

Merrist Wood's golf course has added another dimension to the college's armoury and David Rhodes and Tom Smith are making the most of it.

# Par excellence



It is the dread of many establishments which decide to hold an Open Day that the expected numbers fail to turn up and the specially invited VIP guest is left making a speech to an embarrassingly small audience and little impression is made on the mountain of sandwiches.

Well, Merrist Wood College, in Guildford, certainly didn't have that problem. An Open Day held recently attracted a massive 10,000 visitors and one of the biggest draws was the College's own recently built golf course.

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Previous Page: One of the orchids to be found in Minty's Paddock, alongside the course.

Above: Swans are a regular site on Merrist Wood's man made lake.

Right: An area of natural grasses which may soon house sheep.



"The golf course meant that we had more things to show people. Stick a kid on a big tractor or show someone how to move a hole and they think it is wonderful," said David Rhodes, Senior Lecturer in Sportsturf and Agronomy at the College.

The original idea for the golf course came about ten years ago and belonged to George Shields, who was Vice Principal of the College before becoming a full time agronomist, and this was carried forward by the current Principal, John Riddle, who took the conscious decision to move away from agriculture into other landbased disciplines.

"Initially, the driving force was golf rather than greenkeeping as it was seen as a centre of golfing excellence but we have become more involved in the training and education of greenkeepers in recent years," explained David, whose accent betrays the fact that he is not a natural born southerner having moved to Merrist Wood from Myerscough about two years ago.

The course, laid out over 240 acres of college land, which now, incidentally, also incorporates an equestrian centre next door to the maintenance facility, and costing around £2.5 million, was designed by David Williams

and constructed by Lionel Whitnell.

"We have 500 members and also accept pay and play visitors. There are 120 greenkeeping students and of these 20 are full time with the rest day or block release. We also have 80 full time National Diploma Golfers Studies students who study the golf industry hoping to become either professionals or find other jobs within the golf industry," explained David.

One of the main conditions of the planning approval for the new golf course was that the site be used as a training facility.

"It is now an integral part in the management of training within the college not just for golfers or greenkeepers but we have land managers who use it for flora and fauna identification, arboriculture students who carry out tree auditing every year then we also work with the external agencies on planting schemes etc."



said David, who also uses the course to promote the greenkeeping profession among the younger fraternity.

"I teach National Curriculum science to primary school kids of six and seven and we do pond dipping and use grasses to examine the function of plants. It was a conscious effort to integrate greenkeeping as an industry skill.

"It is breaking the barrier down between greenkeeping and the perception of what greenkeeping is because I want people to see greenkeeping as an industry to which they might be attracted and not a last resort option," said David.

Another of the ways to change people's ideas about greenkeeping is through the careers offices.

"I bring careers officers in from Surrey and take them on tours of the golf course and show them what greenkeeping is all about because they've got no idea."

David chairs the colleges Golf Club Environment Committee and a year ago wrote an intensive management statement of intent.

"On that committee we have a wealth of experience of extensive grassland management provided by other lecturers and we question how we should manage in an environmentally friendly way. We also spoke to the likes of Anna Maria Brennan, Mike Schofield and David Stubbs."

That preparation and research has resulted in an all encompassing environmentally friendly approach to the course.

"We use either slow release or composted turkey litter and I'm proud to say we've never used fungicides while we decided that we'd only use natural or indigenous grasses," said David.

The Barenbrug mixes currently being used are Bar All Bent (60% Heriot 40% Bardot, Brown top Bents) on the greens and Bar 2 (1998) (40%

Barcrown, slender creeping red fescue) 40% Bargreen (chewings fescue), 10% Heriot and 10% Bardot) on the tees and approaches.

Another practice which David preaches is that of overseeding.

"My view is that if you're not introducing competition to the dreaded poa annua you will get what you're given. I remember visiting a fine golf course which had just been hollow tined around May and was just white with poa. The reason was he was hollow tining and top dressing but not overseeding and the little pockets that were being created were just ideal for poa annua.

"That's why I've always advocated that if you've got a hundred quid to spare buy a bag of grass seed."

When disease does strike, and like many new courses Take-All Patch is a problem, the temptation is resisted to reach for the bottle.

"We've got cultural management

policies in place to reduce the symptoms of pathogenic organisms and I'm actually using sulphate of ammonia for Take All Patch Control at the moment."

Another benefit of the Golf Club Environment Committee is the elements which are brought to the table by the lecturers in other subjects.

"The grassland lecturers come out with students and birch whip the bracken using handmade birch whips. We'd never have thought about that in a million years. There is a tremendous amount of information that others have but which we can use on our side of things. We are managing an estate in effect."

Course Manager at Merrist Wood is Tom Smith, coincidentally a former student of David's at Myerscough.

"We have statements of intent for everything that Tom does. For example we have a justification sheet for

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Despite being only a couple of years old the course looks well established

purchasing machinery which is not based on cost or design but on environmental impact -noise level, fuel tank etc. If the ideal machine is more expensive we can use the environmental argument to justify the cost."

David and Tom are well aware that at Merrist Wood they can attempt things which other courses can't.

"On the back of an educational argument I can muscle things through but it is a calculated risk and a compromise between the commercialism of the golf course coupled with the need to train and test for educational purposes," revealed David.

As well as his responsibility to the golf course Tom does his fair share of teaching and has to manage students working on the course every day.

"It's almost a unique job that Tom has with his through put of students," said David.

"I have my own HNC class every

Monday and the students work as greenkeepers. They start at six and finish at three and they do all the jobs that full time greenkeepers do. It is like having another 10 pairs of hands. In machinery terms we have at least two of everything so if students are going out to cut greens they will be 'buddied' at the beginning. On their third time they might be set off on their own and watched."

It is at the early stages that Tom can see who is developing the genuine love of greenkeeping that is needed if they are to be successful.

"On their Wednesday free day some of them come down to see what needs to be done and normally they are the better students," said Tom, who has his D32 and D33 and is currently doing a certificate of management.

The golf course itself is a challenge for the Golfers Studies students who play regularly as they attempt to improve

and bring their handicaps down.

Such is their dedication that a second driving range has just been built because the students spent so much time on the original one members struggled to find slots to warm up for their own games.

Boasting many mature trees, the course also has some unique features - including Minty's Paddock which is a haven for orchids while the resident ecologist also has plans to have sheep grazing in a field within the confines of the course.

"We want this to be a good golf course one which if you can't be a member of the likes of Sunningdale and Wentworth you might consider joining," said Tom, whose comments were added to by David.

"If we can achieve that sort of quality and it also remains an educational establishment for greenkeepers what a wonderful facility it will be."