

The Golf Warehouse 2023 New Zealand Hickory Open

Following on from its inauguration last year, the 2023 New Zealand Hickory Open was once again contested at Christchurch Golf Club during the second weekend of March. Acknowledging the significance of this new national-level addition to the worldwide hickory golfing calendar, Christchurch Golf Club hosted the event just one week prior to celebrating its own one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary. The significance of this honour was not lost on the event's participants, particularly those who had travelled from as far away as the United Kingdom, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand's North Island.

As the shaky isles' second oldest golf club, Christchurch Golf Club (est. 1873) is the seventh oldest outside the United Kingdom, and the fourth instituted in the southern hemisphere. It was preceded in this regard by only Mauritius Gymkhana Club (est. 1849), the briefly existing but soon disbanded first iteration of Adelaide Golf Club (1870–73), and its southern neighbour Otago Golf Club (est. 1871). After a decades-long program of tree removal and other improvements, the club's Shirley-based course has now been expertly returned to its former links-land style and is a perfect venue for hickory-shafted golfing competitions.

In the weeks leading up to this event, course superintendent Mark Lawson (one of the fathers of the renaissance of hickory golf in the Canterbury region) had prepared the course to perfection. After constant cutting and rolling, the club's bent-grass greens had been purposefully groomed to a slickness worthy of a national title. As a result, one of the most highly renowned putters in world golfing history was to figure prominently in the outcome of the weekend's main event.

The South Shore Jug and ANZAC Flask

On the afternoon of the first day of competition, two team events were concurrently contested, using an identical format: handicapped singles play over 9-holes. To determine the winner of each event, the best three scores from the respective teams were combined to obtain totals. A separate 9-hole foursomes event was conducted prior to this.

The first of the team events, the South Shore Jug, was intended as an inter-club competition between the nation's four most prestigious clubs: Christchurch Golf Club, Royal Wellington Golf Club, Otago Golf Club, and Royal Auckland and Grange Golf Club. Prior to play beginning, the event was reduced to a three-way contest between the two former clubs and a 'Barbarians' team made up of the latter two. With their superior knowledge of the demanding Shirley links, the Christchurch Golf Club team came out on top with a combined nett score of 110 strokes from its best three players. The Barbarians team finished with 122 strokes, and the Wellingtonians with 131.

Brothers in Arms—With Hickories Rather Than .303 Inch Rifles

Due to a healthy contingent of Australian players registering for the Open, the organizing committee had most thoughtfully instituted a second teams event known as the ANZAC Flask. This competition is likely to become an annual international fixture between the two highly competitive Antipodean siblings—whose solidarity was forged in the crucible at Gallipoli in February 1915. In a reversal of the usual David and Goliath relationship between New Zealand and Australia, the Kiwi team comprised a large muster of players from all corners of the dominion, while the visitors could summon but a pitiful half dozen. Comprising an enormous solid-silver whisky flask generously donated by event organizer Peter Van Eekelan, the trophy had a capacity more than adequate to satisfy the thirsts of both the winning and losing teams, along with those of the other international onlookers.

The inaugural running of this event was won by the 'little Aussie battlers' and the flask was presented at The Hickory Dinner by former Christchurch Golf Club captain and event co-organizer Glenn Bongartz. The scores were Australia, with 108 strokes, two shots ahead of the Kiwis, on 110. Using the backdrop of what seemed like a stage-managed sunset across the club's glorious golf links, the pre-Open dinner was held in the club's magnificent new clubhouse. Designed by Mason & Wales Architects with a postmodern nod to its historic red-brick predecessor, which was sadly destroyed by the city's disastrous 2011 earthquake, this building is a testament to the resilience of the local golfing community—some of whom had risked their lives to save the club's precious archives. Undoubtedly more than a dram of the

spirit of this city's indomitable inhabitants is inherited from the bloodlines of their mainly Caledonian ancestors.

The morning's foursomes event was won by Australian pairing Andrew Baker and Darron Watt with a nett score of 36.5 strokes, followed in a three-way tie, on 38.5 strokes, by Mark Lawson/Glenn Bongartz, Grant Borrie/Dean Sweetman, and Simon Forshaw/Geoff Pearce. The afternoon's singles event was won by another Australian visitor, Bruce Collins, with a nett score of 35 strokes. Second placing was again shared by a trio of competitors, with Andrew Baker, Paul Kehoe, and Murray Turnbull finishing tied on nett scores of 36 strokes.

The Lay Day

On Saturday—the lay day between the lead-up events and the championship, which was held on Sunday—all visitors were invited by Christchurch Golf Club to play its full course. Teeing off from the white markers, players were able to experience all 18 holes of the layout. This gave them the opportunity to view, from a playing perspective, the course's two newly completed 'Thomson' holes. While Australian golfing legend and five-time Open Championship winner, Peter Thomson, had long advised the club on course design and other architectural matters (much of it on a pro-bono basis), these holes were designed by a much younger New Zealand-born golf course architect with the same surname—Brett Thomson of RBT Design. Generating spirited comment among local players in the author's group, the holes are wonderful examples of the 'give them enough rope and they will hang themselves' school of golf course architecture, which was best expressed in the designs of renowned Scottish course architect Dr. Alister MacKenzie. The opportunity to play with hickory-shafted clubs on a true championship course (on which numerous regional, national, and international events have taken place in the past) was a rare pleasure and greatly appreciated by all who participated.

Nevertheless, this privileged experience was topped prior to post-round drinks, when the international players were invited to visit the club's recently created Sir Bob Charles Gallery. Occupying an attic between the clubhouse's twin glass-fronted gables, this intimate museum and sitting room is filled with a collection of priceless memorabilia donated by the club's most famous son, Sir Robert James 'Bob' Charles ONZ KNZM CBE. Even more special, and as an awe-inspiring and completely unexpected surprise, the visitors were treated to a personally guided tour by the gallery's famous subject, Sir Bob Charles. Among the artefacts viewed were the 90%-scale replica of the famous claret jug trophy that Sir Bob received upon winning the 1963 (British) Open Championship, and The Willie Park Trophy (a replica of the original Open Championship belt) presented to Bob and his son David for winning the 1998 PNC Championship. Among other items, the display also contains numerous photos, artworks, trophies, and objects of interest. Most importantly, on a wall to themselves and mounted in a case, are twelve of the fourteen clubs Bob used to win The Open Championship at Royal Lytham and St. Annes in 1963. The sand wedge from the championship-winning set now sits in the clubhouse of that esteemed Lancashire, England club. While the famed Bullseye putter with which Bob was regarded as the world's best putter of the era is replaced here by a well-used and almost identical substitute (with the exception that its head is painted black). The original brass version now resides at The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews in Scotland.

Drinks and canapes were followed by an audio-visual presentation introduced by Ashley David Lewis and featuring his brother, Mel Lewis. Nonagenarian Mel is the oldest New Zealand descendant of the famous St. Andrews golfing and club making family, the Andersons, and is the nation's last surviving 'old school' hickory-shaft club maker. In his video presentation, Mel began the description of his ancestry by quoting highly-respected St. Andrews historian Roger McStravick, who wrote that a wedding in 1660 was the beginning of 'the greatest of all golf dynasties.' This union was the conjunction of the three most famous early Scottish golfing families—the Robertson, Morris, and Anderson clans. Mel also described how his and Ashley's great, great grandfather, David 'Old Daw' Anderson, had worked as a golf club and feathery golf ball maker, and was also employed as keeper of the greens on The Old Course at St. Andrews. In the 1880s, after his shop on The Links had closed, Old Daw opened a ginger beer stand on the 4th hole of The Old Course. Here he also provided food, golf balls, and clubs to a passing procession of golfers for nearly two decades. Mel then went on to proudly describe how Old Daw's son, the brothers' great, great uncle, Jamie Anderson, had won three consecutive editions of The Open Championship—between 1877 and 1879.

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On the morning of the New Zealand Hickory Open, the organizing committee provided a most time-appropriate entrance for the international players, who were conveyed to the clubhouse in three beautifully restored cars: a black 1929 Chrysler, a maroon 1928 Dodge, and a blue/grey 1928 Oakland. Significantly, the latter of these was equipped with hickory-spoked wheels. The respective owners and drivers of these golden-era of hickory automobiles were John Foster, Eric Cox, and Graeme Read. As the cars approached the clubhouse, twelve-year-old local, Oscar Browitt, resplendently dressed in traditional Scottish attire, piped-in the visitors' arrival. The resonant sounds of his bagpipes echoed across the dew-covered links and heralded the beginning of what would become a momentous and memorable day.

The championship course comprised twelve holes, whose tee markers were set under the expert guidance of club member and golf course architect Bob Charles. Played completely within the Shirley links' home paddock, the layout contained six holes from the course's regular first nine and five holes from its second. Additionally, to add to the eleven holes usually contained within that paddock, a completely made-up hole (variously known as '17B', or 'Bob's Bantling') was employed. This cute yet challenging 120 metre par-three was temporarily constructed, on the day, by placing tee-markers on the rotunda side of the burn that crosses the seventeenth fairway and cutting a hole in the middle of the first/seventeenth double-green—with pins for those holes cut on the green's extremities.

The Foursomes Championship

With the national foursomes championship to be contested in the morning, players were summoned to the tee with resounding introductions by Christchurch Golf Club member Simon Fraser. While also a member of The Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews, Simon was attired in traditional Scottish regalia including his ancestral Fraser-clan kilt.

The unconventional configuration of a 12-hole course was adopted as a tribute to Prestwick Golf Club, the 12-hole course over which the first twelve editions of The Open Championship were run. This occurred between 1860 and 1872. That is, every year except 1871, the year after Thomas 'Young Tom' Morris took possession of the championship belt for having won the event three years in a row. That year the championship was not held, because no new trophy had been made available to replace the winner's belt. It was only in the following year, 1872, that the famed claret jug was inaugurated as the perennial prize for the year's champion golfer. It too was won at its first outing by the young golfing prodigy Tom Morris Junior.

With a three over par score of 51 off-the-stick for the 12-hole course, was the local pairing of Catherine Bell and Richard Reed. Runners-up on the same score were Peter Lund and golf professional and CEO of Pegasus Golf and Sports, James Devlin—the winner of last year's individual championship. In third place, two strokes behind, was the evergreen pairing of Sir Bob Charles and his recent biographer Geoff Saunders. The play-off for first and second places was decided by a unique style of chip-off on the final green. Surrounded by the entire field from the day's play, each player was asked to play a twenty-odd metre chip-shot or putt down the steeply sloping final green. The players were asked to line up, facing away from the contest when they weren't playing their own shots. The assembled crowd was asked to not react to the shots—and before the next competitor took their go, the preceding ball was measured and removed from the green. As each player proceeded, they had no idea of how well the earlier contestants had fared.

In the foursomes handicap event, the winners with a score of 43.4 were Aucklanders, Peter Gaynor, partnered by the course superintendent of Jack's Point, Queenstown, Simon Forshaw. Beaten by one full stroke into second place were Alan Cowie and Paul Kehoe, followed by Australians Andrew Baker and Peter Monks in third place.

The Individual Championship

After a brief lunch break between the foursomes and individual championships, the competitors were treated to a barbecue of gourmet sausages and burgers, which were expertly cooked by Graham Clarke. Meat for lunch was donated by Todd Heller and was complimented by fresh rolls and a delicious coleslaw.

Once more, the 54 players were summoned to the tee by Simon Fraser as their afternoon tee times approached. As on the previous two days, the event was played in brilliant sunshine with a slight cooling breeze. The organizers must surely have felt justified in their choice of dates and venue and could, by now, relax and concentrate on their own games. The high-quality field contained Alan Grieve, a former US Hickory Open and Australian Hickory Shaft Championship winner, and Darron Watt, a multiple winner of the latter event. Foursomes championship co-winner from the morning and the youngest player in the field, Catherine Bell, was stepping up once more to do battle with all comers, again playing from the men's tees. Also competing were the winner of last year's inaugural championship, local professional James Devlin; the North Island's 'gun' hickory player, Peter Gaynor; and the long-hitting 'dark horse' and superintendent of the hosting club, Mark Lawson. Nevertheless, the favourite for the event, playing in the final group with Lawson and highly-credentialed amateurs Geoff Saunders and Glenn Bongartz, was New Zealand's trailblazing left-handed champion golfer Sir Bob Charles—whose caddie for the day was up-and-coming junior golfer Maadi Kiri Kiri.

At the rotunda adjacent to the third, ninth, and seventeenth tees, a ginger beer cart was perfectly positioned to attract passing players for refreshments that included cold ginger beer and whisky (either straight or mixed with milk). The day's whisky supply was donated by Whisky Galore, the nation's premier purveyor of single malt Scotch whisky.

Not far from here, during a delay in play on the seventeenth tee, Sir Bob provided a perfect example of how a true champion's mind operates. When a gallery member jokingly mentioned that he had 'put a bundle on the dark horse'—namely club superintendent, Mark Lawson, who with three holes to go was in joint leadership with Bob—the consummate professional's instant and disarming retort was 'You'd better start laying-off pretty soon.' It is such steely determination and sense of self-belief that was to separate this still-great champion from the rest of the field.

After a wide drive on the third-last hole, which led to a bogey, Lawson was one shot behind starting the final hole. Sir Bob's long drive and laser-like approach, which landed little more than a metre short of the hole, ensured that the title was his. The old adage is 'if you've got two putts to win, use them'—and so he did. Sir Bob Charles, on the eve of his 87th birthday had beaten a strong international field to win the twenty-first Open championship of his career. This was a win for the ages and enough to raise goose bumps on the entire crowd.

For the record, Sir Bob returned a card of one over par 49 for the 12-hole event—beating Mark Lawson by a single stroke, with valiant Catherine Bell only one stroke further back. The handicap event was an Australian clean sweep, with Bruce Collins, Andrew Baker, and Greg Mellifont on the podium with scores of 40, 42, and 43 respectively. Christchurch Golf Club president Jacqui Lowe won the ladies' best nett with a score of 49. The prizes were most generously donated by New Zealand retailer Golf Warehouse.

At the end of play, a piping of the haggis was performed by Graeme Bryce. He was accompanied in this customary observance by Glenn Bongartz, Simon Fraser, and Jamie McEwan. The latter recited Robbie Burns' Ode to a Haggis before ritually carving the Scottish delicacy. It was served later as part of a beautiful buffet dinner and 'och aye it was braw.' After-dinner presentations were made by Glenn Bongartz and the skills acquired in his former vocation as an auctioneer were impressively demonstrated as two hickory-shafted clubs were auctioned: a Tom Stewart putter donated by Peter Van Eekelan, and a long-nosed, scare-necked putter donated by another of the event's organizers, Stu Upton. The latter had been hand-made by Stu from local rimu wood under supervision from master club maker Mel Lewis. Bidding was spirited, with the proceeds going to local junior Canterbury golfers.

Being Lady Verity Charles' birthday (with Sir Bob's to follow in two days), the evening concluded with the surprise appearance of a pair of birthday cakes. Unfortunately, Lady Verity was not present. No doubt she was at home preparing for their shared celebrations. Nevertheless, the assembled throng sang happy birthday to them both, along with universal wishes of 'many more to follow.'

Summary

A gleaming footnote to Sir Bob Charles' long and impressive list of achievements and the rich legacy he has bestowed upon New Zealand golf, is his illustrious name etched onto a new trophy—as a winner of

the New Zealand Hickory Open. For future winners of what has now become a most prestigious event, what could be better than having one's name listed below that of one of the game's true legends?

In his quiet and deliberate acceptance speech, the winner mentioned that his first experience of golf was playing with old hickory-shafted clubs inherited from his father. A most gracious winner, he also casually commented that it was, 'lovely to win another Open championship.' The irony of this statement was not lost on anyone in the admiring crowd. Upon studying the great golfer's record—along with being the winner of the (British) Open Championship in 1963, Bob also won the (British) Senior Open Championship twice, the New Zealand Open four times, four Open championships of other nations, and no fewer than nine other regional Open events during his long and illustrious career.

This event played with hickory-shafted clubs could possibly be Sir Bob's final Open win. Nevertheless, unlike this year (and even though I was joking), I wouldn't bet against it. Hickory golf is the portal via which our hero Sir Bob Charles travelled 'back to the future'. Therefore, unless the field pulls up its collective Argyle socks, I reckon he'll be back again next year to successfully defend his title.

Photos:



Sir Bob Charles and Oscar Browitt



The Field



The Final Group—2023 New Zealand Hickory Open

**Left-to-right: Simon Fraser (Starter), Geoff Saunders, Sir Bob Charles (Champion),
Maadi Kiri Kiri (Sir Bob's Caddie), Glenn Bongartz, Mark Lawson (Runner-up)**



New Zealand Hickory Open Foursomes Champions—Catherine Bell and Richard Reed



Christchurch Golf Club clubhouse



David 'Old Daw' Anderson's ginger beer cart, The Old Course, St. Andrews c.1880s



Dean Tucker, Darron Watt, Peter Van Eekelan, and Alan Grieve at the CGC ginger beer cart



ANZAC Flask Winners with Sir Bob Charles

Left-to-right: Alan Grieve, Andrew Baker, Peter Monks, Sir Bob Charles, Darron Watt, Bruce Collins, and Greg Mellifont



Piping the Haggis

Left-to-right: Jamie McEwan, Glenn Bongartz, Simon Fraser, and Graeme Bryce



Winner's acceptance speech

Left-to-right: Glenn Bongartz and Sir Bob Charles