

# Flying the flag

British and Irish golfers are enjoying a prolific 2026, but only one has lifted the famous Claret Jug in ten Majors at Merseyside's Royal Birkdale – who can match Padraig Harrington's 2008 heroics in this, the 154th Open Championship?

**S**hane Lowry was the last British or Irish golfer to win golf's oldest Championship seven years ago in 2019.

Northern Irish duo Rory McIlroy and Darren Clarke achieved the same feat in 2014 and 2011, but Padraig Harrington's back-to-back in 2007 and 2008 complete a lean 26 years on home soil.

The second of those astounding Majors came at Royal Birkdale, the venue hosting the 154th Open Championship.

A 3-iron from Blackpool Airport on England's rugged northwest coastline, the challenging links layout has never seen an English winner, with Australians Peter Thompson (1954 and 1965) and Ian Baker-

Finch (1991), and Americans Arnold Palmer (1961), Lee Trevino (1971), Johnny Miller (1976), Tom Watson (1983), Mark O'Meara (1998) and Jordan Spieth (2017) joining Harrington on the honours list.

Rory McIlroy and Justin Rose will likely be leading the charge across Merseyside's Birkdale Hills. Riding on a high

after winning last year's Ryder Cup together, they shared top 10 finishes in the first two Majors of 2026, with McIlroy winning back-to-back Masters and tied 7th at the US PGA Championship, and Rose tied third and tenth respectively.

Desperate to add to his solitary major win at the 2013 US Open, Rose has unfinished business with Birkdale after the 1998 Championship where he sensationally holed out from the rough on the 18th hole to claim fourth place and the Silver Medal as an amateur, aged 17.

Englishman Tommy Fleetwood would be eyeing a debut ►

**Below: Rory McIlroy will be among the favourites**





today a plaque permanently marks the spot in the rough.

Then the par-3s at 7 and 12. The 7th is often cited as one of the most visually memorable par-3s in Championship golf, with its iconic doughnut bunker – a trap with an island of grass in the middle that swallows errant shots. The 12th is widely regarded as one of the best and most beautiful par-3s in the world. Nestled between sweeping sand dunes with an amphitheatre-like setting, it requires a highly precise mid-iron, with steep riveted bunkers waiting for anything else.

The par-4 18th offers a dramatic finish, framed by Birkdale's Art Deco clubhouse.

Despite its deep traditions, the R&A continues to evolve, with The Heroes Classic set to debut at the 2026 Open, featuring golf pros and celebrity guests. And news that the 2028 Open Championship has been awarded to England's Royal Lytham & St Annes Golf Club means Scotland's Trump Turnberry course must wait until at least 2029 for another chance to host this prestigious event. The 155th Open will head back to St Andrews in 2027, as is tradition every five years.

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**Above: Scottie Scheffler won the 2025 Open Championship by four shots at Royal Portrush in Northern Ireland**

**Left: Rory McIlroy is coming off back-to-back Masters Green Jackets and Royal Birkdale will suit his style**

**Below: Tommy Fleetwood – who is yet to win a Major – was born a 10-minute drive from Royal Birkdale, England, where the 2026 Open Championship will be played**

Irishman would love to add a third Open and fourth Major to his illustrious career.

As for the course itself, the 16th par-4 is deeply etched into Open Championship history after Arnold Palmer hit an errant tee shot into dense rough in 1961. Rather than taking a penalty drop, he found the green –

Major – the hospital he was born in is a ten minute drive to the Royal Birkdale pro shop, and as a boy he would famously sneak on for a few holes with his Dad. Major form has deserted the Ryder Cup star of late, however, with the 2024 Masters his last top-ten finish.

Jon Rahm, who tied second at the PGA Championship in May, will also be in close contention, with reigning Open champion, American Scottie Scheffler, looking to bounce back after finishing outside of the top ten for only the fifth time in the last 21 Majors in Pennsylvania.

While the Birkdale course underwent significant, member-led renovations to enhance the

layout over the last two years, it will still suit precise ball-strikers and creative shot-makers, like McIlroy. But who's to say another Aaron Rai (US PGA Championship winner in May) won't appear from nowhere? Such is the romance of this gripping tournament.

When Harrington won at Royal Birkdale in 2008, he did so overcoming a wrist injury and challenging weather to defeat runners-up Ian Poulter and then 53-year-old Greg Norman. He secured the victory with what became known as the five-wood of a lifetime on the 17th hole. This will be Harrington's 27th Open Championship, and how the

