

A RICH HISTORY AND OPTIMISTIC FUTURE

Scott MacCallum visited Hesketh Golf Club where the recently appointed Course Manager and his team are working hard to return the course to former glories.

Photograph by Alan Birch

FEATURE



Hesketh Golf Club, in Southport, has a rich history. It is regarded as the birth place of the English Golf Union, the initiative coming from a Hesketh Club Captain who went on to become the EGU's first President, while the Bentley brothers, Harry and Arnold, were among the most illustrious pair of brothers ever to play the amateur game.

Arnold won a rare golfing Olympic Gold Medal at the Berlin Olympics in 1936 in front of Adolf Hitler.

A fir tree, presented to Arnold at the time, and known as Hitler's Tree, was planted outside the Hesketh clubhouse where it still sits, despite regular overdoses of a certain naturally produced chemical, applied by members in its early years

While the history of Hesketh is on a par with any club in the country, in recent years, the golf course itself had slipped slightly from the heights it had reached and was in need of a boost.

That arrived in the shape of new Course Manager, Peter McVicar, who took over the reins in July 2007 and who has since made a big impact. Prior to his arrival in the North West Peter had

been Course Manager at the renowned Scottish links of Machrihanish.

"I spotted the advert for Hesketh in Greenkeeper International and looked the club up on the net. I also spoke to some people who had played the course and, having discussed it with my family, decided to apply."

Granted an interview, Peter arrived on the Monday evening for a Tuesday appointment and decided to take a quick look around the course at the earliest opportunity.

"I got stuck in the car park on the Monday evening because the barrier came down and I couldn't get out," recalled Peter with a smile.

It could have been taken as a bad omen but, on the other hand, perhaps he wasn't meant to leave.

"The interview was at 10am but I got here at 5.30am, went out onto the course, chatted with the boys at work and had a proper look at the holes around the clubhouse. They are amazing and I thought that I could definitely make an impression at Hesketh."

Fate was actually working in Peter's favour when he learned that some Hesketh members had

played Machrihanish the previous summer.

"They had had a great time and they asked me why wanted to come from Heaven to Hesketh? I told them that I thought I'd taken Machrihanish as far as I could and that I wanted a challenge. I told them that I felt I could return Hesketh to its former glory."

The job clinched, and having "Talked the Talk", Peter set about "Walking the Walk".

He was greatly impressed with the team he inherited describing them as "awesome", with all the skills required, but perhaps not the opportunity in the past to show just how talented they were.

"We started with the general untidiness of the course then worked on the shaping of the fairways. I don't like fairways that are straight up and down. I like to get a bit of definition in.

He also picked up a tip from architect, David McLay Kidd, who was a near neighbour of his in Machrihanish and which he introduced at the earliest opportunity.

"David suggested that I cross cut at Machrihanish as it lets you see every undulation of the fairway. I've brought that in here and while it adds about an hour and half to cutting time for all 18 holes



I think it's worth it. The golfers appreciate it because it shows that we're putting in the effort and working with dedication and passion," said Peter, whose first request to the club was for new hand mowers.

Since then the greens have all been hand cut and this has since been extended to the tees and approaches.

Peter involves his team – Deputy, Ken Critchley; David Weir; David Williams, Phil Alvey and Alex Mason – in the decision making processes that have resulted in moving the course on.

"We talk a lot at regular team meetings and have a lot of brain storming sessions in which everyone has an equal say."

Having made an immediate impression Peter and the team moved on to some medium and long term goals.

With the aim of introducing some more quality grasses to the course Peter and his team did a few demos of top dressers for the benefit of the committee.

"Previously it used to take a day to top dress 18 greens with a Cushman, shovels and a little drop spreader. We brushed the putting green,

then cut it, then top dressed it, overseeded it and rolled it again, all in the space of 10 minutes and that sold it to the committee. We got the Cyclone spreader, from Tycrop, and we can do all 18 greens in an hour and a half, which means we save a lot of time."

Hesketh will host two days of The Amateur Championship in 2011, while the club also hosted The Junior Open in the week of the Open Championship at Royal Birkdale last year.

"Padraig Harrington came along and was absolutely great with the kids spending a lot of time with them. It was superb publicity for the club."

As part of preparations for the Amateur the club has plans to improve its practice facilities, which will be of long term benefit to the club.

"At the moment we have a field with a green and a bunker but, in three phases over the next three years, we will build a raised tee half Astroturf and half turf with some targets to hit to. Phase Two is better bunkering with another chipping green while Phase Three will involved putting up some fences and fine tuning what we've done."

Peter is very keen to be approachable and

visible to the membership and another of the early initiatives was to have a "Meet the Greenkeeper" session.

"It was basically me sitting in the clubhouse – with my kilt on – answering whatever questions came up."

Around 200 members attended and Peter tackled all issues whether they be agronomic or, more specifically, what he had under his kilt!

"I make a point of coming into the clubhouse on a Saturday afternoon to chat with members and explain what we are trying to do. The best thing we get though is when one of our members calls us over and points out some fescue that they've found. It's obvious then that we are getting through to them.

"We do monthly reports for the members and started out with bullet points but we've moved on to bullet points plus a bit added on for those who wish to know more. It's a great club for passion.

"We've removed the 'Not beyond this point' white lines for trolleys and the members comply while the juniors are great at repairing pitchmarks," said Peter, who also has 24 artisans to assist him.



The Hesketh team with Peter, third from left

A bunker renovation programme has been put in place, which will see around 25 bunkers tackled each winter for the next four years and a rolling programme thereafter.

“Previously bunkers were built into the existing contouring which meant that some face into the rough and others out to sea. We will be building the bunkers and then shaping around them so that they face the hole.”

Peter was instrumental in the setting up of a Course Development Committee when he arrived involving Secretary Manager, Marytn Senior; Professional, Scott Astin; Club Chairman, Alan Tillbrook, and the Chairman of Green, one of the rare female Chairs in the country, Meegan Switzer, who was instrumental in bringing Peter to the Club.

“Meegan leaves the post at the end of this year (2008) but the job descriptions we wrote for the various positions includes an overlap for Chairmen of Green on the Course Development Committee of a year to improve continuity.

They are all good golfers so we are also looking at bringing in a not so good golfer for another opinion,” said Peter, adding that the new Course Policy Document was written with advice gleaned from the BIGGA Website, the EGU and St Andrews Links Trust.

“The first policy document I looked at was St Andrews’. It’s good to start at the top and that’s where I learned of a Course Development Committee.”

The Committee has already had a couple of course walks to assess the course and agree on potential changes.

Among those is to push some tees back, not for the regular members events but for the larger competitions.

“We have bunkers that the good golfers fly over but catch the regular handicapper.

“There are three pros in the shop and they are happy to hit as many balls off as many tees, or would-be tees, as I want, to see where they are landing. From one new tee 12 balls were hit and eight of them went in bunkers,” he revealed.

“It has been agreed that any major changes we must consult a designer. With smaller tweaks we will do them in-house or with the assistance of Stuart Ormondroyd, of the STRI.

While Peter has taken to working in the North West with aplomb his family have adapted just as

well to the change from the isolated Machrihanish area, where the nearest population centre was Glasgow.

“I was asked about this at the interview and I said that the nearest MacDonald’s was 130 miles away but that there here were three within a mile so we’d be alright,” said Peter, who has ensured that his two children are brought up as Aberdeen fans, although, as a special dispensation, they are allowed an English team as well.

With such a fair minded guy in charge Hesketh Golf Club can expect to have as glittering a future as it has a past.



Peter with Club Chairman Alan Tillbrook and Pro Scott Astin, part of the course development committee