's meet for a jolly good lunch in the clubhouse, then go out at about 2pm." When one receives an invitation from a member of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers to follow in the hallowed footsteps of 15 Open champions, it's churlish to question the order of play. But lunch first, then the round? Us finely tuned athletes usually take our 'A' game into battle before not after relaxing in the snug. But, as I discovered on a wintry March day, at Muirfield they

do things their own way. Once through the slightly forbidding gates of East Lothian's most famous club, visitors, suitably attired in jacket and tie, are greeted by hospitality reminiscent of Simpson's in the Strand *circa* 1935. After a wee dram in the Smoking Room (where smoking is no longer allowed), I am treated to a sumptuous repast, with wonderfully entertaining company. Members often play nine holes before lunch, and nine after, so one might expect a degree of restraint, but there are

no signs of it. Seated at long tables, around which Eton and the Guards are well represented, there is talk of the upcoming Open. All are proud of their course, its fine championship traditions, and the financial benefits thereof. But the loss of access over several balmy summer weeks is not altogether popular. Following whitebait and a roast with all the trimmings, washed down by several glasses of house claret, I try to draw breath. But when my host suggests "you won't have seen a finer dessert selection

since the days of nanny and the nursery", I succumb to the treacle pudding. My pre-game preparation going swimmingly, a glass of the club's favourite tippie, Kümmel, is a shoo-in. So, tip number one: whether playing as a visitor - tee times available Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8.30am to 9.50am - or as a member's guest, don't miss lunch. It's a hugely enjoyable part of the Muirfield experience. The day is chilly, even by Scottish standards: actual temperature +5C; with the wind-chill factor, -5C. But playing conditions are actually in my favour, as I soon discover on the first tee. With OB down the left, past Ronnie Corbett's house, the high rough on either side of the narrow fairway usually makes for a challenging opening drive. Except in March, the rough is almost flat. So tip number two: the course is substantially easier, if that's what you want, from November to April. Visitors can play fourballs in the

(Main image): The glorious view from the Greywalls Hotel, the 9th green just to the right of the frame in this photo, the par-four 10th stretching into the distance



(Top): All set for the main event - lunch is very much an unmissable aspect of the Muirfield experience; (above): Dating from 1744, the competition for The Silver Club on Leith Links was open to noblemen and gentlemen golfers from all over Britain. The winner became 'Captain of the Golf' for the next year, and a silver ball with his name on it was to be attached to the Silver Club







(Above): As golfers tackle the tee shot at the 10th, the rise that leads to the 11th is visible in the distance; (Right): Past captains of the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers adorning the clubhouse walls include, over the fireplace, William St. Clair of Roslin, 1761-66, 1770 and 1771; (opposite): Gary Player reckons the par-three 13th to be one of the great short holes in golf



mornings, but members traditionally play foursomes. It's a particularly sociable form of the game, with rounds here lasting more than 3½ hours the exception. On this occasion my two hosts kindly invite me to play my own ball while they alternate playing the second, and as both are advancing in years, we agree to play from the seniors' tees.

At the Open, the 1st will play 448 yards, but for us it's only 404. I get a good drive away, just catching the rough at about 240. In high summer, I might have lost my ball, but today it's sitting up nicely. I am advised to land the ball

10 yards short of the green and run it up. Having lost my 7-iron in Casablanca the week before (I blame the caddie), I take an 8 and flush it pin high, left edge.

Now, I play off 16, so with a putter in hand, a net birdie beckons. The green looks relatively innocuous, but the first putt comes up short and I miss the second. Still, a five is one better than Tiger in 2002. That's half the thrill of playing Muirfield: history is everywhere.

Taking advantage of the post-Kümmel glow I score fives on both the shortish par-four 2nd and 3rd holes. Three net pars, so far so good, but I admit the forward tees are helping.

By now, I'm beginning to get the hang of things. My hosts are short off the tee but straight and low, and dynamite around the greens. Muirfield is a great test of the short game, with the 40-yard putt, and the mid-iron bump-and-run essential parts of the armory. My first shot out of a greenside pot bunker, at the par-three 4th, comes out to 6-feet – a moment of sheer triumph.

The course's third protection, after the rough and the bunkers, many of which are invisible from the fairway, is the wind, which really kicks in on the par-five 5th. With a prevailing westerly, good players can reach in two, but in today's

north-easterly, I'm struggling to get up in three. Some of Muirfield's holes look relatively benign, but in the wind, with the rough up, from the Tiger tees, it's an entirely different game.

The 6th is a tough dogleg left, with a crosswind and a wall just to the left of the landing area. I struggle but still manage a half. Members seldom compete in stroke play events, and I now see why.

Distracted by the pot bunkers on the short 7th, I chunk it, giving a hole back. The elevated tee on 8 encourages ambitious driving, but no fewer than 12 traps are lurking out there.

The newly lengthened par-five 9th is simply a great hole. The drive is relatively straightforward, but the second is a beast. With OB all the way down the left, and five traps on the right, my host advises a low chaser down the left side. Apparently a member's kick off the wall is not unknown. Ignoring all that, I find the first in the row of pot bunkers.

Making a rookie error, I play out towards the green, only to find the next trap. Then, to compound the mistake, I do the same again.

Tip number three: when in a pot bunker, take your punishment and splash out sideways if that's what it takes.

On the back nine, the first stand-out moment comes on the 11th. After a blind tee shot, one walks up and over a small rise to see the green framed by seven bunkers and the Firth of Forth with the snowy hills of Fife behind. Magic. Too busy admiring the view, I land my approach 25 yards left, on the 12th tee.

Gary Player reckons the par-three 13th (pictured above) to be one of golf's great short holes. Protected by five bunkers, the severely sloping green is a narrow target up in the dunes, so any tee shot staying on the putting surface is a triumph. I lose my ball in the heather to the left, much to the annoyance of a nesting curlew.

By now, the wheels are beginning to come off. To my average club player's eye, with the rough down, Muirfield isn't an exceptionally tough driving course, but the approaches are fiendishly difficult. Any lapse in concentration is severely punished.

At least I manage to par the 18th, which caps a truly memorably day. I can honestly say I have never enjoyed being beaten up quite so much.

My advice is to beg, borrow and book 18 months ahead, but whatever you do, don't miss lunch at Muirfield.

Oh yes, and the course is absolutely magnificent, too. ☑



## GREYWALLS LUXURY ON MUIRFIELD'S DOORSTEP

Overlooking Muirfield's 9th green, Greywalls is the perfect country-house hotel for the discerning golfer who appreciates Lutyens, Gertrude Jekyll, and fine dining provided by Albert Roux. Its Open credentials are impeccable. Gary Player, Jack Nicklaus, Lee Trevino, Tom Watson, Nick Faldo and Ernie Els all stayed in this 23-room Relais & Chateaux gem while winning their respective Muirfield Championships. Hoping that history rubs off on them, some of the world's best players will be there again during the third week of July. But after the circus has moved on, the hotel is well worth a visit.

In contrast to other grander and more famous golf hotels, the Edwardian Greywalls, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, is positively cosy. From the whisky and cream served with the morning porridge to the roaring log fire in the library, and the beautiful rose garden created by Gertrude Jekyll, the ambiance is that of a large private house.

It also has an interesting royal connection.

Early owner Willie James married a local Scottish girl, Evie Forbes, who was the natural daughter of Edward VII. Their son was christened Edward, and the King became his godfather. The King and Court were frequent visitors, even occasioning the building of a small addition on the south side still known today as 'the King's Loo'.

The bar has a good selection of single malts including the local Glenkinchie. Service is impeccable, and personal, but best of all, there's a drying room specially designed for soggy golf clobber.

Of course, Greywalls is the ideal base from which to play Muirfield – there's even a gate leading directly to the back of the clubhouse. But with 9 other courses within five miles, including the three Gullane set-ups, and North Berwick's idiosyncratic links, there's nowhere better from which to explore the golfing treasures strung along the East Lothian coast.

**Contact: 01620 842144; [www.greywalls.co.uk](http://www.greywalls.co.uk)**

