Pennard Golf Club

PENNARD, WALES

A decades-old reference led the author to one of the most dramatic links in the British Isles

by Tom Doak • photography by Pete Fontaine

The short 7th plays along the ruins of Pennard Castle, which dates from the 12th century.







Known as the "links in the sky" because it sits atop 100-foot cliffs, Pennard plays along dramatically rumpled turf. Clockwise from top: the par-5 16th, the par-5 17th, the par-3 15th. Opposite page: the 196-yard 13th.

Of all the golf courses I discovered in my year overseas studying golf architecture after college, the most unexpected find was an unknown links in southern Wales.

Despite all that had been written about the great links of Britain, I found only a single reference to Pennard Golf Club during my research beforehand, and a most obscure one at that—two of its holes had been chosen among the best in Britain by Sir Ernest Holderness, twice British Amateur champion, in a short article he wrote for *Golf Illustrated* in 1926. (The agricultural library at Cornell had a copy in its basement stacks.)

Holderness' selections included holes from a number of other courses in remote parts of the U.K.—Royal Dornoch, St. Enodoc and Westward Ho! among them. His good taste established, I made a note to seek out Pennard while in that isolated corner of the kingdom, which I finally reached in December 1982, five months after I landed.

Driving through the old gray city of Swansea, smokestacks in full force, it became clear how the course might have been overlooked for decades. There is little inherently charming about Swansea, best known as the hometown of poet Dylan Thomas, who described it as "an ugly, lovely town."

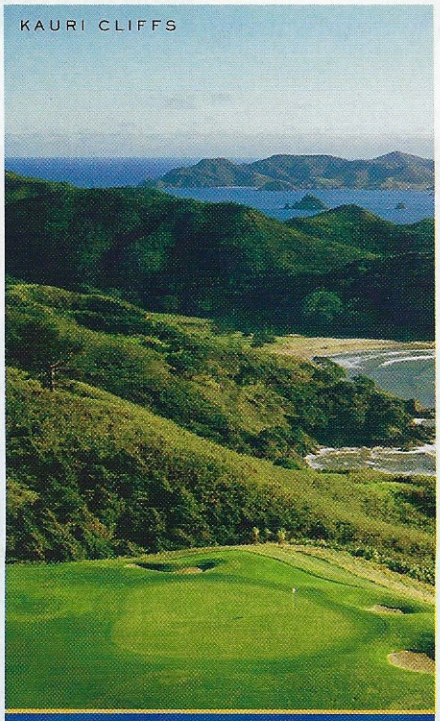
However, ugly is the wrong description of



Pennard Golf Club
PENNARD, WALES

Par: 71 **Yardage:** 6,232
Year founded: 1896
Architects: James Braid, C.K. Cotton
Contact: pennardgolfclub.com

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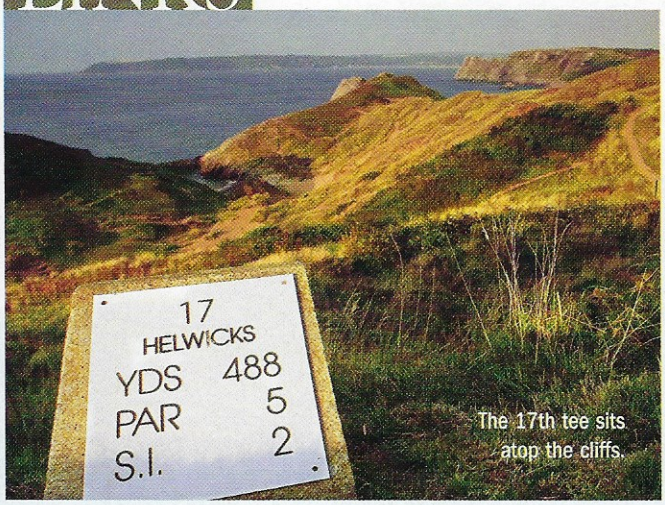
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The 17th tee sits atop the cliffs.

the Gower Peninsula west of the city. It is a beautiful rural area buffered from industry by the brisk westerly winds. And at the end of the road to Southend, I crested a hill to find the most rugged landscape I have ever seen for golf, brilliantly green after the late-fall rains.

Pennard has been described as a "links in the sky" because the tumbling contours of its fairways are found not at sea level but 100 to 200 feet above, with spectacular views of a river valley (known as the Pill) and cliffs leading down to a deserted beach. Dating to 1896, the design is attributed to James Braid, five-time British Open champion and a member of the "Great Triumvirate" of the early 20th century, along with J.H. Taylor and Harry Vardon. Later, C.K. Cotton did work on the 6,232-yard par-71 course.

The front nine begins by heading uphill along the road back to town; the first truly memorable hole is the 517-yard 4th, the first of a quartet of challenging par 5s. But it's when you arrive at the 7th tee that the nature of the course shows its full jaw-dropping potential. The short par 4 plays between a small church ruin on the left and a much more complete castle ruin just to the right of the fairway, overlooking the deep river valley just beyond. Once the tee shot is negotiated, the pitch must be played to a fall-away two-tiered green hidden in a hollow in the hills.

Still, the back nine is the reason to make the trip. The par-5 10th is a sharp dogleg to the left; to reach it in two you have to carry a narrow stream and some nasty native vegetation on the inside corner. The 180-yard par-3 11th plays back across the stream valley to a very small green benched into the side of the hill. After the driveable par-4 12th falls away dangerously toward the Pill on the right, the green of the par-3 13th, one of Holderness' favorites, is tucked awkwardly behind a dune on the left, on the other side of a deep, sandy dip.

After a strong dogleg par 4 and a short hole across flattish ground, the three finishing holes crank up the drama. The tee shot on the 493-yard par-5 16th plays out to sea, then doglegs sharply to the right, with a wide green perched at the edge of the cliffs daring you to blast a fairway wood toward the green. This wasn't Sir Ernest Holderness' favorite hole, but it is positively one of mine.

Holderness preferred the 488-yard par-5 17th, with its tee atop the cliffs, a fairway falling away to the right with just a small shelf in the center, and the last half of an interrupted fairway swinging around the back of a gorse-strewn hillside, so that going for the green in two requires you to flirt with the blind left side. As I walked up to look for my own second shot, a small herd of horses galloped across behind me, headed down through the ferns toward the beach. The course is sited on common land, so the locals have grazing rights for their sheep and horses—a low wire fence around the greens keeps the animals from trampling them.

The 399-yard 18th hole tries to play straightaway from a high tee, but in contrast to the 17th, its fairway tilts sharply to the left, so severely that only a faded tee shot has any chance of staying out of the rough. Still, it's not too demanding a finisher, with the green laid out directly in front of the clubhouse so that members in the second-floor lounge could wonder aloud how a young American had found his way to this corner of the globe.

But golf is indeed a small world. A year later, I was visiting a friend at an amateur event in Florida when I met a golfer from Pennard—Vicki Thomas, who played in six Curtis Cups. Next to her home course, I suspect all the rest looked rather dull by comparison.