

ON 7th March the Chiltern Hills were still frozen along the top, like icing on a cake, when the Herts. Amateurs played the Herts. Professionals at Berkhamsted. It was abominably cold; with a sear east wind chasing across the top of the wide open common-land where the course lies. But the greens, though frozen like boards at first, were true; and putting—if fast—was fair enough.

With the club's main event of the year, the 36-hole open scratch amateur Berkhamsted Trophy due on the 10th, though, all plans for removing moss, treating and truing the greens, had already long gone by the board. Green-keeping can be a very frustrating life, when the weather goes hard against you. The moss killer which Head Greenkeeper R. Lewis had put down five weeks before had still had no rain to wash it in, and in fact all Lewis and his men were able to do was to whalebone brush on the Thursday and mow the greens lightly when they thawed on the Friday; and then hope for the best.

*On Friday night it rained buckets, and up came all the turf, expanding like a sponge after weeks of dry frost—not exactly what a greenkeeper wants on the night before an event for which he has planned to have his greens at their best.*

In fact, they got by: well enough for Eric Holt of Herts. to run off a 71 in the afternoon, and for the main event to go to the English International David Neech, with a fair enough score of 76, 73: 149—though the number of scratch men scoring in the 80's all day surprised them all.

### Hertfordshire Relish

It did not, though, surprise the members of Berkhamsted, who have always sat back with a certain anticipatory relish when good players from elsewhere are expected upon their course. Even when the greens are perfect—as they were for 30 years up to the war and look like being again from now onwards—Berkhamsted is one of those courses which astound golfers, particularly amateurs accustomed to having a very fair opinion of themselves. It is, in fact, almost unmatched as a course

## BERKHAMSTED IS NEVER EASY

says John Stobbs

---

The first of a series of articles specially written for The Greenkeeper by The Observer's Golf Correspondent reporting points of interest from courses and tournaments he will be seeing during the 1962 season

---

for cutting ambitious young players down to size.

Why exactly it can do this, on a mere 6,500 odd yards from the back tees, makes an interesting study in course value and design. It is not easy to put a finger precisely upon the source of Berkhamsted's formidable powers of intimidation. Examine any hole, and, looked at simply in plan and dimensions of fairway, etc., it looks a perfectly straightforward challenge.

*The men who made Berkhamsted, though, sensed the value of the ground they had, and the course's toughness lies in their use of it. Two men were mainly responsible, a local amateur and lover of the game and the common, C. J. Gilbert, who laid out most of the present course, and James Braid, who extended it and brought in four new holes in 1927.*

Between them they have left us a course where the ground is used without ostentation or any unusual or apparent trickery; but where the natural hazards of the country are left alive and primeval

to do their omnivorous worst. The ground is gently sloping hilltop heath, naturally harbouring gorse, bracken and fine fescues. Centuries of rabbits have fed on the lush parts of the rough, depositing the results all over the fairways and giving, where trolleys still leave a patch unworn here and there, a beautifully thick, springy turf. Mow the common and you have a fairway: mow the heathery rough too tight and you have a fairway, too.

Nowadays this has been done to such an extent, the edge of the real tiger country pushed back so far on most of the holes, and the thick heather cut so low and regularly, that the pre-war Berkhamsted man can hardly recognise his course.

*In those days you drove over up to 100 yards of 8-foot high gorse, to a fairway seldom more than 40 yards across, tacking through further banks of gorse, and over cross-barriers of gorse as well on many holes, to the green. It was a veritable terror then, indeed.*

## No Sand

Today, even with the whole course vastly more open, the visiting scratch man still seems unable to play to the par of 72. The reason lies somewhere in the naturalness of the terrain and course architecture. There are no sand bunkers whatsoever; and although this means that you never need have anything worse to play out of than a grassy hollow or mound, it also makes the shots to the greens that much more deceptive to the eye and instinct. Grassy humps and hollows can be one of the subtlest of all forms of visual architecture. There is one short hole, the 5th, where from any of the forward tees nearly everybody misses the green on the left—and nobody quite knows why: it is something to do with the look of the humps and hollows before and around it. There are many shots on the course where this sort of thing happens.

Then there are the one or two deep grassy dells, old chalk pits or Roman horse-ponds. One before the green at the long 7th makes all the difference between its 500 yards being a straight-forward long-hitter's 4 and a very tight

one; another just short of and to the left of the green at the 400 yards 12th has a positively mesmeric effect on the average player.

*Braid sited his new 16th green between a May tree and a particularly steep deep pit, cutting into the back-right of the green: their joint effect is to make at least eight out of every ten iron shots to that green drop short!*

May trees, in fact, are used at several holes: notably the 2nd and 3rd, to tempt the player—by simple visual intimidation—to funk the par-man's line. The 13th uses one in a cross rough before the green to lend a note of definite uncertainty to what would otherwise be a comparatively simple pitch. And although the placing of the grassy mounds before the greens (rather "one right—one left", though sometimes staggered) is old-fashioned and lacks subtlety, the ease with which a loose shot can run off most of the greens—noticeably the 2nd, 3rd, 6th, 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th, 14th and 17th!—begins in time to frighten the suffering tiger. Not that the greens are in any way unfair—they simply find out the unworthy shot into them nearly every time.

## Cheeky

There is lots more that goes to make up Berkhamsted's challenge: the odd gorse bush left standing with an evil little leer not quite on the line of a long second; the unobtrusive patches of just-dead ground before a green here and there; the impertinent use of Grims Dyke to hide the bottom of two or three flag sticks from the fairway; the sudden patches of heather left calculatedly in its prime full-bushiness; the birch tree commanding the inside of a dog-leg; the sudden narrowing of fairways on the most thoughtless line from the tee.

For anyone at all interested in how to add to a course's playing value with the minimum of upkeep costs, Berkhamsted is always well worth a study. Old-fashioned it may seem at first glance: but it stands the test of time: and never for a moment do you feel you are playing on anything except what has been left lying around for you by divine providence—and, of course, the rabbits.