

Course Feature



▲ Course Manager, Philip Taylor (left), and Head Greenkeeper, John Goldthorpe

An Old Master

Scott MacCallum visits Alwoodley Golf Club, a superb heathland course with an impeccable pedigree.

There are some jobs where you wouldn't be thanked for any supposed improvements you might like to introduce. For example the Director of Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, USA, would be fed to the grizzly bears if he were to install a roller coaster straddling the Old Faithful geyser, while the Curator of the Louvre Gallery, in Paris, would face the guillotine if he brought the Mona Lisa "up to date" so she sported low slung jeans, a cropped top and a pierced bellybutton and eyebrow.

Philip Taylor and John Goldthorpe, Course Manager and Head Greenkeeper respectively of Alwoodley Golf Club in Leeds, know better than to fall into those traps.

Like the enigmatic portrait which hangs in that Paris gallery, Alwoodley is a masterpiece which requires little or no tweaking. That said, finding the delicate balance between meddling and neglect is not always an easy task although, in Philip and John, Alwoodley has a team that instinctively knows what is best for a course which has a pedigree to match anything in the country.

Ask any given group of golfers which one course in the world they'd love to play more than any other and I can guarantee that the name "Augusta National" will crop up.

Well, Alwoodley was laid out by Harry Colt, a highly respected golf course architect from around the turn of the last century, and Alwoodley's first Secretary, Dr Alistair MacKenzie. If his name rings a bell, it should because a few years after making his name as a golf course architect in the UK he left for the United States where he linked up with Bobby Jones to design Augusta National.

Although Alwoodley was one of the good doctor's early forays into golf course architecture it is one of the finest courses in the country. Regularly ranked in the top 50 by national magazines, it is also rated the sixth most difficult course in the country.

"We're not particularly long but it is very tight. There is a lot of gorse in close proximity to the fairways and greens as well as a lot of heather. The greens are very well bunkered and once on them there are many slopes. We're also easier in winter than in summer when the rough comes up to chest height in some areas," said Phil, by way of explanation.

Former Ryder Cup Captain Mark James often practised at the club when he lived locally and he played with Phil not long after he took over as Course Manager 15 years ago.

"He said that he could always tell when he was in the rough at Alwoodley. If, when he got down over a shot, it was tickling him under the chin, he knew he was there," laughed Phil.

Occasionally members ask him to cut areas back but if they were to remove too much it would water down a course which showed its teeth to BIGGA's finest at last

year's National Championship. However, Alwoodley is not so cruel to its members as to have them play a course which they can't get round. As well as the traditional tee complexes certain holes have Veteran/Junior Tees which take the longer carries over heather and gorse out of play.

"When you get in the rough at Alwoodley, Ganton or any really difficult course, if you've got any sense, you just take a sand iron and hit out sideways," is his advice.

In his time at the club Philip has completed two major projects, neither of which has impacted on the look of the course but both have significantly improved the playability.

The first was to overhaul the entire drainage network as the original drains had either collapsed or were full of tree root.

"I remember walking down the 8th with the then Chairman of Green and it was like a lake and you couldn't do a thing with the greens. It was there for all to see," recalled John.

Drainage consultant Barry Cooper was brought in and he designed a programme which White Horse Contractors carried out in conjunction with Philip, John and the team.

An expensive operation but the club had been extremely shrewd and sold off the nine acre practice range to a house developer and purchased some agricultural land adjacent to the course for a replacement range.



"The old range was soft and in need of draining itself so it made sense to get rid of it and the money the club made was then put to good use," said John, who added that the first thing that the club did with its financial windfall was to build a new maintenance facility.

Carried out in an eight week period during one of the wettest summers for years, the new drainage included a 100mil pipe to every green which was left so the team could plug into it where they discovered a need.

With the work done and the members being extremely patient while the course was disrupted everyone moved on in a spirit of genuine optimism only for the winter months to provide a real shock.

"We were twice as wet as we had been before the work was done, the reason being that the new drainage hadn't started working coupled with the fact some of the old drainage which hadn't been seen had been damaged," said Philip

"We had to dig holes and connect the old drainage to the new and once the soil got some structure back it started to pull," he explained.

He also recalled an attempt to speed up the healing process to the turf which didn't have the desired results.

"We tried some liquid sod - pregerminated seed mixed with fertiliser, fungicide and papier mache - which we sprayed over the drainage lines and which, if kept moist, is supposed to germinate within four days.

"We thought it would be ideal so we sprayed it on. Then we had such a thunderstorm that it all washed away into a big pile. So that was no good," he sighed.

Now the course drains beautifully and as Philip puts it: "You could walk down the 1st in carpet slippers and still have dry feet by the time you'd finished."

The second project, carried out hard on the heels of the drainage work, is perhaps an even better example of the careful way the stewardship of Alwoodley is carried out.

The greens were thatchy and in need of work and while Philip's initial wish had been to improve them by the tried and trusted mechanical approach it soon became apparent that a more drastic approach would be needed.

"We decided that we needed to rebuild the greens to a USGA spec and we also agreed that we would put them back as close to how they were as possible apart from the 15th which had been altered anyway and where we tried to get back to MacKenzie's original design.

"It was never an issue. Nobody could fault the way he'd designed them. We and the members thought that it was such a special course that we didn't have a reason to change as I don't think we could have made them better," explained Philip.

"We could have made them easier from a greenkeeping point of view and given ourselves more pin positions but, for example, when you get onto our 11th green which goes from front to back and you've a putt across the green which you've got to hit up there to get down there it's different isn't it?" said Philip, pointing out the line of his imaginary putt.

Jonathan Tucker, the STRI's architect, was contacted to engineer the project - as Philip said there was no real designing involved, while Global Surveying lazer measured every green at one metre intervals to ensure they could be re-laid as accurately as was possible. The rootzone was supplied by Mansfield Sands after a frustrating long search to find a product which met USGA specifications.



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The success of the new greens comes from the fact that, one, they don't flood like they used to, but also that you certainly can't see the join.

The pair, in conjunction with then Chairman of Green, Peter Gilbert, have also been instrumental in the removal of many of the trees on the golf course to return it to its heathland roots and improve some of the vistas on the course.

"Peter Gilbert was a strong person and an excellent Chairman of Green and he had a lot of input into the major jobs," said Philip.

John has taken care of the bracken while the heather regeneration is another on-going job.

Peppering the conversation with Philip and John comes references to the Alwoodley members and what a fabulous place Alwoodley is to work. John is proof of this, having just two weeks before taking delivery of a carriage clock to recognise 25 years with the Club.

"It is one of the best clubs in the country and they are absolutely superb people to work for," said Philip, a point reinforced by John.

"We had the same Chairman of Green for 16 years and the only thing he asked us to do in all that time was to put in a stile and remove a few thistles."

The club, which has a membership of just over 450, know that if you have the right people in post saying little is the best way to get results.

"The responsibility to look after the course does put pressure on you more than having someone telling you what to do. We try not to give people anything to complain about," said Philip, and the two of them obviously have a great feel for the golf course and an eye for detail when it comes to preparing it.

"If you have an eye for detail and keep on top of the job you are not going to have much grief," said John, who retires in a couple of years, fittingly, in the Club's centenary year.

To mark the centenary the Club will host the British Mid Amateur Championship and by then the bunker renovation programme should be near completion - another occasion when Dr MacKenzie's work is being polished rather than changed.

"In the 60s the Club decided to roll the bunker faces over. I don't know why but a few more people are doing it now but we go to the stage that we feel it is wrong. Take the 1st for example. You can stand on the tee and although you can see the face of the fairway bunker you can't see the sand and you should be able to because that's what puts the terror into you," said Philip.

"It was Mackenzie's philosophy that you should see some sand so we started to redo the bunkers around three years ago. John did some of the smaller ones and we will get contractors in for the larger ones. I always like to get experts in wherever possible."

It's that sort of attention to detail which ensures Alwoodley's place near the top of the golfing tree to the extent that perhaps, rather than call Alwoodley the Augusta of Leeds, we should be describing Augusta as the Alwoodley of Georgia!



▲ View of the Clubhouse from the 17th

