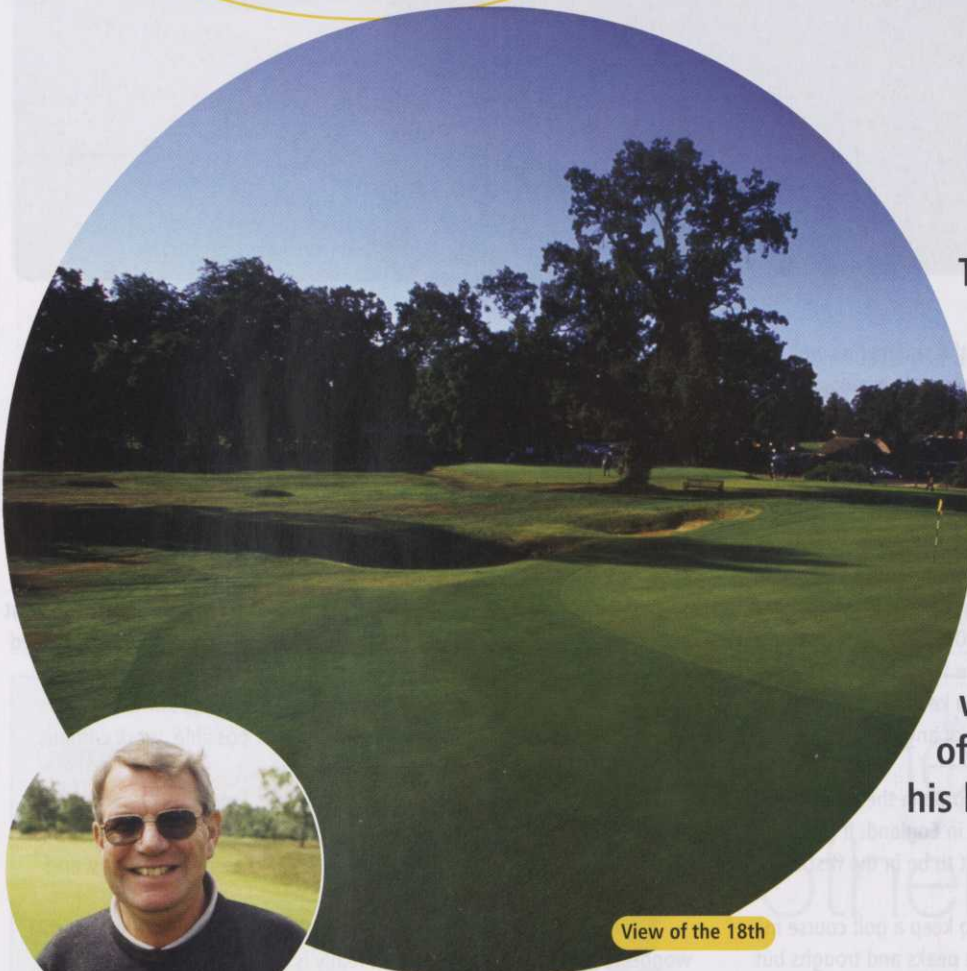


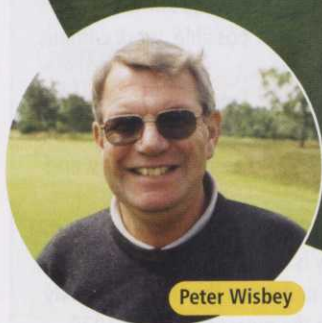
Course Feature

The Lure of Woodhall Spa

Scott MacCallum travelled to Woodhall Spa to meet up with Peter Wisbey, a man who gave up the sunshine of Portugal to take on a great new challenge.



View of the 18th



Peter Wisbey

Ten years after taking the brave decision to move to Portugal at the age of 40 Peter Wisbey had made such an impact in his time on the Algarve, and enjoyed it so much, that those who knew him would have said that it would have taken one hell of a job to lure him back to his homeland.

The fact that seven years on from then he and I are sitting in his office, deep in the heart of Lincolnshire, and that the enthusiasm for greenkeeping he exudes says much for the position he now occupies.

As Courses Manager at Woodhall Spa, the English Golf Unions home and Centre of Excellence, Peter has all the challenges he could ever ask for - looking after the world renowned Hotchkin Course; the newer Bracken Course, which opened for play in 1998; a fabulous training academy, in addition to speaking at many of the EGU Road Shows and generally acting as the Unions front man on matters greenkeeping.

One of the attractions of returning to the UK was the chance to get back to traditional British greenkeeping.

I've always been a traditionalist. For example at North Foreland GC in Kent, where I was for 22 years before heading to Portugal, we produced our own compost and top dressings. Now we are doing the same here as well. The amount of micro flora and fauna it contains is, in my opinion, far greater than in any commercial product and aids the conversion to the finer grasses.

It was part of my upbringing, working with Jim Arthur when North Foreland became an Open Qualifier in 1981 and 1985 reinforced my own

beliefs. I'm certainly a minimalist with the regard to the amount of fertiliser and water I use.

However, one of the things I learned very quickly at San Lorenzo and Pinhieros Altos, both in Portugal, was that growing in a new course is completely different to maintaining an existing one. You almost have to grow a crop," said the man who in his time on the Algarve managed all four courses on the Quinta do Lago Estate.

"I would liken it to bringing up a child. If you fed a baby as regularly as you fed an adult it would die, so you need to feed more aggressively and then, once you have proper cover, you can start greenkeeping.

"I loved the challenges that different grasses, climate and language presented.

That said it was good to come to such a great course and be able to get back into some good traditional British greenkeeping. We do a lot of aeration, particularly on the Hotchkin Course, in the months between the end of October and the end of March and we slit the greens and fairways, weather allowing every week. Whenever possible during this same period we use the Shattermaster and Vertidrain.



The Woodhall Spa team

We solid spike on a monthly basis throughout the summer as well as using the sorrel fitment on the Toro Sandpro as frequently as possible. We apply minimal nitrogen and potassium to the greens, something along the lines of 60-70 kilos per hectare every year on the greens and tees and we've got some good grasses. I'm also a great believer in Farmura and seaweed liquids and these we apply on a monthly basis."

Being in charge of the EGU's courses does bring its pressures. "One of the difficulties of working for a place which is so much in the public eye is that the majority of the golf played is visitor golf as opposed to local members - probably 80-20. There are some 800,000 EGU members and this is their home of golf. Some of them may only come here once and they come with very high expectations. We also have to keep the pricing structures fair so we probably offer the best value of any comparable course in the country."

The Hotchkin Course has been ranked in the top 30 in the world and is currently ranked as the number one inland course in England. If people come to play the number one course they expect it to be in the first class condition.

"We greenkeepers know that it is impossible to keep a golf course in prime condition all the time, and while I don't like peaks and troughs but more of a gentle ripple, there is always a little drop off from time to time."

Peter recalls a lunch he had with the then pro at Gleneagles, Ian Marchbank, who gave him some advice he has held on to ever since.

"He told me that clients will always go away and remember the course as it was on the day they played it. It's obvious really, but sometimes not until you are told. Golfers are not interested in how the course was last week or how it will be next week, and while at members clubs the members will understand, if it is communicated well, what you are trying to achieve and the benefits to them on the longer term, here we have so many visitors year round that cannot apply this philosophy to the same extent. It is the same at the likes of Turnberry and Wentworth."

Peter has become increasingly aware of the need to be customer focussed and has some interesting thoughts on the issue.

"You hear greenkeepers saying occasionally, 'If the golfer doesn't like it, well tough.' I'm afraid that's not a reality any more, if indeed it ever was.

We are living and working in a buyers' market. If a group of golfers are considering coming here but the package is not acceptable they simply go elsewhere.

"It is important to realise that we are selling time and if we don't sell it today, it's gone forever. It's not like selling mowers or tractors when if you don't sell this week you can sell it the next" said Peter, whose machinery comes from Toro, with whom, along with Lely, he has had a strong

relationship for many years and whose praises he sings loudly. "They consistently supply us with product and service that is second to none in my experience" he remarked.

With that in mind Peter, his Deputy Sam Rhodes, Head Mechanic, Bart Wilson, and their 16 strong team, work closely with the golf operations staff to ensure everything possible is done to ensure visitors have as enjoyable experience that maintenance operations are carried out to avoid conflict.

"We know the bookings two weeks ahead of time, major events at least two years ahead, and every evening the following days start sheet is faxed to me so the next morning we know who will be out on the golf course. I put a copy of this on the mess room tables so the guys know exactly where the gaps in play are so we can, wherever possible, work without interfering with peoples enjoyment."

Woodhall Spa is a remarkable golfing venue. From most directions it appears to be in the middle of nowhere and even within a couple of miles of the sleepy little village you would wager large sums against a world class golf course being nearby.

"People are amazed when they travel across the fenland and find this wonderful heathland golf course. It really is an oasis."

The original layout was by Harry Colt and when the Hotchkin family bought it. Colonel Hotchkin changed it to the present layout in 1920.

"When I first heard that the owner has redesigned it I did not realise that Colonel Hotchkin was a renowned architect. In partnership with Guy Campbell he designed West Sussex, Stoke Rochford, Leeds Castle to name but a few in this country, as well as five very good courses in South Africa. He wasn't just dabbling that's for sure."

The Hotchkin Course is a classic with every hole presenting its own challenge with very few running in the same direction. There are three fantastic par-3s with the 12th regarded as one of the best short holes in the world. The bunkers are fabled. There are many of them and they are known for their depth.

"They say a bunker should cost you half a stroke but these can do more damage than that. We had the English Amateur here four years ago and one guy came to the 12th three under-par and when he left he was something like 10 over! Without ever being unfair it can destroy the unwary."

From a maintenance perspective the Hotchkin is very labour intensive thanks to its very steep sided bunkers and tees. At least 80% of the tees surrounds cannot be mown with a ride on mower.

Therefore there is a lot of flymowing and strimming to be done. Scotts Shortcut has been a Godsend and reduced the frequency of this operation.

Course Feature



One of the infamous bunkers on the Hotchin Course

Another interesting element of the course is the fact that it is very natural and doesn't lend itself to over presentation.

"When people do come here it is a case of educating them as to what they should expect to find. We don't have fairway irrigation so when people visit from an irrigated golf course they are sometimes surprised by what they find. In the dry weather it's firm, brown and fiery. This is how we feel a true heathland course should be presented. The Officers of the Union are 100% behind us in this philosophy. It's about education," said Peter, who is often involved with the EGU Road Shows which visit about six or

seven golf clubs a year and talk to Chairs of Green, Secretaries and occasionally greenkeepers.

"There is a view as to whether we best serve the greenkeeping community by having greenkeepers at these events or whether they should be aimed solely at the committee and Club Managers. When it is a mixed audience the agronomists who speak can only talk at a very basic level and greenkeepers can go home disappointed, but perhaps the Chairmen of Green might have learned something which could result in less pressure or more support being given on their return."

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Course Feature



View of the 5th

When the EGU bought Woodhall Spa seven years ago it was felt that a second golf course was required and Donald Steel was commissioned to design the Bracken Course and it has turned into another fine test.

"At a lot of 36-hole complexes the second course is looked upon as the poor relation no matter how good it is. What attracts people here is the Hotchkin, but once they are here they find that the Bracken is a lot better than they were expecting," said Peter, who took the opportunity to put right the myth that Woodhall Spa is supported by the affiliation fees paid to the EGU, but that the golf course operation has to be self supporting."

The Bracken has given Peter more than a few headaches along the way however.

"It is built on clay and running sand. The land was mostly commercial woodland and very impoverished with a pH as low as 3.5 in some areas. You can maintain grass at that but it not easy to establish grass cover. But never say never, we had to use quite a bit of lime to get establishment in those areas and the soil is very aggressive with such a high acid content. Indeed we found that within five years some of the irrigation bolts have corroded and disappeared. The irrigation specialists said they had never seen bolts attacked so quickly. They are now replacing them all with stainless steel."

A main framework of drains was also put in, Peter felt more were needed and worked closely with David Shelton, of Sheltons Drainage Solutions, who coincidentally happened to be in the same Rotary Club as Peter.

"He showed me some of his equipment and we hired a gravel bander from him, eventually buying one ourselves. Now nearly all the fairways have been covered to 40cm centres with slits backfilled with Lytag. We can now play right the way through the winter with no stoppages or the need to take trolleys off."

Peter admits that they have had problems establishing the bent grasses in the Bracken greens and suffered with poa infestation.

We started by handpicking the poa but quite honestly it was like painting the Forth Bridge and now we try other ways of minimising it. Some people talk about not needing to add micro nutrients but we have very low magnesium and manganese levels and we have had to put those elements down.

We've had good results and I don't think we would be where we are now if we hadn't added micro nutrient packages almost on a fortnightly basis. As I said about the lime, I don't think you can ever say never.

The magnificent training academy is the equivalent of another nine holes in terms of work for the team, with 4,000 square metres of tee and 3,000 square metres of green but it is something special.

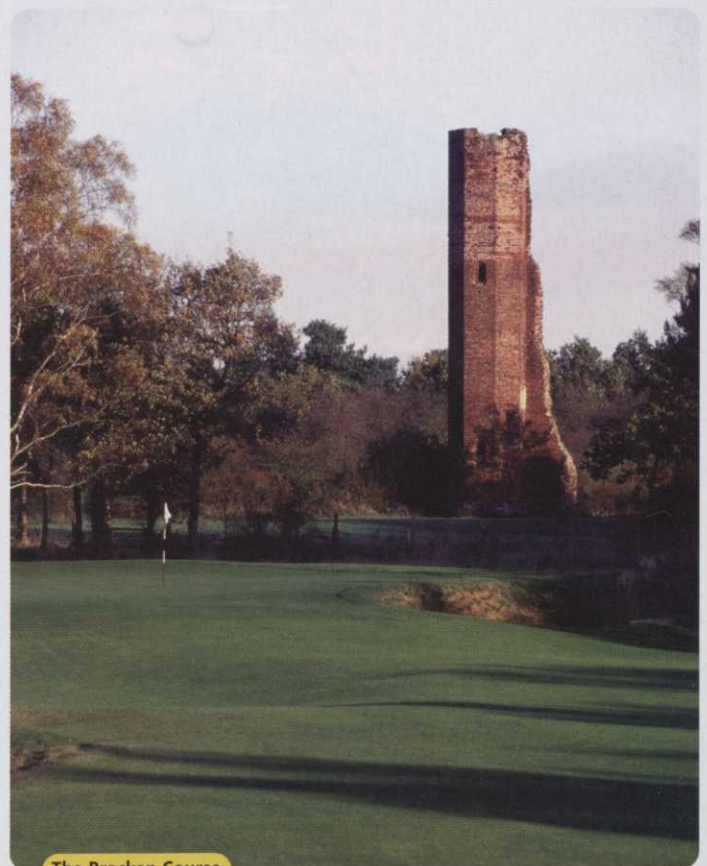
"We've got a large putting green, three chipping greens, bunkers, a

very large tee with five target greens each set at a different angle and any shot on any type of golf course can be replicated," said Peter, who explained that the facility was used by everyone from the England Elite squads through to county and even club teams.

He is well aware that as Courses Manager at the EGU's Headquarters he must be seen to be a paragon of good practice and he is quite comfortable with the spotlight on him.

"It is easy for people to be critical and I am there to be shot at, but we do try to make sure that correct practice is in place and an example set. This from record keeping, health and safety etc. right through to turf management. It's a state of affairs with which Peter is very happy and you can be sure that despite the fact that the weather is perhaps not Algarvian he is more than happy to be working back in England.

Photographs courtesy of Eric Hepworth



The Bracken Course