Six months from now the world of sport will have turned its attention away from the Olympics and will be focussed firmly on Medinah Country Club, in Chicago, and the Ryder Cup. Golf fans, general sports fans, even non sports fans, will be kept enthralled as fortunes sway throughout the three days and 28 matches, but among the most interested observers will be the members of Moortown Golf Club which played host to the first Ryder Cup on this side of the Atlantic in 1929.

The razzmatazz which surrounds the most recent playings of the Ryder Cup wasn’t quite the same at Moortown in Leeds, West Yorkshire, that May, but golfing aficionados of the time would have been extremely impressed that the American team containing such legendary figures as Gene Sarazen, Walter Hagen, Horton Smith and Leo Diegel was beaten 7-5 to level the series at one all. The British team containing, among others Henry Cotton, Abe Mitchell, George Duncan and the Whitcombe brothers, came from 2.5 – 1.5 down in the Foursomes to win the Singles 5.5 to 2.5.

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If, prior to settling down in front of the TV to watch the latest chapter in the Ryder Cup saga, the Moortown members decide to play a few holes they will do so on a course which has been modified and modernised, yet returned to the style created by Leeds Doctor, Alistair MacKenzie, who honed his skills in the UK and Australia before heading to the US and designing Augusta National and Cypress Point.

The Club has worked closely with architect Ken Moodie, a man who has studied MacKenzie thoroughly - travelling far and wide to experience golf courses first hand and reading everything the great man wrote on the subject of golf course design. He has also worked at other MacKenzie courses including Moortown’s near neighbour, Alwoodley, putting that knowledge to good use.

Ken was originally brought in by Moortown in 2004, along with namesake, former Ryder Cup player and now BBC television commentator, Ken Brown, and woodland management expert, John Nicholson, with the brief of improving the challenge for the better golfer. Over time that remit has expanded and the current work includes an extensive bunker renovation and the remodelling of two holes – the 6th and 7th – which will be concluded this spring.

“The impetus for the more recent work coincided with the arrival of Course Manager, Steve Robinson, and some key members of the Moortown Committee visiting other MacKenzie courses, including Cypress Point and Pasatiempo Golf Club, in California.

“They have seen the restoration work that has been done on those courses, as have I, and we wanted to do the same with Moortown,” explained Ken.

MacKenzie styling includes very distinctive kipper noses on bunkers and much more intricate and interesting shapes, and the work has been carried out in-house with the assistance of a freelance shaper ensuring that Ken’s plans make the transition from paper to play.

The results so far are stunning.

“In war times, I don’t think that the course would have changed much since MacKenzie last visited for the Ryder Cup in 1929” Ken Moodie, Architect

Back to the future
of the golf course which had been taken by the RAF when they flew the country after the war.

“I don’t think that the course would have changed much from when MacKenzie had last visited for the Ryder Cup in ’29 to then, so we could be fairly sure that it was close to his original design,” he explained.

Steve arrived at the club five years ago from Blackmoor, in Hampshire, where he had managed a similar renovation programme.

“After the War, to cut down on costs, many bunkers were filled in and we earmarked where many of these were,” explained Steve, who also added that there were some large “waste area” bunkers for which it would have been a step too far to re-produce, while others were in areas which would no longer be in play.

“Since I started in 2007 we’ve filled in four bunkers and built 29. We’ve gone from 66 to 91,” he revealed.

Steve and the club took the decision that they would undertake the bunker rebuilding work in-house aided by a locally based freelance shaper.

“We felt that given our particular situation with peat subsoil and our weather conditions that it was better to employ a freelance shaper who I could call on, once I’ve checked the weather forecast for the following day, rather than being charged for big plant and men not being able to work because the conditions don’t allow it, which is a downside of employing an outside contractor,” said Steve, who added that his team were doing a superb job and that their skills levels were rising all the time.

“IT’s a bit like archaeology – Time Team stuff,” said Ken, who is on site at least once a week during the project.

“The outcome has been that the team has done a great deal of the work by hand which has been very much in keeping with the MacKenzie style and it has meant that skills have developed.

They have also derived great satisfaction from beginning work on what would be a reinstated bunker, which Ken had sized using evidence from the aerial photograph, and discovering sand which had been there since the days of the original bunker.

“The Moortown soil structure has caused them a few issues however.

Mackenzie styling includes very distinctive longer noses on bunkers and much more intricate and interesting shapes, ensuring that Ken Moodie’s plans make the transition from paper to play.

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"We are built on peat and we would have situations were the whole base of a bunker would be on the move," explained Steve.

"We would dig out a bunker but if it rained between Ken’s visits it meant that the team had to wade into bunkers, which resembled duck ponds, to dig them out. We get pictures of the guys in wellies and waterproof clothing taking bucketfuls of what looks like peat soup out and decanting it into Pro Gators. It was stagnant horrible stuff.

"If Ken said he wanted it another four inches deeper we’d then need to go down that, plus an extra four or five inches to accommodate the several inches of angular 25mm-40mm stone which we’d discovered was the best way to firm up the bunker," said Steve.

Ken wasn’t unsympathetic, however, and worked with both the land and the crew to find solutions.

"We compromised on some of the bunker depths and built up the banks a bit higher instead. What we are trying to do has got to be achievable and you have to create something that is going to work in the long term. I’m sure MacKenzie MAIn ABoVe: the 12th bunker and InSet ABoVe: How it used to be

OtherS: the Moortown staff carrying out work on bunkers beside the 6th green

...for Dry Patch”

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA TRIALS, 2010

MacKenzie’s Mound (12th hole)

“Breaker Dynamic surpassed all other treatments

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MacKenzie’s Mound (12th hole)
would have done the same,” said Ken.

Part of the project is the re-
designing of the 6th and 7th holes, which have long been recognised as the weakest on the course. They had been a late addition in the late 80s and early 90s, following boundary issues and the removal of other holes on the edge of the course, but restrictions in place at the time meant there was a limit to what could be achieved by the replacements.

John Nicholson has been instru-
mental in ensuring that the work required to create the new holes is in keeping with the heathland/moorland nature of the rest of the course while at the same time con-
forming to Forestry Commission demands.

The new holes will benefit from the removal of trees and the intro-
duction of heather which will open up the holes in keepi-
ing with the landscape. “The genius loci – the spirit of the place – is what you’ve got to assess on day one. You’ve got to take on board that whatever we do has to be in keeping with the landscape.”

When assessing a site John considers the agronomic, strategic and the ecological elements but there is another issue which takes precedence. “The genius loci – the spirit of the place – is what you’ve got to assess on day one. You’ve got to take on board that whatever we do has to be in keeping with the landscape.”

As we spoke the construction work was around 50% completed but Steve was well aware that it would take time for the results of much of what has been done to come through.

“Members do appreciate that trees can have a negative impact on keeping and introducing heather, but they also think that once the trees have been removed the heather will come back on its own. “They don’t always realise that the tree removal is only the first stage and that it still requires work to bring back the heather. We scrape back the soil to expose dor-
mant heather seed, some of which have been buried for 90 years. “You can be looking at a mini-

“After visiting MacKenzie courses, Cypress Point and Pasatiempo Golf Club, in California, and seeing the restoration work that has been done on those courses, we wanted to do the same with Moortown” Ken Moodie, Architect (left) who is remodelling the 7th hole (as shown)
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The new bunkering will up the holes in keeping with the production of heather which will open the removal of trees and the introduction of Forestry Commission demands.

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