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Friday's Local Hero

Relics from the past securing future of their own, writes **Richard Winton**

TECHNOLOGICAL advances are undoubtedly diluting the difficulty of some of the world's most revered golf courses. What were once meddlesome fairway bunkers or troublesome clumps of trees are now obsolete, taken out of play by the extra distance that 21st century players can muster from the back tees.

Even a hapless hacker is now capable of scudding drives well over 200 yards – although not necessarily on their chosen path – thanks to the latest jumbo titanium graphite-shafted wood, or making a chip check on the green after an agricultural swipe with a lob wedge at that extra-spin ball. As a consequence, the entire nature of the game is changing as the epic duel between golfer and course is increasingly weighed to the benefit of the former.

It is enough to make the Oldest Member splutter into his gin.

But it was not always thus, recalls Lionel Freedman. The 75-year-old – who signs his age as three over fours – is far removed from the narrator of P G Wodehouse's golfing tales but the sardonic septuagenarian evokes some of the storyteller's sentiments in his appraisal of the modern game. Yet rather than simply talk from a terrace, the captain of Craighielaw Golf Club in East Lothian has franked word with deed.

Five years ago, Freedman founded the World Hickory Open as little more than a fun diversion from the monotony of medal play. Inspired by the Musselburgh Challenge, a nine-hole event he conceived in 1999 while secretary at the town's Old Course in which local teams would replicate the days of yore by using hickory clubs and guttie balls, the first year of the event was essentially only an Edinburgh corporate event. However, the reaction convinced the organiser he was on to something.

"I don't know what I expected but I knew people would enjoy it," admits Freedman in his eloquent drawl. "After the first one at



CLUB LOYALTY: Lionel Freedman, founder of the World Hickory Open to be held on Gullane No.2 next week as part of a quest to take the tournament to various historic courses.

Picture: Julie Howden

Musselburgh I went to the PGA and Peter Lloyd, the secretary at the time, said we owe it to the game of golf to support you and it has all developed from there."

Craighielaw, the club of which Freedman is captain, has hosted the past three incarnations – which had metamorphosed into a two-day event encompassing a pro-am as well as an open – but on Thursday and Friday of next week the 2009 edition will take place at Gullane No.2 as part of a quest to take the tournament to various historic courses around the country and possibly beyond. Before that, an invitational event – the Festival of Golf – will be held at Musselburgh Old on Sunday and Monday, with the likes of Dean Robertson, Andrew Oldcorn and Pierre

Fulke, the Swedish former Ryder Cup player, taking part in the first professional competition on one of the world's oldest courses since Harry Varden won there in 1906.

The competitors are limited to just six hickory-shafted clubs – either produced before 1935 or replicas – and bedecked in plus fours and flat caps, but Freedman insists that only adds to the enjoyment, noting that Zack Saltman ambled round in a record 67 strokes with just five weapons in his bag three years ago.

"It has really taken off around the world because it takes you back to how golf was played 100 years ago," he explains, noting the popularity of the discipline in the US and Sweden, in particular. "It brings in play hazards that are now beyond

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