

Miles Whitelock

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In the autumn of 1943 Miles Whitelock, a captain in the 1st Parachute Battalion on leave from fighting in the North Africa campaign, stepped onto the first tee at East Devon Golf Club. He was 25 years old. It wasn't the first time that he had played there. His parents had brought him to Budleigh Salterton for a holiday ten years previously when, already an accomplished golfer, he had been introduced to the course by a cousin. But this time he had come under his own steam. "I had decided to drive down to Budleigh Salterton in my Morris 8 with a chum," he recalls. "I stayed a couple of nights at the Blueberry Downs Hotel." The hotel, like all of Budleigh's old resort hotels, has now been demolished. But for Captain Whitelock that autumn day marked the building of something else - a lifelong love affair with Budleigh Salterton and its beautiful golf course.

Miles Whitelock was born in Whitchurch-on-Thames in Oxfordshire in 1918. He was the youngest child and only boy of a London solicitor and his wife. He grew up in a large family house on the banks of the Thames where he learned to play cricket, tennis and golf. "I remember," he says, "being taught to chip a golf ball by the secretary of the local club when I was seven." Three years later, with the help of his sister Nancy – no mean golfer herself – he had built a five hole course on the cricket field which was part of the family's extensive garden. The first tee was carved out of a former marrow bed, and the drive from it was mighty, a great carry across fruit cages and the rough of the outer field. "Woe betide you if you landed in the strawberries," says Miles. The second, third and fourth required mainly chips to avoid the cricket square, followed by a long fifth across the whole pitch back towards the house. Here, in the uneasy peace of the inter-war years, Miles began to fashion the game that would be his companion in the years ahead.

He went off to school at Rugby where he played cricket for the First XI for two years – cricket was his preferred sport throughout the first half of his life – and in 1937 went up to Trinity College, Cambridge to read Modern Languages. At Cambridge he joined the Artists' Rifles, a London City branch of the Territorial Army.

This turned out to be one of the most fateful decisions of his life. On the 2nd September 1939 he was ordered to mobilise for war. Earlier that summer he'd gone off to France to polish up his French and as a result was put on a charge for being absent without leave as soon as he reported for duty. Quickly forgiven, his war began. Cambridge, England and the pleasant recreations of cricket and golf were forgotten as Rifleman Whitelock went to the defence of his country.

Miles answered the call for volunteers to what was described as "an exciting branch of the British Army." He joined the 1st Parachute Battalion – 1 Para as it became known – and spent the summer of 1941 demonstrating this extraordinary new art to members of the Home Guard and other local recruits. The great fear in Britain during the frightening early years of the war was that hordes of Germans would arrive by parachute as part of an invasion force. Miles and his colleagues were on hand to show their fellow countrymen what to expect.

But the fear of invasion receded and Captain Whitelock, as he had now become, was posted to North Africa. Two months after he had been dropped in - and after a period of hard fighting in the mountains – he was badly wounded in a night attack on a German encampment. He suffered injuries to his knee, thigh, nose and head and spent the winter of 1942/1943 in hospital in Algiers but managed eventually to return home on a hospital ship.

He was promoted to Major and sent off to serve the Governor of Bermuda. It was here that he met his wife, Kyla, the Governor's personal secretary. His war ended in very different circumstances from those in which it had begun. He got married in brilliant Bermudan sunshine: Cambridge, Whitchurch and the life of his youth were all behind him. Like so many of his generation who served their country in its greatest hour of need his life had been changed forever.

Miles and Kyla settled in Birmingham where he managed a family manufacturing business that made and sold silver plated tableware. Cricket remained his first love until he was in his early forties, but in 1961 he joined Edgbaston Golf Club where he was chairman for five years. Golf had now become a principal interest in his life – and his devotion to the game was reinforced by a tragic accident. His second son, Roger, was killed on a golf course in South Africa at the age of 24 when he was struck by lightning. "Roger's death is one of the reasons I wanted to play golf," says Miles. "He would have wanted me to."

His son's death also prompted him to consider retirement and in the mid 1970s he and Kyla settled in Cliff Terrace in Budleigh Salterton. It took him four years to be admitted to East Devon but he soon became an active and admired member of the club succeeding Geoffrey Moxon as Captain of the Veterans' Section in 1990. He remembers his three year stint in this role with great fondness and is deeply grateful to all the members who helped him at the time. The job allowed him to play on courses throughout the county but, he says, "I can honestly say that none of them was as challenging or as beautiful as East Devon." His wife's long illness, and her death in 2005, meant that he was unable to play for several years. But once that sad period of his life was over he felt able to pick up his clubs again. "I came back to this wonderful club with relief," he says. "Although I no longer play in competitions, I can still break 100 and have been known to go round in my age – given a putt or two."

With his effortless swing, gracious manner and delightful courtesy, Miles Whitelock epitomises the game of golf. He loves the game and enjoys watching the juniors as they practise their way to perfection. "I admire the rhythm of their swings and the elegance of their style," he says. "They are a credit to the club."

It is a compliment that they – and all of us – should return to him.

Hugh Williams, 1st November 2008