

# Course Feature

## THE BEST OF THE WEST

Scott MacCallum visits West Hill Golf Club and learns about the plan to restore the course to classic golfing heathland



A newly built fairway bunker with the heather face

Five years ago West Hill Golf Club, deep in the heart of the stockbroker belt of Surrey, came to a decision. Always known, by those in the know, to have one of the finest heathland layouts in the country, the club felt that it didn't always get the credit it deserved and wanted to do what needed to be done to change that fact. To that end the club, led by its Board of Directors, set itself the goal of getting back to being an outstanding members' club.

Having made this conscious decision, a master plan was put in place with a series of recommendations designed to propel the club back into its rightful place, bracketed alongside the very top heathland courses.

The first was the installation of a state-of-the-art irrigation system; the second, the appointment of a quality Course Manager; the third, the total refurbishment of all the bunkers; the fourth, the implementation of a tree clearing programme designed to assist with the regeneration of heather, and finally, an improvement to the course's drainage system.

Relatively quickly the first element was completed and the club boasted a superb new Toro Sitepro irrigation system. Next, Terry Huntley, previously of Ashford Manor Golf Club, was appointed Course Manager and almost immediately he was heavily involved in the bunker renovation programme.

"As I arrived the irrigation system was being handed over and one of the main things I had to contend with was to become familiar with the system. It's a wall to wall system, all valve in head, and is as good a watering system as there is out there," said Terry.

"Within a month a meeting had been set up with architect Jonathan Gaunt, who'd already been into the club and set out his plan for the bunkers," recalled Terry.

The bunkers had long been a bone of contention for the West Hill members.

"The faces had deteriorated, they didn't drain, so that every time it rained they filled with water and stayed filled for two or three days. The playing characteristics had also been lost and the shaping was wrong."

Under the watchful eye of Alistair Lawson, the then Chairman of

Green, Jonathan's brief was to look at improving the challenge of the golf courses and create more consistency with the bunkers and he achieved this by pulling some bunkers in, pushing others back and basically tightening up the entire course.

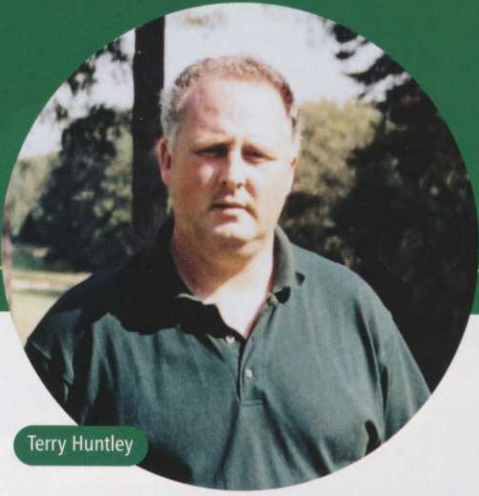
"Everyone was concerned that he didn't change the heathland characteristics of the course and it was paramount that we didn't Americanise West Hill. That was the big concern for the members and the traditionalists. It was an exceptionally difficult brief given that Jonathan is a modern golf course architect but he has done an excellent job."

The plan, covering some 80 plus bunkers, all individually designed, or redesigned, and rebuilt, was carried out in three phases, the first in the winter of '99-2000.

"It was decided that for the first phase we would go out to tender, which was won by Kestrel Golf, but that we would lay all the turf and heather in-house. It was a cost related decision but I felt it would be good for the staff to have an input into the project.

"That was a big decision for me, being new to the job, and knowing that I had other important jobs to tackle at the same time," admitted Terry.

As it turned out the team, or at least five of them, laid 4000 turfs in an intensive four week period. Although we got there it was extremely arduous and it meant that we got nothing else done in that period so we decided that for the last two phases Kestrel would take over completely."



Terry Huntley



Terry and his team

That said, the first phase went extremely well, starting in the last week in September with 31 bunkers done by December 1, drained and ready to go.

They were kept out of play for the rest of the winter with the sand being added in the first week in March, four weeks before the club's famous Father and Sons' Tournament which is played in the first week in April.

"It was always the goal to have the bunkers in play for the Father and Sons," explained Terry.

If they thought having got phase one out of the way it could only get easier they were to be sadly mistaken, and those who can remember the winter of 2000-2001 will not have been surprised to learn that fact.

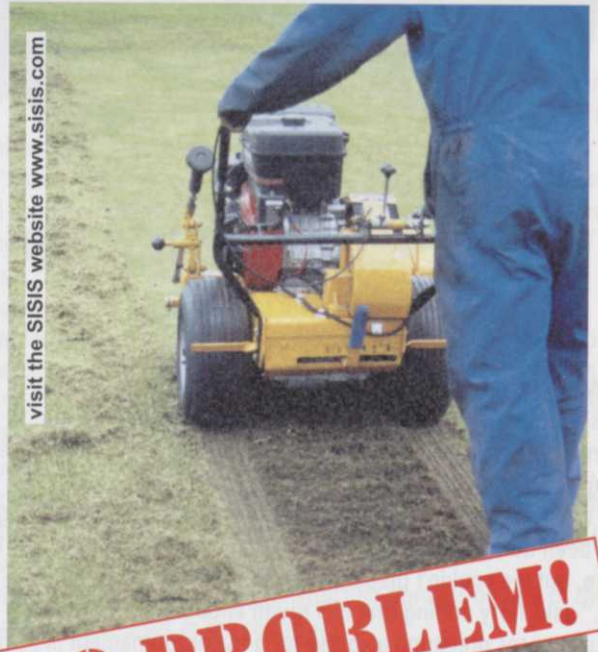
"Because of the weather we only completed 17 bunkers in phase two when the intention was to do 29 and the remaining three holes, the 7th, 8th and 10th had to be moved to the third phase making it the biggest phase of them all."

Ironically phase two has started very well but within two weeks the skies had opened and in Terry's own words "it didn't stop raining until the end of March".

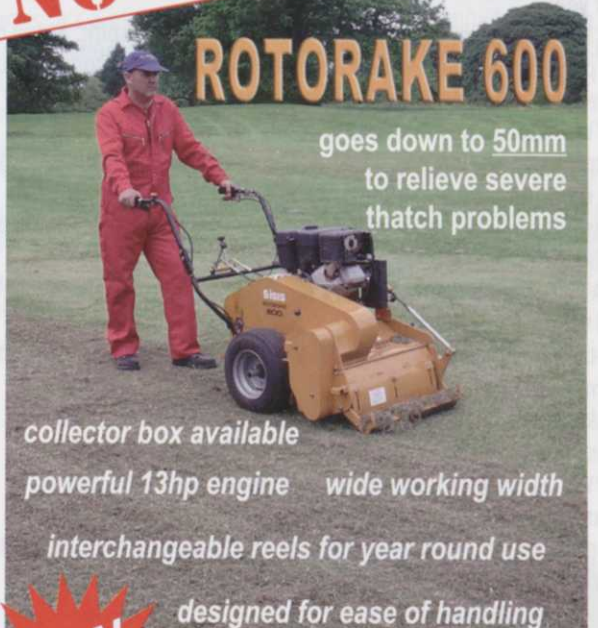
It was also the only occasion in the history of the Father and Sons Tournament - which draws entrants from far and wide- that it nearly got cancelled.

"If it had rained that week it certainly would have been," revealed Terry.

# THATCH PROBLEM?



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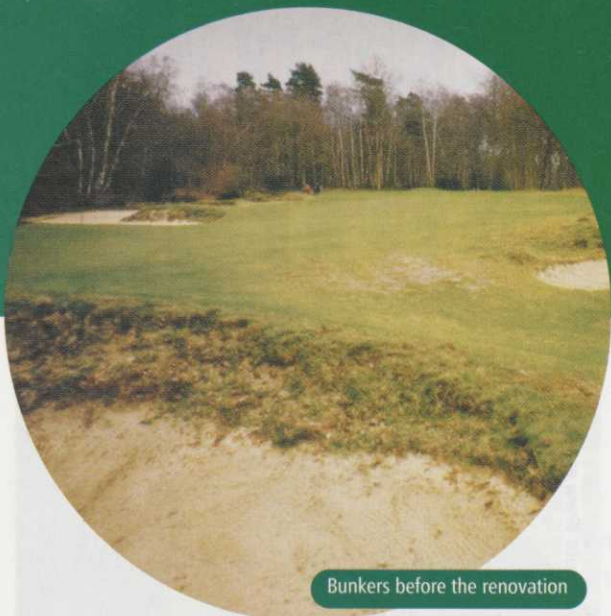
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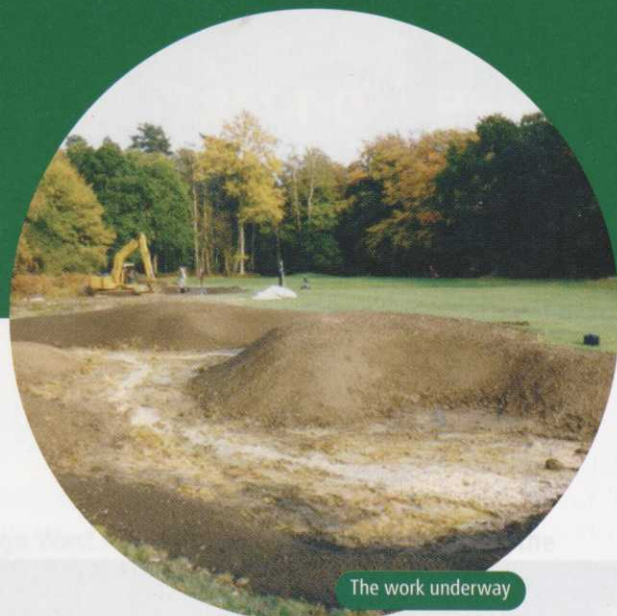
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Bunkers before the renovation



The work underway

With the phase two bunkers not ready the club took the conscious, and difficult, decision two weeks before the event to deem the bunkers out of play rather than try to rush through their completion and perhaps inflict long term damage.

"We'd completed two of the holes but on the rest, the turfing had been done, the heather was planted and the drainage was in place, but we couldn't prepare them properly as the bases were too wet," said Terry adding that it is tough enough under normal circumstances preparing a course for a major tournament in April.

However, he was full of praise for the competitors who played that year.

"They never complained and took it in the right spirit. Many of the players said there would have been no way their courses would have been playable in similar conditions.

"We were hand cutting at four mil and we were leaving footprints on the greens... and our greens aren't particularly thatchy. The ground was just sodden. At the end of the first day the 7th green was black. It was soul destroying, but you accept that is part of the ticket."

As it turned out the rain stayed away for the tournament itself and the course got better as the week wore on."

Having survived their biggest week of the year Terry, his six man team, and the club faced up to the prospect of completing bunkering of the final eight holes in one, larger than expected, phase.

"We'd already decided that if we were faced with similar weather conditions we'd pull the contractor off the site but as it happened we started the work in the last week in October and the major part of the construction was finished by the last week in January.

"Kestrel did the lot including the laying of 3000 metres of heather around the bunkers," said Terry, adding that the heather acts as a superb feature of the fairway bunkers on the course.

What it meant was that everything was completed for this April's Father and Sons tournament.

"It was absolutely magnificent this year," said Terry, with understandable pride.

"The comment we kept hearing was that 'We'd forgotten how beautiful West Hill was'. We were helped by dry conditions and the greens putted really well and we cut the greens daily at three mil."

With the bunker work completed Terry can look forward to

progressing the course in other areas and in particular points four and five of the original master plan.

"The tree work has been on-going and we are looking at clearing more this winter. We've found that everywhere we've cleared trees we are getting heather regeneration. I've never seen the heather so good as it has been this year and members say it's as good as they've seen in 30 years."

The drainage work is also on-going with much of it being carried out in conjunction with the bunker renovation.

"We're picking off broken drains winter by winter and every time we fix one another one pops up. It's a sad fact we'll be doing that for the next three or four years."

Terry has worked to the Acid Theory with regard to his management practice and since arriving three and a half years ago has seen a 60-40 poa bent ratio reverse to 40-60, without resorting to blanket overseeding.

"I have to be a little careful because if the ph comes down too low the moss starts out competing with the poa so it's a balancing act. So the down side of getting the poa back to bent is that from time to time we get this moss invasion. I'm working closely with David Stansfield on this," said Terry adding that his Chairman of Green, David Hargreaves is also very supportive and proactive.

Fulham-born Terry began his greenkeeping career at Fulwell before moving to Foxhills where, at 21, became Deputy Course Manager and worked on six European Tour Qualifying Schools, two British Ladies' Opens and two Tournament Players' Championships.

"Working under someone like John Campbell, who'd come down from St Andrews, was incredible. I learned so much from him about traditional Scottish greenkeeping techniques, revetting bunkers, mixing up fertiliser and top dressing and weighing up dried blood.

"He'd done everything you could in greenkeeping and was the first superstar greenkeeper, without a shadow of a doubt."

From there Terry moved to Laleham to his first Course Manager's job, then Ashford Manor before the chance to come to West Hill came along.

"I remember playing here a few years ago thinking that I'd love to work on a place like this."

Terry has some strong, interesting and common sense opinions on the greenkeeping industry.

"In the past we were cocooned in our golf clubs and they were like safe havens but as clubs have become more business like it has

# Course Feature



Jonathan Gaunt

become much more competitive and we've got to be prepared and be able to take criticism," he said.

"I think we worry about stupid things. At my last club we didn't have a watering system and the course was built on a gravel bed which was fantastic in winter but a nightmare in the summer. I used to pace around the bedroom at 2am, keeping my wife awake, praying for rain which was just plain silly.

"With the modern day pressures all we can do is look at ourselves in the mirror and say we are doing our best.

"For example, today I'm three staff down, we've had a hydraulic oil leak, I've got a ladies' medal and we have three temporary greens. But it's not the end of the world. The golf course will still be here next year and the year after that," he said.

He also has some thoughts on greenkeeper accommodation.

"I believe that, wherever possible, every greenkeeper should own his own house. I know that years ago one of the big incentives was tied accommodation but you should be the master of your own destiny and take control of your life. Don't be dependent on someone else whether you have a roof over your head," said Terry, who does have his own home, despite living in one of the most expensive areas in the country.

"I had a choice. I could have gone out and bought a new car or taken out a mortgage," he said.

Although the clubs has completed the vast majority of the club's five point plan they are still aware that there much work still to be done.

"Ultimately it is going to depend upon the quality of the course we are providing and I'm heartened by letters I get from people who have played the course and from positive feedback in magazine articles. One recently said we were a candidate for the most improved course in Surrey, which is nice."

## THE ARCHITECT'S VIEW

Jonathan Gaunt's brief was to improve the challenge of the golf course and try to create some consistency in the bunkers.

"Some bunkers were waterlogged while others drained ok; some had sand and others sand mixed with soil so were contaminated. Some had heather round them when they should have had turf and others turf when they should have had heather," explained Jonathan, as he looked back at the project.

Jonathan worked on the strategy of the course tightening up holes around the landing area and on the approaches to greens.

"It's an old established golf course and a bit of a collector's item so it was a real risk for the club to take such a drastic step. However, they were very fair with me and took me at my word. The first phase was very much the testing block but it went very well and by the third phase it was going even better from my point of view."

So how did he go about reconstructing bunkers on one of the most historic courses in the country?

"I view the original architect's work as an influence and then read up about the course and visit it and surrounding similar courses. It's a history lesson and also an opportunity to make a great golf course even greater... or make it worse. That's the risk involved."

How do the West Hill bunkers differ from Jonathan Gaunt bunkers?

"That is difficult to describe. If you go to three or four of the courses I've designed you will see something different at each as I'd like to say I'm influenced by the site itself. I suppose my bunkers are longer shape and set higher so you see more of the sand. They are probably a little bolder."

*Jonathan Gaunt is a member of the IEGCA.*



Building the face

