

# Mersey Paradise

Royal Birkdale is the proud host of the 2008 Open, but there are many more little beauties in this neck of the woods...

Words: Richard Lenton Photography: Paul Thomas and Mark McNulty



## MONDAY

9.32am: "Richard, this is your editor speaking," says Shaun, far too chirpily for my liking on a dismal Monday morning. "I want you to go to Southport, play Birkdale and a couple of other courses nearby, and check out the local nightlife for our pre-Open caper. Oh, and you'll need to sort out some accommodation and photographers as well." "No problem, I'll get something sorted for next week," I reply. "Er, no fella. Get your arse up there this afternoon..."

11.01am: The voyage of discovery begins. Equipment Editor Dan Owen, fresh from a four-day golf and grog bender in Lisbon, is my reluctant right hand man for the 300-mile trek from Brighton to the north west coast. All he wants to do is kip, but sleeping's cheating at *GOLF PUNK*. I'll leave it a while before I tell him that we've got nowhere to stay, no photographers or guarantees that we can play Birkdale – or any other local course for that matter...

3.30pm: A nasty snarl-up on the M6 has seen my spirits plunge. The mobile rings. "I've got a couple of photographers for you," says GP workie, Malcolm. "I'm not sure how old they are, but one's called Jeffrey and the other's George." "I tell you what," I snap, "if you can get me Bungle and Zippy as well then they've got a deal."

6.58pm: We finally hit the Victorian splendour of Lord Street in Southport. I've sorted out a twin room at a hotel on the seafront, but 'hotel' should surely be replaced by 'old folks' home'. At every twist and turn we run the risk of being run over by a blue-rinsed old dear in a souped up Shopmobility. I make my way up the stairs past a posse of pensioners who glare at me in the same way you'd look at a man who'd burgled your house and run off with your missus. Our room is at the back of the building. It's like a sauna and there's no air-con. Oh well, I'll just open the window. Ah, there's a huge generator beneath it...

We nip out for a pint on the promenade, but it's eerily quiet. The Specials' song *Ghost Town* comes to mind... Disillusioned, we retreat to the sanctuary of the hotel bar for a nightcap. "You've picked the wrong time to come to Southport," says our friendly hostess. "It's quiet in the week but busloads come from Thursdays onwards and it goes mad. There are loads of clubs just behind here and they all get rammed. And wait until the Open; it'll be crazy."

## TUESDAY:

Is the Open the best sporting event on the calendar? Has Kool got a Gang? Nineteen years after Greg Norman's blistering front



A Big Bertha, and a huge driver...



The intention was Ben Hogan, the reality; Hulk Hogan



Dan walking to his ball.... 10 yards away



'Yeah, it's a new thing. Collymore loves it'



**Where to eat...**

**THE CHINA RESTAURANT**

Address: Eastbank Street, Southport, PR8 1DG  
Tel: +44 (0)1704 548972

Review: You can't go wrong with an all-you-can-eat buffet at £6.95 a pop. Not a destination for a fella trying to impress a new lady friend, but honest, tasty grub in pretty basic surroundings. Fill yer boots. We did.

**THE BELASH TANDOORI**

Address: 14 Bath Street, Southport, PR9 0DA  
Tel: +44 (0)1704 530034

Review: We were more than a wee bit concerned when we took refuge from the rain in the Belash, and there were only two other diners in there. We needn't have worried – the food was terrific, the selection of beers was great and the service excellent. However, the mood lighting and background music prompted a weird, feminine conversation about when to start a family, so be warned... Try anything from the Chef's Specials section. You won't be disappointed.

**CLOISTERS DINING ROOMS**

Address: 239 Lord Street, Southport, PR8 1NZ  
Tel: +44 (0)1704 535153

Web: <http://cloistersrestaurant.net>

Review: Cloisters is housed in what used to be the Scarisbrick Hotel's original stables. The restaurant is warm and interesting, and boasts an English style menu, using local produce whenever possible, with the main focus being char-grilled food cooked over hot coals. The cooking of the dishes is designed to be healthy and light, reducing fat contents and offering subtle flavours. Main courses start at just £4.95.

nine at Royal Troon lured me into a love affair with the game, I'm standing on the first tee at Royal Birkdale. It's surreal.

The breeze has all but disappeared. I reach for my less-than-trusty driver, take a final glance down the tight fairway and offer a word of prayer to the man above. They're answered; I pierce the fairway, leaving myself 180 yards to the pin. It's a dream start. Paul, the Kiwi snapper we picked up en route, is impressed; he thinks I can play. Suffice to say it doesn't continue in quite the same vein, otherwise I'd have joined the hopefuls at Open qualifying.

But there's enough about Birkdale elsewhere in our sensational Open supplement. There's more than one classic links course in this neck of the woods...

Southport, with seven championship tracks, is at the centre of 'England's Golf Coast'; in fact over 20 courses can be reached in under an hour.

And if you are in town for the Open this summer and you fancy a true test of your golfing credentials, then book yourself 18 holes at West Lancashire GC. A raw, rugged links with rough that makes Carnoustie's '99 set up look forgiving, this course, which was once again used for Open qualifying this year, provides the sternest of tests. We head



Caper  
Destination...  
Southport

there immediately after our pilgrimage to Birkdale, fully expecting a case of 'after the lord mayor's show'. No way, Pedro.

I am to golf what Beth Ditto is to Slimfast, so the straggly rough and swale offers a daunting challenge, particularly when I'm going head to head with Dan, who boasts a single figure handicap.

My playing partner's monster tee shot to the first, a left-to-right dogleg, drifts just into the left hand rough 300 yards away, while my slightly topped four-iron has come to a standstill just 180 yards up the fairway. "That's more conservative than Maggie Thatcher," says Dan, in total disgust at my lack of adventure. But he ain't laughing 10 minutes later when he's reaching into his bag for another ball. Even though his tee shot has barely drifted into the rough, it's a goner. I go one up.

By the fifth, Dan's hurling his driver down the fairway, after a slightly blocked drive disappears into an abyss of whin and broom. "Sorry Rich, I'm acting like a spoilt brat. I'm playing okay, but I can't score." After six holes, I'm three up, but in the end class prevails. To safely navigate this little beauty, patience, skill and the ability to manufacture shots are required. This is real golf, and I'm anything but a real golfer.

After 13 sometimes breathtaking holes, we're overtaken by a stampede of golfers taking part in a foursomes match. Remember when you played your old seven-inch singles at 78rpm instead of 45 (come on, you must...)? Well that gives you an idea how quick these guys are playing...

Thirty-one holes in one day is plenty anyway – it's time for some liquid

West Lancs GC;  
putting the boys  
to the test



'Où est le whippet?'



Where to play...

WEST LANCASHIRE GC

Address: Hall Road West, Blundellsands, Liverpool, L23 8SZ

Tel: +44 (0)151 924 1076

Web: www.westlancashiregolf.co.uk

Details: 18 holes, yardage 6,772, par 72

Cost: £70 - £90

Review: The oldest surviving golf club in Lancashire, and among the 10 oldest clubs in England, West Lancs is a true test of your golfing ability. The sometimes stunning 18 holes are a joy if you're in the zone, but don't get frustrated when you inevitably stray into the near impossible heavy rough. Used for Open Qualifying again this year.

HESWALL GC

Address: Cottage Lane, Gayton, Wirral, CH60 8PB

Tel: +44 (0)151 342 1237

Web: www.heswallgolfclub.com

Details: 18 holes, yardage 6,882, par 72

Cost: £50 - £60

Review: Enjoyable, open parkland course on the Wirral Peninsula, with stunning views of the River Dee and the Welsh Hills. The course, which has recently been extended, presents a variety of challenges for short and long handicap players. Was the venue for the Junior Open in 2006 and will host the North of England Under 16s Championships for the third year in a row in August.

SOUTHPORT MUNI

Address: Southport Municipal Golf Club, Park Road West, Southport, PR9 0JS

Tel: +44 (0)1704 535286

Details: 18 holes, yardage 6,253, par 69

Review: If you arrive in Southport a couple of days early and you've got a few hours to kill, then you could do worse than hack your way round this unpretentious municipal track. Despite being flat and well drained, it offers a tricky test in the obligatory coastal winds. Some long straight drives are required, especially on the back nine, but the rough is pretty forgiving if you do happen to stray off the fairway.

FORMBY HALL:

Address: Formby Hall Golf Resort & Spa, Southport Old Road, Formby, Southport L37 0AB

Tel: +44 (0)1704 875 699

Web: www.formbyhallgolfclub.co.uk

Details: 18 holes, yardage 6,955, par 72

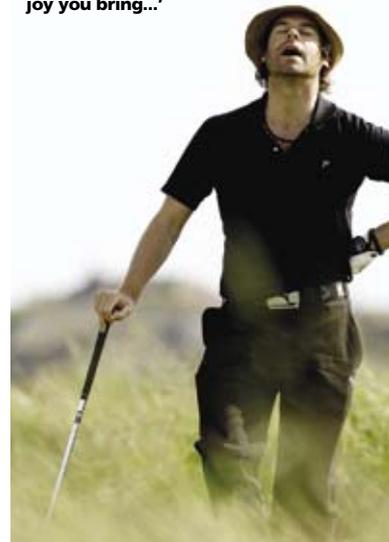
Cost: £35 - £55

Review: This little beauty only opened a dozen years ago, but has already developed a reputation as one of the finest courses in the area. Features a series of testing holes protected by water and well-placed bunkers. With its views across to distant hills, great fairways and manicured greens, the club is already an established venue for tour events.

SEE SIX OF THE BEST ON PAGE 120 FOR INFORMATION ON HILLSIDE GC AND SOUTHPORT AND AINSDALE GC.



'And that's the joy you bring...'



refreshment. We've been assured that Maloney's is the ideal venue to kick-start a fun-filled night on the tiles in Southport. We can hear the music pumping from outside, the neon lights are flashing invitingly and, as we enter the saloon doors like Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday, we're expecting wine, women and song. There are five people in the bar... "Sorry lads, Southport is dead Monday to Wednesday," says the apologetic barman. Even though we had been warned yesterday, we just didn't want to believe it, I suppose...

We console ourselves in an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet. It's less than seven quid a pop and it's top drawer.

### WEDNESDAY

I've seen some sights in my life, but Dan wrapped up in a blanket on a rickety armchair with his nether regions in full view, is not what I want to clap eyes on first thing. "I've not slept," he moans. "And don't tell me sleeping's cheating..."

We've got a date with Heswall GC this morning. However, first of all we head for Crosby where we pick up another photographer, Mark. He looks haggard, like a man who hasn't seen daylight for days. "I haven't," he says, in a Scouse drawl. "I've been at the Sound City Festival all week, working 18-hour days. I shot Paul McCartney yesterday." Really? Heather Mills will be well chuffed...

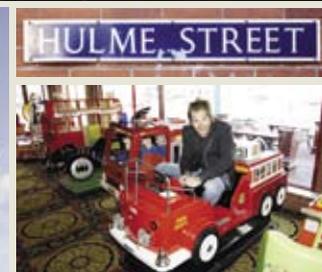
After yesterday's challenge of West Lancs, it's a relief to be presented with an open parkland course. The view from the clubhouse is stunning, with the River Dee separating the Wirral from North Wales. In the distance is Molfamau Hill. "All the schools in the area have been on walks up there," says Mark. "Every kid in Liverpool has been convinced by their teachers that there's an ice cream van at the top..."

I hack my way round this jolly little number much more impressively than normal, but Dan's in imperious form – a 75 is a bit too good for me.

We say goodbye to Mark, challenge him to get an ex-Beatle on a golf course for GP in the near future, and hit the road. "Shaun, it's Richard. Mission accomplished." "Nice one, although you could have gone to Southport next week instead. I was only having you on..." **GP**



House of Lord Street



'So, Kebab and Britain's got Talent?'



### Where to stay...

#### THE VINCENT HOTEL, SOUTHPORT

Address: 98 Lord Street, Southport, PR8 1JR  
Tel: 01 704 534400

Web: [www.thevincenthotel.com](http://www.thevincenthotel.com)

Review: Situated on Lord Street, Southport's Parisienne Boulevard, the Vincent takes comfort and service to new heights – all within a fresh, stylish and contemporary interior. The Vincent only opened at the end of June so there's still a chance you could be the first to christen one of their luxury rooms. GOLFPUNK'S intrepid explorers took a peak before its grand opening, and the place is pukka.

