



The members at Holtye Golf Club, on the borders of Kent and Sussex, have sound reasons to be proud of David Wood, their 31 year old head greenkeeper of just three years standing. To even the most casual observer it is clear that the Holtye course is in spanking condition – unarguably better now than it has been for most of its 99 years of existence. They can with every justification boast of David's achievements, not only for his bringing the appliance of science to this utterly charming course, but in capturing a veritable armful of major awards as the star student of the BIGGA approved Plumpton College, under the expert tutelage of David Blackmur.

Few, however, would have believed that the young junior golfer who joined Holtye in 1974 whilst still attending the nearby Sevenoaks Public School would develop into a major Club asset. No, they knew him then only as a keen youngster who played a mean game whenever studies permitted and who happily worked on the course during weekends at humble green switching, his first greenkeeping exposure. David has always been a keen golfer, playing now to a handicap of 11 and having been in single figures when calls upon his time were not as demanding as they are now.

Leaving Sevenoaks in 1975 with eight 'O' levels, David astounded his parents (his father is a schoolmaster) by announcing that he wished to make his way in the world of agriculture, beginning with a two year spell on a mixed arable and dairy farm. This decision was hardly surprising however, for his grandfather had been a farmer – indeed may well have been his guiding influence – and the family home was sandwiched between two lovely farms. The call of open air life had snared David early and he was determined to make headway, spending three years between 1980 and 1983 at Plumpton College whilst taking a National Diploma in General Agriculture. However, this young man was no run-of-the-mill agricultural labourer and in observing the general decline in agriculture he quickly moved into his own business as a garden landscaper and designer, his own boss at 22!

The creative aspect of landscaping was very much to David's liking and it is conceivable that he may well have progressed and, who knows, perhaps even entered into golf course design, but it was not to be. In his own words, "landscaping was a hugely satisfying business, but like so many one-man-bands I was doing too much for one, working all the hours that God created, but still not quite making enough profit to pay for an assistant".

The call of golf echoed again and early in 1989 David joined the greenkeeping staff at Holtye, a small team in which his obvious talent soon came to the fore. It may seem hard to believe, but within eight months he was offered the job of head greenkeeper – a meteoric promotion happily accepted.

Holtye is on common land, Par 66, 5,325 yards, nine holes of quite delicious heathland reminiscent of a miniature Ashdown Forest. The traveller comes upon it quite suddenly on the twisting main road between East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells, its simplistic charm guaranteed to turn every head. It is carved through age old woodlands and is sparsely bunkered, thanks to clever green siting, with cross hazards of close cut heather through wide runnels – a legacy of old pack horse tracks. It is a haven for wildlife (look out for David's strategically placed bird breeding boxes), and is awash with silver birch, fir and gorse. One may be forgiven for forgetting that golf is the reason for its existence, for the numerous glimpses of nearby Ashdown Forest and stunning views of the North Downs can easily make one dismiss the less than perfect shot. It is a hugely popular course with 450 active members and its very popularity could have been its downfall.

With popularity comes activity, and the nine holes have

David Wood

been well hammered over the years, compaction being a continually recurring problem. David's programme evolves around relieving compaction and retaining the near 100% fescues and bents often found on heaths lacking any depth of top soil. It is typical heathland, weak and acidic, and David is of the opinion that not having automatic irrigation until very recently was the saviour of such fine turf. A greens irrigation system was installed in 1990, prompted perhaps by previous drought panics, but David uses this in a minimal way, giving the natural firm turf just enough moisture to keep the grass alive – no more, no less. He believes that over enthusiasm with fertilisers in the mid-80s was the cause of the dreaded *Poa annua* creeping into his greens, though he keeps this from becoming more than a minor irritation by natural minimalistic practices – ageless methods well taught at Plumpton. Even in late March the hand mown greens were looking healthy and putting quite beautifully – a credit to his clever maintenance programme.

Ninety-odd years of marching feet have taken their toll and David was at pains to point out that a programme of slitting, hollow tining and Verti-draining was an immutable necessity. Enthusiastically, he took me to where Colin Pryce was working with his Terralift compressed air subsoil aerator, hammer probing to a depth of up to 3ft and firing a seaweed based soil conditioner under pressure, into the soil profile. "I had seen the Terralift was complementary to Verti-draining, working wonders in relieving deep seated compaction on our fifth green, which was rebuilt a few years ago with decidedly dodgy materials and had always panned and behaved out of character", he said, "the whole nine greens are undergoing the same treatment now and I am sold on the efficacy of the treatment. The cost is £1,300 and takes about two days, but will be appreciated long after the price is forgotten" – sound recommendation indeed.

David reports directly to the general committee and keeps members informed with detailed but easy to understand course maintenance notes. Understanding is clearly the first step to acceptance, and David's members greet him with enthusiasm rather than as an opposing force out to get them!

Apart from day-to-day routine, David has the touch of an ecologist in restoring still more of the delicious heather. He is also carrying out a continuous programme of rebuilding pocket sized tees into areas which will more adequately cope with constant tee box changes and all tees will be sizably increased in time for Holtye's centenary year. His new construction is detailed (as one would expect from a landscaping expert), utilising sound practices and turved with Tiller turf, grown and lifted from a complementary growing medium. Whilst the tee building takes place, David is also installing strategic tee pop-ups himself, which makes him something of an irrigation engineer to boot. Nothing is left to chance and those tees already completed are looking wonderful. One hesitates to use the language of the real estate salesman, but they are of true championship quality and size, greatly improving playability.

David's BIGGA connection began three years ago, being a perfect mixture of active golf participation (he won the prestigious Ransomes Trophy at Ganton, represented BIGGA in the Kubota Challenge in 1990 and played for England in the Ransomes International Challenge at Fulford in 1991), along with dedicated work for the Kent section as their treasurer and secretary, taking the latter mantle from John Millen – a tough act to follow. His earlier committee work at college has stood him in good stead and he is now on the regional board, being the spokesman for Kent. Long term



New tee: the 2nd at Holtye Golf Club

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aspirations lean toward serving at national level, which he hopes might come "when I've enough experience". It would be remiss to gloss over David's academic record, for in recent times he has achieved the rare and coveted distinction of being the first ever greenkeeper to take the nationally awarded City and Guilds Silver Medal – the Top Student of the Year Award presented by the examining body itself, the City and Guilds of London Institute Examination Board. Last year he won the BIGGA Cup and Tankard for Best All Round Student (Phase II) in Greenkeeping and Sportsturf Management at Plumpton and he is currently engaged in Phase III, a busy man in every way.

Where does a high-flyer like David set his sights? Despite his unbelievable modesty I fancy that Europe may well beckon before too long, for those Europeans have a penchant for British technical competence and seem ever willing to offer both challenges and generous pay structures. Looking at his bulging library of well-thumbed fine turf manuals and stealing a glimpse at his recent examination work – whilst never forgetting his practical expertise – one thing is certain: we shall be hearing much more of David Wood, both on the course and in the continually active world of greenkeeper education.

Major machinery and equipment in the Holtye stable

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| 2 John Deere 855 compact tractors. | 1 Modus 'T' top dresser. |
| 2 John Deere 22" pedestrian greens mowers. | 1 Wessex sweeper. |
| 1 Sabo-Roberine C900 3D mower. | 1 Wessex rotovator |
| 1 Coremaster hollow-tiner. | 1 Hardi sprayer |
| 1 Charterhouse multi-purpose spiking frame with deep and fine slitting drums. | 1 72" rotary deck for compact tractor. |
| 1 Huxley fine turf scarifier | 1 (aged) Ransomes Hahn 171. |
| | 2 Ransomes Auto-Certes. plus Sports Ground Irrigation automatic pop-up system. |