



In Peak Condition

Scott MacCallum meets up with Pete Smith, who has taken to life at Cavendish Golf Club, in Derbyshire, like a duck to water





Buxton's Cavendish Golf Club, deep in the heart of the wonderful Peak District National Park, in Derbyshire, is bucking the trend by increasing its membership numbers over the last two years - by around 15% - while visiting societies and casual green fees are also on the up.

It would not be too much of an exaggeration to suggest that within the membership packs issued to those new recruits, information suggesting that wellies would be of more use than soft spikes at certain times of the year!

Cavendish may be one of the most beautiful golf courses to be found anywhere, but it is also extremely wet!

"You don't expect to get Buxton Spring Water in a place that's dry, do you?" joked Course Manager, Pete Smith, who moved to Derbyshire from the cosy south two years ago to take on the challenge of a Dr Alistair McKenzie-designed course which was in need of a bit of a boost.

"The national average rainfall is between 700 and 800 ml a year. Up here we generally get around 1400 ml, which makes it about

50% above average. Coupled with that we are built on a six inch layer of peat, which sits on top of the limestone and slows any drainage, Basically we sit on water."

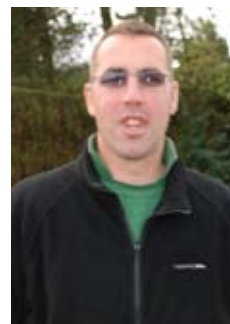
The night before my visit there had been half an inch of rain and when I arrived the course was puddling up.

"On other courses that sort of rain wouldn't have made an impact at all, but because of our soil structure and topography it is anything but an average situation," said Pete.

Not long after he started he and the Board walked out to the 14th, the course's only par-5, to look at the fairway, which was incredibly wet, and they asked him if he would drain it.

"I took one look at the soil profile, the underlying conditions, the natural fall of the site and the very flat fairway. Then I looked at the hill, one of the many the Peak District is named after, overlooking the fairway, and from which water runs on to the surface and sub surface. I told the committee that there was no point.

"To attempt to drain an entire site would be expensive and resources would be well and truly stretched, with very little end



Course Manager Pete Smith

BELOW: The Shelton System 25 after two weeks on the 6th green





ABOVE: The Course is set in fabulous Derbyshire Countryside

result, so my answer to the Board was that I'd rather work with what we'd got because, while we might be a little spongy and waterlogged, thanks to the limestone we are still firm underfoot."

Pete and his team are, however, working on improving the greens two of which have just had the Shelton System 25 installed.

"In 22 years as a greenkeeper and 10 as a Course Manager I've not seen a soil profile as saturated and heavy as that in our greens. After four dry weeks I took some of the soil and was able to squeeze it and it was still wringing with water, and this was despite an intensive vertidrain and topdressing programme over the last two years. Changing holes on this course is a real challenge as suction makes it incredibly difficult to pull the changer out.

"By the time we've pulled the hole changer out and grabbed the cup the entire hole has shrunk inwards and is smaller than the size of the cup. That happens all the time. It's not a thatch problem, it's a moisture in the ground problem – our thatch levels are good and our grass coverage and sward density is brilliant."

The new drainage system should

help to ensure the greens are given the best chance of remaining playable.

"Every half a metre we've gone down 30cm, laying a 25ml pipe into the bottom of each line and back filling with Lytag to the surface. We've also got two or three exit drains running across the greens. We've done the 4th and the 6th, finishing just two weeks ago, and they are already showing significant signs of drying out and the puddling is disappearing," explained Pete.

"It still means that we have a very heavy soil profile between the half metre spacings but it does mean water can soak away into these drains and then through our regular vertidrain and top dressing programme we can ameliorate the rest of the soil."

Remarkably despite appearing to be more suited to paddy fields than golf greens the grass has adapted well to its damp conditions.

"You can take cores out of our greens and see superb root development, it just proves that grass is highly adaptable to its environment and has made the most of living in a permanent perched water table.

"If the two newly drained

greens are a success the policy will be rolled out to the remaining 15 – there is one USGA green, the 9th, on the golf course, designed by member and respected golf course architect, Jonathan Gaunt.

"We will monitor them over the winter and if successful do the others in one go over next winter. Basic cost is around £2000 per green for the Shelton 25 whereas rebuilding to USGA spec would be around £30,000-£35,000 per green."

The McKenzie greens are a real feature of the course with subtle borrows and significant slopes.

"If we have them at any more than 8.5 people would walk off," said Pete.

One of the reasons why the club is attempting to make the course as playable as often as possible, are the demands of members now wanting to play year round golf.

"The older members always considered Cavendish to be a summer only golf course and any golf in the winter was seen as a bonus but younger and new members expect golf 365 days a year," he explained.

"Although we get increased revenue from more members and more play it also creates more

wear and tear and some of that revenue has to be used to keep the course open. If the new members can't play we won't retain their membership so we need to look at ways of trying to deal with the wet conditions"

With that in mind if it is recognised that the course is particularly wet, the members are happy if we open 13 holes, nine holes or even just six holes rather than close the course, just to allow some golf to be played.

"Since I've been here we aim to allow golfers to play on the main tees throughout the winter, and so long as golfers replace divots we allow them to play off the fairway without using fairway matting, and use main greens as often as possible. I think the members appreciate what we are trying to do," said Pete, who is often around the 120 plus members who play every Saturday - including the 13 hole events that are held in the winter.

Pete has been able to improve the presentation of the course despite having a full time staff of just three, including himself and three occasional staff, two of whom are purely available in the summer months.

"I'm very lucky to have a dedicated team of staff - Nick O'Meara, who is acting as my Deputy and who has been here nine years and our new trainee, and Mark Elliott.

"We also have Bob Turner, who is a member who we bring in when we need an extra pair of hands and for any special projects we've got going.

"Then there is Callum Hardy, and Tom Nadine, who are studying sports science at University and who work here during their summer holidays which coincides with our busy time."

Pete says he can run which such a small core of permanent staff because of the simple cutting regime.

"In the summer months we are able to cut all the playing surfaces in a single day, which with all the rain we get really helps keep the course well presented for those odd dry days."

Then there is the fact that the growing season is so short.

"Our fairway and rough mowers don't move for almost six months of the year!"

That said, Pete has simplified the cutting regime to make it more maintenance friendly,

"My first priority when I came here was to improve the quality of



ABOVE: The Greenkeeping Team

the playing surfaces and change cutting regimes and add definition to the course. We only have three major heights of cut - the greens; tees, fairways and collars are all cut to the same height, and then we are straight into semi rough. This has allowed us to increase definition and the golfers have started to enjoy the visual aspect of the course again while at the same time it simplifies our maintenance" said Pete, who moved north from what he affectionately calls, "Creepy Crawley" where he managed Selsdon Park GC, in Croydon.

Pete is very keen that the course blends into the stunning countryside and he has some interesting thoughts on the sustainable golf debate.

"We have 120 hectares of land within our boundaries and the idea that we should try and chase sustainability on just one hectare - the greens - doesn't work for me. I give members what they want on the greens and try to maintain the best quality surfaces, I will then try and be as sustainable as possible on the other 119 hectares. I can reduce my fertiliser input, grow areas of rough, put up bat and bird boxes, create wildlife corridors - we've got red deer on the course for the first time in years - and try and blend in with the environment which I think is true sustainability. But on one hectare of greens? What's the point."

He and his family have embraced their new life in Derbyshire and he has taken the

ribbing and endured being called "Peckham Pete" with good humour.

"People are so much more friendly here and, to be honest, I was fed up of dealing with water shortages so I moved somewhere where I will never have to worry about water shortages ever again," he said, with tongue firmly in cheek.

With the enthusiasm Pete shows for his course and his new life you can be pretty sure he won't be returning south for a while at least.

