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SCOTT MURRAY AND SIMON FARNABY

The Phantom of the Open

Meet Maurice Flitcroft, the World's Worst Golfer

'Hilarious'
ESQUIRE

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For
Alexander Murray and Margaret Murray
and
Jeff Farnaby and Barbara Farnaby

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Introduction: The Warm Up

'We don't get very many visitors here,' announces Trevor Kirkwood, as he wheels around the avenues of Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria's number-one industrial port. 'People don't pass through it on their way to somewhere else either. We call it the insular peninsula, the longest cul-de-sac in Europe. It's said that Barrow's not quite the end of the world . . . but you can see it from here.'

Well, we can *sort* of see it: we're in the back of Trevor's van, rattling around alongside detritus from his print and photo stall in Barrow's indoor market: pieces of a broken photocopier, some *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* posters, a signed photo of The Jam, a box of XXXL replica rugby league shirts. Trevor has kindly agreed to show us Barrow's sights. Or, more specifically, the one-time stomping grounds of his old friend, the late, great Maurice Flitcroft: the man who shot a failure-redefining 121 in the greatest golf championship of them all, the man who would go down in history as the Phantom of the Open.

Trevor has been friends since school – four decades past – with Maurice's twin sons, the impressively

monickered James Harlequin Flitcroft and Gene Van Flitcroft. Abandoned as a baby and brought up in a children's home near the Flitcroft family terrace, the resulting stigma in the less-enlightened Sixties led young Trevor to be shunned by most of the local kids and parents alike. Maurice, however, invited Trevor in to play with his sons. A glass of squash, a biscuit and a spot on the carpet in front of the TV was always on offer *chez* Flitcroft.

'Maurice didn't care that I was different; he always had time for me,' remembers Trevor. 'In some ways he was the dad I never had.' The moving eulogy is tempered only by the discomfort of our touring vehicle. The heater isn't working, a major flaw while driving through this chilly appendage to the Lake District. It is freezing and soaking, and no wonder: the Barrow peninsula pokes out into the Irish Sea from the most remote point on England's far north-west coast, miles from Carlisle, inaccessible to Blackpool, and ostracised from the tourist traps of the Lake District.

We chug through rainy red-brick terraced streets, then past grimy blackened tenements. All the while, a miserable grey sky grumbles aggressively overhead, almost as though it's about to accuse someone of spilling its pint. We drive down Laurence Avenue, passing the tiny gun-metal-grey council house where Maurice lived all his life with his loyal wife Jean and the twins. We visit the meagre strips of boggy waste-land where Maurice spent hours practising his short game. And we swing through the rusty shipyard where

he toiled as a crane operator, his old workplace now dwarfed by titanic iron hangars hiding nuclear submarines from prying eyes in the spurious interests of national security.

'When you left school in Maurice's time it was either the shipyard or the shipyard,' explains Trevor. 'The place needed twenty thousand men to work it. So if you were a lad from Barrow this is where you went. They called them shipyard fodder.' The last place, then, where you'd expect to discover a future champion of the Open. And, alas, it still is. But by God, Maurice Flitcroft tried his damnedest to put Barrow on the golfing map.

He was a working-class man from Barrow who tried as hard as he could to avoid becoming 'shipyard fodder'. Harbouring artistic ambitions since childhood, he tried his hand at painting, songwriting and poetry. He even toured for a summer in a high-diving comedy troupe in the Sixties. But he was always drawn, ineluctably, back to the shipyard. Until, that is, he was bitten by the golfing bug in 1974. The experience would change his life.

Within two years, he had chanced his way into the Open and carded the worst-ever round in the tournament's 116-year history, his score of 121 a depth unlikely to be plumbed ever again. In retrospect, it wasn't too much of a surprise: he had never before played a full round of golf in his life. The press had a field day, and golf reporters nationwide revelled in the oddity.

But the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews,

the game's governing body and the organisers of the Open Championship, took a much dimmer view of Maurice's antics. Humiliated by a mere hacker bodyswerving his way past the entry regulations and into their prestigious tournament, the R&A did everything in their power to make sure Maurice would never make a monkey of them again.

Never one to shy away from a fight, Maurice responded to the R&A's punches with a couple of jabs of his own, and for the next decade-and-a-half the two traded blows. R&A secretary Keith Mackenzie escalated the row into a personal vendetta, while Maurice deliberately turned it into a farcical game of cat-and-mouse. Determining to secure a place in the Open by any means possible, he cast himself as David taking on the R&A's Goliath. Observers might paint him as a modern-day Don Quixote, a deluded fool, tilting his nine-iron at the sacred windmills of the R&A.

Maurice's battle would not be limited to the golf course, often spilling over into the mean streets of Barrow. 'People would throw stuff at him and call him names when he went to practise in his check trousers, diamond jumper and his bobble hat,' says Trevor. 'People just didn't behave like that in Barrow. He totally divided the town. Half of them thought he was a pillock, but the other half, including me, loved him for showing you could do something different with your life.'

Maurice's sons, James and Gene, would be blessed with this approach to life, too, taking the scenic route

whenever possible. James claims to have won the 1984 Malibu World Disco Dancing Championship, only to have the title wrested from his grasp after some off-floor politicking involving an unnamed coke-addled record producer, several ladies of the night, and a six-foot-two dancer called Venal John. ('Why was he called Venal John?' we asked him. The reply was straight to the point: 'Cos he were, y'know, venal.') His pseudonym for this escapade was Paris Ventura. Meanwhile Gene – a dancer too, trading under the brand Troy Atlantis – had the added distinction of having caddied for 1971 and 1972 British Open champion Lee Trevino at the 1990 Open at St Andrews.

But, alas, Paris and Troy's glamorous escapades have long since been replaced by James and Gene's episodic bursts of booze-fuelled bleak farce. Their *Saturday Night Fever* mojo long gone by the turn of the millennium, the Flitcroft juniors were awarded the UK's very first ASBI [anti-social behaviour injunction] after sword-fighting each other in their back garden. The pair starred in an episode of Channel Five's Jerry Springer-lite show *Trisha* entitled 'I hate my twin!', James detailing how he had slept with nearly 400 women and once had his leg broken by his golf-club-wielding brother. ('He were too quick for me, he used to be a boxer,' he said with a smile, a strange sibling pride oozing from every pore.) And both men spent the 1990s and 2000s systematically picking up bans from just about every pub in Barrow and the town's immediate surrounds, as a result of their wholesale commitment to creative drinking.

Trevor drops us off at our hotel, and informs us that the twins have agreed to an evening out with us to talk about their dad – as long as we buy the drinks, which is fair enough. Maurice died in 2007, so all that is left are the memories of his sons and a few friends – principally Trevor and his partner Karen Storr, a Cumbrian artist who in 2007 staged a stunning photographic exhibition, *At Home with the Flitcrofts*, which essayed the idiosyncratic lives of Maurice, James and Gene. Maurice was so fond of Karen that, days before he died, he entrusted to her his prized possession – a faded 400-page manuscript. It was his memoir, initially handwritten and typed up onto foolscap by his late wife Jean, variously entitled *The Phantom of the Open*, *The Golfer Who Tried, Golfer Extraordinary* and *The Artful Golfer*. In a collective act of criminal literary neglect, the publishing world inexplicably turned down this sprawling epic when it was touted around in the early 1990s. Maurice's words have therefore never seen the light of day – until now, with James, Gene and Karen granting us exclusively the right to quote from the manuscript, so this unique story may be told.

'My dad should have a statue erected to him,' says Gene, midway through what becomes a Homeric evening of booze-fuelled debauch. He's tottering unsurely on his feet outside Barrow's busy Duke of Edinburgh hotel bar, which is relatively new and hasn't got round to banning him yet. He's gesticulating wildly at a bronze tribute to the town's other much-loved and much-missed sporting son, the late footballer

Emlyn Hughes. 'I mean, what did he ever do?' wonders Gene as he flicks his cigarette towards the two-time European-Cup-winning captain of Liverpool, England and *A Question of Sport*.

The main event of the evening is a Northern Soul night Trevor has helped organise at a local cricket club. Our presence there lasts around two seconds, if that, with Gene instantly dispatched back through the door. 'That were quick, even for him,' notes Trevor with a resigned sigh, one eyebrow raised. After a long search, we eventually find a pub willing to allow the twins to remain on the premises. It is in an area of town known to locals as the Gaza Strip. 'The Flitcroft brothers are in the house!' announces the DJ. It's a seemingly surreal touch, but these lads are notorious. Within seconds, they are surrounded by – there is no other way of putting this – a bevy of buxom beauties, who all want to see the pair's best moves. James and Gene glide across the dancefloor, light on their toes despite their advancing years. After his dismissal from the cricket club, it is the second time tonight Gene's feet don't appear to have touched the carpet.

Towards the end of the evening, Gene goes AWOL. A few frantic phone calls are made, before Trevor finally locates our fallen soldier. He's been taken home by kindly and long-suffering police officers after being found wandering aimlessly around the street.

'He's absolutely fine,' reports Trevor. 'This much I know because he's claiming to have slept with one of the policewomen.'

The morning after, with heavy heads but lighter

hearts, Trevor takes us on another whistle-stop tour of Maurice-in-Furness, around a few old haunts we'd failed to take in the previous afternoon. There's a rugby league ground where Maurice would clatter long irons between the posts and occasionally get into fights. There's an old abbey ruin, the National Trust's least-popular property in the country, and perfect for working on his driving. And then there's Sandy Gap on Walney Island.

Walney is a 14x1-mile behemoth plonked in the sea alongside Barrow. A middle-class enclave, it is home to Vickerstown, built in the early 1900s by local shipyard magnates Vickers to house their workers, and the Furness Golf Club, the area's most windswept and interesting course. Maurice was never allowed on to play, not that he could afford it. Instead, he headed for the vast dunes of Sandy Gap. As do we, tumbling out of Trevor's van into a full-force gale.

'The least-visited seaside resort in the British Isles!' offers Trevor with a proud grin just about visible as the rain lashes his wide moustachioed face.

'This is a *resort*?'

We stop to take some seaside snaps. Sandy Gap is a place so windy we have to lean on each other to keep the camera steady, a human tripod. So it was over this barren vista, a good one-hour walk from his home, where the tide comes in so quickly you literally have to run to get away from it, that Maurice practised his long game?

'Oh yeah, he had no other option,' chirps Trevor, ignoring the sideways, coat-penetrating rain. 'It was

the only place where he could guarantee he wouldn't hit anyone. He would spend hours here in all weathers. He nearly drowned a few times, but he were bloody good out of bunkers!'

Which, of course, he wasn't. There's a pretty strong argument to be made, as we shall see, that Maurice Flitcroft was the world's worst golfer. But there's a counterclaim, too: OK, he didn't exactly boast the golfing ability of a Golden Bear or Tiger, but painting him as a cartoon oaf, a personification of hopelessness, is an outrageous slight on a wildly creative and talented man. Either way, though, debating Maurice's sporting skillset spectacularly misses the point. What was important was that Maurice tried. And, by God, did he try.

Out

WHITE COURSE

FORMBY GOLF CLUB

PAR 72

(Standard Scratch Score 72)

Player Maurice G. Flitcroft

Competition 1976 Open Qualifier

Handicap n/a

Date 2nd July 1976

Marker's Score	Hole	Length in Metres	Length in Yards	Score	Strokes Rec'd	Par	Won + Lost - Halved 0 Points
	1	370	405	7	12	4	
	2	348	381	5	7	4	
	3	466	510	6	3	5	
	4	286	313	6	14	4	
	5	148	162	6	17	3	
	6	370	405	6	6	4	
	7	453	495	12?	1	5	
	8	316	346	6	10	4	
	9	166	182	7	16	3	
Out		2923	3199	61		36	

Marker's Score	Hole	Length in Metres	Length in Yards	Score	Strokes Rec'd	Par	Won + Lost - Halved 0 Points
	10	469	513		4	5	
	11	355	388		11	4	
	12	372	407		5	4	
	13	349	382		15	4	
	14	384	420		9	4	
	15	369	403		2	4	
	16	113	124		18	3	
	17	432	472		8	4	
	18	358	392		13	4	
In		3201	3501			36	
Out		2925	3199			36	
Total		6127	6700			72	
				Handicap			
				Nett			

Holes won .....

Holes lost .....

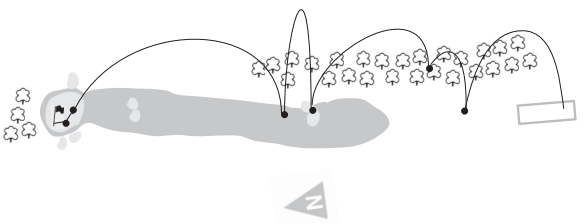
Result .....

Players's Signature .....

Marker's Signature .....

PLEASE REPLACE DIVOTS

Hole 1: Mean streets and hard-earned treats



Maurice tied his shoelaces as best he could and pulled his socks up to his knees. They were far too big for him, he thought. In fact, everything was too big for him. His shorts settled near his ankles, his tie almost dragged apologetically along the floor, and the rim of his cap fell well below his eyes unless pulled back every few seconds. It wasn't ideal but it would have to do. This was young Maurice Flitcroft's first day at school, and nothing would stop him enjoying it.

Maurice Gerald Flitcroft was born on 23 November 1929 at 67 Robert Street, West Gorton, Manchester. His mother's name was Olive Mabel. His father Herbert was a bus driver. He was the middle child of five brothers, and they all lived together in a quiet,

cobble-stoned street lined with identical redbrick terraced houses distinguishable only by the occupant's choice of curtains.

He was a tiny baby, and as he grew – slowly, and in an almost haphazard angular fashion, all elbows and knees – it quickly became clear the description 'wiry' would forever be used to describe him. Even through his adult years he would maintain this diminutive figure, only ever reaching a waist size of 26 inches. (His son Gene would reminisce in 2009 that 'he was a huge man, my dad, six foot two he was, hands like shovels', but pride distorts; Maurice was five foot seven in his golf shoes.) But what he lacked in stature he made up for with energy. 'Me mother used to call me Hoppy as a small kid, Hoppy Johnny she'd call me,' he told Dick Nelson of American network WGVU-TV-35 in 1988, 'cos I was always hopping and skipping around the place like a rabbit.' Given Maurice's future sporting misadventures, old Mrs F's bunny comparison was eerily prescient.

Like all rabbits, Maurice never felt comfortable with city life and craved open spaces where he could gambol and frolic. One such area was a small croft near the family home, about an acre in size, which would become the stage for his first brush with the law – a taster of what would become a regular occurrence in his life.

Maurice claims not to have known that the croft was, in fact, private land, but one summer's night in 1933, this fact was made plain to him in no uncertain terms. That evening, during a peaceful game of 'pitch

and toss' with other children on the croft, the area was stormed by police. Maurice, below average in dimension, slipped through a gap in a neighbour's fence and hid in the backyard. Others weren't so lucky. 'Struggles took place and arrests were made,' he recalled. 'It was exciting and amusing, although why the police would make such a to-do about what seemed to be a rather dull game I've no idea.' It was the first time Flitcroft found himself chased from a grassy area by men in uniform while wondering exactly what he had done wrong and what their effing problem was; it would be by no means his last.

Maurice's father, Herbert Flitcroft, was an honest and hard-working man. He kept pigeons in the yard, and enjoyed reading, listening to plays, opera and the news on the wireless, and swimming. The family would enjoy occasional trips to the cinema and regular walks through the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens. The walks were some of Maurice's most treasured memories from his early childhood. He would replay them in his mind with great fondness, especially as they would soon become faded, like a silent film reel, by the outbreak of war. Decades later, as the cherished moments became ever more distant, he would describe the scenes in the gardens as 'being very much like the painting *Sunday afternoon on the Île de la Grande Jatte* by the French Impressionist Georges Seurat'. For a working-class man with no classical education, Maurice's knowledge of art and literature was impressive, every inch the Barrow bohemian.

'Oh he always had his head in some book or other,'

said his son Gene. 'He especially loved art and pictures and that.'

In summer, the family would enjoy trips to the countryside where they would engage in epic games of 'armies' with other children. These games would start off friendly but become more serious and life-like, resulting in the very real threat of extreme physical violence by one little soldier to another. Yet no matter how heated these battles became, a temporary ceasefire would be declared when Mrs Flitcroft turned up with ice creams. As Maurice noted, 'One cannot enjoy the full flavour of a red, green or yellow cone-shaped lollipop while being so energetically engaged in mock mortal combat.'

Maurice realised early on that bigger children were wont to regard him as easy pickings because of his size. Lacking physical strength, he'd need to acquire super-human mental skills if he was to survive the mean streets of Manchester. And he got the chance to test these powers before he'd even started school.

Returning home from the local shop one day, having taken his usual short-cut down an alleyway, he was confronted by a boy of eight, twice his age and size, and was asked rather impolitely to relinquish his handful of sweeties. The more the thief pushed and cajoled Maurice to open his hand, the tighter his grip became. As the bully began to attack him physically, with a few thumps in the solar plexus, Maurice simply closed his eyes and stood there, taking the punishment in silence. He hoped to bamboozle 'the Juvenile Highwayman', as Maurice called the bully in his

memoir. If he stood his ground, maybe the tyrant would get tired and go away, a junior version of the rope-a-dope technique, made famous by Muhammad Ali in the Rumble in the Jungle.

But unlike George Foreman, Maurice's attacker didn't tire. Instead he began to enjoy himself, hoofing and flinging the poor little mite around the back streets like an old sock. At one point, the bully wedged young Maurice's head in a drain and pressed on his face with the sole of his shoe while concurrently trying to prise open his fist. Maurice took the punishment in silence, theorising that any cries of pain were unlikely to encourage the Highwayman to eschew a belief system that saw the meting out of torture rewarded with tasty sweeties. Eventually, his stoicism was rewarded when one of his brothers turned up and chased the bully away. A beaten and bruised Maurice shared his well-protected spoils with his saviour: three white mice and a couple of midget gems. Not much of a celebratory feast, but it was a defining moment in young Maurice's personal development, an act of defiance that provided him with the confidence to begin school without fear, having stood up to the Dick Turpin of the alleys.

And so Maurice tucked his shirt into his voluminous shorts, adjusted his cap and tie, and pulled his socks up one last time before leaving home for his first day at school. He waited for his older brother Roy to leave the house and followed him out shortly afterwards. Maintaining a respectful distance behind Roy, he reached the school some twenty minutes later.

As there appeared to be no spare seat for Maurice, he took up a position on a small bench at the back of the class and waited patiently for the learning to begin.

Ten minutes later, a kerfuffle was heard at the door and the headmaster made a rare appearance. Seeing the rest of the class stand to rigid attention Maurice followed suit. 'Is there a Maurice Flitcroft in the room?' asked the head, who to the school debutant appeared to be about 25 foot tall. Maurice declined to answer. The tone of the headmaster's voice engendered a feeling within him that, should he own up, the resulting events would not be to his liking, nor cause any pleasurable physical or mental sensation. 'Roy! Have you seen your brother this morning?'

'No, sir,' Maurice's elder brother replied shakily. Maurice held firm. Perhaps this will play out all right after all, he thought.

'Mrs Flitcroft, please step inside,' asked the headmaster. To his surprise, Maurice saw his distraught mum enter the room. 'Do you see Maurice in here, Mrs Flitcroft?' Olive frantically scanned the children to no avail. Then, sensing a better perspective was required, she knelt down and scanned the gaps between the grubby knees. Suddenly, and much to her relief, she spotted a familiar nose and mouth beneath an over-sized cloth cap, much like the one her husband Herbert owned.

'Ah, there he is! Sorry about this!' she exclaimed as she zig-zagged her way to the back of the class and swept Maurice into her grateful arms. She paused to

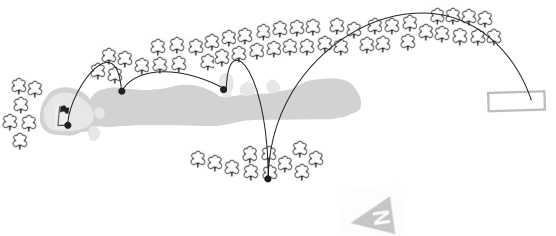
apologise to the headmaster on her way out. He in turn furrowed his brow into a frown, but couldn't keep up the pretence, almost immediately letting a smile play across his face as he shook the tiny hand in mock formality.

'Very nice to meet you, young Maurice,' he said. 'I just hope you have the same enthusiasm for learning once you reach the legal age to attend school. See you next year!' And with that, Olive Flitcroft whisked the errant interloper back home for a stern telling-off, and some egg mixed with bread in a cup.

'I just couldn't wait to start,' recalled Maurice some seventy years later. 'Mother had to come and pick me up several times after that. I had a thirst for knowledge.' When he was finally allowed to stay in school the following year, Maurice found it a doddle. 'I took to it like a duck takes to the water,' he claimed with typical modesty.

But the halcyon days of Manchester were short lived. One day, his father cut his thumb on some chipped crockery. Though Herbert thought nothing of it at the time, the wound soon became septic, hospitalising him for two months. In the days before penicillin was freely available, the lay-off meant that he lost his job on the buses. When he eventually recovered, he spread his net wide in the search for work. Eventually the family settled in the Lancastrian town of Barrow-in-Furness, with Herbert finding employment in the shipyards. Maurice himself was forced to start a new school, which meant subjecting himself to the human hacky sack treatment all over again.

Hole 2: The gap between hope and reality



Maurice had barely turned seven years old, but his face was settling into a distinctive old-fashioned form. It was already beginning to resemble the one that would be carried years later on photographs by nerve-racked R&A officials the length and breadth of the country. A long narrow nose separated two large bulging eyes, which protruded from sunken eye sockets. His mouth was a tiny pillar box, set back deep into his chops, making it difficult for a casual observer of his face to discern the presence of any teeth. (In later years, Maurice would have nearly every molar smashed out in a diving accident. Often he wouldn't bother wearing the false set he was given to replace them, because he thought he 'pretty much looked the same' with them in or out.) But his most

striking feature were his ears, which protruded farcically from the side of his head like two halves of a cheap radar dish, presumably positioned by some mischievous gene to detect the nearest trouble and instruct the brain to head straight for it.

With the family Flitcroft now denizens of Barrow, Maurice was packed off to Rawlinson Street Junior School. It didn't take him long to attract the attention of bullies and other assorted little eejits, all of whom would be wont to tease him with the usual height slurs, now accompanied by ear-referencing monickers showcasing varied levels of wit and imagination: the Goblin, Wingnut and the common-or-garden Big Ears were three of the most popular. It was again time for young Maurice to take a stand – but unlike on the back streets of Manchester, this time, the human punchbag would swing back.

As the bell sounded to end playtime one morning, and the children queued up to be allowed back into the school hut, a large boy regarded widely as 'the cock of the class' made the mistake of pushing 'Wingnut' out of the line. Maurice stumbled slightly, but ignored him, rejoining the line at the back, refusing to rise to the bait. The Cock, not used to being ignored by jug-eared squirts, followed Maurice to the rear and shoved him out of line again. It was a none-too-subtle attempt to attract the attention of the teacher and get 'Luggy' into trouble. A gauntlet having been thrown down twice, it was time for the little man to step up to the plate and let The Cock know who and what he was messing with: 'I responded

by turning and slapping him hard in the face and inviting him to meet me after school behind the Waterloo Hotel across the road.'

During the afternoon, the entire school crackled with expectation of the impending fight. At the allotted time, behind the Waterloo Hotel, Wingnut and The Cock squared up to each other in front of a large crowd of baying spectators. They were disappointed at first: Maurice's rope-a-dope technique may have been vaguely effective for self-preservation, but it was no crowd-pleaser. Finally, sensing the need to do something to lift the atmosphere, Maurice began to strike out, haphazardly at first as he had his eyes closed, but he soon enough located his target. To Maurice's delight the crowd loved his offensive efforts, cheering on the little man for all they were worth. But whipping the audience up into such a fervour would seek to bring about the final bell sooner than expected. 'Things were just starting to warm up nicely,' reported Maurice, 'when the roar of the crowd – goading, encouraging, inciting – attracted the attention of the hotel's landlady who, brandishing a broom, told us to break it up and go home, or else. Well, children were more respectful in those days than they are now, so we did as we were told.' Still, for Maurice, the job was done. The nicknames stuck, but were now tempered with affection. And The Cock never bothered him again.

Independence of mind came naturally to Maurice, but its supplementary fearlessness was occasionally less beneficial to his well-being. Maurice was proving

himself an indomitable soul, which would explain a litany of medical catastrophes, including broken noses, burst eardrums and broken arms. If there was a tree that seemed unclimbable, Maurice would scale it – and then fall out of it. If there was a canal notorious for danger, Maurice would dive headlong into it – and burst his head open like a bag of crisps.

All challenges, physical or mental, were met head on. Before he could face plummeting head-first into canals, Maurice was forced to conquer a deep-seated fear of water. The sight of a mere puddle would send him into shivers, and he'd regularly have to sit out of swimming class at school. So, as a determined eight-year-old, he set about ridding himself of his phobia. 'I overcame this fear quite simply by lying in a bath of tap water, taking a deep breath, holding it and ducking my head under,' he explained, describing how he would force himself to hold his head in the tub for a few extra seconds every night, only emerging when total panic had set in.

After a few weeks, he got a little braver. 'I soon progressed to opening my eyes underwater,' he recalled, 'which is why the water must be clear, not soapy, as soapy water will make your eyes sting and smart and perhaps discourage you from continuing with the exercise.' His description had segued from personal account into positivity seminar for the benefit of aquaphobes worldwide. Maurice considered the episode as pivotal in his development as a human being, and he was sure children or even adults could benefit from literally diving headlong into his water-

conquering technique. 'A word of warning,' he added. 'Be sure that you are well clear of the taps when using this method, to avoid hitting your head on them when you raise it out of the water.'

It was a lesson clearly learned the hard way. But Maurice didn't stop there. Now he'd beaten his fear of what he melodramatically referred to as 'The Blue Watery Vagueness', the child could not rest. 'The next step for me was to become a competent diver. This in the course of time I did – but not in the bath.' In years to come he would value water-based leisure pastimes second only to golf. 'Swimming, like golf, is something you can do on your own. You don't need to be a member of a team to enjoy it.' And, of course, solo pursuits allow participants to judge how good they've been based on arbitrary criteria set down in their own head.

Maurice began to flourish intellectually towards the end of primary school. His reading soon graduated from the whizzo works of D.C. Thomson – the *Dandy*, *Wizard* and the *Beano* – to the more cerebral output of William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens and Renaissance author and poet Giovanni Boccaccio. Every inch the prodigy – he was only *ten years old* – Maurice would read and re-read these works again and again, along with the western novels of Zane Grey and the spine-tingling thrillers of Sax Rohmer, the creator of Fu Manchu. He listed among his favourites the mysteries of Edgar Wallace, *The Three Muskateers* by Alexandre Dumas, the foreign legion tales of P.C. Wren and *The Coral Island* by R.M. Ballantyne. For

the pre-teenage son of a shipyard worker in late-1930s Barrow, this was exotic fare and marked Maurice down as something different. It is safe to say that The Cock's reading list would not have contained any doomed romantic legends penned in fourteenth-century Italy.

Here was a well-read boy, although he preferred to read for pleasure rather than academic success. 'If I was interested in a subject I would listen and pay attention; if I wasn't interested I would pass the time drawing caricatures of other pupils and teachers, who I considered worthy and suitable subjects for my artistic intentions.' Maurice further demonstrated his independence when he decided, against the advice of his teachers, to sit his eleven-plus exam. While his teachers (and even his parents) didn't think Maurice would make the grade, he felt he belonged with the cream of Barrow's youth at Alfred Barrow Grammar School for boys. In truth, he was mainly attracted not to the quality of teaching on offer, but rather to the extensive playing fields over which he could give his spindly legs free rein. He could also picture himself cutting a dash in the school's fancy cap and blazer. Whatever the allure, to everyone's astonishment, Maurice passed the exam with flying colours.

This triumph would, sadly, be short-lived: Maurice soon had to uproot his life again with the outbreak of the Second World War on 3 September 1939. Barrow was the home of the naval construction arm of Vickers-Armstrong Ltd, one of the most renowned warship manufacturers in the world. The town therefore was

brought to the attention of a Mr Adolf Hitler and his Luftwaffe squadrons. After Maurice's home was bombed out – the family survived by taking shelter under the stairs – it was felt that the children should be evacuated to a safe haven.

To this end, Maurice would spend the next four years in the Lake District town of Kendal, his guardian a Mrs Langhorn. It was to prove an eventful period, which began with the forced acquisition of yet another unfortunate nickname from his new classmates at Kendal Grammar School. Popular at the time was a poster warning of the dangers of unexploded bombs. In it, a cheeky cartoon personification of a torpedo – Firebomb Fritz, with his bomb-shaped nose, landmine eyes and wings for ears – wagged his finger as a warning not to come near him. His new school friends noted a startling similarity between Maurice and the impish anthropomorphised incendiary, and so during his stay in the Lakes he would forever be known as Firebomb Fritz, Fritz or simply The Firebomb. Maurice would, during his golfing career, garner many nicknames, such as The Open Joker, The R&A Rabbit and The Phantom of the Open. It is something of a shame that nobody picked up on The Firebomb, fizzing over the hallowed turf of the R&A as he would later do, undetected, unexploded, before detonating a hysterical frenzy of shanks and snap-hooks, shrapnels of embarrassment whizzing through the clubhouse at St Andrews, eventually razing the reputations of golf's top administrators to rubble.

Soon after arriving in Kendal, Maurice joined the

Boy Scouts and found once again that he had a flair for pretty much whatever he turned his hand to. With an annual parade only days away, the drum major in the Scouts' marching band, responsible for flinging a heavy mace into the air, making it perform elaborate twirls and revolutions, was taken ill. The Scoutmaster, an experienced mace thrower, was prepared to step in himself, but Maurice begged to be given an opportunity. Despite initial misgivings, Maurice's persistence – he considered it 'a challenge not to be ignored' – ensured he was entrusted with this most vital of tasks.

Taking a mace home, he practised day and night in order to replicate the feats usually performed by the stricken drum major. Soon realising that Mrs Langhorn's front room was too small and generally ill-equipped for hurling a four-foot mace – a point made with some directness by his guardian as she swept up two broken china cups – Maurice took to the local playing fields to hone his skills. The difficulty of top-quality mace-throwing soon became apparent. 'Performing this feat standing still was one thing. Doing it whilst marching was something else!' And all this while surrounded by 'a veritable confusion of drummers and flautists'.

Despite all the hours of practice, Maurice had a back-up plan should he find himself accidentally knocking another child's teeth out with a 48-inch metal pole. In such circumstances, he'd simply recite the Scout Law – to 'smile and whistle under all difficulties' – and exhale a cheery trill through a fixed rictus. But he needn't have been concerned. The march was

a triumph. In fact, after a couple of early nervous fumbles, he soon got so confident that he performed the most difficult sections of his throwing act 'whenever and wherever the spectators that lined the route were most numerous'. He also notes with great pride that 'in the days that followed, I learned that my showmanship was the talk of the town, which I must say I found very gratifying. But being of a modest nature, I didn't let it go to my head.' It was further evidence of Maurice's innate showmanship. Perhaps more crucially, it was his first taste of fame. Certainly the episode has some parallels with his later pursuit of golfing excellence – the hours spent brushing up his talent on school playing fields, by way of example – although his adroit twirling of a mace was never quite matched by his handling of a golf club.

It was also during his Kendal sabbatical that Maurice began his fateful love affair with the world of sport. Rarely was there a discipline in which, according to his own record, he failed to show a remarkable talent as soon as he stepped onto the field of play. Cricket? 'I showed a natural ability for it. I finished the season with the best bowling average.' Track and field? 'I acquitted myself spectacularly at all of them and even won a couple come Sports Day.'

He gave himself a particularly hearty slap on the back for his rugby skills. 'What I lacked in knowledge and experience, I more than made up for in enthusiasm.' He recalls how in the very first game he played, he did his usual trick of switching off whenever a teacher was explaining the rules to a game: 'I would

often stare into the distance with a faraway expression on my face. Daydreaming, my teachers called it.' Consequently when the game started, the daydreamer was somewhat stunned to see bodies everywhere, arms and limbs flying all over the place, contorted in unspeakable angles and trapped under sweaty writhing piles of flesh and bone. Despite his confusion, he decided to join in with gusto. Upon seeing the ball pop out of a thing called a 'scrummage', he sensed his moment to make an impression and pounced on the oval object 'with a reckless disregard for my life and limb. But as I did so another player with even less regard for my personal well-being kneed me in the back of the head – a sickening blow.' Being knocked unconscious during his first game didn't dampen his enthusiasm for the sport, however. Soon enough, just as he had done with cricket, he joined the school team, citing his 'speed and all-round ability to gain advantages' as the two main quivers in his bow.

Another sport at which Maurice excelled was cross-country running. Before one particular race, he was so confident of victory that, as the field lined up, he asked the other competitors if they wanted his autograph now or after he'd won the race. Sadly, his cockiness backfired when, mid-joke, the race started. 'I'd only just finished laughing at my quip when to my surprise I found myself at the back of the field,' he moaned. Despite his bad start, Maurice soon found himself up with the leaders, though the effort left him 'in a state of distress'. Halfway through he was joined