

# Ticking all the Boxes

R&A

Steve Isaac takes a trip to Littlestone GC, who are the first club to complete The R&A's best practice checklist.

By now you should all be aware of our course management best practice website, [www.bestcourseforgolf.org](http://www.bestcourseforgolf.org). If you have not registered to it, do so now. The ultimate aim is for clubs to work through the checklist system to the site - only available to registered users - which is, effectively, an auditing process through which you can compare your management and recording against our view of best practice. This not only allows your club to assess its performance, it also provides The R&A with information to support our work in promoting best practice and the case of the benefit of golf to legislators around the world. We believe the implementation of best practice ensures sustainability in golf course management.



L-R, Colonel Charles Moorhouse, Malcolm Grand & Tim Taylor

Our definition of sustainability is: "Optimising the playing quality of the golf course in harmony with the conservation of its natural environment under economically sound and socially responsible management".

The other potential value of completing the checklists is that it is ideal preparation for any club considering working towards one of the environmental accreditation schemes, e.g. Committed to Green, EMAS or ISO14001. Working through the checklists honestly is not a simple process. It is challenging and demands a high level of record keeping and documentation. However, as these are now vital aspects of good course management it should be in the best interests of all clubs to be able to complete this auditing process.

In March 2005, Littlestone became the very first golf club in the world to complete the checklist auditing system on [www.bestcourseforgolf.org](http://www.bestcourseforgolf.org). To mark this achievement, Tim Taylor, Chairman of The R&A Golf Course Committee, and I visited the club. Here we met Colonel Charles Moorhouse, Secretary, and Malcolm Grand, Head Greenkeeper, and walked the course with them, discussing their work and the many interesting features on and surrounding the course.

## LITTLESTONE GOLF CLUB

There are two courses at Littlestone, which is situated on the edge of Romney Marsh, between Folkestone and Hastings. The championship links is home to the Private Members Club, and Romney Warren is run as a pay and play facility. Littlestone is a Local Final Qualifying venue for The Open Championship when it is held at Royal St George's and hosted the Ladies' British Open Amateur Championship in June 2005.

The clubhouse overlooks the practice putting green and 1st tee and has a very homely feel. The walls of the lounge are filled with photographs tracing the history of the club and

its course maintenance. Images of the irrigation available in the 1920s are a reminder that the more difficult it is to water, the more chance you have of retaining true links character. Fortunately, even with a modern automatic system, on tees and greens only, Littlestone retains putting surfaces dominated by bent and fescue grasses.

Laidlaw Purves laid out the original links, which was modified in 1892 before a final layout was designed by Purves and David Herd, Club Professional for 43 years. This was given significant additional bunkering by James Braid in 1905 and 1909. Since then, Alister Mackenzie, Frank Penninck, Peter Alliss and Donald Steel have all had an influence on the layout. Alliss and Steel advised on the introduction of five new tees, which were opened in 2000, providing a Blue Course measuring 6,676 yards with a Standard Scratch Score of 73.



The 16th green, showing the superbly consistent surfaces produced at Littlestone



The dog's graveyard



The triangle of land fenced off for sheep grazing

With the exception of parts of the 1st, 2nd and 18th, the land on which the championship course lies is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The site was an estuary until the Romans arrived on the shores of Britain. They drained the land and the dykes which cut across the course still serve this purpose. The course is vulnerable to flooding, as much of it lies below sea level, and the Environment Agency has overall responsibility for flood control. Between the EA and the club, the dykes are dug out as necessary to maintain their function. The club added extra drains in 2001, which stood them in good stead in November 2003 when, despite 200mm of rain, the course remained open to play.

The subsoil across the site is a sand/shingle mix and in places the topsoil is only millimetres thick. Topsoil depth is greater to the holes lying closest to the clubhouse and here the soil has a relatively high silt content. Through the reclaimed land a series of shingle banks run for miles across the marsh, interspersed with infill that produces more luxurious grass growth. The banks are known as "fuls" and the infill "innings".

#### HABITAT MANAGEMENT

Littlestone Golf Club is not afraid to try novel means of managing the variety of different habitat on site. One of the more daring ventures has been the use of sheep to graze the rough in selected areas. English Nature paid for fencing off a sheep field in the triangle between the 7th, 11th and 12th holes. The benefit of grazing to the quality of the rough grassland can clearly be seen by comparing that inside the fence to the rather rank rough immediately outside.

A gorse planting programme is trying to enhance the appearance of some holes and a hawthorn management scheme, operated in conjunction with EN, is controlling the spread of this non-indigenous bush, which is often seen invading rough grassland to links and heathland courses. One of the more unusual features, which shows the caring side of the greenkeeping staff, is the sight of gravestones on a small plot near the maintenance facility. This is not a graveyard of Past Captains, fertiliser salesmen or agronomists. It is where the pet dogs of greenkeepers and some members have been buried.

Littlestone is a fascinating place to visit. Its history, landscapes and designation make it unique. The red brick water tower that dominates the skyline to the left of the 18th fairway is yet another landmark. Everywhere you look there is something of interest.

#### COMPLETING THE CHECKLISTS

Charles Moorhouse has compiled excellent documentation in the form of a rolling plan, records of past performance and future plans for the course and the club, including a 10 year capital expenditure for greenkeeping machinery, irrigation and accommodation. There is another document that records any changes made to the course since 1970. The club also has an excellent website, which is well worth visiting at [www.littlestonegolfclub.org.uk](http://www.littlestonegolfclub.org.uk).

The availability of these records made working through The R&A best practice checklists relatively straightforward, but an achievement nonetheless. Littlestone were the recipients of the very first certificate to acknowledge this - a feat which should be put into perspective. There are now over 1,200 clubs registered to the site from 85 different countries.

Record keeping and planning are essential aspects of course management. They mean little unless best practice is implemented. Receipt of The R&A certificate is a reflection of the standard of playing surfaces and presentation at Littlestone and recognition for Malcolm Grand, Head Greenkeeper, and his hard working team.

#### CAN YOU TAKE ON THE LITTLESTONE CHALLENGE?

Littlestone has shown that good management these days relies on implementation backed up by documentation. However interesting the site and no matter the quality of the course, if you do not keep up with the paperwork and carry out all of the tasks necessary to achieve sustainability you will not produce what the golfer and regulators require.

The R&A course management best practice auditing checklists can help you achieve this, so register to [www.bestcourseforgolf.org](http://www.bestcourseforgolf.org) and start working the site today.

*Steve Isaac is Assistant Director - Golf Course Management at The R&A, who can be contacted on 01334 460000.*



The 1st green with the water tower in the background