

***The Rambler's Fairway—A Gouffer's Odyssey
Revisited, June 2021***



Bob and Molly Hillery

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It has been four years since six Gentlemen Gouffers made their epic and unconventional golfing odyssey across Scotland along a cross-country route now known as the Rambler's Fairway. It was almost 2 ½ years afterwards that about two dozen pages of notes, assembled from the memories of each participant, were presented to me with the hope that they would be used as a basis for a permanent record of the event. An event that has still, to the best of our knowledge, never been repeated! One year ago, the first proof copy of the book was available for review and in October 2020, the final version was printed, and copies distributed to the Gouffers at a local West Chester pub – somehow entirely appropriate!

The chief architect, leader and team recruiter, Chris/Shep/Chip, felt that there were others who had played a role in the adventure and should receive a copy of the book for their reading pleasure, their coffee table, or simply to be archived. Many of these were, of course, local to the Greater Cincinnati area and hopefully by now have received – and enjoyed – their copy. Others, however, contributed to the success of the venture through their interest and hospitality along the route and hence were living in Scotland. Names and addresses were known but the cost of mailing this rather heavy tome was prohibitive – about the same as the cost of the book itself. So, it was decided that distribution would be carried out either in person or by mailing the necessary copies from within the UK whenever another visit was planned. Covid, lockdowns, quarantine requirements, tests and inordinate amounts of paperwork meant that it was June 2021 before Molly and I were able to once again take advantage of the beautiful apartment in Yorkshire that has become our home away from home for the past ten years – courtesy of our nephew. It is fortunate that we in effect have a whole wardrobe of clothes in Ilkley as we left Cincinnati on May 28 with our suitcases heavy with books – and very little else.

Having successfully passed all Covid tests and satisfied the week-long quarantine requirements, we were now free to get out to the local restaurants, walk and cycle through the beautiful countryside – and plan driving trips a little further afield. We made reservations for a two-night stay at Powfoulis Manor, which had been the assembly point for the six Americans four years ago and from where their journey had begun. June 28 and 29 were the two nights (four years and one week since Day 1 of the Odyssey) and the full day in Scotland would allow us to follow the route (as closely as possible) and distribute books as appropriate.

On what was another bright and sunny morning (having seen no rain in our four weeks stay to date) we left Ilkley to begin the five-hour drive to Powfoulis Manor, near Falkirk. It was a beautiful drive along the edge of the Yorkshire Dales, up the eastern side of the Lake District, through the Border Counties in England and Scotland and around Glasgow. We arrived shortly after 3pm and were greeted first by Ann and then Paul, the proprietor. We had a brief chat about the reason for our visit (the Gouffers and their visit were instantly recognized by both) and then retired to our “chalet” room, a short walk from the main house. It would appear that the marvelous 300-year-old house is now used only for dining and receptions and all guest rooms are in the chalet block, where the rooms are adequate but nothing like the elegance of the main building.





Shortly after checking in, I went for a solo drive from Powfoulis, following the golfing route as far as I could remember it and as well as I could without the aid of a navigator (Molly rested at the Manor) and while trying to negotiate the busy traffic in the area around the city of Stirling. I soon reached Airth and saw where the GGG had turned to “drive” along the footpath south of the castle walls and soon passed through Dunmore – missing the Dunmore Pineapple (a folly in Dunmore Park, ranked “as the most bizarre building in Scotland”) which Chris had so much wanted to visit in 2017. I approached Stirling from the east (the GGG came into the city from the south) and “recognized” the light industrial area and “car dealers’ row” which they too had ultimately reached and close to the point at Craigs Roundabout where they had ended Day One. I somehow made it though the busy streets and the one-way systems before reaching a much more open area almost in the shadow of Stirling Castle.

This was the King’s and Queen’s Gardens, opposite Stirling Golf Club, and the place where the Day Two tee-off had taken place. I recognized the path on which they had been passed by (and impressed by) a young woman enjoying her late morning jog and then saw the field where at least one golfer had come too close to a large Highland Cow (Bull!!)

I passed over the Motorway on Dumbarton Road, along the exact path where they too had crossed, taking advantage of the footpath and the grass verge for their drives and some decent putting practice. I could not, of course, leave the road and head across fields as they had done but I was able to follow a side road that brought me to the main entrance of the Touch Business Centre, which they had come across and ultimately played through. I could not see the heavily wooded area that Skip



had led them to and in which Bill had taken some interesting drone footage, but I did get an overall impression of the terrain before returning to Powfoulis for dinner. But not before seeing the Powside Cattery, which had bemused the golfers and prompted me to devote an explanatory page in the book, and just missing Cowie, cut off from my route as a result of road works. The next day (Wednesday) Molly and I would attempt to follow the rest of the route from Gargunnoch to Helensburgh.



First, however, we had the pleasure of presenting Paul with his copy of the book as we spent two hours in the main building enjoying a leisurely dinner and conversation with Ann and Paul. They both had vivid memories of the GGG visit and Paul recalled having served the six a very early breakfast and then joining them – and piper – at precisely 5:23am on the Summer Solstice as they teed off to start Day One. As only a true Scot could be, Paul was most impressed that Chris had hired a piper from Cupar, 35 miles away, and was still trying to assess “what that must have cost him!”



We had a full Scottish breakfast in the manor on Wednesday morning and then drove directly to Gargunnoch – a 30-minute drive for us, but 1 ¾ days of hard golf for the six on a previous occasion. Both Chris and I had been in contact with two people in the village and they were expecting our visit and we took two copies of the book. Stuart had even told me that a fellow village trustee, Dave, might even

offer us a cup of coffee as we passed through town. However, a few days before June 30, I received an email from Stuart saying "Just a slight change to our plans for next Wednesday, we will meet you at the Gargunnock Community Centre instead of Dave's house". Wow! It sounded like they were pulling out all the stops.

We arrived at the Centre a few minutes before 10am and were indeed greeted by ten citizens of the village (900 population) and a coffee and cakes spread in the main hall. Everyone that we talked to was obviously aware of the events of 2017, but I had to clarify my role to most of those present. Not surprisingly, perhaps, several people thought that I had been on the epic journey, but all managed to cover their disappointment at not meeting one of the he-



roes. We had some great conversation along with our snack and were then escorted to the bottom of the village where the US flag was flying in our honor. This was indeed a nice gesture, even when we learned that Gargunnock has the "flags of all nations" which they fly on appropriate national days. With July 4 just around the corner, I suggested that perhaps the US flag might fly for several days but was informed that it had to come down to make way for Canada Day tomorrow (July 1). So, the Stars and Stripes were indeed for us.....



Gargunnock welcomes US visitors in grand style

We presented books to Dave and to John McLaren, the local historian (and who was cited in the book in relation to events of witchcraft in the village that in many ways outshined the mythical Gargunnock monster stories created by Shep and Fraser), but we were surprised to receive a presentation of our own. The flag of Gargunnock—replete with drum and bugle—was now ours and, by tradition, should be flown on the first Saturday in June (if I remembered that correctly) and on New Year's Eve. Molly and I will certainly keep up our side of the bargain and proudly display the flag on those days (and those alone) but already our son-in-law has suggested that June 22 (the day the Gouffers passed through the village) should be on the list also—at least in the states of Ohio and Georgia in the USA.



The Lion Rampant, the Royal Banner of the Royal Arms of Scotland and the Queen's official banner in Scotland, was also flying at the Community Centre and we were told that this is normally kept for the Queen or other Royal visits. I had joked with Chris via email that, with the fuss planned in Gargunnock, we were probably headed for TV and Radio slots during our visit to Scotland, perhaps followed by an invitation to The Palace. It was now beginning to look as though it might not be a joke!



One last interesting aspect of our two hours in Gargunnock occurred when we were grouped around the flag. A young man who had not been part of the "reception committee" approached the group and introduced himself and opened his palm to

reveal one of the GGG tokens. These poker chip sized tokens had been left along the route (as well as many other parts of the United Kingdom) for lucky citizens to find and perhaps use the data on them to enter for prizes and make contributions to the sponsored charity. Clearly, word had spread that today was a follow-up to the epic journey and he had taken the trouble to look out his token and show it off to the visitors. We can only assume that he must have dined at the Gargunock Inn either on the day in 2017 or subsequently. I was so stunned by the incident that I didn't ask! We just recall that everyone in Gargunock was extremely pleasant and seemed genuinely interested in the journey and the book-making process. It was a great visit.

The rest of the day was spent following the Rambler's Fairway – or at least as close to it as we could get in many places. For me (and to a lesser extent, Molly) it was as exciting as if I had been part of the trip and we saw many places that were instantly recognized. I felt that I knew the route without the aid of a map – although one came in handy from time to time. It was difficult to stop and take photographs but, of course, all of them would have been repetitions of those in the book.



Along the way we saw so many of the notable sites from the week in June four years ago. The Cross Keys in Kippen where they stayed at the end of Day Two, the “White House”, across whose land they had trespassed



The “White House” just outside Kippen

The unassuming start to The Bog

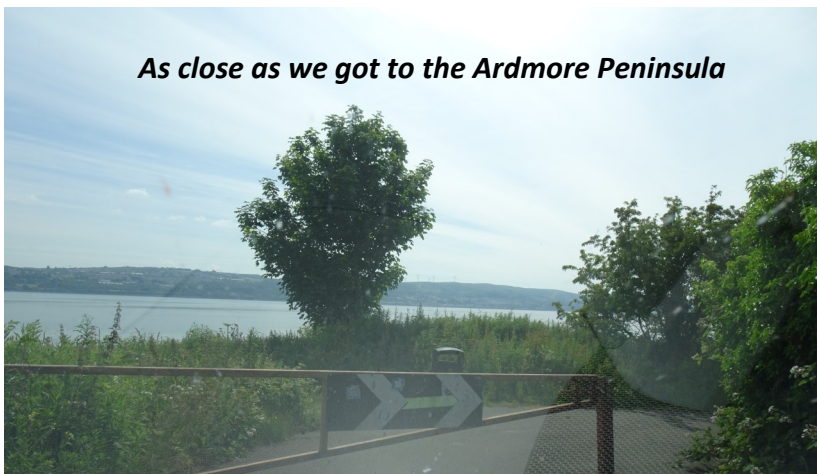
shortly after starting the third day, and – of course – THE BOG, which was the nemesis for that day and for the whole adventure. We saw the spot where they had stopped for a lunch break after emerging from the first wooded area around a small lake but before they entered the forest and bog that was to consume the rest of Day



Three. We were thankful that the road we were on skirted the bog to the south and then the west so we could keep it in sight without experiencing its difficulties firsthand. How (or why) Shep felt the need to play a hole of the Balfron Golf Course after emerging from the watery forest remains a mystery.

Days Four and Five were, thankfully, much easier as they golfed near Loch Lomond, climbed Duncryne Hill to hit balls from the top, had a slight altercation with a local farmer (and hit balls at a banner advertising the business of his boss) and had lunch at the oldest inn in Scotland. Leaving Balfron along Station Road we saw why the team chose to accept a short lift along a very narrow but heavily trafficked road (with Shep tucked in the rear luggage well). We were unable to follow their route through the Buchanan Castle Golf Club where they made friends with the pretty bartender but followed close to their path as we approached Balloch at the southern end of Loch Lomond – and the end of Day Four.

The Golfers' Day Five was mostly cross-country and the roads we could follow allowed us to catch only a few glimpses of what they had experienced. We passed by the Ardmore Peninsula where they completed the task and hit balls into the Atlantic, but we were unable to find any road that went more than a few yards towards the sea. So, for us it was on to Helensburgh where they were to spend their final night with Mission Accomplished. It was in Helensburgh that they enjoyed not only the excitement of a job well done but a rather nice Bed and Breakfast where, it appears, all six fell in love with the proprietress, Catriona. Molly and I were easily able to find the Number 20 Boutique B&B, with its fine views over the River Clyde, and were prepared to present a book if Catriona were home. Chris had said that, although she was very pleasant on their visit, she hadn't expressed too much interest in their trek, so a book may not be of much interest to her. I had sent several emails announcing our intent to visit but had received no reply. Still, we had the book and there was a blond lady in the garden enjoying the warm afternoon sunshine. I approached, said I was sorry to interrupt her day, and asked if she were Catriona. "No", she said, and indicated that she was a guest at the B&B. She thought that the proprietor's name was Alice, so we concluded that the business must have changed hands and Catriona was no longer around – and without a copy of the book!



We drove back to Powfoulis on the motorways through and around Glasgow and passed several street names that sounded familiar from Day Six in 2017 – the Subcrawl through the city in which the six visited many public houses for liquid refreshment on their most unusual golfing day (with its own peculiar rules) – using Glasgow's subway system between stops. We did not stop but made our way back to our hotel for another fine dinner and continued chat with our new friend Paul. Our "Reprise" of the GGG Odyssey was over and we both felt that it had been an enjoyable visit – with the need to pick up a club or hunt for a lost ball. Our book delivery mission was completed.

On returning home (to Mason) we found an early opportunity to fly our Gargunnock flag, which, although not on a recognized official day, we felt showed itself very well with Old Glory!



