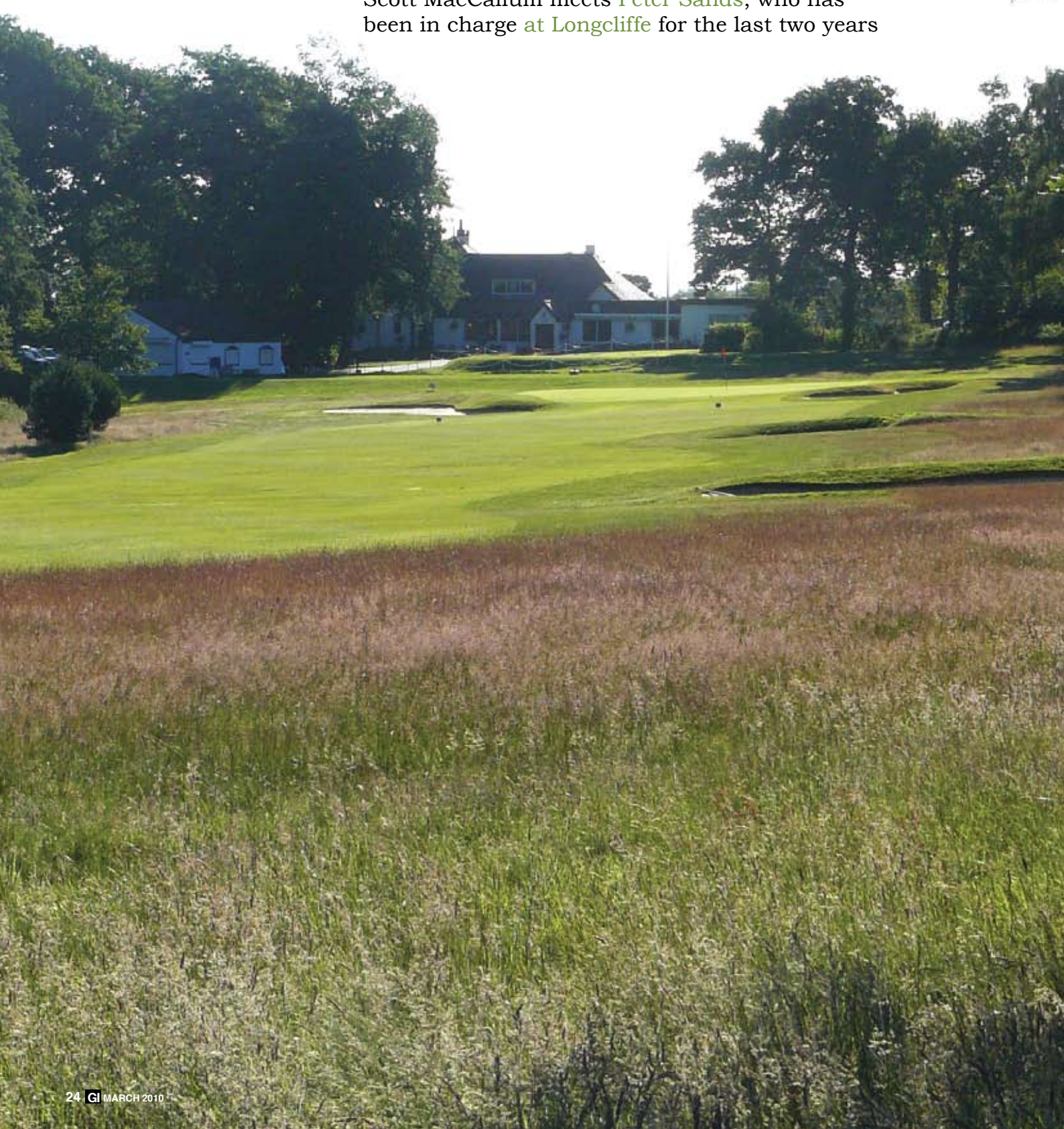


Making *a Mark*

Scott MacCallum meets **Peter Sands**, who has been in charge at **Longcliffe** for the last two years



Longcliffe Golf Club has long been regarded as one of the best in the east midlands and when the job of Course Manager was advertised in Greenkeeper International in 2008 it was an attractive proposition to a number of experienced greenkeepers

The man who got the job was Peter Sands, who had been Deputy Course Manager at West Hill Golf Club, in Surrey, and since taking up the reins two years ago he has brought his own stamp to what was already an excellent golf course.

Peter arrived on the retirement of Walter Cole, who had been an institution at Longcliffe for 46 years and been responsible for nurturing the careers of many young greenkeepers who went on to become Course Managers, while, at the same time, producing a fine course. It was never going to be easy for Peter to make his mark quickly.

But that's exactly what he did.

Having come from the Home Counties, where courses were kept on main greens and tees wherever possible Peter saw no reason to change his thinking just because he happened to have moved 130 miles north.

"The very first thing I did was to get rid of the winter greens and winter tee mats," said Peter, who started work in February 2008.

"I'd come from a course which

never had winter greens and not seen any real damage done by frost. If the greens were so bad that damage would be done the whole course would be shut," explained Peter.

"I still get questions from members about it now and I reassure them that it's ok to play on frosted greens. The only time there might be a problem would be like recently, after the snow, and the sudden thaw with movement on top. All the time that it is hard it's not going to cause any damage that wouldn't be irreparable in the spring."

The move has been warmly welcomed by the club, not least by the pro shop, because societies, who'd previously not book in the winter months because they knew Longcliffe played on temporary greens and tees, are returning and there is more revenue coming in.

Peter's success at interview could be traced to having identified similar issues to those of the experts the club had commissioned.

Ex-Woodhall Spa Course Manager and consultant, Peter Wisbey, sat on the Interview Panel and had views on a number of issues which matched those of the successful candidate, while Peter (Sands) ideas on bunkering also matched those of another specialist, who had looked at the course.

Prior to visiting Longcliffe the club had engaged architect, Simon





Gidman, to write a report and had identified the bunkering as something that needed to be improved.

“I was asked what I thought of the course and said that I thought it was great but that the bunkering could be improved upon,” said Peter, whose aim is to get the course into the Top 100 in the country.

“A lot of the bunkers were now in the wrong place and many were in need of a complete refurb and the club asked me how we should go about doing the work – how many phases etc.”

John Griesley was appointed to carry out the work and following discussions with Peter they decided on a three phase strategy with those holes where the improvements would be most dramatic coming first.”

That involved six holes and 16 bunkers, 12 of them brand new, and most of them fairway and the work, which took around eight weeks, was carried out in February and March of last year. The second phase, involving another six holes with more refurbishment work, was carried out in October of last year.

“The third phase has still to be fully agreed but we will hopefully also look at the 7th and 9th greens which are divided by only a ridge. It is one of the things that Longcliffe is known for but from a greenkeeping perspective it is tricky because there are so few pin placements on each green while health and safety is also an issue. I’ve looked at it and we can pull the 7th green back by about 30 yards and do the same with the tee so we wouldn’t lose any yardage on the hole. It would make the two holes more separate,” said Peter, who has also reintroduced rough the course.

“The course had been cut wall to wall but I’ve brought in some rough

and some carries, which hasn’t been fully appreciated by some of the lady members.”

One particularly prominent lady golfer who is a regular at the club is European Tour pro, and rising star, Melissa Reid, who uses Longcliffe’s practice facilities.

Since arriving he has also spent a lot of time examining the soil he had inherited and has worked closely with Aitkens and Scotts to improve the balance.

“I did some soil testing and put a fertiliser programme together. It just needed an extra boost as it was lacking some nutrient while I also introduced regular hollow-coring which was only done very occasionally previously,” said Peter, who revealed that the Ph had ranged from 5.5 to 6.7.

Having seen the benefits of Primo Maxx at West Hill Peter introduced it to his greens at Longcliffe.

“In the first three months of using it I found the sward definitely thickening up while I also noticed fewer grass clippings and the percentage of bents increasing,” he explained, while adding that he is planning to use Rescue in the rough to reduce the Yorkshire Fog.

He has been working to reduce the budget and has made significant savings by replacing some of the old machinery while was racking up hefty repairs costs each year.

“The first thing I bought was a Toro Pro Core but I mainly brought in Jacobsen. I’m a Jac person as I find I get value for money.

Peter spent 18 years at West Hill, 10 as Deputy working under Terry Huntley and latterly Iain Morrison, who was particularly encouraging when it came to Peter’s professional development.

“Ian pushed me to start by Higher National Certificate and made me



believe that I could be a Course Manager. I did day release at Merrist Wood and when I moved here I spoke with the College and they were more than happy for me to email them my work and go down once a month rather than every week.

Having gained the confidence to look for a Course Managership Peter spotted the Longcliffe job advertised in the magazine and immediately thought that being a heathland course and coming from a heathland course it would be worth applying. Two interviews later and the job was his.

Prior to starting he travelled north and held a half hour interview with each of the team to get to know strengths and weaknesses and explain some of ideas about moving forward.

“It helped to break the ice and made the actual start date less



Heights of Cut

Greens
3 mil summer
5 mil winter
Fairways
13 mil
Tees and Surrounds
12 mil



The current ridge between the 7th and 9th greens

intimidating for everyone concerned," he said.

He has an excellent relationship with this year's Longcliffe Captain, who also happens to be BIGGA Past Chairman, Richard Baker, who in his current role as Assessor for Brooksby College, assesses some of the Longcliffe staff.

"It is nice to know that someone who knows the job – and who was on the green staff her for a while – and understands the frustrations of being a Captain is in the role. He has been very supportive."

All in all Peter has thoroughly enjoyed the experience of being in charge and admits that he has achieved more in his first two years than he had anticipated

"Such progress was only possible because they are such a good bunch of guys here who work extremely hard."



Course Manager, Peter Sands



Longcliffe Club Captain

Richard Barker was BIGGA Chairman in 2002 and in January he became the fifth Barker to hold the position of Captain of Longcliffe Golf Club – his father and grandfather and two grandmothers. His father and grandfather have also been Club Presidents.

Richard drove into office, together with the Lady Captain, in suitably elegant attire on January 1, having arrived in a Bentley.

"It was a super occasion and I was delighted that my tee shot was fairly decent," said the 5 handicapper.

Richard has deliberately not got involved with the course management side of the club but has nothing but praise for the direction the club is going in.

"Since Pete was appointed the club has disbanded the Green Committee and been replaced by a Green Liaison Officer. As a former Course Manager who had 10 Chairmen of Green in 13 and a half years I think this is a very good move."

He does see some similarities between his Club Captaincy and his BIGGA Chairmanship.

"You are a figurehead at both. With BIGGA it is not your role to make changes – you are there as the figurehead for the Association for that year, and it's the same at the golf club. I'm not here to plant trees or fill in bunkers, I'm here to support the members and be a figurehead for the golf club," he explained.