

Course Feature

Best Peak Practice

Scott MacCallum travelled to Derbyshire to meet a Course Manager who is living up to the family name.

The Peak District town of Buxton is known for its famous spring water while the local golf club, Buxton & High Peak Golf Club, is certainly synonymous with the name Norton.

Steve Norton is the current Course Manager, having taken on the role in 2001. His father, Ray, worked at the club for 35 years but that's nothing. His grandfather, Bill, devoted 55 years to the club starting in 1911 as a shepherd (sheep were an ideal form of early triple mower); caddie; and eventually pro/greenkeeper with stints as Club Steward thrown in as well. Another sideline was cutting the juniors' hair for them in the pro shop. You had to turn your hand to everything in those days.

"It seems that I've inherited the family role – that of custodian of Buxton & High Peak Golf Club. When I was growing up I didn't realise it would become a lifetime's work," joked Steve, who was given some time off to increasing his greenkeeping knowledge in other parts of the country before, almost inevitably, returning home.

And there is a fair chance that the dynasty will not end with Steve, as his 12 year-old son, Jonty, is already mad keen to join the family firm and helps his dad on the course whenever the opportunity arises. Steve also smiles when he says that the incoming Captain may cause him a few problems when he takes up the reins in December.

"He's my brother, Philip!"

Buxton & High Peak is very much a



community golf club edging right onto the edge of the town and split by the extraordinarily busy A6.

"I remember when we were kids that we just ambled across it. We rarely needed to stop for cars. Now at peak times we can be sitting on a machine for up to half an hour for a gap in the traffic to allow us to cross."

Steve started as a 16 year-old under his father at the club before moving to become Assistant Course Manager at Tewkesbury Park Golf and Country Club which was initially owned by Country Club Hotels but was bought by Marriot while he was there.

He then moved to Goodwood which was also owned by Marriott and worked there for just over a year before moving to Elsham, near Scunthorpe, where he spent five and a half good years at a "great golf club with some lovely people".

The lure of his home town was too strong though and Steve, who had retained his membership, was invited to take up the challenge.

"After my father left the course was managed by an ex-farmer, a super guy, but it would be fair to say the most sophisticated agronomic techniques weren't employed. He didn't have the experience or the knowledge to take the club forward, nor did he have the right people to support him in the club."

"A lot of the machinery was still the same kit my father had used and a lot of it was older than me,"

Steve found a course in need of some drastic work. "The club had invested in reports from several agronomists, including the STRI, and all had reached the same conclusion which had taken them back a bit. They needed investment in machinery, investment in buildings, investment in staff training.

“ There was an old Toro Mark 1 and the Certes hand mowers were at least 40 years old.

It was a working museum. ”



“A lot of the machinery was still the same kit my father had used and a lot of it was older than me,” recalled Steve.

“We had an old Land Rover which was used to trail a set of five Allen gang mowers. The view was that the Land Rover still worked so why the need to change it. There was an old Toro Mark 1 and the Certes hand mowers were at least 40 years old. It was a working museum.” Steve marked out a five year plan to remove thatch and solve the drainage problems. At its lowest ebb for six months of the year they were on temporary greens and the club was leaching members at an alarming rate.

“The plan wasn’t difficult to sell to the club because they’d hit rock bottom but I knew that due to the drastic nature of the work that needed to be done a lot of criticism would come our way.”

The first 18 months involved making sure the foundations were in place and that the equipment which would be expected to take the strain was safely tucked away in the maintenance facility.

The club has a basic irrigation system but as the local water is licensed to Perrier, the owner of Buxton Spring Water, they would be unable to drill a borehole even if they wanted to. The thought of irrigating a green with Perrier has quite a ring to it though!

“We didn’t have a top dressing machine and you can’t put on top dressing without one while we also invested heavily in aeration equipment.”

When they started, they did so with a vengeance.

“For the first three years we hollow tined every six weeks with heavy top dressing into the rootzone and scarified in between times. We also vertidraind three times a year,” said Steve, a close friend of another Buxton Boy, David Golding, of the GTC, who began his greenkeeping career working under his dad.

The golf season, because of the unusual nature of Buxton, is only really May to September so the membership had to be particularly tolerant. Last year the Met Office, who have a station in the town, recorded 64 inches of rain, while the highest village in England is just a few miles away.

“We used to have four months of snow every year but now it falls as rain. I remember being confined to barracks and working on odd jobs in the clubhouse for much of the year,” said Steve, adding that the Norton family, himself included, are skilled joiners providing much of the course furniture.

“Granddad Bill always said you should have more than one string to your bow.”

There was four and a half inches of thatch across the entire course and the par-3 8th green which used to be played over the aforementioned A6 had six and a half inches of thatch.



The Buxton team – Len Frith, Phil Riley, Steve Norton and Colin Ralpheson

“If you put your foot in it you just sunk. Underneath it was like a bale of straw it was so yellow.”

That green has been hollow tined on a four weekly cycle for four years and now can be walked on, even after rain, without leaving a foot print.

“It has created a bit of a buzz around the clubhouse and has help to prove that we do know what we’re doing,” said Steve, who explained that the old greens were of a clay bowl design ideal for winter only golf but which struggled when the game became a year round pursuit.

Other than the occasional break because of snow the membership have played on the main greens now constantly for 18 months and because of the success the club has been able to raise membership fees by £100 and direct the additional finance towards further on-course improvements.

“I’m indebted to the Chairman of Green, Drew Turner, who has taken on the brunt of acting as spokesman and being the buffer between us and the membership, while the Finance Chairman is a very forward thinking guy who has put in rolling programmes of investment.

Another issue was drainage and the team has tackled that with huge enthusiasm, drying out areas which have consistently sat in puddles and provided much improved playing conditions.

And all the work has been carried out in-house with the help of a neighbouring farmer who offers digging equipment in exchange for work on his garden.

“We had our latest recruit start just yesterday. Colin Ralpheson has now done – pause to look at the clock – 12 and a half hours with us, but the bulk of the work has been down by my First Assistant and Mechanic Len Frith, Phil Riley and myself.

“Len – who as we talked was getting to grips with a recently-installed Bernhard grinder - worked for my granddad as a kid divoting and then worked for my dad as well before joining ICI as an engineer. He returned to us 14 years ago after a spell with his own lawnmower



The suite of bunkers designed by Phil Riley



A set of steps built by Steve

company. He is one of the nicest guys and very good at what he does. He wants to retire but I won't let him. He keeps all the machinery going and has probably saved this club as much as £70,000 and his work goes on unseen, unrewarded and unthanked.

"Phil has just finished his Level 3 at Reaseheath College and he has now got the knowledge and skill to move anywhere but I wouldn't want him to go."

Phil, a 23 year-old rugby player, has also left his mark on the course with a suite of four greenside bunkers borne out of one enormous bunker which he designed and built with his two colleagues.

The trio have also worked hard on a tee levelling and replacement programme where they use a wooden grid to create levels for the rootzone and then remove the wood and replace with a soil and seed mix when the turf has knitted.

Steve places a great store in communication with his staff and membership and how important it is to be sociable.

"Greenkeeping is not exactly rocket science if you follow what our training and nature tells us, 90% of our job is learning to communicate, learning to get on with club members and listening to what they want. Egos do get in the way but if you are delivering what the membership wants it shouldn't be an issue," he said, as we tucked into a sponge cake which had been handed in to the team by one of the lady members.

"What the members want might not be what we want but we are in a consumer business and if the customer wants it, what's wrong with giving it to them?"

A well schooled golfer he used to play off 2 but now is 5. something he has spotted a change in the game as demonstrated by son Jonty.

"When I was a learning it was all about hitting it straight. If I hit it 20 yards off line I lost a ball so you had to hit it straight and we were all obsessed with getting our handicaps down. Your golfing prowess was gauged by your handicap. Now Jonty and his friends measure their ability by how far they hit the ball and they don't want a low handicap because they wouldn't win prizes!

"Golf has to change to reflect that and make golf accessible to youngsters – allow them to play in jeans and trainers."

It may be that it will be young Jonty Norton who, 25 years from now as Course Manager and the fourth generation Norton, will be sitting in his office talking about the changing face of the golf.



A newly built tee



The 8th green which had six and a half inches of thatch



Steve and Len built this fence on the edge of the course