

Not so common

That it is called *Hankley Common Golf Club* is a bit of a misnomer. It is one of the finest examples of a heathland course in the country, and Scott MacCallum discovers, as a golf course, it is anything but common



Heathland Splendour on the 6th hole



Located deep in the heart of Surrey, Hankley Common GC has a great feeling of space. This is not surprising as the club owns 860 acres, leasing a large proportion of it out to the Ministry of Defence for training purposes. An extensive woodland management programme also started a number of years ago, which opened the course up again after the pine and birch left its mark.

The programme was hugely successful and led to the club winning BIGGA's Golf Environment Competition in 1997, but the work that has gone on to maintaining the heathland is equally impressive.

At the forefront is Course Manager, Gareth Roberts, a man with mountaineering and photography, as well as an immaculately maintained golf course, on a very full CV.

Gareth had recently joined then Course Manager, Ian McMillan, when the decision was taken to return the course to its heathland roots.

"The course was turning into a tree lined course with a lot of canopy and a lot of shade.

"We'd done some thinning of blocks of pine, regenerated pine and birch, which were so dense you couldn't see through to the next hole," explained Gareth.

Then, in the company of the then Chairman of Green, Peter Green, Ian and Gareth had a meeting on top of Yagden Hill, which overlooks the course, when the decision to really grasp the nettle was taken.

"Peter, who had great vision, said how great it would be if we could clear all the trees and show off the course and from there the wheels were put in motion," he recalled.

The plan was pushed through the various committees fairly quickly and, about six months after the meeting on the hill, contactors came in and the work began.

"We brought in local contractor, John Thorne and his crew, and they took down all the pine and birch and, in all honesty, a lot of rubbish over an area of around 22 hectares, but in doing so we left a screen of trees of around 25 metres deep while the main work was going on," he explained, adding that the work

began in November '96 and was completed the following March.

"There was a committee meeting on Sunday evening and Ian got the call to say we could start removing the screen and, at 6am on the Monday, we started work, dropping all the trees one after another," said Gareth, adding that it did get quite contentious for some members.

"One came to see me in an extremely angry state while I was cutting and asked if I was going all the way up to the corner of the 4th. I didn't have the heart to tell him I was going up the 5th and 6th as well.

"That member was good enough to come back later and apologise.

"We knew there was a viable seed bed within these areas but we also added heather seed/brashings. It was eight months before we saw signs of seedlings coming through, but once they started, the areas exploded with new growth"

Gareth Roberts

He said that now that the trees had gone he could see what Hankley was all about," he said.

The whole process hadn't cost the club a penny as grants from English Nature were available at the time and they were also able to sell the timber.

With such an immediate and dramatic change to the golf course the team did have some concerns that they may have gone too far.

"When we had the fires burning it was something out of the Battle of the Somme and we did think, 'Have we done too much here?'

"We knew there was a viable seed bed within these areas but we also added heather seed/brashings back into these areas. We still had our fingers crossed though. It was eight months on before we saw any real signs of the seedlings coming through but once they started the areas exploded with new growth.

"Some areas were stripped and seeded, some we did by just removing the litter layer and others we added brashings and incorporated it into the litter layer with a tooth bar. The seeded areas came first



Gareth Roberts,
Course Manager

but four years later all the areas looked exactly the same."

Having seen the benefits of all their work, keeping heathland, always in transitional state, is never easy but Hankley Common brought in extra help to ensure saplings were not able to encroach.

"After the heather restoration we actually got in four Old English White cattle to keep the saplings down. They belonged to Surrey Heathland Management Project which also paid for the electric fence round the five hectare plot in which they grazed; all we were required to do was make sure they had sufficient water."

The policy came to an end with the advent of Foot and Mouth, but



Collection of stunning photography from Gareth Roberts, showing MAIN ABOVE: 10th hole; LEFT: Colourful view from the 12th to 15th holes; INSET ABOVE: 15th and 16th holes



The 8th green

the cattle definitely proved to be the best method to keep the land free from tree samplings.

“Without the cattle we have to employ contractors, or use our staff to physically remove the samples and it can take a large part of the budget.

“That’s why we are looking at bringing the cattle back again. The members really liked having them about.”

The other projects which have kept Gareth and the team busy in recent years are one of course lengthening and bunker modernisation.

“We had the Open Qualifier for 14 years up until ‘99 but when it moved to Hindhead we started to look at the length of our course – 6400 yards – and how it compared to those courses around us – the likes of Sunningdale, Walton Heath and Wentworth, who had all put in new Championship tees.”

It was a slow process as they had to work with English Nature, as the course is a SSSI, SPA, AOC and AOB, but they received a lot of help from Dr Keith Duff.

“We did the eight tees over a two year period taking it up to 6700 then we put in a new tee on the 3rd for the British Boys’ Home Internationals in 2009, which turned a short par-4 into a long dogleg par-4.

“With approval for another new

tee on the 11th just approved it will lengthen the course to around 6800 yards which we consider to be about right.”

While building the new 3rd tee they uncovered two old ponds, which a local historian informed us, had been built in the 17th century by Monks who kept fish for the Duke of Winchester’s banquets when staying at Farnham Castle. In effect it was an early fish farm.

“We would have liked to incorporate the ponds into the hole but Natural England said it wanted the land left the way we had found it so it is a very natural wet area around the tee which is accessed by a bridge.”

With the lengthening all but achieved Gareth and the team are turning their attention to the bunkering some of which have become obsolete due to the advancement in ball and club development and also the player’s fitness.

“We are looking at making the golfer think and not just pull out his driver and smash it. We want him to think about clearing a bunker or laying up with a 3-wood or rescue club.”

Gareth designs all the new bunkers and tees himself, providing the committee with photographic impressions of what the new bunker or tee will look like, and how it will fit into the hole, produced

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RIGHT and BELOW: part of the bunker renovation programme





on a computer with a paintshop programme.

Among the other interesting elements of Hankley Common is the hibernaculum, which they have built to provide a winter hibernation for snakes with the club acting as home to the complete set of British snakes; the on-site borrow pit, complete with digger, from which the club can provide all its own construction materials; 10 bee hives and the Atlantic Wall which was a training facility for the British Army in the Second World War so they could prepare to breach enemy barricades.

All of which offers Gareth a wonderful opportunity to indulge his passion for photography, a hobby which led to him winning the 2010 BIGGA Golf Photography Competition, sponsored by Syngenta.

"I've got a Canon 350D with various lenses as well as a little 14 megapixel Fujifilm JX, which I carry around with me so if I see a good opportunity I can grab it," said Gareth, who has also been placed in the competition in previous years.

His camera was also part of his essential luggage when he climbed Kilimanjaro in February with three friends in aid of local charity Help Autistic Children.

"We were all 50 or about to become 50 and decided we needed

a bigger challenge, so over a pint we decided to take on the climb. We covered 100km, walking eight hours a day for eight days, often over very difficult terrain and changes in altitude and reached the summit on morning of February 18.

"In the past year we have raised over £50,000 through two golf days, a dance and the climb, and over the 9 years since we started the charity golf day, played at Hankley we have raised £100,000, and I'd like to thank the many companies within our industry who have donated and helped the cause."

Back at Hankley, sitting in his office, Gareth still glows with pride at the achievement but when he looks out of the door he should be more proud of what he and his team have achieved on a far from common golf course.

BELOW: A new bunker looks the part
ABOVE RIGHT: View from the ridge
RIGHT: The Greenkeeping team

