

Course Feature

coursemanager@hotmail.com

Scott MacCallum meets Chris Lomas, a young man well prepared to meet the challenge of becoming the fourth head man in the history of The Berkshire Golf Club.

When Chris Lomas took over as Course Manager at The Berkshire Golf Club, in charge of the club's two highly rated courses, last September it was a challenge he was more than ready to meet.

He had spent four years working at Swinley Forest as Deputy Course Manager before making the short journey to The Berkshire where he initially shadowed Rob Moreton. After about 18 months he began to take more and more responsibility for the running of the courses before finally, on Rob's retirement, he was promoted to the position of Course Manager.



After two hours of chatting with the 29 year old Lancastrian I was more than convinced that the club had been right to identify Chris as their new Course Manager and nurture him accordingly, but it was just before we said our good-byes that I appreciated fully that Chris was a man doing the job for which he was destined.

At the end of the interview I said I'd send him the piece before publication just to ensure I hadn't misinterpreted anything and that he was happy with what had been written. He said to email it to him and proceeded to write down his address.

Now having only been in post a few months you could have forgiven him for not yet having acquired clomas.theberkshire@hotmail.com or coursemanager.theberkshire@hotmail.com as his email address so, as you might expect, his address was neither of these.

Chris' email address is coursemanager@hotmail.com When I complimented him on having got hold of such a definitive address he said he'd had it for sometime and that he had coursemanager@btopenworld.com as well.

If good management is all about planning ahead and seizing the initiative Chris obviously has those qualities in spades.

And he has grabbed his opportunity with both hands keen to place his own stamp on the Herbert Fowler designed Red and Blue courses at The Berkshire,

which both rank within the top 50 of Golf World's rankings, but at the same time full of praise for the way in which Rob Moreton prepared him for the task.

"A lot of people were upset that the position wasn't advertised and I'm not surprised because it's a wonderful job and I'm very lucky to have it," said Chris, as we sat in the bungalow style office and mess room block which sits alongside the main maintenance facility.

When it came to the hand over period which can often be a fraught time for any retiring Course Manager and his keen-to-get-started successor Rob's handling of the situation could provide the blueprint for others.

"He did it very cleverly," said Chris.

"He started to cut me more and more slack, leaving me to make the decisions I find myself making today. From time to time our ideas conflicted a bit but on the whole it was a sound partnership.

"I've never met a man who was so enthused about greenkeeping as Rob. He would live it, breath it and talk all day about it. It was wonderful because I learned so much from that.

"He also acknowledged his mistakes and was very open about them. He'd say 'Look I did that wrong' or 'I didn't get that drainage right'. That was what I liked about the man."

So what will the Lomas approach be to managing what is one of the finest



The Berkshire Team with Fudge the dog



Chris classifies The Berkshire as a woodland course with heather

pieces of golfing land to be found anywhere?

Well, one of the first things that he did was to split his team of 14 into two teams, one for the Red Course, under Head Greenkeeper Mark Hancock and one for the Blue, under John Haines.

"At the moment there is a team of six on each course with myself as Course Manager and our Horticultural Engineer - he hates to be known as a mechanic! We have 576 acres of land, which is a fair old lump and the guys used to go out in the morning and have little focus on where their job was going to be. By splitting them into two teams I'd like to think everyone was a little bit more focussed. It's been difficult through the winter as all we seem to have been doing is digging holes and repairing drains and cutting and burning trees, but in the summer we should get a bit of friendly rivalry and competition going. People commenting on the greens on the other course and that sort of thing," said Chris, who is hoping to add another man to each team to bring them up to seven.

The Berkshire never has winter tees or greens and Chris has inherited a non course closure policy which he loves.

"It takes the pressure off me as I don't have to come in in the morning and say sorry guys we're closed today."

On the management of the courses themselves, Chris sees woodland management as a big issue and has been talking with John Nicholson about improving their practices.

Interestingly Chris doesn't class The Berkshire as a heathland course any more.

"I think 75 years ago you could say it was heathland, when there were no trees but I'd class the likes of The Berkshire and Sunningdale as woodland courses with heather. I'd actually say that genuine heathland courses are very few and far between. Hankley Common and Walton Heath are two of them but they have both done a great deal of work in clearing out trees. Some courses are meant to be heathland and others are meant to adapt between the two.

"If we were to clear trees here I think it would spoil the nature of the golf course. Each hole is an entity in its own right and some members like to see thick woodland on the course. We are trying to retain that but thin the trees

out so that if you look carefully you will be able to see another fairway. We are trying to get more light and wildlife into the areas, give the trees a chance and get some secondary growth coming through. Most of the trees out there are the same age as the golf courses 75 years, so they have all grown to the one height and will die and fall down around the same time so we need some secondary growth."

They are working on an on-going programme of tree thinning using AJ Forestry to remove trees for them.

"Where we have a green surrounded by trees with the sun struggling to get through we are taking out a wedge of trees - the wider portion near the green working back to a point - which will let the light in and retain the look of the hole from the fairway.

"Woodland management plays second fiddle to turf management but it is hellish important on these golf courses. If you don't keep it up it soon gets away from you."

Chris drew my attention to an aerial photograph of the course on his office wall.

"If you look you can see that where the trees are creating shade there is no heather but where there is sunlight the heather is better developed."

Knowing how important heather is as a resource, a number of Course Managers at some of the more heather rich clubs are planning to form a Heather Committee to discuss the best ways of managing and protecting it.

"David Murdoch MG, of Liphook; Brian Turner, of Sunningdale; Clive Osgood, at Walton Heath; and Gareth Roberts, of Hankley Common and others will get together and talk as we've all got similar types of golf courses of similar ages."

Heather is a much talked about subject among the Course Managers who are both blessed with it and carry the responsibility of looking after it.

"You hear that Swinley's heather is good one year or that Sunningdale's is fantastic and wonder why?. So we intend to get together and discuss who's cutting at what height, how regularly and the benefits that have come from it. How do you get rid of grass in heather - spraying, digging, burning it out? Everyone is doing so many different things. Clive does a lot of turf lifting at



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Course Feature



Walton Heath and it works well for him but might not work for other people so we will brain storm it. You can never know too much, the minute you think you know it all is the minute it comes up and bites you."

One of The Berkshire's contributions to the discussions is on the topic of heather overhangs in bunkers.

"They look beautiful but are not very playable and some people chop it back severely, but you lose the heather. We have been building the bunker faces out with pit sand so the overhang is not so bad and we don't have to cut the heather back. A few of the other guys found that interesting," said Chris, whose father, Nick, worked with Clive Osgood, as Secretary of Walton Heath for a number of years.

"He loved working with Clive. He could listen to him all day and says that Walton Heath have a wonderful asset in Clive," said Chris.

He was always going to have a career in sport. He was brought up in a home backing onto Pleasington Golf Club, in Lancashire and initially he became an Assistant Pro at the club.

"I got a little disillusioned working in the shop and felt I wasn't going to be good enough to make it as a player but I got to know the greenkeepers at the club and became really interested in agronomy and turf culture, learning a lot from Len Cook, the now retired Head Greenkeeper."

He left the Assistant's post after eight months, finished his A Levels and contemplated doing a Sports Science degree but eventually decided upon the HND at Reaseheath College, which was in its first year.

"I did my sandwich year at Carden Park under Andy Campbell MG and worked for a time for the European Tour, at The Colony Club in Vienna under Gary Moseley."

He freely admits that he, along with his fellow students were the guinea pigs for the three year HND course and feels that many of those who finished the course quickly became disillusioned.

"Many of them had no experience of working on a golf course before starting the course and were expecting to walk into good jobs at the end and I

would think about a third of them are no longer in greenkeeping at all," he said.

When he finished the course he sent his CV to all the clubs he admired in the Home Counties, as he'd played golf in the area and loved the courses and also wanted to live near his brother, who'd also moved south.

He also wanted to further his rugby career which had seen him play for, among others, Orrell along with England international, Dewi Morris, and win around 30 England caps at various levels up to England Under 21. He is also a good friend with England and Lions Centre, Will Greenwood, with whom he grew up, and who also visits The Berkshire for a game while training with England at their base near Bagshot.

Chris initially played for Premiership club, Richmond, as he says, acting as a human tackling bag for Ben Clarke and Scott Quinnell, before playing semi professionally for Esher and latterly Chobham before retiring last year. It doesn't prevent him from accepting the odd invite to play in the Dubai Sevens however.

"I quit because I'm 29 and wanted to wake up at 40 and be able to play golf and not be carrying long-standing injury problems."

Back to greenkeeping...

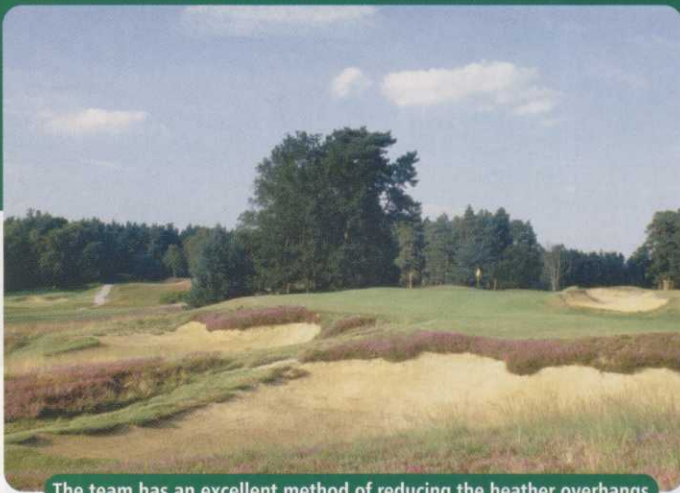
Among the clubs to reply to his CV blitz was Wentworth where he was interviewed by Chris Kennedy and Graham Mathieson and offered a job.

"Quite a surprise really because I wasn't Scottish," he joked.

However, Chris Kennedy advised him that there was an opportunity at Swinley Forest and to get along there. I'd heard of Swinley Forest as my dad had played it years before and you can't do anything but fall in love with it. I owe Chris Kennedy a lot for pointing me in that direction."

Chris worked under Lawson Bingham for three years at Swinley and is grateful to Ian Pearce, Secretary, for taking a gamble in a young upstart still wet behind the ears. Then the opportunity of becoming Deputy at The Berkshire came along.

"I knew Rob was due to retire but there was never any guarantee that I'd



The team has an excellent method of reducing the heather overhangs

get the job."

But get the job he did, becoming only the fourth head man at The Berkshire in its 75 year history. To celebrate its 75th anniversary among other things a shotgun start tournament for 140 between The Berkshire and Sunningdale will be held in the summer complete with marquee and barbecue while the club is hosting the British Ladies' Seniors this year and the British Men's Seniors next year.

"I am indebted for the opportunity I've been given here and I will do everything in my power to justify their confidence in me. The members are a really supportive bunch and I have a very experienced team who rarely let themselves or each other down. I also work closely with the Secretary, Colonel John Hunt, who will fight my corner if needed," said the extremely happy Chris.

Oh, and he's more than happy to communicate by email with anyone who wants to discuss anything within the piece, or greenkeeping matters in general.

You know the address.

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