

PETER'S ROYAL REFLECTIONS



By Andrew Crockett

Peter Thomson, Arnold Palmer, Tom Watson, Lee Trevino ... Johnny Miller, Ian Baker-Finch, Mark O'Meara and Padraig Harrington...the cream seems to rise to the top at Royal Birkdale, but there is one man who has won The Open twice at the coastal links, Australian golfing immortal Peter Thomson, now aged 87.

Thomson won the first of his five Opens at Royal Birkdale in 1954, the first time the course hosted the championship and he won it impressively beating his hero Bobby Locke by one shot, with a 9 under-par total and a whopping £750 first prize. Leading in to 1954, Thomson had come 16th on his debut (aged 22) in 1951, lost to Bobby Locke (by a shot) in 1952 at Royal Lytham & St Annes and of course it was Ben Hogan in 1953, at Carnoustie in Scotland, who won by four shots from... Peter Thomson (Antonia Cerda, Dai Rees and Frank Stranahan). By 1954 and aged 24 Peter Thomson was 'The Open Champion' and that was a title that would stick with him for the next decade as he became known as the best links player on the planet.

In 1954 Thomson was 24 years young and the youngest champion since Bobby Jones in 1926. Immediately after winning, Thomson

squirrelled himself away into a quiet corner to write his piece for the Argus, driving to the local post office in Southport to cable the article to Australia. Thomson set a youth movement onto the game in Australia, he was front page news and would be for years to come. The following years Thomson's dreams would go to another level, as the defending champion at the Old Course, St Andrews in Scotland.

In 1955, Peter Thomson backed up his 1954 victory at Royal Birkdale with the crème de la crème of golfing stories, by winning The Open Championship at the home of golf, St Andrews. His victory was a world-class win, with the top ten including players from Scotland, England, South Africa, Argentina, Belgium and Ireland. Interestingly, Thomson chose not to practice at St Andrews in the week leading up to the championship, he chose to go sight-seeing around St Andrews. Thomson had won the British Matchplay the previous year on the famed Old Course, which leading up to the Open was bone dry with a tonne of rain. *'I chose not to practise as I figured the rain must come before the week was out and the course would change completely. I know it was a big gamble, but on the day before the qualifying rounds, rain fell all day.'* (148 was the score that enabled 94 players to contest the 1955 Open at St Andrews) Thomson won in 1955 by two shots and collected £1000. He was famously handed the Claret Jug by former Australian Prime minister Lord Stanley Bruce, who was appointed the chair of the R&A in that year.

While the running was hot, Thomson won for the 3rd straight year, in 1956, this time at Royal Liverpool, beating the likes of Gene Sarazen, Gary Player, Roberto De Vincenzo and Henry Cotton.

Going for four in a row in 1957, Thomson was stopped by his hero, South African star Bobby Locke, who chalked up his fourth (and final) Open Championship at the home of golf, St Andrews ... but the win was not without controversy. 1957 is famous for slow play complaints, with 3 hours and 18 minutes being cited as 'in need of a penalty'; but as far as Thomson's legacy is concerned 1957 was the year he could have won four Open Championships in a row. Standing on the final green Bobby Locke had a four-foot putt for the championship, but he marked it a putterhead to the side to avoid the line of his playing partner, Australian, Bruce Crampton. After Crampton holed out, Locke forgot to replace his ball to its original position...and sank the putt, for the win. (Officials were only made aware of Locke's mistake at a much later time; the Championship Committee decreed that no advantage had been gained and that the result, and Locke's three-stroke victory, stood.)

In those days the only ruling was disqualification and had Locke been disqualified, Thomson would have won in 1954, 55, 56 AND 57...and given that Thomson won the Open again in 1958, it would have equated to five Open



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Championships in a row, unparalleled and an indication of his unbridled talent on the firm links ground in Great Britain.

Thomson did win again in 1958, beating Dave Thomas (Wales) in a 36-hole playoff at Royal Lytham and St Annes. 1958 was the 7th consecutive year that Thomson had finished either 1st or 2nd in the Championship. Imagine that today? After a 36-hole pre-qualifying at Lytham, then 72 holes for the tournament, followed by a 36-hole playoff, it took Thomson 144 holes to win The Open in 1958.

In his mid 20s and with the world at his feet, Thomson chose to play tournaments in Europe rather than head for the money in America. His style of golf was suited to firm terrain and traditional links golf, some saying he might be the best to ever turn his hand at the game. America would wait. Thomson would have a few cracks at the American style of golf, winning the Texan Open (1956), but really his heart was in Britain and if not in Britain it was in the fledgling golfing cultures of Singapore, Thailand, India, New Zealand and Japan where he was a prolific winner and a world star.

In 1965 the Open Championship returned to Royal Birkdale and Thomson was several years shy of his last victory. The American stars of Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus were in the field and it was The Big Time! Thomson cruised to victory with his closest American pursuer the famed Tony Lema, the defending champion, 4 shots back. Thomson still cites this victory as the sweetest.

'The last day's play in 1965 was on a Friday and we played 36 holes. I was playing against Tony Lema (1964 champion). He had done well in the morning, but by the afternoon he was tired. He wasn't used to walking that far in a day. I went around in 71 for the last round with 35 putts, so I didn't mis-hit one shot in the afternoon. Not one.'

Footnote: Sadly, Tony Lema died a year later (1966) in a plane crash en route to a golf tournament in Chicago. In his short life he had notched up an Open Championship at St Andrews (1964), a 2nd in the US Masters (1963), a 4th at the US Open in 1966 and a T9th at the US PGA in 1964. He won 12 US PGA tour events between 1962-1966 and to those that knew him, Tony Lema was a standout.



Peter Thomson enjoys a moment with the crowd.

LOOKING FORWARD TO 2017

Looking ahead to The Open Championship of 2017, Peter Thomson will be 87 years of age, and how much life and golf has changed. In Thomson's era you had to pre-qualify, even if you were the defending champion. Bunkers were not raked, players were not walking endorsement deals and often the last day's play was 36 holes, on a Friday. Television coverage was fleeting, the media tent was a tent with grass (or mud) on the floor and the winner had to be well groomed and wear a sports jacket to the presentation to receive their cheque and Claret jug. A championship round of golf took around three hours and some of the best players in the world still had day jobs.

Last month, we asked Peter to share his memories of Royal Birkdale.

After you won the '54 Open Championship at Birkdale, did you have to pre-qualify in 1955?

Yes.

Can you remember when the pre-qualifying was no longer compulsory for all entrants and approximately what year was that?

I can only guess it was about 1967.

The Open Championship changed from 36 holes on the last day to 18 holes on Saturday and 18 holes on Sunday – why do you think they changed that format?

By the time I got to play the event in 1951, it was already 80 years old. They had plenty of time back in those days before 1950 and they could spread the event into the week before. It was the week of golf, so we played one round on Monday and the second qualifying round was Tuesday. Then we were ready to go. One of the rounds, of the two

qualifying rounds, was played on the course proper, whether it was Lytham or Birkdale. In the case of Lytham and St Annes in 1958 in the qualifying round on the course proper I shot 63; they don't call that a record in the Open Championship because it wasn't in the Open Championship – it was qualifying for it. On the Wednesday during the tournament proper I shot 66, so I went backwards.

Can you remember roughly how long a Championship round would take you, in your prime of the late 1950s?

Oh yes. Three hours and twenty minutes. In a pair. We would be walking to our golf ball and sizing up what club we might need for the next shot, when we got to the ball we would pull the club and hit it. In 1952 at Lytham (Royal Lytham & St Annes) Bobby Locke won the championship by one stroke, from me. Norman Von Nida went off his head yelling and screaming and saying that Locke should be disqualified, or at least given a two-stroke penalty, for playing slowly. They clocked him at three hours and twenty minutes. I remember the final of the 1948 Victorian Amateur championships, I got knocked out in the semifinals, but I went to watch the final and they sped around in two hours and 20 minutes.

One of the problems with the modern clubs is that it takes too long to play the course. It is more than half a day. That dismays a lot of people. I am a member at Victoria Golf Club and on Saturday there would be 100 players before 10am, because they want to go and watch the footy in the afternoon. That is not possible anymore, forget it, it takes five hours to get around!



Peter Thomson with caddy Walter Gillespie.

What about this year's Open, can you offer any insights?

Royal Birkdale has been very kind to me. Looking forward to The Open in 2017, I have to say that the course is a different one altogether than the course I played then. It is now much narrower and therefore more difficult. British-style courses require extremely delicate judgements, rather more exacting assessments of each shot. It is not a question of fixing your eyes on the flag and swinging. It is a more sensitive game.

Any other special memories?

When celebrating the 50th anniversary of my first Open win (1954) in 2004, Kim Baker asked me for suggested locations for a photo at Royal Birkdale. We went to a par-three on the back nine where, in the final round of The Open, I had hit a four-iron from the tee. I'd hit it with a slow swing and kept the blade a little open because there was a strong right-to-left wind. The ball flew beautifully, slicing a little into the wind, which held it straight. It finished a yard from the hole, but I missed the putt. Baker asked me if, 50 years after my first Open win, I could still see the shot in my mind. 'Still see it? I can still feel it,' I told him. And I still can. •

Photos courtesy of John W Fischer III Archives.

Citations: *Lessons I have Learned* : Peter Thomson *Inspirations & Insights from Australia's Greatest Golfer* by Steve Perkin (Geoff Slattery Publishing)

The Complete Golfer: Peter Thomson, A Biography by Peter Mitchell (Lothian Publishing Company)

The Peter Thomson Five: A golfing legend's greatest triumphs by Tony Walker (The Miegunyah Press)



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