

Course Feature

TOUCHED BY A MASTER

Hawkstone Park is closely associated with an Open and Masters Champion, but as Scott MacCallum found out Sandy Lyle didn't just play over the golf course



On a clear day you can see 12 counties



Frank Tong and Mike Sheehan

Mention Hawkstone Park, in Shropshire, to any golfer with more than just the passing knowledge of the game and one name will immediately spring to mind.

When Sandy Lyle was at the top of his, and the world's game, winning the '85 Open at Royal St George's and the Masters two years later, he was attached to the club and the name Hawkstone Park was known the world over in association with the big Scotsman. Indeed more than that he was born and brought up at the pretty parkland club as his father and coach, Alex, was first pro-greenkeeper at Hawkstone and then owner, as part of a consortium.

Walk round the impressive and imposing clubhouse and you will see pictures of Sandy, at various ages, clutching trophies and posing with club officials.

But one fact I didn't know until Course Manager, Frank Tong, told me, when I visited just before this year's Open Championship, was that Sandy's first passport listed his occupation as "Greenkeeper".

And Frank should know as Sandy worked for him in the early 70s before his burgeoning golfing career took over.

"Sandy was officially on the greenkeeping staff and worked for me after leaving school. He was very good too," recalled Frank, whose career at Hawkstone has only been interrupted by National Service and a short spell as Head Greenkeeper at Leamington Spa GC.

"His father thought greenkeeping was a good way for him to improve his fitness levels and he trained him well in all the greenkeeping skills. He worked here for several years," said Frank, who has a host of stories about the amazing golfing feats Sandy

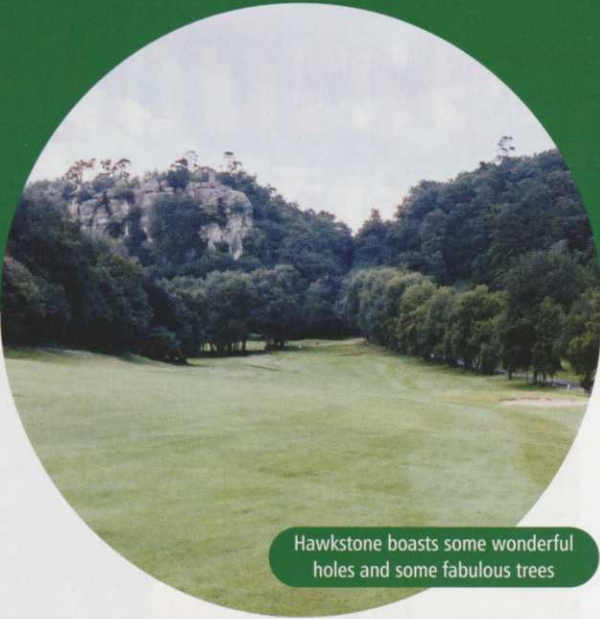
performed almost on a routine basis. It is not widely known that Seve Ballesteros regards Sandy as the most naturally talented golfer he has ever seen.

Frank also recalled his time working with Alex Lyle, with whom he co-designed Hawkstone's Weston Course.

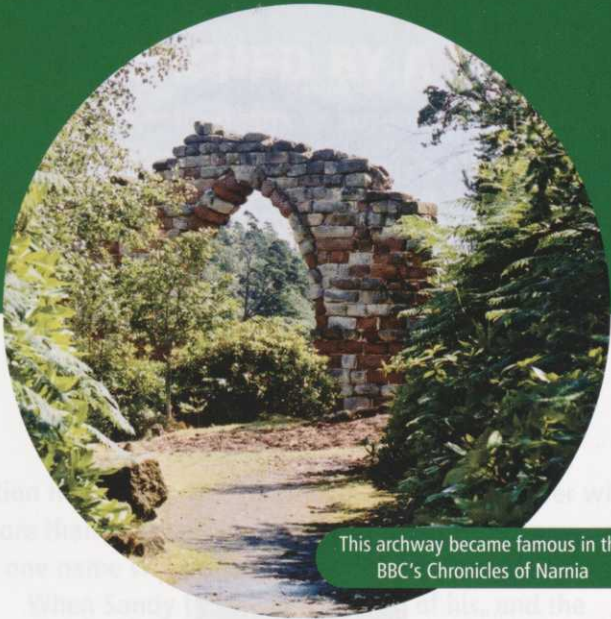
"It was very satisfying to see the course develop and people grew to love it. Originally it was built to relieve the pressures on the original course but by the end as many people were playing it as the Hawkstone."

Alex and Frank managed the course with the help of one other who used to rake bunkers but despite the lack of staff, by modern standards, they didn't compromise on the condition of the course.

"Alex Lyle liked fast greens and he used to mow all 18 greens, initially with an Overgreen, double mowing if necessary, before he took on his golf lessons. Then he'd often play a round of golf in the evening. He was a great guy but I don't think people could work like that nowadays."



Hawkstone boasts some wonderful holes and some fabulous trees



This archway became famous in the BBC's Chronicles of Narnia

Hawkstone now boasts a fine 65 room hotel and a purpose built golf centre and Alex and Frank's the Weston course has been incorporated into The Windmill Course, designed by Brian Huggett and opened in 1995, while there is now a six hole academy course for beginners or those wishing to hone their short games. It brings the total number of holes, plus an excellent practice range, to 42 for Frank and his team of 13, including two gardeners, to maintain.

Having progressed from those days to embrace the modern day course management regimes Frank is well placed to appreciate the differences.

"You used to be happy to go out and mow six greens a day and hollow tine by hand. You prided yourself in that but it is like chalk and cheese to today. The biggest differences I've seen are in the paperwork and the standards that we are trying to achieve on a day-to-day basis. Fortunately the change has been a gradual process as I don't think I would have been able to cope otherwise but I think I've been able to adapt to the modern day pressures."

In recent times Frank has been able to turn to an old friend, and well known face in the industry, whose job has taken him out of the Maintenance Facility and into the Board Room.

Mike Sheehan first met Frank when he took over as Course Supervisor at Mere Golf and Country Club in 1983.

"The syndicate - including Alex Lyle - which owned Hawkstone Park at the time also owned Mere and Frank had been combining his work at Hawkstone with managing Mere as well," explained Mike.

"When I started he gave me a two week overlap during which time he gave me the run down on the golf course, irrigation, drainage etc."

At the end of '83 Hawkstone sold Mere to Stephen Boler, a Manchester businessman and very keen golfer. Some years after that Mere was purchased by Stephen Boler son, Mark, who then, in August 2000, purchased Hawkstone Park, thus squaring a very neat circle and bringing Frank and Mike together again.

This time it is under different circumstances as Mike's career has blossomed and taken him off the golf course on a daily basis.

He started at Mere as Golf Course Supervisor and was promoted to Golf Course Manager. Next he became Operations Manager and

as a result more involved in the running of the business. Next stop on the career ladder, was Operations Director then, when the company purchased Hawkstone Park, he was appointed Group Estates Director working between Mere and Hawkstone.

"My job basically involves the running of every aspect of the group outside of catering, banqueting and conferences. One of my main roles is overseeing the development of the golf courses - reaching, then retaining Championship standard for as long in the year as we actually can," explained Mike, who had previously been Head Greenkeeper at West Derby, having started his career under Edwin Walsh at Childwall.

"Frank and Paul Hyde, Mere Course Manager, are our men on the ground while I work with the Chairman, who is a 2 handicap golfer, on what our future policy should be," he explained.

Although the two clubs work independent of each other they do share a mechanic and Mike does use the buying power of two clubs to ensure the best possible deals.

Having Mike, and a golfing man like Mark Boler, in charge has given Frank and his team a real boost.

"We get more input on greenkeeping matters from Mike and Mr Boler, who are both very knowledgeable about golf, whereas our previous owners (newspaper-owning entrepreneurs, the Barclay Brothers) were hoteliers first and golf course owners second."

One of the elements which has really been improved is course presentation.

"We have progressed under Mike's guidance on this and it is now done on a far more regular basis than it was before. All the intensive mowing was a little bit strange to begin with, but everyone can now see the rewards from it," said Frank.

Mike looks for an equal standard over both clubs with diamond cutting of the fairways and graded rough. Although with one course on a rock based site, another on a clay and with Mere Golf & Country Club 70% sand based and 30% clay, they are three very different courses so the team has to adopt different management techniques for each.

Mike, who has swapped his traditional outdoor clothes for a smart suit ("Let's not go into the suit!"), has adapted well to the demands of his new role.

Course Feature

"I've done it by putting a hell of a lot more effort in," he said candidly.

"That's not to say I didn't feel that I was not putting in a lot of effort in the past but it is demands on time. I spend much more time in the evenings in meetings or meeting and greeting customers."

Watching him as we made our way around the golf courses, jumping in and out of the 4x4 to avoid the showers, you could still see the innate greenkeeper's attention to detail as he picked up the odd piece of litter and chatted to Frank about the nuances of the course.

"The training I received as a Course Manager has been extremely useful in the areas in which I now work. I attended the four week long Management Training Courses at Aldwark Manor and a lot of people have gone on to be extremely successful having attended these. I found them very beneficial while I've also tried to read up a lot and train myself. I speak to people in the industry and have been fortunate enough to go over to the GCSAA Show and talk to guys abroad.

"Just by talking with them tells you just how many years we are behind in certain aspects... although we are ahead in others."

Mike pinpoints customer demand as being the one thing which has really come to the fore in recent times.

"This is far higher now than it was ten, even five years ago," he said, as already highlighted by the much higher tariff now placed on course presentation.

Anyone not acquainted with the area surrounding Hawkstone Park should make a point of visiting - it is truly unique.

The cliffs which border the club and give it much of its character are full of tunnels and grottos - legend has it that it is the final resting place of King Arthur, while the area was used as a location for the BBC's Chronicles of Narnia. It is also a wonderful location for Santa's Grotto every December. The guided walks provide those with the stamina to make the climbs with views of a dozen counties when the weather is obliging.

It all adds to the feel good atmosphere inherent in a golf club Mike regards as a sleeping giant.

"Hawkstone Park has a worldwide reputation and the Chairman and I felt it was a project which we could develop."

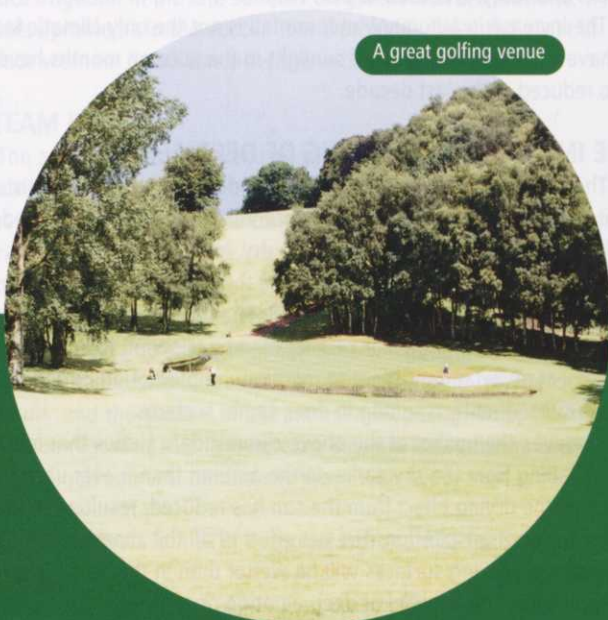
That development has included on-course improvements including the stripping away of the turf on the 6th fairway of The Windmill course, removing all the clay, installing a draining system and returfing the 16th green on the Hawkstone course which was on the old style clay based basin type.

"We agreed something needed to be done so we removed the top fourteen inches and installed a herring bone drainage system and a new root zone and returfed. The result has been very worthwhile," said Frank modestly.

It is another step towards achieving the aim of Championship standards that Mike is looking for.

"We have done it at Mere over the last 17 years and hopefully in two to three years we will achieve that standard here, then we have to maintain it at that. That's where the real fun starts!" said Mike.

With a history that includes an Open and Masters Champion on their Green Staff you can be sure that achieving the standards desired will not be a problem.



A great golfing venue



The King Arthur exhibit in one of the cliff caves above Hawkstone