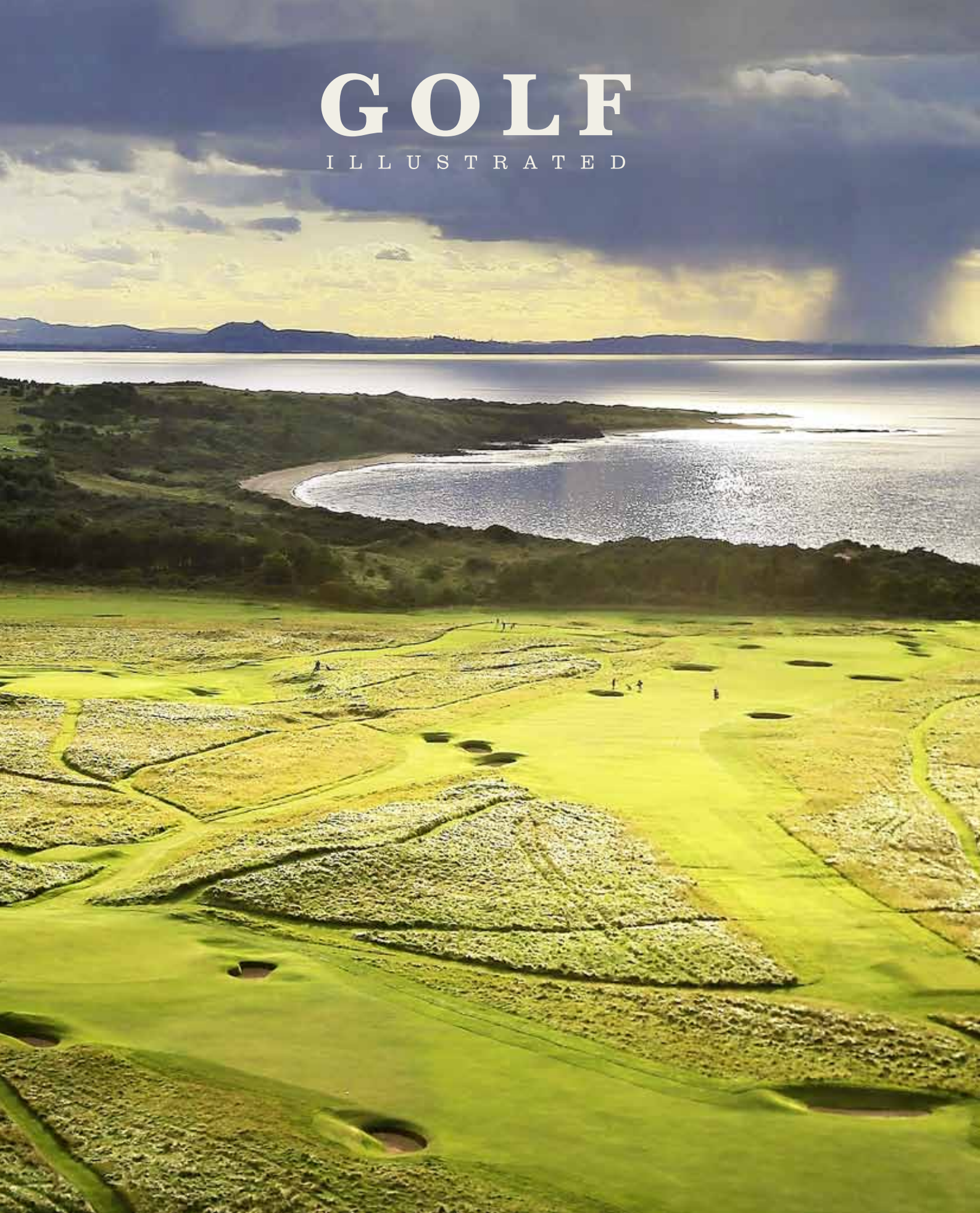


GOLF

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Lost art of clubmaking

One of the world's finest custom clubmakers resides in a converted farm shop near Tonbridge in Kent.



Words *Stuart Hood*
Photography *Tom Howard*

Some people call Richard Kempton's custom club fitting business old fashioned. Others use the expression behind the times. The unkind may even select the word obsolete. And in fairness, you can see where these naysayers are coming from. After all, do we not live in a world where clubs are made on mass? An era where 'off the shelf' drivers can be adjusted to suit individuals? An age when the brand name is almost as important as the performance?

"There is no doubt that it has become increasingly difficult to make a living as an independent clubmaker," admits Kempton. "Up until 2008 things were okay, but since then money has got a bit tight. But it's like every industry. The better clubmakers will survive and the ones who don't know enough won't."

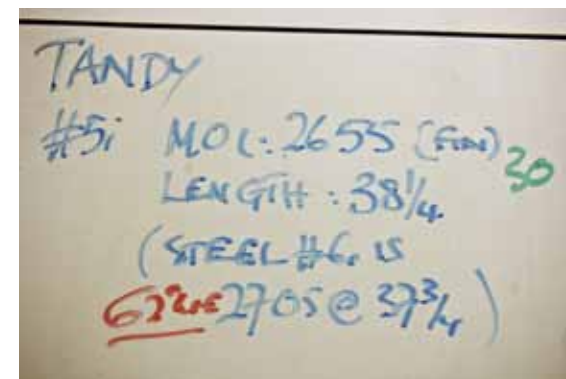
A glance at the diplomas, certificates and awards that decorate Kempton's workshop walls is enough to tell you that he is one of the world's 'better clubmakers'. But this wasn't always the case. The Kent native only entered the industry in the mid-1990s, after a diverse career that saw him try everything from marine engineering to exporting kitchen scales to freelance interpreting (German to English) to importing machinery into Russia.

"Back in 1994, I knew I wanted to quit my job and become my own boss in the golf industry, but there were several ways I could have gone," he recalls. "One option was organising golf sales in hotel rooms and another was taking up a franchise with a golf shop chain, but I couldn't really see how the numbers stacked up in either of them. Then I read a trend report that claimed only around 10 per cent of golfers who bought clubs off the rack were properly fitted for the specifications they needed and a light bulb went off in my head. I was going to take the plunge and get into the custom fit side of the business."

The only issue was a major one. Kempton knew nothing about making or manipulating golf clubs, so he did something that he continues to do to this day. He asked questions. What equipment should he purchase? Which books should he read? Which courses should he take? And which expert should he listen to?

The answers to the first three questions varied. The answers to the fourth didn't. The man to learn from was Tom Wishon, the poster boy of the industry who remains the only custom clubmaker to have had his equipment used in the Ryder Cup.

Fortunately for Kempton, the American, who now runs Tom Wishon Golf Technology, but at the time worked for leading golf club component supplier Golfsmith, was due to give a talk at the NEC in Birmingham later that year.



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Overleaf: Kempton prepares to work on a driver in his workshop. Left (top): A selection of the iron heads offered to customers. Left (bottom): The converted farm shop that Kempton now calls 'the office'. Above (top): Kempton's custom club-making diploma. Above (bottom): A customer's 5-iron swing and club statistics.

‘You can go on courses and ask people how to do it, but there is no substitute for actually doing it because golfers regularly find ways of screwing with science’

“I sat in the front row and it was incredibly impressive,” remembers Kempton. “Tom spoke for 90 minutes without glancing at a note. It was fascinating, but he raised a lot of issues that I didn’t understand or wanted to explore further, so I kept firing questions at him. Apparently he later e-mailed Golfsmith’s European office to ask ‘Who on earth the guy in the front row was?’ That was 19 years ago and, after completing Golfsmith Clubmaking and Advanced Clubmaking courses, I started my own business the next year.”

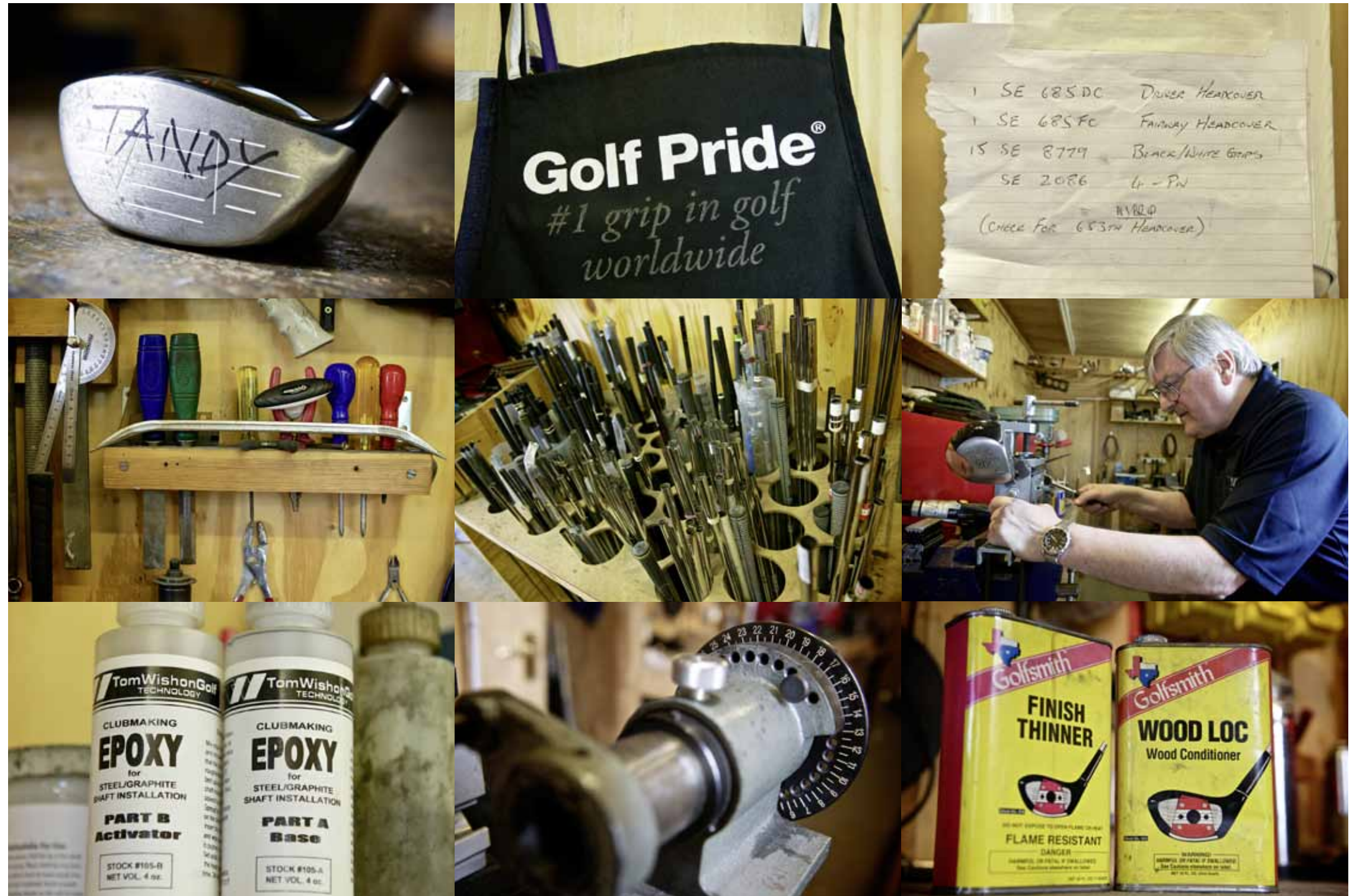
Kempton rented a farm outbuilding, purchased a load of basic tools, placed adverts in local newspapers and waited for the customers to walk in. Which was when the fun really began.

“You can go on the courses, read the books and ask people how to do it, but there is no substitute for actually doing it,” smiles the former Knowle Park and Royal Cinque Ports member. “I say this, because you quickly find that golfers regularly find ways of screwing with science.

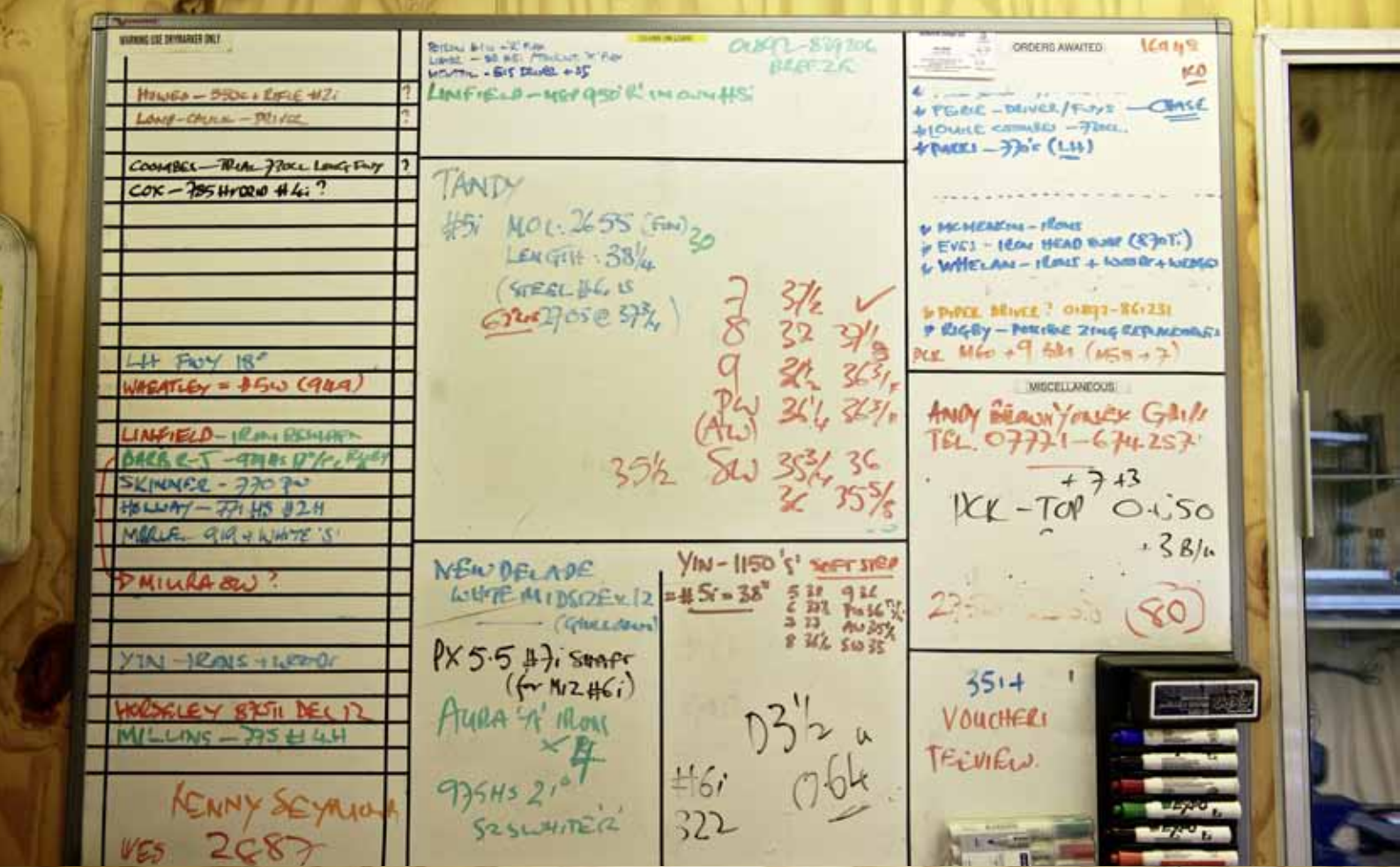
“For example, one of my first customers was a pro who was getting ready for Open Championship qualifying. He came in and asked me to adjust his lies because he was pulling everything left. This should be a relatively simple operation that involves flattening the lies, but when I put his clubs on the machine it turned out that the lies were already too flat.

“Why was this guy pulling his shots when lies that are too flat should lead to pushes? I scratched my head for a while, asked some more questions and then realised the reason was quite simple. He could feel the shots going right, so was hitting pulls to compensate for the pushes and had begun overdoing it. That is not what you would expect and you only learn how to deal with situations like these by doing the job.”

Kempton grafted away for the next few years, building up more and more knowledge and customers. Then, in 2001, one of his regulars nominated him to be European Clubmaker of the Year. It was a title that the Englishman would go on to win and



Clockwise from top left: A clubhead ready to be fitted; one of Kempton's many aprons; today's 'to-do' list; working on a driver; two products that help Kempton restore persimmon drivers; checking the loft angle is crucial; the glue needed to keep a shaft in place; some of the basic tools Kempton has used for over 20 years; a shaft to fit every swing speed.



‘Tom Wishon initially thought I was a pain in the backside’

one that would bring him back in contact with Tom Wishon.

“The awards ceremony took place in America and Tom presented the prize,” smiles Kempton. “He said that he’d known me for several years and initially thought I was a pain in the backside, because I asked so many tedious questions. The audience laughed and then Tom went on to explain how he had changed his mind about me when he remembered that he had also asked lots of questions when he had been learning about how clubs performed. Tom said, ‘He would never have known what he knew if his mentor had refused to answer his questions, so he was more than happy to keep answering mine.’ I was glad about this as I’d booked an extra week in America, so I could shadow him at work and get into the industry more deeply.”

A dozen years on, Kempton remains at the epicentre of the club fitting industry. Not that you would know this from the signpost to his office – a laminated poster propped up against a post on the bend of an A-road in Kent – his office itself – a, perhaps rather aptly, custom-built workspace that is half farm shop, half grafted on container – or his office’s television, a grey box with a screen the same size as a modern driver head.

“I can’t remember the last time it was on,” smiles Kempton. “If I’m not with a customer, I’m online researching new findings and techniques or on forums talking club fitting or dispelling myths. It is amazing what some people believe, for example... ”

At this point the former 10-handicapper, who has had to give up the game due to a persistent back injury, does something that he does several times during our afternoon together.

He gets up in the middle of a sentence, wanders off into his workshop and comes back with some evidence that helps to illustrate his point. On this occasion, he returns with a digital camera and shows us two pictures. The first image has impact marks all over the clubface, and the second has impact marks only in the centre of the clubface.

“Do you know what the difference between these two pictures is?” he asks rhetorically. “Three grams. Both clubs were hit by an 18-handicapper. The one with the impact marks in the centre of the clubface has three grams of lead tape on the bottom and the one with the impact marks all over the clubface doesn’t. And to think some people still insist that moment of inertia doesn’t matter. If they had seen the things I have seen, then they would know that it does.”

And make no mistake, Kempton has seen just about everything walk through his door, including: a Ryder Cup player who was struggling to hit a driver because the shaft was three-quarters of an inch too long for him; the mid-handicapper whose driver was so badly fitted Kempton managed to add 20 yards to his game; the 50-something who increased his swing speed 6mph with two grams of extra clubhead weight; a golfer who insisted



Left (top): The whiteboard where Kempton scribbles his customer’s vital statistics. Left (bottom): Shaft torque analysing? Kempton has a tool for that. Above (left): Sparks fly as Kempton gets to work with his chop saw. Above (right): A ruler to measure shaft length.



one putter performed better than another despite them having the exact same specifications; and the 15-handicapper who was opening the face of his clubs so much at impact, to perform to his best he needed a four-degree driver.

While it is possible to make such a club (long drive competitors use them), Kempton never did. Instead, he told his potential customer to go and see a coach before investing in a new set of clubs. “It is always a dilemma, but if I am in any doubt, then I will always tell a customer to sort their swing out before investing in a set of clubs that won’t work for them if they ever do get their swing corrected. This sounds like commercial suicide, but in some ways telling someone you can’t do anything for them is a good move. It shows people that you are not trying to con them and if you do this, in my experience, they tend to both come back when they have fixed their swing issue and recommend you to friends. That sort of referral is crucial for me. Word of mouth is everything in this industry.”

The word on the street says not only is Kempton honest and knowledgeable, he is also thorough. Forget walking in to a shop, being fitted and then collecting your clubs the next week, buying a set from the man people call ‘the Club Doctor’ has several

‘Mercedes makes good cars, but you still have to adjust the seat and mirrors’

stages. First, you fill out a questionnaire to help Kempton understand the current state of your game and what you hope to achieve through custom fitting. Then, he assesses your current equipment to see if it is contributing to your problems. Then, you do a session on the £15,000 Trackman custom fitting machine, so Kempton can assess your data and see how it changes with different shafts and clubheads. Then, he guarantees how much improvement he can offer you through custom fitting. Then, he makes up a trial 5-iron and sends it to you to test for a period of time. Then, you give him as much feedback as you can about the ball flight, feel, accuracy and distance. Then, if it needs to be

Above: A vice and an accurate eye are crucial tools for the custom clubmaker.



tinkered with, he tinkers with it until you are happy. Then, when you are both completely happy with the specifications, he makes your new set, which comes with a year’s warranty and a personal guarantee: if they don’t do what he said they would do for your game and he can’t fix them, you get your money back. It is a bold promise, but he has only been asked for two refunds in 18 years.

When you consider this, Kempton’s service proposition sounds incredible, but, as he is quick to point out, though some of the technology may be revolutionary, the personal service isn’t. Once upon a time golf club professionals used to make all of their members’ sets like this and, who knows, perhaps in the future this is the way the big corporations will go too?

“I don’t see that happening,” laughs Kempton. “But I do think golfers should take equipment companies to task more. If your clubs aren’t doing what it was claimed they would, then take them back and ask the seller to adjust them to fit you. Today’s big golf manufacturers make good clubs, but this doesn’t mean that they are set up correctly for everybody. As I always say, ‘Mercedes makes good cars, but most people still have to adjust the seat and mirrors before they start driving.’”

Kempton doesn’t drive a Mercedes. He, again rather aptly,

drives a classic Rover that is bordering on extinction (there are only eight working models still on the road). On face value it looks like it needs to be significantly upgraded and updated. But when you peer under the bonnet, get into the driver’s seat or study the statistics, you discover that it performs just as well as a new car, which quickly brings Kempton onto a point about modern golf drivers.

“Most people are more interested in fitting their driver than any other clubs and I don’t frankly know why,” he states. “Actually, I do know why, it’s because the big companies have pushed drivers more than any other club and turned it into an ego thing, where you have to knock it past your mates.

“Let me tell you two things. If you hit the ball relatively straight, then hitting your driver 10 yards further will not do much for your game. And if you are only going to get one club in your bag custom fitted it should be the putter and not the driver, because of all your clubs the putter is the one you use by far the most. Say you shoot 80, about 40 per cent of those shots are going to be with your putter.”

He is up again. This time he strides into his custom fitting room and returns grasping a piece of curved metal with a grip.

Above: The fitting studio where Kempton assesses all his clients’ swings and putting strokes.



It looks like a cosh for ‘the thug who wants to maintain the softness of his skin’. It isn’t. It is Kempton’s ‘phony putter’, a homemade device that allows golfers to get over the ball properly when setting up for a putt.

“Around 80 per cent of golfers are using the wrong length of putter,” Kempton explains. “This is because when you fit people with actual putters it is very difficult to tell whether they are in a comfortable position or they have adjusted their body to fit the length of the putter they have been handed. It is impossible to get past this problem unless you use an invention like mine. With it, I can work out a golfer’s optimum hand position and where the ball is in relation to the middle of the face, and this allows me to find the perfect putter length and lie for them.”

When Kempton talks about the intricacies of fitting he talks at pace, with excitement. It is a trait that is contagious and soon we find ourselves picking things up, spinning things around and asking questions, lots and lots of questions. What does this do? What does that do? What do the scribbles on the whiteboard mean? How does my shallow swing plane affect the launch angle? Should I be using a face-balanced putter? We want to know everything and Kempton is more than happy to tell us, which is when the blatantly obvious smacks us in the face. Everyone from Paul Way to 24-handicappers come back to Kempton and tell their friends about him, because he offers so

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much more than a set of golf clubs and a good service proposition. A fitting from him is a lesson, an education, a bespoke, interactive experience that makes you feel more like a trusted lab assistant than a number. And in many ways you are.

“I learn something from every customer who comes in,” admits Kempton. “It is a constant learning process and that is what I love about the custom fit business. In this game you never, ever know it all and if you think you do, you should get out of the industry because you are fooling yourself and your customers.

“Yes, I have been fitting people for nearly 20 years, but I discover new things every day, some of which keep me interested for weeks, months or even years. It is for this reason that, no matter how quiet I am, you will never find me with my feet up.”

Having spent an afternoon with ‘the club doctor’ we can’t help but believe him.

Left: Another set of clubs ready for collection. Above: Space is at a premium in Kempton’s cosy workshop.