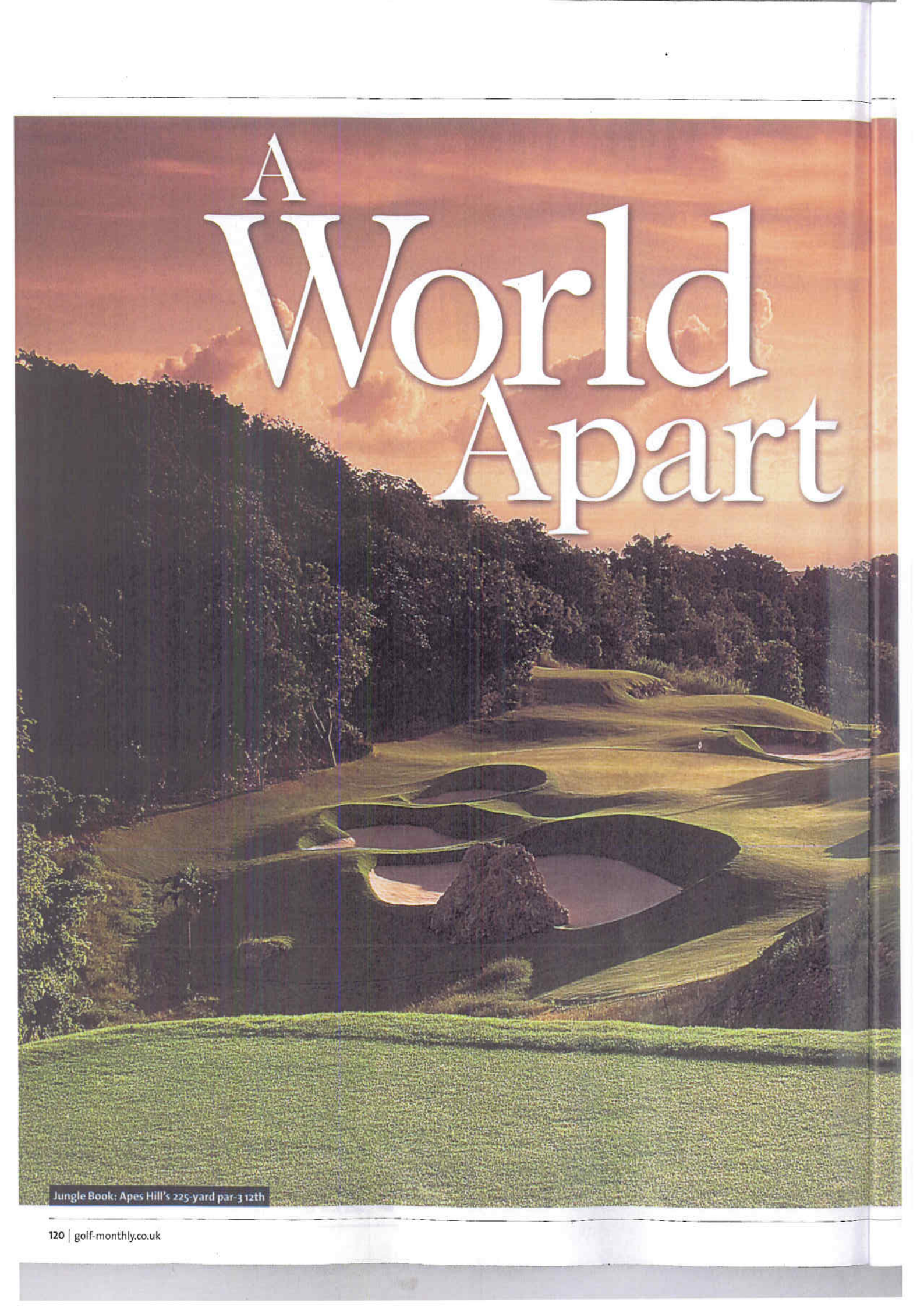


A World Apart



Jungle Book: Apes Hill's 225-yard par-3 12th

With the entrepreneurial skills of Sir Charles Williams – a man who has built a personal fortune with land development in Barbados – Apes Hill promises to be one of the most lavish and high-class courses in the Caribbean. Bill Elliott meets the brains behind the beauty of this stunning new track

Life is full of surprises, but it is never a surprise to discover that the biggest ideas usually are the imaginative by-products of a man who has clambered and fought his way out of the chorus line to stand alone in a very big spotlight. These men always have one thing in common: they are risk-takers, moving relentlessly from not much to something, to a lot and then on they go again. They never stand still; they are never satisfied; they see opportunity where others see a problem and, of course, they can make the rest of us feel tired just listening to them.

Such a man is Sir Charles Williams, or 'Cow' as he swiftly tells you to call him. Why should this bull of an entrepreneur wish to be known as Cow? Because his full name is Charles Othniel Williams – his middle name a hangover from a distant, bleaker time. In Cow's case this distant time dates back to the 17th century. It was 1652 when his Royalist ancestors listened to Cromwell's hunting horns in Wales and decided that, nice though the valleys were, it was probably a good idea to leg it.

Quite why they chose Barbados is uncertain. It may be because this Caribbean island was the easiest to get to, sitting as it does in the middle of the Trade Winds. But 'easy' is a big word when the transport is a wooden boat and the water is the Atlantic and at this time, no one was yet totally certain there was no edge to fall over.

Barbados it was though and the Williams family has lived on the island ever since. It is easy to see why. Think palm trees, a gentle, swelling sea (on the west coast anyway, the Atlantic tends to pound the more dramatic east) and, eventually, rum punches. Think ▷



On the run: Apes Hill's testing greens need a gentle touch



14th: wayward hitters beware

idyllic temperatures and, mostly, reasonably contented people. Think of all those island clichés and then throw something on top.

Sir Charles (there is a limit to how many times I can call a man 'Cow' in one article) is presently throwing a hell of a lot on top. Apes Hill is a huge project even by the standards of a man who started life about as modestly as a man can when he worked as a chicken-sexer and who now owns the biggest construction company in the Caribbean. Some chicken; some sexer.

This is some leap but, at 76, Cow (oh, okay) is still taking those big jumps of imagination and investment. His mum told him when he started making money: "Son, buy land because the good Lord is making no more." He took her advice. Apes Hill started off as a sugar plantation, transmogrified into a dairy farm, was bought by our hero about 30 years ago and is now being turned into a well-heeled golf and polo sort of community.

This prospect you will either love or loathe, but if you have a ton of money what's not to love about a place that comes with a guarantee of class and service and, as I'll eventually get round to describing, a golf course that is in parts simply breathtaking. Not only that, but the major partners have all taken a sacred oath that two-thirds of the 470-acre site will forever be green.

The job is being done in partnership with Landmark, the American golf and real estate cohort that lists the likes of Oak Tree, La Quinta, PGA West and Kiawah among its portfolio of developments. Landmark, too, is headed by a man whose vision has yet to outrun his capacity for hard graft. Jerry Barton, like Sir Charles, is heading into his late seventies and like Sir Charles, you need a microscope to notice this.

Barton was raised in an Oklahoma village, population circa 800, and has spent his

adult life trying to recreate the sense of community he enjoyed as a kid. A happy by-product of this ambition has been that he has sold a lot of property along the way. "The greatest egos go into politics and the second go into real estate," he told me.

Quite where this thought leaves Jerry, a one-time Oxford scholar, is beyond me as he has done both – running the office of a governor of Oklahoma for a year some time ago when he took time out from golf courses and upmarket housing. The salary he demanded at the time was one dollar for the year and he had the good grace to laugh when I asked him if he thought he had been overpaid. "Maybe," he said grinning.

SEEING IS BELIEVING...

Like Sir Charles (whose sporting preference is polo, who owns around 150 ponies and who sponsors the team the princes, William and Harry, play for) Jerry does not play golf, but each man knows the importance of a high-class golf course when it comes to selling property and lifestyle.

Now there are those – and I may well be one myself – who lament the connection between course and house but, let's be honest here, there is unlikely ever again to be a golf course built that is not conceived as a 'tease' to owning a house. This is not new either. Harry Colt only got to build the splendour that is Wentworth because someone wanted to flog a housing estate.

The Wentworth Club, by the way, is also a partner at Apes Hill, chief executive Julian Small and his team bringing their expertise on how to run a golf club not only efficiently but also with a dab of style and a slice of class. This is working already, for the director of golf, Ben Hatch, was a pro at Wentworth for a decade – and it shows.

It was with 'Gentle Ben' as a guide that I played the course on yet another sultry,

sunny day. It is a delight. The front nine is as open and inviting as the back nine is spectacular and challenging. Each hole boasts a flurry of tees so, depending on ability or age – or both – you can take on the course to suit yourself.

The opening holes are uphill and into those prevailing winds. The 2nd, 185 yards from the back and into a green with a coral-rock backdrop, is the opener to a series of par 3s that test and thrill in equal measure. Once up the hill – and you will always be doing this by buggy – you come down again – that gently slurping Caribbean always in view. Tough holes are



The spectacular 16th green

followed by easier ones. This course tries to slap, but then reaches out to cuddle.

But however much you enjoy the front nine – and you will – this is an entrée into the main course. There is so much to savour over the back nine that I have no hesitation in claiming it to be simply sensational. And contained within this sensation is a three-hole stretch that may be the best of its kind built anywhere in the world over the last decade. A big claim I know, but, really, you've got to see it.

The 12th has been carved out of jungle. It's quite a carving. From the back, elevated tee it is 225 yards to the middle of a green set into a startling clearing. Coral rock outcrops embroider the approach, while the jungle itself does the rest of the job. Spin around on this tee, the highest point on the island, and you can see east and west coastlines. It is absolutely thrilling.

This, funnily enough, is followed by the 13th. By far the most difficult hole on the course, this is a 435-yard stonker with jungle flanking the fairway and then an approach over a ravine to a tilted green. Is



Good connections: Sir Charles Williams (above), and princes William and Harry

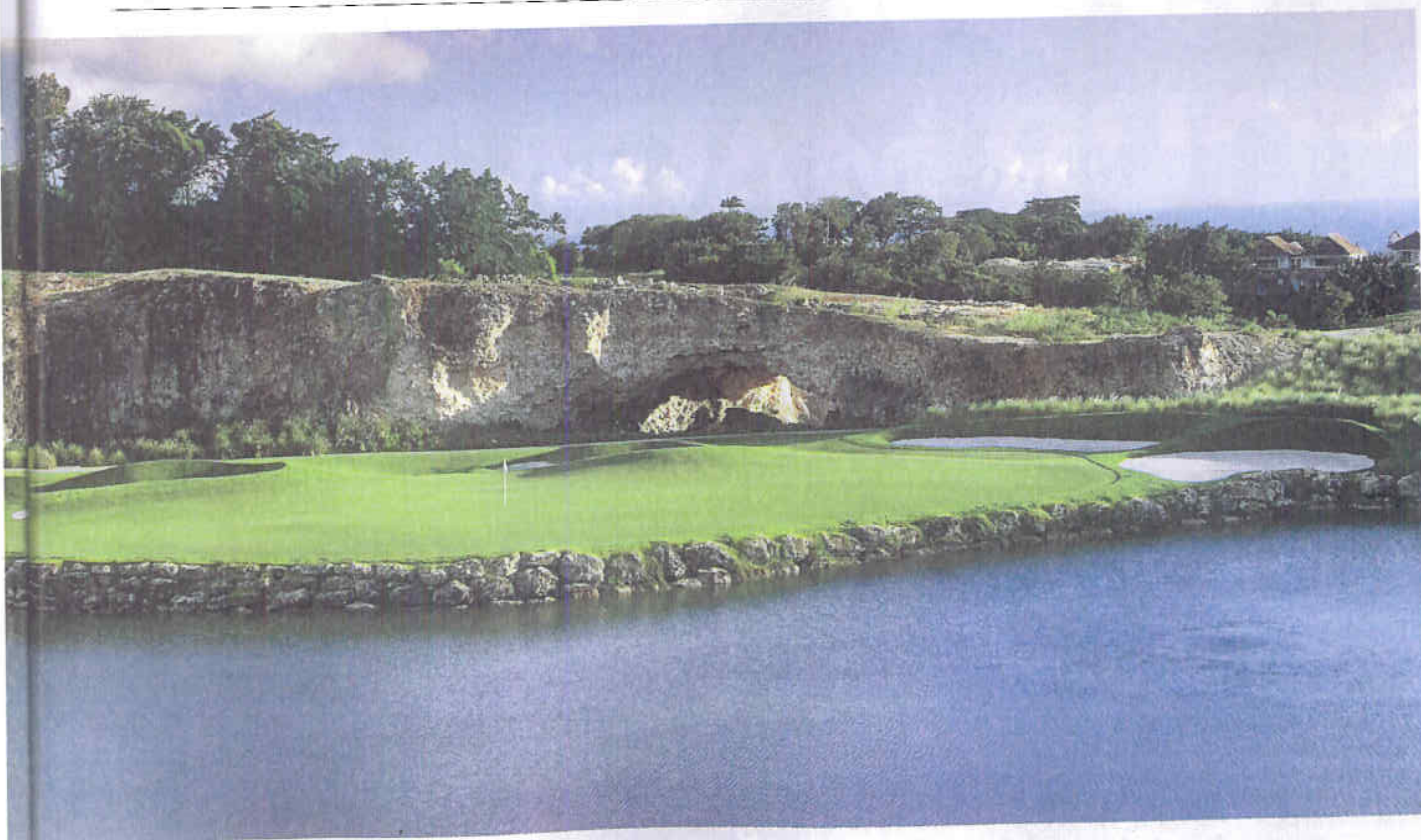
it too difficult for mortals? Yes. Is it brilliant? Absolutely.

The 14th is another par 4 and a drive that must go over – or through – a cluster of magnificent Royal Palms and then on to a green set like a gem in another jungle arena. To play these holes towards dusk, to listen to the sounds of the forest

and the opening chorus of the tree frogs and, as happened, to stop to watch a troop of green monkeys scamper out on to a fairway for some pre-bedtime fun is, believe me, blissfully exotic. As Jerry told me: "We wanted to make it fun for an 80-year-old golfer, but fun also for a great athlete. I think we've succeeded. My wife of 57 years says I am often wrong, but rarely in doubt. I have no doubt about Apes Hill."

Neither have I. I just hope that one day Sir Charles gets off his polo pony to play it. Why isn't he a golfer? "One day maybe, but I'm not old enough yet," he says. The old warrior doesn't know what he is missing.

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