





Pretty as a Picture

Scott MacCallum visits **Meon Valley**, the subject of last year's Photographic competition winning picture, and discovers a hotel golf complex with a members' club feel

Let's face it, we are all guilty of stereotyping. Scots are all tight-fisted; southerners are all softies; the Welsh all sing and are descended from coal miners, while the Irish all come up a bit short when it comes to grey matter. We all know it's nonsense, but the myth still gets perpetuated on a daily basis.

It also exists in golf. The accepted mantra is that members' clubs are invariably cosy and stuffy with visitors treated as a barely tolerated, but necessary, evil, while proprietary clubs and hotel courses on the other hand have wide fairways, short rough and pile as many people through as can humanly be accommodated.

We all know that while there is perhaps an element of truth in it there are many golf venues which don't fit into that stereotypical model.

One such is Marriott Meon Valley Golf & Country Club, in Southampton, which operates much more like a conventional golfing establishment than many traditional golf clubs and possesses 27 holes that are as interesting as they are challenging.

Attached to a superb, recently refurbished, four star hotel – the 18 hole Meon and excellent nine hole Valley – offer a great test for hotel guests, but the 700 Meon Valley members are lucky to have some great facilities and a golf course which is set up for enjoyment rather than purely speed.



“The last thing I would want is a park. I go with the theory that golf should be a walk through the countryside playing golf as you go. It shouldn’t be a quick whiz around a park where everything is mown at the same height and things are all tidy and trimmed,” said Course Manager, Phil Walker, who has been at Meon Valley for 14 years.

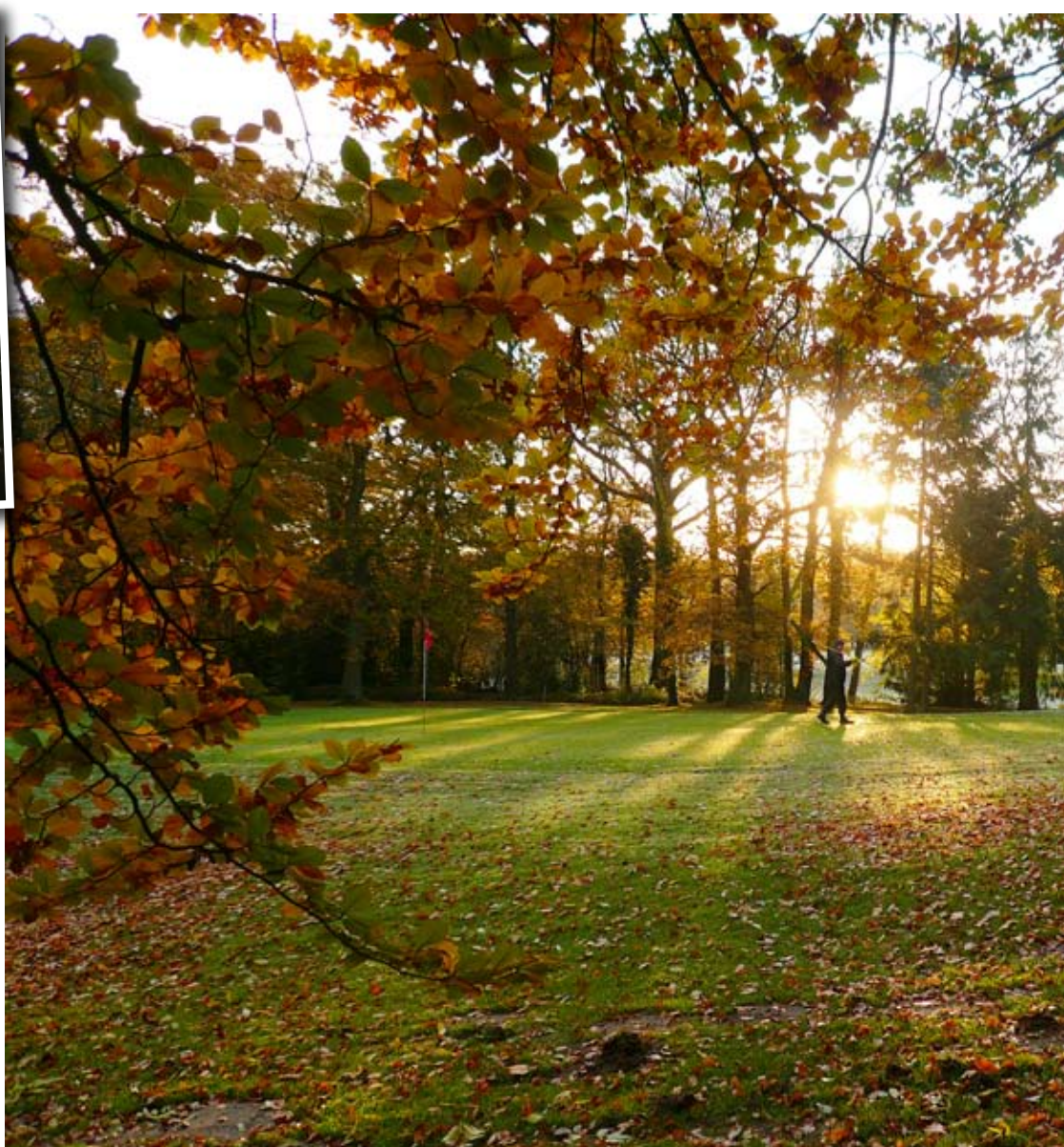
Outside of course furniture there is no corporate look to the Marriott golf venues on this side of the Atlantic and Phil and his fellow Course Managers are left to manage their courses in the appropriate manner for each one.

“There is a corporate logo with regard to flags, tee markers, signage etc but apart from that it’s entirely up to us how we set up our courses. Different courses require different styles of presentation and we are spread from Scotland (Dalmahoy) to South Wales (St Pierre), central England (Forest of Arden) and Ireland (Druids Glen). The Course Managers get together about once a year and have telephone conferencing now and again. In fact we had one yesterday to discuss Audubon.”

The Marriott Hotel Group has taken on the Audubon Environmental programme and is looking to have all of its UK golf venues certificated by the end of this year.

“We started at the beginning of this year so we haven’t got long to achieve it but that’s the Marriott way – throw everything at it and make it happen. In one way that’s good because it forces you to get stuck in and get it done otherwise it can sit on the back burner and just drift along,” explained Phil.

The American Audubon programme was adopted by Marriott because it too is an American company but it has seen Phil, and his fellow UK-based Marriott Course



Dean studied at Portsmouth University, two years full time BTEC National diploma in General Art and Design, and three years BA HONS in illustration, finishing up with a 2.2. He also studied GCSE Photography at Peter Symonds Sixth Form College.

A collection of his artwork is shown on the right.

Managers, having to adapt the paperwork to UK terminology.

“We have to convert everything to imperial measurements as the paperwork doesn’t recognise the metric system and one question asks how many acres of prairie we have. Easy, none! Tick the box,” joked Phil.

“Certification falls into sections – wildlife surveys, tree surveys, water conservation and testing and finally outreach education which involves inviting groups of adults or children onto the golf course to teach them about the environment and how best to manage it. The water surveys are possibly the most important as it give an indication of any nitrates or chemicals leaching into the streams or ponds.”

Much of what Audubon does records what is already being done at the club as routine maintenance but it is a great way of reinforcing the environmental message.

“When you start looking into it

you realise that so much of what we do is just the sort of thing that the ecologists are looking for anyway. If we are clearing woodland we’d automatically leave a log pile for animals or insects.”

Becoming certified involves significant investment for Marriott but the company sees it as a serious project and is committed to doing it properly.

“It’s not just a case of getting a little stamp every year but it will involve sending off documentation showing how we’ve reduced our pesticide usage and how we’ve developed areas of land to encourage wildlife or cut water loss through correctly set up sprinklers or repaired leaks. It will also mean keeping a log of wildlife spotted on the course.

“For instance we’ve planted some wild flowers down by the 17th pond on an area of scrubland that we’d cleared. That came about because we saw it as a project that could work towards Audubon. There



Works of Art

Dean paints almost every day, and can squeeze between four to six hours in a week day, and sometimes up to 12 hours a day at the weekend.

“Being a greenkeeper gives me plenty of free time to be creative. It also provides inspiration and material to fuel my paintings. I’ve also had one or two commissions from the golfers, and am planning to produce a collection of golf course photography in the form of a calendar. This should hopefully go down well with the members,” he explained.

Dean favours oil paints, oil pastels and oil bars, acrylics, and in the last couple of years he has embraced the new medium of digital painting.



“For me this is a step like the one artist took in the past, from egg tempera to oil paints. There is even the same stigma as before, people think because it is drawing on a computer it’s easy...”

This is the furthest from the truth, for starters the pen is harder to control, and the detail is as fine as a single haired brush, if you could get such a thing. Although it is faster to work, more time seems to be spent trying to achieve the finish required.”





was a cost in terms of seed and in preparing the ground but in the long term if it encourages bees and other wildlife it's got to be positive," explained Phil, who also explained that a lot of the on-going work at Meon included tee levelling bunker renovations and sleepered bank retention.

Phil is a self confessed poa fan and has found that by incorporating Primo Maxx into their management programme it is making a genuine improvement to turf quality.

"I'm quite happy to say that I grow Poa as it's one of the most resilient grasses I know. Yes, you get seed heads for a few weeks a year but with Primo the seed heads tend to shrink and we don't get any real problem with them while we get a dense sward all the way through the winter and as long as we apply a preventative strobilurin fungicide in the Autumn we suffer very little fusarium.

"With Primo we don't cut less we just take less grass off. This can be up to 50% which significant and the root mass is definitely improved. A lot of people cut one day and iron the next and we are going to try that as it cuts down the stress on the plant.

"I just think that Poa gets a very bad reputation and every one is afraid to say they've got it. I've managed it for nearly 25 years now and



Course Manager, Phil Walker, who has been at Meon Valley for 14 years.

PREVIOUS PAGE PHOTOS: Top left (inset), by the lake at night; main above, crunch deweying the 6th; and above right, the green by the misty pond.

MAIN ABOVE: The 17th at Fillamor

it's nothing to be afraid of. If you've got it work with it. I'm a firm believer in the maxim you've got what you've got so don't fight it and I believe that if you've got more than 50% poa there is no point in trying to get rid of it as I don't think you'll ever keep it out and you'll probably go mad trying.

"The worst thing is if you've got a mixture of poa and fescue bent. All these grasses grow at different speeds especially in the Spring. Then you've got problems."

The Meon Valley team is very experienced with more than half the guys having more than 15 years' service at the club and they are a talented bunch. Dean McMenemy won last year's BIGGA Photographic Competition with a stunning landscape of the course while, from their mess room up a spiral staircase in the top of an old barn, each breakfast involves some serious collective thinking.

"We do the Daily Mail quiz page every morning and if we get every question correct the prize is that we get half an hour off at the end of the day. It's happened once in nine years. It's the Master Quiz that kills us," said Phil.

Dean's success in the Photographic Competition created a real buzz among the team with many of his colleagues already taking

pictures for this year while there is also talk of a Meon Valley calendar to be produced by the team.

"Dean should really be an artist or a photographer but, because of his artistic flair he's a brilliant greenkeeper – he has a real eye for how things should be presented."

One of the big bonuses of being involved with a large corporate organisation is training and every Marriott employee receives 40 hours of training a year - more than a working week's worth.

"The difficulty we have is to make training relevant for greenkeepers but it is high quality training," explained Phil.

At this point, Dean stuck his head around the door to say he'd finished his job but that he'd noticed some areas of long grass around some of the trees and could he go out and strim them.

"See that. He cares about the golf course. He's spotted a job and thought I'll do that and it's not that he's picked a cushy job, he's going out strimming. That's not something you'd necessarily associate with a corporate environment but I don't think Meon is different from the other Marriott venues where they also have a lot of long service so, while it's not perfect, there must be something right with the Marriott way."

info

Height of Cut In Season:
4 mil 3 mil for major competitions
Out of Season: 5 mil

Fertiliser Regime
Start of year a granular feed at 18-0-36
Monthly liquid feed of seaweed and low N mixed with Primo Maxx
Winter High K feed