

Course Feature



Priceless Parkstone

Parkstone Golf Club is in the middle of a massive heathland restoration project and Gareth Jones discovered how the developments are going.

With housing values at an all time high and space to build extra accommodation at a premium there is a certain area of land located on the south coast of the UK that is reported to be the third most expensive land in the world. Situated nearby is a golf club that is worth more than all the money in the world to its greenkeeping staff.

Parkstone Golf Club is to be found comfortably nestled in between the numerous multi million pound, brightly coloured houses, most of which you expect to see running alongside a Californian beach rather than Poole Harbour.

However, it is not these glamorous dwellings that catch the eye of passers by, it is Parkstone and the attention to detail and sheer hard graft that is being put into the course is what makes it truly stand out.

The club has a dedicated staff of eight who are undertaking a massive restoration project that has consumed their working lives. The greens staff is currently restoring the course to its original heathland state, which has witnessed the removal of vast amounts of trees from around the entire course.

Parkstone has always been considered to be a heathland but, as time went on, in reality it resembled more of a parkland course. Like all major projects, this restoration programme has certainly not happened overnight, in fact it had been started just before current Course Manger, Bill Garner, joined the club back in 1998.

"This project is important to the golf club. The heathland must not be lost, that is crucial. We are taking great strides to regenerate the heather and it is important we do as much as possible," said Bill.

"I have been at Parkstone for seven years and in that time lots of manpower, time and money have gone into it and the course is now showing signs of all that hard work."

Wonderful shades of heather are now appearing across the course and you get a real sense that there is plenty more to come, and success to be gained, from the project. The team is certainly not resting with what they have and plans are afoot for more trees to be taken out and more of the course's natural heather to return.

The club has had to work closely with various organisations during the





Course Manager, Bill Garner, (right) with Deputy Alex McCombie and, to the right, with their team.

restoration process, in particular English Nature, The Forestry Commission and Poole Borough Council.

"All three have really helped us out and played their part in restoring Parkstone to its rightful state. It was difficult when we first started as we all had different views and ideas and fought our own corner. But now, with the results that we are seeing, we are all pulling in the same direction and it is working well.

"Everyone has agreed that there is a balance needed between heathland and woodland, it is about getting that balance right and I'm sure we are getting it right here. We had our last meeting in early December and as we walked around everybody agreed that the course was looking great."

The club, who's professional between 1957 and 1970 was Ryder Cup player and BBC commentator Peter Alliss, is involved with the Woodland Grant Scheme, run by the Forestry Commission, which has pushed the development further forward with specialist advice available to the club and also helping them gain approval to remove certain trees.

"The whole project is ongoing and we are now ready to move it on to the next step. We have taken out two major woodland areas and now we plan to take out the small blocks, which are dotted around the course. We need to take the canopies back and that will be quite a job, but we are encouraged by the work so far and we aren't going to stop until we are happy," stated Bill, who looked both extremely proud of the work completed so far and excited about the upcoming plans.

Major heathland regeneration work, such as Parkstone's, can never run perfectly, results are not always guaranteed and typically they are influenced by uncontrollable factors. Heather reestablishment is not a certainty and growth from one area to another can vary dramatically. Between holes 12 and 13 the heather has developed significantly more than the area between 11 and 12, but that is something Bill always expected.

"No part of the course is the same, so you are never 100% sure what is going to happen. In certain areas heather wouldn't grow back at all, while in others it will flourish. You don't really know before hand what the result will be. For example, you never know how the ground has been tampered with in the



past and what has been done to it. You just have to work around it and in most cases you have to try and regenerate the seed bed before you can do anything else at all."

Despite the odd problem here and there the project has been very successful, to such an extent that the club won the Outstanding Achievement Award, given by English Nature. The awards have been running for five years and just 10 are handed out each year.

"I believe we are the only golf club to have won this award and it is an honour. Bill and myself went to the Warwickshire Royal Agricultural Show and the Chief Executive of English Nature presented us with the award there," said Alex McCombie, Deputy Course Manager of Parkstone, with a thoroughly satisfied tone in his voice.

"It came out of the blue really. We don't do all this work for awards, we do it for the club, its members, ourselves and most importantly, for the course. However it is always nice to receive accolades like this and it just helps prove we are heading in the right direction and carrying out the correct procedures, it is nice to have that type of backup," said Bill.

The award also endorses Parkstone's credentials as a top 100 ranked golf course in the recent Golf Monthly rankings. With more courses popping up around the country Parkstone briefly slipped out of that top 100, but with all the hard work that has been put into the course from the team, the club is now firmly rooted back in that elite band.

"There are a lot of nice clubs around this part of the world, and there is a major new one being build down the road, but I wouldn't say we feel the pressure of having to compete with them for green fees and membership numbers. We just get on with our jobs and all I ask from my team is that we all





give 100% and work as best we can. You can't ask for more than that and I have found that with that attitude you can't go far wrong," insisted Bill, who benefits from having a solid team and a low turnover of staff.

"We must be doing something right as the lads enjoy their work here and because of that they are happy to stay. This heathland restoration has given them another side of greenkeeping you don't always get on other courses.

"We don't encourage the grass to grow here and, in fact, it doesn't grow fast at all, it is not that type of course. This allows the team the time to experience other areas of golf course management and that is great for them."

The magnitude of the Parkstone project can not be underestimated and to be completed successfully a whole number of factors have had to be right, from staff to machinery the club has had to get it spot on.

"The club is very good, the staff are very good and the machinery is very good. Everything has had to be top notch in order for us to be successful. It all combines to make the job easier and the results better. There is no point having good staff but poor machinery that is not up to the job, and vice versa. The club recognise that and do what they can to make this project as successful as possible."

Parkstone, which is a 6,254 yard par 72 course, keeps Bill and his team up to date with all the latest machinery, and if it is needed then it is brought, while also providing numerous education and training opportunities for the staff. The club's team of eight boast two qualified assessors, with Tim Rockey, who is bound for the US in early 2005 as part of the BIGGA Delegation trip, supported by Bernhard, to the GCSAA Show, a NPTC assessor.

"As a club Parkstone has a really positive approach to greenkeeper education. They are always keen to push us forward and enter us on to courses, conferences and seminars, and that is really important and beneficial to all the staff. It is a major reason they enjoy working here," said Alex, who is clearly a big advocate of greenkeeper training.

As well as the restoration programme, the education side of the club has helped the green staff to tackle their other major work, drainage. Parkstone, which is split by a single road, is just a drive and a nine iron from the English Channel and, with some of the course at sea level, numerous drainage troubles have been created. The 11th and 12th, in particular, suffer and located just off the fairways is a waterway that runs down to the Channel. This is tidal, which has caused the course to be flooded on occasions.

"A lot of people don't think we have a problem with drainage, but we suffer quite badly at times. We have gravel banded and also just drilled and filled with Eco Solve on seven of the greens, so that should help us out, even though, typically, we haven't actually had any rain since we did the work," quipped the Head man.

The secret to the course's success is Bill's philosophy of keeping it simple. He keeps a diary of every year of his working life as a greenkeeper, which contains information on all the work he has done on a particular day and he records all

the important stats, such as rainfall. It is this method he then uses to plan what he has in store for his course.

"I don't plan too far ahead, and I don't have a year long planned out schedule that I must stick to. I look back in my diaries and see what I was doing this time last year, and think well maybe I should be doing that again about now.

"We are dictated to by the weather conditions. For instance, it has been a surprisingly dry December so far, so the lads are out there verti-draining. If it was wet, and we had planned some major work, we would just do something else instead and wait until the time and weather is right. We are adoptable here and this kind of approach works very well for us, each course is different and so is each greenkeeper."

Bill, who started his greenkeeping career at Wilmslow Golf Club before moving onto The Grange in Dublin, honed his simplicity method in Holland. Course Manager at the Hilversumsche Golf Club, a regular venue for the Dutch Open, Bill was responsible for testing the cream of the golfing world, while also taking up the education opportunities provided by the developing FEGGA.

"FEGGA put on some good education conferences for greenkeepers and I attended quite a few. The education is strong over in Holland and well supported. Because chemicals are banned over there it puts more emphasis on leaning other ways to cope with disease and things like that.

"That is probably the biggest influence working in Holland had on me, I am more relaxed when we have a problem such as getting a disease at Parkstone. Fusarium is nasty, and leaves a horrible scar on the grass, but we don't panic about it. We just do what we can and get on with it, we don't go over the top and spray like mad," stated Bill.

"We just get on with things here, each day is different, and we all enjoy what we are doing here to make Parkstone as good as possible."

So while the building developers fight it out for the third highest valued land in the world, close by will be a team of dedicated greenkeepers making sure their Parkstone Golf Course remains priceless.

Parkstone Golf Club Machinery Inventory	
3 X Toro GM 3250D	1 X Carrera 6500 Tractor
1 X Toro GM 3200D	1 X New Holland 27hp Tractor
2 X John Deere 220	1 X Richard long flail mower
2 X John Deere 220A	1 X Richard long scarifier/collector
1 X John Deere 3235C fairway mower	1 X Sisis Litamisa
1 X John Deere 3245C rough cut	1 X Groundmaster turfcutter
1 X Greentech thatchaway units	1 X Long equip top dresser
1 X Greentech vibrating rollers	1 X John Deere top dresser
1 X Case 580K Digger	1 X Turfmech stumpgrinder
1 X Hitachi excavator	1 X Gambetti 400l sprayer
1 X John Deere 420 Tractor	1 X Farmura F25 sprayer
1 X John Deere 4600 Tractor	1 X Sisis outfield spiker
	1 X Charterhouse 7212 verti-drain
	1 X Charterhouse 7416 verti-drain
	1 X Blec Groundbreaker
	1 X John Deere Gator
	1 X John Deere pro gator

