

An environmental haven



James Hutchinson examines some fungus

Scott MacCallum travelled to the north west coast to meet a man who is seeing some real rewards for his hard work



Fairhaven Golf Club, in Lytham St Annes, is one of the finest tests of golf in an area which is renowned for quality courses. With its unusual tree lined but links characteristics it is very much one of a kind, but nowadays it is forging an equally strong reputation for its environmental stewardship.

Peter Simpson is Course Manager but credit for much of the work that has been carried out on encouraging ecology on the course must go to his Assistant and Eco Co-ordinator, James Hutchinson, whose infectious enthusiasm has galvanised the entire club and seen him named as the Conservation Greenkeeper of the Year, as well as him closing in on a Sports Turf Science Degree, at Myerscough College.

But it was not always so and while James was always a conscientious and dedicated worker, he didn't

begin to move forward professionally until about five years ago, ironically, when the club first entered the Golf Environment competition.

"Peter knew I was interested in the environment and asked me to go round the course with Bob Taylor and Kelly Harman, of the STRI, as they assessed the course," recalled James.

"I spent a couple of days with them but was embarrassed that when they asked me questions I didn't know any of the answers. I felt completely out of my depth.

"I decided there and then that if I wanted to progress in greenkeeping, and ultimately get a course of my own, I'd have to do something about it."

That was very much the catalyst and to say that James has upped his game since would be very much an understatement and the work that has been done on the course – mostly in spare time after the

essential course management work has been carry out – is quite awe inspiring.

"Basically I started to improve my knowledge base by keeping in touch with the guys at the STRI and



A small wet area has been created to serve the local fauna.



“We have 17 different varieties of butterfly and we are delighted that the 73% of the 100 wildlife boxes we have erected in the last five years (many of them built by members of the team) were occupied this year, and up 1% on the year before”

James Hutchinson



tion as I could from the web and from books. I now have around 20 books, most of them about nature and golf course ecology but there are also some on pure greenkeeping.”

Having well and truly caught the education bug someone then told James that he could gain a degree by distance learning and this was something he kept in the back of his mind for around a year.

“I didn’t think I’d have the right criteria to do a degree, as I was lacking academic qualifications, but I did have 18 years in greenkeeping and what I did have was Accreditation for Prior Learning so when I got in touch with Myerscough they accepted me. I was over the moon and determined to give it my best shot,” said James, who has rigidly stuck to two hours of study every evening since and has been rewarded with results consistently over the 70% mark.

James received funding for his course from the Ransomes Jacobsen BIGGA Scholarship Fund while he has also been successful in winning an R&A Scholarship, covering the final two years of his course. He is hoping to graduate in June next year.

But while he has been putting in the hours at home in front of a computer screen James, with the full encouragement and support of Peter and the rest of the team at Fairhaven, has also ensured that the golf course is now alive with flora and fauna.

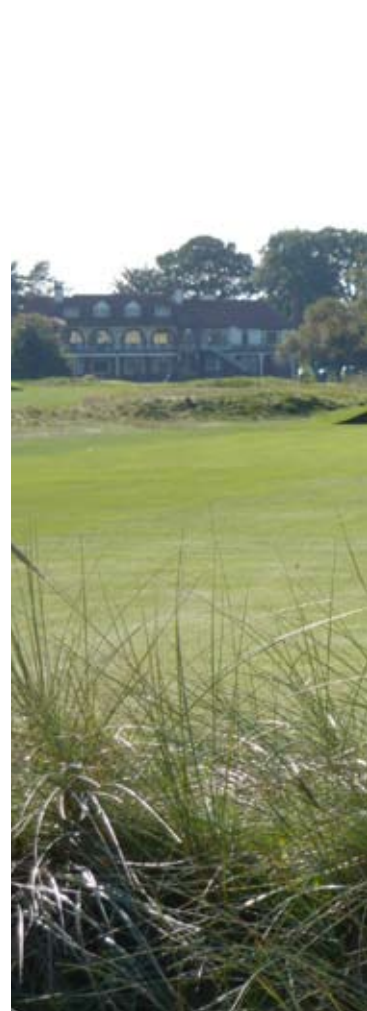
“If you had come to the course four or five years ago you would certainly have seen some wildlife but there is far, far more now. We have 17 different varieties of butterfly and we are delighted that the 73% of the 100 wildlife boxes we have erected in the last five years (many of them built by members of the team) were occupied this year, and up 1% on the year before,” he said, of the bat boxes, bee boxes, owl boxes, kestrel boxes and modified tennis balls on sticks aimed at encouraging Field Mice.

As a younger greenkeeper James didn’t push himself forward to achieve, believing that should be left to others and he actually left the profession for a couple of years around 1999 to set up his own gardening business.

“I used to do Peter’s garden for him and one day he said that one of his guys was leaving and did I want to come back. It had been driving me mad to be spending so much time on my own so my first words were ‘When can I start?’.”



The pond is part way through a three year clearance programme.



“We do most of the work after hours, staying behind in our own time or when we have a few hours left on a Friday afternoon after we’ve done everything for the weekend”

Peter Simpson

Enthusiasm bursts from every pore when James talks about the various projects being carried out on the course – a passion which carried over to his invitation to visit the course with a host of emails urging me to pay a visit.

“My aim has been to have something on every hole as well as many of the out of play areas and we have achieved that.”

Proof needed?

There is.

Creeping Willow encouragement; Heather regeneration; Woodland management – eco piles, standing timber and Rhododendron/Sycamore management; Composting of golf course waste; Wild flower Meadow creation; 100 wildlife boxes; Orchid encouragement with three types now on the course; Marram Grass introduction; Wetland recover project; Pond clearance of Canadian Pond Weed; Dune Slack development – the green staff removed all the turf by and then replaced it piece by piece; Gorse management – a five year rotation policy of coppicing down to 50-80

mil and the introduction of home grown 100-200 mil plants to the natural links areas of the course; Common Reed encouragement and finally those Field Mice habitats made from tennis balls.

James had received news of his Conservation Greenkeeper of the Year Award from the STRI Golf Environment Competition after his invitation to visit the course but before it had actually taken place, but, in truth, he had almost given up on winning this year.

“I had been told that we would receive news the week before so when Peter came flying down to me as I was on the 12th fairway with a letter from the STRI I wasn’t too hopeful. The Club had won Best Newcomer in ’07 and was Northern Winner in ’08 and ’09 and the envelope had contained a certificate.

This letter looked a bit thin but it did contain news – right at the very end – that I’d won the individual award,” said James, who can now look forward to at Study Trip to the United States, in the company of Colin Webber, whose course, Port-

more Golf Park, in Devon, won the top Award.

“We are all very proud of him and the great thing is that he’s got the other lads interested as well. It’s just snowballed and Jim has been the main instigator. Winning the prize has been a just reward for him,” said Peter, as we spoke after a course walk.

Conscious of the ever present potential criticism of spending too much time on the nature reserve element of the golf course and not enough on the playing areas Peter is keen to ensure that the environmental work is an “add on” rather than “alternative” to the regular course management.

“We do most of the work after hours, staying behind in our own time or when we have a few hours left on a Friday afternoon after we’ve done everything for the weekend. What would we do - tidy the sheds or do a couple of hours of this work?”

The cash prize that the club received for previous success in the competition has been ring fenced for environmental work and if they need to buy Marram grass the funds are already in place to do it.

The club is not standing still in the development of the golf course from a playability perspective either and it has recently been rewarded by the R&A with the World Junior Open to be held during the



A rivetted bunker



The redesign of the par-3 5th

week of the Royal Lytham Open in 2012.

“We knew we were in line for either a Final Qualifier or The World Junior Open and are absolutely delighted to have got this. It is a big event and some of the stars of tomorrow will be playing.”

Ahead of that they are currently involved in the redesign of the par-3 5th under the direction of golf course architect, Tom McKenzie.

“We are making the green more visible from the tee, but at the same time trying to keep the bunkers in play,” said Peter, whose team are doing the construction work in-house.

In keeping with ensuring a challenge for the modern day player with the modern day equipment the club’s plan in recent years has been to take the course over 7000 yards and it now stands at 7025 from the back tees.

“That’s the end of it. We are over 7000 yards so that will be the last of the winter alterations,” said Peter, who explained that the current description of the course is “Hybrid”.

“We used to be know as a tree lined links, or semi links – we’ve got revetted bunkers and most of the course is on sand – but the current name is Hybrid.”

With Fairhaven moving forward and becoming a haven for all sorts of wildlife there is one species that



INSET ABOVE: A box for catching wildlife, and a modified tennis ball on sticks aimed at encouraging Field Mice
RIGHT: The greenkeeping team

has made its home on the course which perhaps marks it out as different from most courses.

“We have nine ring-necked parakeet who live on the course and who we see quite regularly. They must have escaped from somewhere,” said Ames.

“They are quite aggressive to

the other birds, but we are a bit concerned about them becoming weaker through inter breeding.”

While those parakeets may have lost their way to have arrived at the North West seaside resort of Lytham St Annes the same can’t be said of James, who is now right on track and loving his job more than ever.

