

ENGLAND'S FORGOTTEN LINKS

With a magnificent stretch of seaside golf, northwest England, site of July's British Open, is the place to discover the links of the past

BY DAVID OWEN

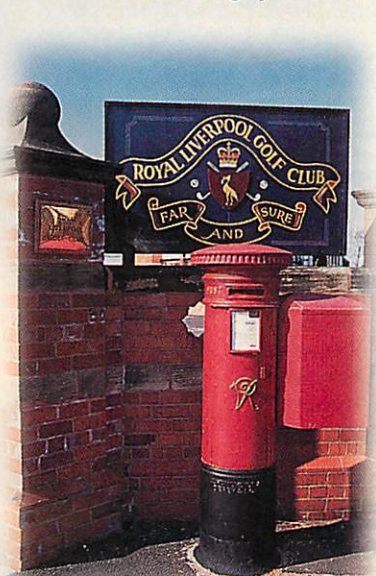
You don't need a weather forecast to know which way the wind blows at Royal Lytham and St. Annes Golf Club. Even on calm days, the permanently traumatized trees lean away from the clubhouse at an angle of 20 or 30 degrees. When the force that crippled the trees is with you, you feel like John Daly. When it blows in your face, you discover with shame that your standard tee shot, which at home looks straight, is at heart a feeble banana.

The site of this year's British Open is not routinely visited by golfers from the United States. It's not in Scotland or Ireland—the alpha and omega of international golf trav-

el for most American players—and it's not in an especially lovely part of England. But it nonetheless anchors the northern end of one of the finest stretches of seaside golf on the planet.

Between Royal Lytham and Royal Liverpool, a distance of less than 30

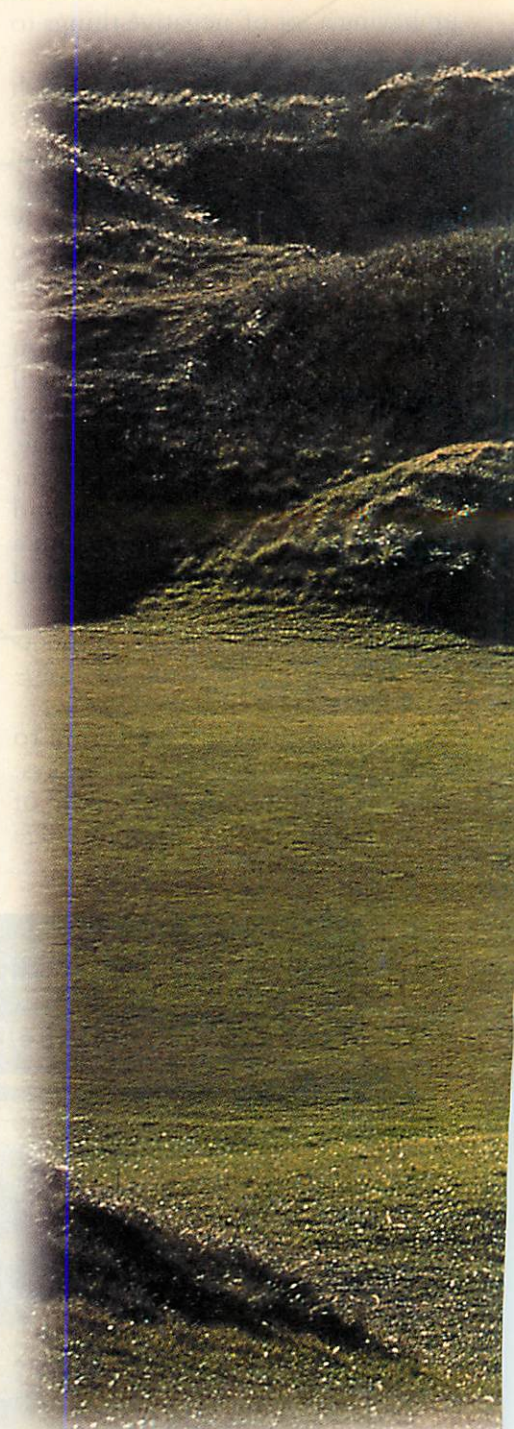
Old-world Royal Liverpool is steeped in tradition and thoroughly British.



miles as the seagull flies, are more than half a dozen superb golf courses, any one of which could prove to be the highlight of a golfing expedition. When I asked a good golfer at Lytham to name his three or four favorite courses nearby, he didn't even mention Royal Birkdale, just a few miles to the south. Imagine living amid such golfing opulence that you could afford to have mixed feelings about a course that will host

its eighth British Open in 1998.

Lytham, Birkdale and most of the other notable courses along the Lancashire coast were laid out in the late 19th and early 20th century for the holiday amusement of wealthy industrialists from Manchester and Liverpool. The boom times in those two grimy cities ended long ago, leaving a shortage of wealthy industrialists and a surplus of





In the perfect stillness and late summer shadows of Royal Birkdale's towering dunes, two golfers putt out at the short but testing 12th hole.

wonderful golf—ideal conditions for a serious player with wanderlust.

Because the Lancashire area does not attract many international tourists (except when the Open is in town), visiting American golfers are less likely than at St. Andrews to be viewed as the vectors of a deadly plague. In fact, at most

of these private clubs, day-trippers are welcomed with enthusiasm, since guest fees help to pay for improvements that might otherwise be out of reach. In planning a visit, you should contact the clubs well in advance and be prepared to show proof of handicap (although I was asked for my card only at Lytham). But

you won't need to lie or pull strings to get through the door.

The best way to experience **Royal Lytham** is as a resident. The club has a very comfortable dormy house. Guests there are allowed to take their meals in the clubhouse and to play golf at many times when other visitors are not. In

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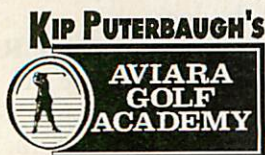


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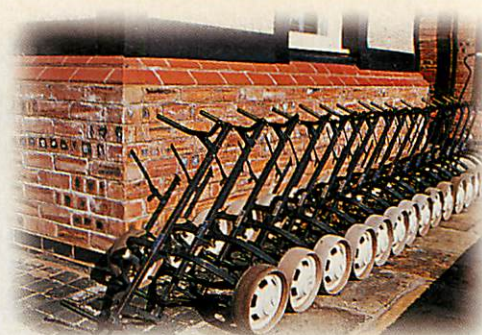
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fact, you almost can't afford not to stay in the dormy house, since the cost of a single weeknight's stay—which includes meals and *two* rounds of golf—is actually less than the à la carte cost of the golf alone (£130 versus £150, or roughly \$195 versus \$225). If the dormy house is full, you will have no trouble finding an inexpensive room either in Lytham St. Annes or in Blackpool, minutes to the north.

Blackpool's nearest American analogs are Coney Island and some of the tawdrier stretches of the New Jersey coast. Prosperous Britons look down their noses at it, but your children wouldn't. You can ride a donkey on the beach, eat fish and chips or worse along the concession-choked promenade, watch retired laborers sunbathing on the



Few British clubs have golf carts. Copy the locals: Take a pullcart or carry your clubs, and walk.

To attack the other courses of the Lancashire region, you should probably establish a base camp in the town of Southport, which lies roughly halfway between Lytham St. Annes and Liverpool and is virtually within bicycling distance of all the great courses.

Southport had two golden eras, one in the late 1800s and one in the years immediately following the Second World War. It's a bit faded now, but still lively and attractive. In the big brick houses on the north side of town you can see vestiges of the cotton fortunes that built it. I spent several pleasant nights at the Prince of Wales, a well-preserved Victorian showpiece on the town's main drag, called Lord Street.

My small but comfortable single room cost roughly \$135 a night, which is about as pricey as Southport gets. There are also other nice hotels, as well as a huge supply of inexpensive rooms in the town's innumerable small hotels and holiday apartments, many of which are priced in the Myrtle Beach range. Southport gets crowded in the summer, but not as crowded as it did 40 years ago, so there are usually plenty of vacancies.

Within the city limits of Southport are four excellent courses: **Hesketh, Royal Birkdale, Hillside and Southport and Ainsdale.** The last three are laid out almost continuously along the coast to the south of town. They are so close together that if you miss the driveway for Birkdale heading south, the handiest



Two women, wrapped up against the elements, total their scores after a round at Hesketh.

muddy sand while wearing their shoes and all their clothes, and ride on what was once the world's biggest roller coaster but may now be merely the world's biggest roller coaster that looks as if it's about to fall down.

place to turn around is the side street that leads to Hillside. Of the four, the greatest (and the only Open course) is Birkdale—although some argue the real gem is Hillside, which is less well known mainly because its grounds are too confined to handle the crowds of a big tournament. The greens at Birkdale recently emerged from a three-year makeover.

Peter Thomson, who won two Opens at Birkdale, called the course “man-sized but not a monster.” It me-



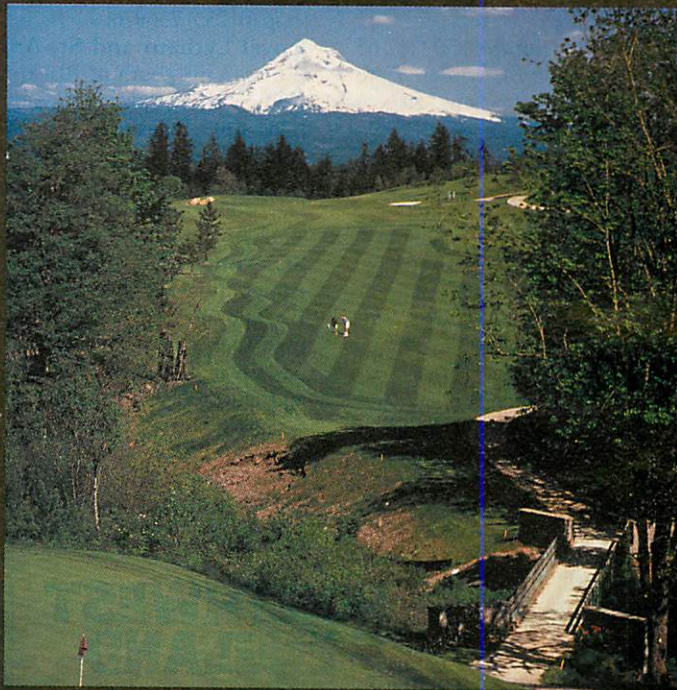
As well as the main 18 at Formby, there is a great Ladies Course—and it's not just for ladies.

anders among the dunes, continually changing direction in relation to the baffling wind. Unlike Royal Lytham, which is surrounded by bungalows, buildings, a railway line and a big brick hospital that looks as though it might be a sensible place to sit out a nuclear war, Birkdale is a beautiful course. The most famous shot ever struck here was Arnold Palmer's testosterone-aided 6-iron from under a bush on what was then the 15th hole (and is now the 16th) during the 1961 Open, which he went on to win.

Hitler's tree

On the day I had hoped to play Hesketh, that course was closed to visitors for a big club match. I was doubly disappointed, because in addition to playing the course I had wanted to lift my leg at the fabled Hitler tree. This monument, which stands near the 18th green and is traditionally used as a latrine, was a gift from the Third Reich to a Hesketh member who had won a golf medal at the 1936 Olympics, where golf was an exhibition sport.

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Northwest England at a glance

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AIRPORT

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GOLF FEES

Fees in British pounds (£1=\$1.52). Winter rates lower at some courses.

Note: Tee times must be made in advance through the Secretary's office. (A handicap certificate or letter of introduction from your club pro is often required.) Carts generally unavailable; caddies by advance arrangement with golf pro.

LANCASHIRE

Fairhaven G.C., Lytham St. Annes: Green fee £30 a round, daily fee £35. Course closed to visitors on Thurs. Pullcart £1.50. Caddie by advance arrangement with pro. Club rental £5. Phone Mr. Fielding, Secretary, (01253) 736741; golf shop (01253) 736976.

Royal Lytham and St. Annes G.C., St. Annes (5 mi. south of Blackpool): Weekdays £75, restricted play weekends. Caddie £20 (plus tip). Pullcart £2. Golf package including weekend play available for guests of dormy house (men only). Phone Mrs. Harrison, Assistant Secretary, (01253) 724206.

St. Annes Old Links G.C., Lytham St. Annes (located between St. Annes and Blackpool): Weekdays £30 (closed to visitors Tues. a.m.), weekends £40 on limited-availability basis. Pullcart £2. Caddie and club rental £10 each. Phone Mr. Ray, Secretary, (01253) 723597.

MERSEYSIDE

Formby G.C., Formby (13 miles northwest of Liverpool): £50 a round or day. Pullcart

£2. Caddie £20 (plus tip). Restricted play on Wed., weekends and bank holidays. Phone Mr. Dixon, Secretary, (01704) 872164.

Hesketh G.C., Southport (1 mi. north of Southport): £25 a round, £35 daily fee; £40 weekends (limited availability). Pullcart £1.50. Club rental £5. Caddie £20 (plus tip). Phone Mr. Seal, Secretary, (01704) 536897; golf shop (01704) 530050.

Heswall G.C., Gayton, Wirral (8 mi. northwest of Chester): Weekdays £30 a round, £40 daily fee. Weekends (limited availability) £35 a round, £45 daily fee. No caddies. Pullcart £2. Rental clubs by arrangement. Phone Mr. Butler, Secretary, (0151) 342 1237; golf shop (0151) 342 7431.

Hillside G.C., Southport: Weekdays £35 a round, £45 daily fee. Weekends £45 a round. Caddie £20 (plus tip). Two electric carts available, £20. Pullcart £1. Course closed to visitors Tues. and Sat. before 2 p.m.; limited play Sun. Phone Mr. Graham, Secretary, (01704) 567169; golf shop (01704) 569902.

Hoyle Municipal G. Cse., Hoyle, Wirral: Fee £6 a round. Pullcart £1.50. Club rental £5.50. Golf shop (0151) 632 2956.

Royal Birkdale G.C., Birkdale, Southport (1½ mi. south of Southport): Fee £55 a round, £75 daily fee. Caddies available. Pullcart £2. Course closed to visitors Fri. and Sat. Very limited play Sun. £75. Phone Mr. Crewe, Secretary, (01704) 567920; golf shop (01704) 568857.

Royal Liverpool G.C., Hoyle, Wirral: Weekdays (except Thurs.) £47.50 a round, £65 daily fee. Weekends £60 a round, £95 daily fee. Play restricted daily before 9:30 a.m., between 1 and 2 p.m. and on certain weekends. Pullcart £2. Club rental £15. Phone Group Captain Moore, Secretary, (0151) 632 6757; golf shop (0151) 632 5868.

Southport and Ainsdale G.C., Ainsdale (3 mi. south of Southport): Fee £30 a round, £40 daily fee. Pullcart £1.50, £2.50 daily fee. Play restricted daily before 9:30 a.m., and between 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., on Thurs. and all day Sat. Caddies, club rentals available. Visitors must have handicap certificates. Phone Mr. Flood, Secretary, (01704) 578000; golf shop (01704) 577316.



Southport Municipal G. Cse., Southport: Weekdays £6, weekends £8. Tee times may be booked up to six days in advance. Caddie £20. Pullcart £1.50. Club rental £5. Golf shop phone (01704) 535286.

Wallasey G.C., Wallasey, Wirral: Weekdays £27 a round, £32 daily fee. Weekends £32 a round, £37 daily fee. Caddies and club rental available. Pullcart £2. Phone Mrs. Dolman, Secretary, (0151) 691 1024.

West Lancashire G.C., Crosby (located between Liverpool and Southport): Weekdays £28 a round, £40 daily fee. Weekend £50. Pullcart £2. Course closed to visitors Tues. a.m. and some Saturdays. Caddies and club rentals available. Phone Mr. Bell, Secretary, (0151) 924 1076; golf shop 924 5662.

All fees subject to change.

WHERE TO STAY

You'll find a number of places to stay in the area, including many bed and breakfasts. A selection of hotels:

Heswall (Thornton Hough): Thornton Hall, (0151) 336 3938.

Hoylake: The Green Lodge G. Links Hotel, (0151) 632 2321.

Southport: Bold Hotel, (01704) 532 58723; Royal Clifton, (01704) 533771; Prince of Wales Hotel, (01704) 536688; Scarisbrick Hotel, (01704) 543000; Stutelea Hotel & Leisure Club, (01704) 544220.

Wallasey: The Grove House, (0151) 639 3947; Leasowe Castle Hotel, (0151) 638 2435.

Liverpool: The Blundellsands Hotel, (0151) 924 6515.

OFF-COURSE ACTIVITIES

Blackpool: Pleasure Beach and Blackpool tower. **Liverpool:** ferry between Birkenhead and Liverpool, old mills, Anglican Cathedral, Albert Dock. **Chester:** the Roman wall and Grosvenor Museum. **The Lake District** including Lake Windermere and Scafell Pike.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

British Tourist Authority, 551 Fifth Ave., 7th fl., Suite 701, New York, N.Y. 10176-0799. Phone 800-462-2748, 212-986-2200 (Mon.-Fri. 9:30 a.m. to 7 p.m.).

The North West Tourist Board, Swan House, Swan Meadow Rd., Wigan Pier, Wigan WN3 5BB, England. Phone (01942) 821222. (Open weekdays 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.)

Compiled by Margaret Farnsworth



The best part of British golf: the post-round chitchat in the bar at Hillside. It's cold outside, but the beer is warm.

Choking back my regret, I played a round at **Southport Municipal Golf Course** right next door. You would never play Southport Municipal if you had an alternative. The layout is dumb, the grass is sparse and many of the regulars are local lowlifes who were prompted by the excitement of the Ryder Cup to give up rugby for golf, which they treat as a contact sport.

Still, I had a very nice time. One of my playing partners was a retired businessman who had recently given up tennis for golf but whose age, he said, made him undesirable as a candidate for membership at the distinguished private clubs in the area. When I asked him about his working years in Liverpool, he said, "I knew Jim McCartney, who was Paul's father. We were both in the cotton business, and his office was next to mine. There was a time when we were both dealing in Iranian cotton. I had better shippers and was offering a better price, but Jim was getting all the business. I later found out why: He supplied a signed photograph of the Beatles with every order. He used to fret terribly about Paul's future. He desperately wanted him to go to university, because what sort of future could there be for a musician?"

On my last night in Southport, I set out in search of a caddie hang-out called the Masons Arms, which a playing partner at **Fairhaven** (a worthy parkland course

and Open qualifier not far from Royal Lytham) had told me about. The Masons Arms was the local of the late Alfie Fyles, the Southport legend who guided Tom Watson to all five of his British Open victories.

I found the pub on a grim side street and sailed through the door, anticipating an evening of colorful storytelling. Instantly, I wished I hadn't come. The patrons looked like—well, they looked like British caddies, but they were indoors, boisterous, in a group and drunk. The bartender was sitting on a foot-tall stool, so that his head was barely visible above the bar. Oddly, he seemed scarier in that position than he did when he stood up. I made the mistake of sitting at a small table directly below the wall-mounted television set, which most of the patrons were watching. During breaks in the action on the screen, they would permit their chilling gaze to drift downward. I drank my beer as fast as I could and fled back to the safety of the Prince of Wales.

A few miles south of Southport, in Liverpool's most enchanting suburb, is **Formby Golf Club**. Formby is probably the sentimental first choice among Lancashire golfers, and it is high on my list of favorite courses anywhere.

The course is lovely, challenging, imaginative and serious—the British Amateur has been held there three times—yet it is also more approachable than either Lytham or Birkdale.

One of my favorite holes is the eighth, a par 5 with a fairway that from the tee looks like the back of a snake. If you pull or push your drive, you end up at the bottom of a grassy ravine from which your next play is inevitably a blind iron into trouble on the other side. Loving the eighth is considered heretical by

Don't miss out on the local cuisine: mushy peas for under a dollar.

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members, since it is one of three replacement holes built in the 1970s, when the sea threatened to consume the outermost corner of the course. But it's a terrific hole, just one of many.

Between rounds, the best place to enjoy the Formby course is in a chair beside the big windows on the second floor of the clubhouse. If you spend the night in one of the spare but comfortable guest rooms, as I did, you can eat your breakfast by those windows and watch the superintendent whip the dew from the greens while an

early mist burns away from the hills.

The bar downstairs is what every 19th hole should be: small, warm and welcoming—a good place to decompress from a memorable round, as I did with my playing partner, a retired chief superintendent of police from Liverpool.

Just south of Formby, near the town of Crosby, is a very good course that visitors usually overlook: **West Lancashire**, referred to invariably as “West Lancs.” The course is hard to find, and the clubhouse looks like a tired suburban YMCA, but you shouldn't pass it up.

I played the front nine with a member and the back nine with an assistant pro. I loved it. It's not a pretty course, like Formby, and I overheard some (justified) grumbling among the members about the condition of the greens and fairways. But the layout is on a par with Birkdale's.

Both of my playing partners apologized repeatedly for what they called the lack of wind, leaving me to wonder what invisible power was causing my ball to wobble on its tee. (On truly breezy days, the assistant explained, the flagsticks will sometimes jump out of their holes.) The assistant's favorite hole was the par-4 13th. We played it from the tiny, elevated tiger tee, which has the best views on the property.

I lingered over the view, because the tee shot is intimidating. You have to hit a precise drive to the right side of a left-bending fairway, then find a way to make your second shot stick to a ball-proof green. The 15th hole forces you to pull off the same trick in the opposite direction, with the added requirement that you not hook your tee shot over a stone wall out-of-bounds.

The wall runs alongside a railroad line, on the other side of which you can see the outlines of several abandoned holes from the course's original configuration. The rail line was built at the request of the club's early members, who wanted easier access to their golf. The railroad company originally objected that it could not build a rail line merely to serve a golf club, so the members quickly put up enough houses to make the investment worthwhile.

Far and sure at Hoylake

The southernmost course on my tour, **Royal Liverpool**, is just a short hop from West Lancs. You drive along the wharves of Liverpool, through a tunnel under the Mersey River, and across a tongue-shaped peninsula called the Wirral to the town of Hoylake.

If the great courses of this region were the members of a club, Royal Liverpool would be the silver-haired former captain, sipping brandy in the place of honor by the hearth. Founded in

The birthplace of the Beatles

Thirteen years ago, on assignment for a British newspaper and an American magazine, I traveled to England with a tour group of 67 American Beatles fans. (The tour members' interest in the Beatles was not casual; one woman had twice tried to kill herself after the murder of John Lennon.) Our itinerary was divided between London—where we visited EMI's Abbey Road Studios, drove past the apartment where Beatles manager Brian Epstein overdosed on sleeping pills, and stripped leaves from a shrub on property formerly owned by Paul McCartney—and the band's birthplace, Liverpool, which the tour members viewed as the promised land.

The statement “We're going to Liverpool on holiday” has no exact equivalent in American English. (Roughly comparable: “We're spending our honeymoon in Cleveland.”) Londoners snorted derisively when we mentioned our destination. “It's an industrial city but not an industrious one,” I was told, through smirking laughter, in a London pub. Even Liverpuddlians were taken aback by the tour members' enthusiasm. They were used to being the butt of jokes, not the objects of adoration.

For a nonfanatic, Liverpool's charms are harder to see, but they still exist, as I was reminded during my recent visit. The city's suburbs (and their fabled golf courses) are lovely—especially Formby and the villages of the Wirral. The city itself is not as bleak as it's made out to be; even in the seedier precincts along the wharves, you can catch glimpses of what used to be one of the world's premier seaports. And, of course, the Beatles.

Finding traces of the Beatles in Merseyside is oddly difficult. There's a guided bus tour that will take you to Penny Lane, Strawberry Field, the hospital where John was born, and various sites of lesser



England's most famous foursome. From left: Paul, Ringo, George and John.

significance. There's a good souvenir store and an occasional convention. But the Cavern—the stifling, smelly, sepulchral jazz club outside which, in 1961, shop girls carrying sandwiches lined up for blocks in the hopes of squeezing downstairs for a lunchtime performance by the proto-Beatles—was demolished in the 1970s to make room for a railway ventilation shaft that was never built.

There are now replicas of the Cavern both in the basement of a shopping center on the original site and in the basement of a shopping center on the Albert Dock. (The one on the dock is part of a well-intentioned but bland and unsatisfying exhibition called “The Beatles Story.”) But there are few genuine artifacts, and there isn't a proper museum.

The British don't quite have the American genius for shamelessly exploiting a national treasure. Liverpool hints at the Beatles' history but doesn't surrender it. To get a sense of how it must have felt to watch four local boys ebulliently preparing to remake the world in their own image, you have to close your eyes and imagine.

—D.O.



A lone golfer strides out from the second tee at beautiful Formby, one of England's most precious but unheralded jewels. Less than three hours later, he'll be ensconced in the clubhouse.

1869, it is the second-oldest seaside course in England (after Westward Ho!).

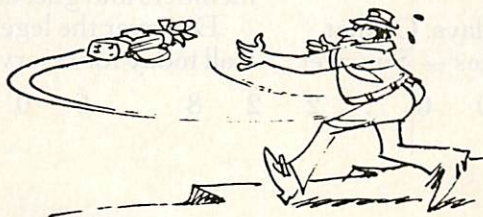
It has a powerful air of ancient significance. The first British Amateur was played here in 1885, and so was the earliest match between Britain and the United States, an impromptu contest that led to the creation, a few years later, of the Walker and Ryder Cups. It's also a former British Open venue.

The motto of Hoylake (as the club is known among friends) is "far and sure"—sound advice for any visitor. When you stand on the tee of the first hole, a long par 4, and turn to face the distant flag, virtually all the real estate in your field of vision is out-of-bounds. The prospect tempts you to violate every tip you've ever absorbed about how hard to grip a golf club.

Equally unsettling is the 17th hole, called Royal. Its right side is flanked by a chain-link fence, which marks the club's northern boundary. For most of the length of the hole, the openings in the mesh of the fence are small enough to knock a wayward shot back into play. Alongside the green, however, the openings in the fence have been enlarged to the size of dinner plates. You could switch to a volleyball for your approach and still be in danger of pushing your shot into the road.

Despite these terrors, Hoylake is

deeply seductive. I had played here three years before, during the week before the Ryder Cup, and had been longing to come back ever since. When I finished my round this time, I left as I had back in 1993—contentedly, reluctantly and with a certainty I would return. ■



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