

# Course Feature



▲ Paul Worster

## God Gave this Place for Golf

Scott MacCallum visits BIGGA Environment Competition winner Minchinhampton Golf Club and meets a Course Manager, whose environmental work acts as a real stress buster.

There are some parts of the country where golf seems to be a much bigger part of the community than others. There are some places where it seems that everyone and his pet dog are involved in the game in some way or another and its not just skateboarders you have to be wary of when you walk the pavements, but caddie cars.

St Andrews and Gullane spring to mind immediately as just that sort of place but there is another, not quite such an obvious name, to add to that list.

Minchinhampton, in Gloucestershire, is not the biggest place in the world, but Minchinhampton Golf Club boasts 54 holes with the Old Course resembling an inland version of some of those in Fife or East Lothian. Cut from the common land the course passes backwards and forwards across public roads with golfers holing out just a few yards from the through traffic. The other two courses, complete with a magnificent clubhouse converted from a stone built barn, are more conventional and under the stewardship of Course Manager, Paul Worster, represent fine challenges for the 1400 playing members - the Old Course - which is almost a club within the club, has another 600 playing members. Both clubs have thriving junior sections, encouraged by the club, as an investment in the future.

The three courses are maintained by a combined staff of 11 - nine on the New Courses, consisting of the Avening designed by Fred Hawtree in 1972, and the Cherington designed by Martin Hawtree in 1992, which cover a combined 250 acres, and the other two on the Old Course - but despite the obvious hefty workload the team still has had time to become the 2004 winners of the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition, sponsored by Scotts, Syngenta, and WRAP.

"People do ask - haven't you got enough to do without bothering about environmental matters, but it isn't a case of that," said Paul, who is a superb ambassador for his profession and the environmental lobby.

"It takes a lot of the stress out of the daily grind of preparing a golf course. I'll bet I was the only Course Manager in the country who was transplanting buttercups and reeds at the beginning of the week. We've produced a little marshy area and are making sure that it develops".

Of course, its not just therapy for the staff, the Minchinhampton membership also benefit. "It brings a whole new perspective for the members. They are not wholly focussed on lightening fast greens and criss-cross cut fairways they realise there is something more involved and it takes their attention when they are playing" said Paul, who along with officials from the club received the Environment Competition trophy at Harrogate in January.



A combination of 11 staff maintain the three Minchinhampton courses

Golf began at Minchinhampton in 1889, when the Lord of the Manor was introduced to the game by a friend from Scotland. It is no surprise that when you take on board the introduction to this article, or indeed the name of the first course, that the friend came from St Andrews.

"The friend actually said, and we've included the quote in the club handbooks, that 'God gave this place for golf'."

The Lord of the Manor, being a golfer - albeit a recent one - and as a result a decent sort, appreciated that he couldn't just ride roughshod over the community and take over common land to indulge his latest hobby - the relatively new sport to the area of golf - so he made his Great Park at Minchinhampton available for graziers and public use in exchange for the rights to play golf over the commons. However, the game quickly caught on and Paul produced a framed picture, which hangs in the Mess Room, showing women in long skirts and bodices playing golf over the Old Course with horses and carts travelling along the tracks which are now busy B roads. At that stage, in much the same manner as courses were maintained up and down the country, it was a Pro\Greenkeeper who was in charge of the upkeep. In the 1960's and 70's the common started to get a lot busier and many more people were playing golf so the club realised that if it was going to develop they have to move. To that end they sold their only tangible asset, a pub called the Old Lodge, previously an old Coaching Inn, which acted as the clubhouse, and used the money to finance the land for the Avening Course on farmland a couple of miles away.

## Course Feature



This water feature is a haven for various wildlife



"There were, and still are, some pretty astute financial people running this club and 20 years after building the Avening they were able to build the Cherington course to cope with the yet more demand for golf in the area.

Although built on modest budgets father and son Hawtree both did remarkable jobs on limited budgets - Martin who is retained as the Club's resident architect to oversee any design project which is undertaken, also had to comply with regulations which dictated that the course could only rise or fall by no more than one and a half metres. The swales, mounds and contouring he put into the course means it looks anything but a flat golf course and the greens are very undulating and can stimp at up to 11," said Paul who is a category one player himself.

To assist with the development of the Cherington course trees were transplanted from the Avening to add character and definition as quickly as possible.

"We transplanted 8,000 trees using a JCB or tree spade and if we lost 50 I'd be surprised. We had the right operators who know how to dig a tree without ruining it."

Ironically, some of those trees are now being repatriated to the Avening Course as there is a feeling it needs to be tightened up.

"We employ an arboriculturalist who advises us on each and every tree and we can look at strategy, species and health of trees. We are thinning out about 180 trees this year and there was quite a bit of disquiet among some of the members as some of them can remember when they were planted, indeed some of them were members of the planting parties and actually planted the trees and to see someone taking a chainsaw to them has been a bit of a shock," said Paul.



The Old course is common land and is split by public roads

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## Course Feature



Wooden trays are positioned throughout the courses to store grass clippings



A place to rest for the local buzzards



With Marking Day approaching the Old course's grass cannot be cut for two weeks

"If you get the right professional advice it carries the day. That's what we do. If we feel we haven't got the knowledge, we'll go out and get it rather than making it up as we go along".

The bunkerless Old Course is looked after by Senior Greenkeeper Nigel Crewe and his Assistant, Ian Shaw, and their job has some interesting elements.

Cattle and horses roam free on what is still common land and the first job of the day is to repair the damaging cattle and horse prints from the greens - a task that can take up to three or four hours.

Bizarrely, although all Minchinhampton's courses are run by Paul, the Old Course is a separate section and any time that materials or labour are transferred from one to another, a paper trail has to be left, and invoices drawn.

"At the moment, we're on the eve of Marking Day when the cattle are branded and we are not allowed to cut any grass other than greens or tees for two weeks before or after Marking Day. The idea is that the livestock get the first cut so it can get pretty tough," said Nigel, who added that a few beasts are lost through accidents on the roads around the common each year.

Marking Day also signals one of the highlights of the Minchinhampton golfing calendar - Cow Pat Night!

Among the touches which impressed the judges in the Environment Competition were holes left in a new drystone wall to retain badger runs, wooden perches which attract the local buzzards, wood construction frames and trays which have been placed discreetly on every other hole on both new courses to take grass clippings. "The guys are now fanatical about finding one to empty their boxes and from there we can shovel the clippings easily off the ply and return them to compost. We did the whole job for £250."

Composting is another extremely important element of their work and there is a massive compost heap on the edge of the Maintenance Compound measuring about 30 Metres Square and nearly two metres high.

"A fan is used twice a day to get some oxygen into it to aid decomposition and we reuse what we produce in about nine months."



Paul and his team created this hole to retain a badger run

Paul believes that golf clubs are far more environmentally aware now than in the past. "We are all a lot more conscious of environmental matters than we were, but we are also far more active and as a result have a far greater potential to pollute. We can all do our little bit to help," said Paul, who is slowly changing some of his machinery fleet to electric or LPG.

"We are not just providing a wildlife sanctuary. We are operating a business while trying to minimise the effects of environmental damage. The environment belongs to us all, and its up to all of us to help look after it."

He is also aware of the "bad press" that golf gets from some aspects of the media, which fuels a low public approval rating for golf.

"Ninety percent of the UK population lives in big towns and cities so for a lot of people sport is playing snooker and darts in the pub and going to football matches. Golf has unfortunately been perceived as damaging, polluting, and therefore expensive and elitist - people still think that there is an arsenal of chemicals and fertilisers wantonly thrown at golf courses because some of the courses they see on TV lead them to believe that to be the case.

"If we can get the point across that we've got some wonderful habitats out here and that this sport does little or no harm to the environment, we shall be preserving the game for generations to come."

Paul's first involvement with environmental matters came at his previous job at Lilleybrook golf club, on which a SSSI site was designated just before he left to join Minchinhampton 13 years ago. "What was involved came as a bit of a shock to me at the time, but when I came here there was so much work involved in building the Cherington Course that we didn't have much time to devote to the environmental aspects."

That all changed when one of his staff, Samantha Kennedy, began to take an interest in the environmental well being of the site. "Sam was critical to what we were doing so we sent her on training course to improve her knowledge. She helped me to create a methodology statement for the maintenance of the golf courses, and produced a booklet for the members to read in the clubhouse explaining our approach.

When Samantha left for Bowood Golf and Country Club, her role was taken by another member of staff, Martin Didcott, who was employed primarily for his environmental knowledge but also doubled as a greenkeeper.

"He coordinated the environmental work because I've got a lot of other things to think about - budgets, committees, competitions, Health and Safety, Risk, COSHH, staff appraisals, training, the list goes on and on.



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The club have been busy transplanting and thinning out trees



A feature like this highlights why the BIGGA Environmental Competition judges were so impressed



The compost heap has a fan which blows air into it everyday to assist decomposition



### Golf Environment Competition

Quite frankly, none of these things, the environment included, are easily managed without the support of a good team, and at Minchinhampton the focus is very much on the team, and a partnership between staff, management, and the members themselves.

"The environment is very much an opportunity to reward a member of staff with more responsibility. It can be easy for Assistant Greenkeepers to become frustrated at an apparent lack of rapid career progress - you can take a member of staff from outside your "core team" and give them the environment as a big important project.

"Do not underestimate the pressure that Course Managers are under. I have been there and felt it. The R&A Best Practice website is an example. People don't have the time to visit it as regularly as they should to get the full benefits of the information available. Making that commitment is a difficult thing".

Minchinhampton entered the Environment Competition for the first time in 2003 and it says much for the quality of the work being carried out that only a year later they were picking up the top prize.

"We were running along competition lines for some time but felt that we weren't ready for that final step of putting in the entry form. I'm so glad we did because it wasn't nearly as invasive or time consuming as we'd feared."

The club held a presentation dinner for the staff and their partners during February in honour of winning the competition.

"I was so proud when the guys were applauded into the room by about a hundred members. I followed it up after the meal with a PowerPoint presentation on the work we had done to win the competition and this was really well received. I've since had some rebookings, and done the presentation for the ladies, three BIGGA and company seminars in the south, and an advance booking from the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust."

What advice could he give to other clubs thinking about becoming more environmentally active? "I'd sit down with anyone and everyone who's interested. Itemise the things that need to be done, put someone in charge, give them a budget, and let them run with it."

Paul is also concerned about the threat to remove more and more chemicals from the greenkeepers armoury.

"I firmly believe that before I retire routine chemical applications will have been withdrawn from use on Amenity Turf. While I have no intention of suddenly and completely ceasing the use of chemicals here, what I want to do is to understand how best to manage without. Golfers have got to appreciate that it is not necessarily best practice to exterminate every single weed just because they don't happen to like the look of it, but we are in a competitive business and I don't want to fight it on the back foot."

You can't see Paul Worster or Minchinhampton Golf Club ever being caught on the back foot and the Club will continue to thrive.