

Scott MacCallum left the Association helicopter in the garage and drove down the M1 to visit BIGGA's latest Golden Key supporter - Stoke Park Club, the first golf club to become supporters of this extremely worthwhile programme



The Club with the

golden  
key





**In today's customer-focussed, competitive environment, where every effort is made to attract new visitors to golf clubs, you often find location maps issued giving directions and advice on the best way to get to the club by car, train and sometimes, at the bigger clubs, plane.**

**You know you are visiting somewhere a little bit special when that club also issues instructions as to how to get there by helicopter.**

But Stoke Park Club - Helicopter Grid Reference O/S SU 970827 - is indeed a special place and the list of what makes it special is longer and more diverse than virtually any other establishment in the country.

Just as a taster, the Estate was mentioned in the Doomsday Book in 1066; Elizabeth I once owned the Estate; it was the home of the guy who coined the phrase "An Englishman's home is his Castle"; it was also owned by the Penn family after whom Pennsylvania is named; it was the base for the famous Corinthian Sporting Club; Capability Brown designed the lakes on the Estate; Harry Colt designed the course; the most famous par-3 in golf - the 12th at Augusta National - was model on the 7th at Stoke Park; the most famous golf scene in all cinema - James Bond and Goldfinger battling it out both inside and outside the rules - was filmed at the course, while, more recently, scenes from Bridget Jones' Diary were filmed at Stoke Park.

Undoubtedly however, most significantly of all for BIGGA members everywhere Stoke Park has become the first golf club to become Golden Key supporters of the Association.

"We were amazed to learn that you didn't have any golf clubs as Golden Key supporters," said Stoke Park Club Marketing Director, David Fardon.

"We see ourselves as one of the leading clubs in Britain and felt that by taking this opportunity to be the first club to invest in greenkeeper education and training through the Golden Key programme we would be showing leadership. Hopefully it will lead to other golf clubs doing the same. After all, by investing in the people who look after our golf courses it can only benefit the game as a whole," explained David.

Estate Director, Alex Millar, a member of one of the premier greenkeeping families in the country, was quick to add his endorsement to the move.

"One of our main thoughts was to put something back into greenkeeping," said Alex.

The King family (who own Stoke Park Club) do like to invest in people and many of the people who come and work for them do so for a long time. They also feel that by taking out Golden Key membership it will make the greens staff more aware of BIGGA and the work that the Association does for the greenkeeping industry," said Alex, who has been at Stoke Park Club for 13 years.

He also admitted that with 10 golf courses within five miles of the club finding good green staff was not always easy.

"Stoke Park Club is a great name to have on a CV and we want people to want to work here. As Golden Key supporters and being seen to give good in-house training and encouragement to greenkeeper education, ideally we should have a waiting list of people wanting to work here.



While everything at Stoke Park Club from the Hotel, which is a member of the Leading Hotels of the World, to the golf course and the new £9 million Spa, Health and Racquets Pavilion due to open next year is of the highest possible standard, the staff and members of the club are all part of an inclusive environment.

"The greens staff are a key part of making this club what it is today and we make sure they, and everyone else, are treated in the same way," said David.

The point is hammered home by Alex when he says that the quality and condition of the golf course wouldn't happen but for the way everyone is treated by the Board of the Club.

"People just won't produce the

goods to the same way if they are not being looked after," he said.

Stoke Park Club's arrival as a Golden Key supporter was welcomed by BIGGA's Executive Director, Neil Thomas.

"I am delighted to welcome Stoke Park Club as a Golden Key member of BIGGA. Their initiative in supporting greenkeeper education in this way is to be applauded and we hope that more golf clubs will follow their example and thereby boost the monies available to enable us to provide first class training opportunities for BIGGA members," said Neil.

The Millar clan is one of the strongest in greenkeeping with at least half a dozen of them head men at clubs in the UK - along with Alex's father, also Alex, from Denholm GC,





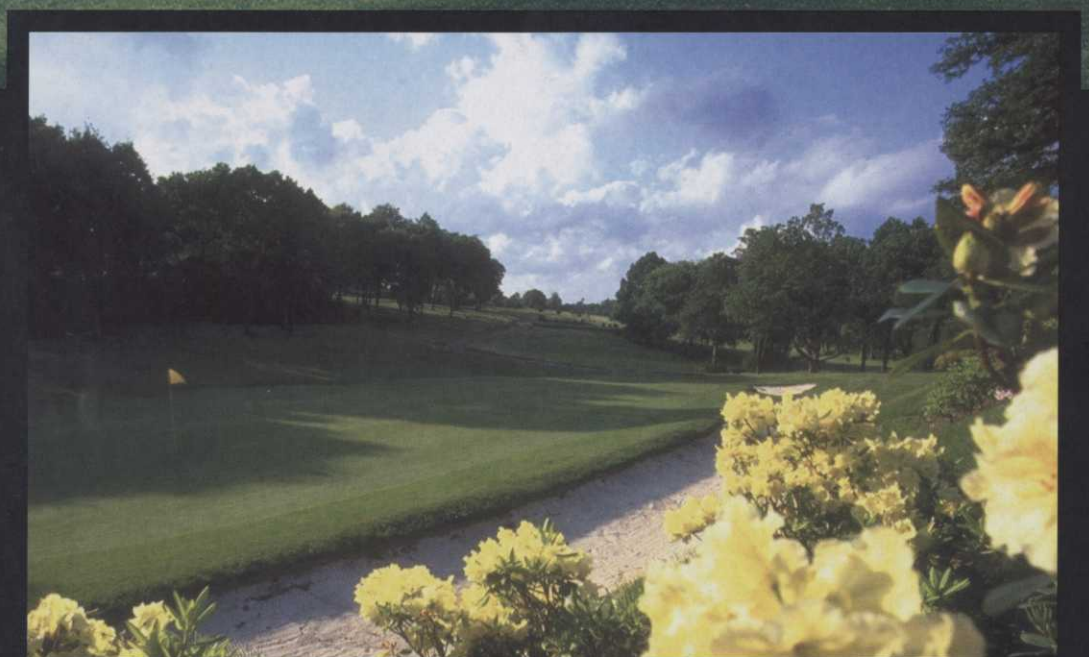


and Jock, from Burnham and Berrow GC, both of whom are now retired - and another in Cairns, Australia. It isn't a surprise to learn that Alex fell in love with Stoke Park at the age of 14.

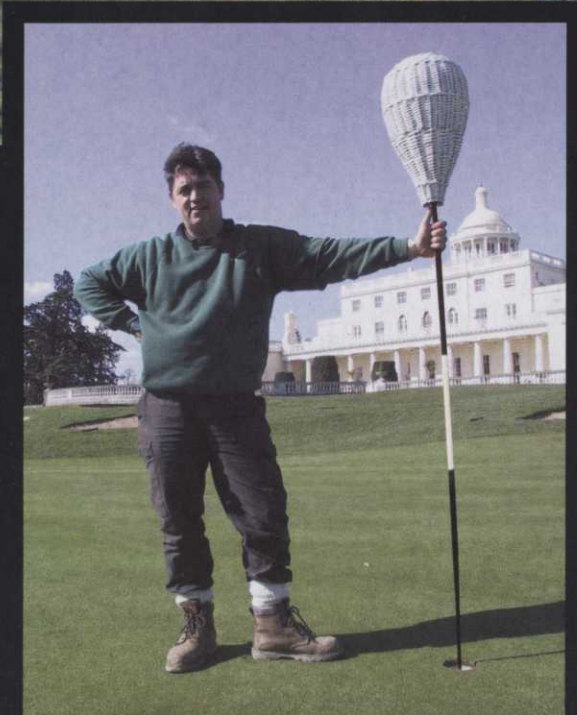
"I played golf here with the Artisans as a 14 year old and I knew that I was going to be a greenkeeping and that this was where I was going to be head man," said Alex.

He started his greenkeeping career as an apprentice under his father and in nine years rose to First Assistant before being offered the job of Head Greenkeeper at the club.

"I was lucky as it was a case of right place right time. I played golf to county standard - he still plays off 2 - and one of the county officials was quite high up here and thought I might be







suited to taking on the task of improving the course," explained Alex, although he had no idea of how his job would grow over the intervening years.

He took over a course for which the term "sleeping giant" could easily have been coined having lost its pre-eminent place near the top, alongside the Wentworths and the Sunningdales, during the two wars. Part of the course was given over to the war effort to plant potatoes, and in the subsequent years there was not the investment to haul it back into the Premier League.

"Up until the mid 80s the profile of the club was still fairly high but after the Ryder Cup victory in '85 the golf boom really started and investment kicked in and Stoke Park was left behind."

Alex and the team worked hard on the course - he was faced with 70 mil of thatch and grass coverage of around 25% on each green - until yet another significant moment in the history of the club when the King family bought it in 1993 with a vision for what they wanted the club to become.

"That vision was to create a Championship course to the standard Colt had laid out but to make the most of the Capability Brown landscaping around it. It was the dream ticket," recalled Alex.

That point is reiterated by David. "The King family goal is to take the Estate back to the standards of the original Stoke Park Club in 1908 with a world class golf course; world class tennis facilities - three indoor, four all-weather and five grass courts as





**STOKE PARK CLUB**

**Stoke Park Club  
Notable Dates**

1666 Stoke Park Estate mentioned in the Domesday Book

1581-1603 Owned by Queen Elizabeth 1

1603-1644 Owned by Sir Edward Coke who coined the phrase "An Englishman's home is his castle"

1760-1848 Owned by the Penn family whose name gave rise to the state of Pennsylvania

1750 Capability Brown designed the lakes on the Estate

1792 Humphry Repton designed the landscaping of the Estate

1908 "Pa" Lane Jackson bought Stoke Park and turned it into the Corinthian Sporting Club, the last amateur team to win the FA Cup and a name still synonymous with fair play and sport for sport's sake

1908 Harry Colt designed the golf course including the 7th hole upon which the 12th at Augusta National was modelled

1964 Stoke Park used as location for James Bond's famous golf scene with Goldfinger

1993 Stoke Park bought by the King family and plans put in place to restore it to its former glory

2001 Stoke Park used as location for Bridget Jones' Diary

2001 Stoke Park becomes the first golf club to become a BIGGA Golden Key Supporter

scale of the project when they set out. "The job just got bigger as we moved on. We'd cleared areas and more views of monuments would become apparent from the house and that would encourage us to do more. You can actually see Windsor Castle from the house now.

"We were told by conservation experts that it was not forests that were threatened in this country but parkland and that we were actually putting back what was supposed to be in place and now we've got much more wildlife on the Estate than we've ever had," said Alex, who added that he reckoned they'd ripped out as much as three times more scrub than anyone else before or since.

The other major project was the rebunkering of the entire course.

"We had to take the modern game into account when redoing the bunkers and we almost had to imagine how Harry Colt would have built them if he had had a JCB. A Colt bunker always had a tongue on it, always had a face and nine times out of ten you could see the danger from the tee or the second shot. They had a flattish bottom but always ran in from both front and back," said Alex, who researched the bunkers by playing and visiting many of the Colt courses in the south east.

"This is Colt country round here and it was a case of playing them, studying photographs and looking at what we already had. Sometimes we'd go to a bunker and know that we wouldn't have to do very much to it but about 95% of them we just flattened and started again."

They also picked up on the favourite Colt idea of a bunker in the middle of the fairway about 100 yards short of the green.

"I used to think that they wouldn't have caught anyone even when they were built but then I realised that the purpose of them was to throw your eye out. You learn these things and slowly get the feeling what Colt intended us to get from his golf courses," recalled Alex who added that as their skills developed they went back and redid some of those they had done earlier.

Although still on-going the bulk of the work was completed three years ago around the same time as an additional Donald Steele nine holes were opened, giving 27 holes - the holes are numbered 1-27 - of "Colt-style" golf to enjoy. They have also reinstated 10 acres of the 15 acres of gardens.

"What I like to feel we have here is a 100 year old golf course with a history and maturity to it which is maintained by the most modern technology available - they have a new million pound Toro irrigation system - and managed to the highest possible standards," said Alex.

He is always keen to restore the links to golfing history and one of these will come to fruition this month when the restores the lobster pots which acted as flags in the early days.

"Many people will know them from Merion Golf Club in the States but they took the idea from Stoke Park Club having visited us on a tour. It was originally an idea Colt brought down from the west coast of Scotland where lobster pots were used in preference to flags which would become ripped in the wind. The feeling about them was that golfers wouldn't receive any 'outside assistance' in the shape of clues to the direction of the wind from the way the flags were fluttering. It is a tradition I was keen to bring back and we're doing so with different colours of pots for each of the three nines."

The lobster pots are yet another example of Stoke Park's rich history and by bringing them back it merely helps to trumpet how the club has influenced the rest of the game.

Stoke Park Club is a very special place, whether you arrive by helicopter or any other means of transport, and by being the first to become Golden Key Supporters the Club is setting a trend which others may follow.

well as the Health Spa, fishing, croquet and other facilities.

"We will be looking to hold top quality high profile golf and tennis events in the near future and really pushing to get the Stoke Park brand known throughout the world of sport," said David, as we sat in one of the beautifully appointed reading rooms within the 20 room hotel.

It was with that picture firmly in the front of Alex's mind that he set to work on bringing the golf course and garden side of this equation to reality.

"We went in and got rid of 95% of the scrub on the 350 acres estate, the majority of which we did in-house only bringing in contractors for the major tree work," he explained.

It would be fair to say that Alex and his team had little inclination of the



For further information on joining the Golden or Silver Key Circle of Supporters, please call Neil Thomas, Executive Director, BIGGA on 01347 833800 or visit [www.bigga.org.uk](http://www.bigga.org.uk)