

Back to the future

Scott MacCallum visits Moortown Golf Club, which hosted the first Ryder Cup match on this side of the Atlantic, and discovers a restoration project which is returning the course to its best

Six months from now the world of sport will have turned its attention away from the Olympics and will be focussed firmly on Medinah Country Club, in Chicago, and the Ryder Cup. Golf fans, general sports fans, even non sports fans, will be kept enthralled as fortunes sway throughout the three days and 28 matches, but among the most interested observers will be the members of Moortown Golf Club which played host to the first Ryder Cup on this side of the Atlantic in 1929.

The razzmatazz which surrounds the most recent playings of the Ryder Cup wasn't quite the same at Moortown in Leeds, West Yorkshire, that May, but golfing aficionados of the time would have been extremely impressed that the American team containing such legendary figures as Gene Sarazen, Walter Hagen, Horton Smith and Leo Diegel was beaten 7-5 to level the series at one all. The British team containing, among others Henry Cotton, Abe Mitchell, George Duncan and the Whitcombe brothers, came from 2.5 – 1.5 down in the Foursomes to win the Singles 5.5 to 2.5.

If, prior to settling down in front of the TV to watch the latest chapter in the Ryder Cup saga, the Moortown members decide to play a few holes they will do so on a course which has been modified and modernised, yet returned to the style created by Leeds Doctor, Alistair MacKenzie, who honed his skills in the UK and Australia before heading to the US and designing Augusta National and Cyprus Point.

The Club has worked closely with architect Ken Moodie, a man

who has studied MacKenzie thoroughly - travelling far and wide to experience golf courses first hand and reading everything the great man wrote on the subject of golf course design. He has also worked at other MacKenzie courses including Moortown's near neighbour, Alwoodley, putting that knowledge to good use.

Ken was originally brought in by Moortown in 2004, along with namesake, former Ryder Cup player and now BBC television commentator, Ken Brown, and woodland management expert, John Nicholson, with the brief of improving the challenge for the better golfer. Over time that remit has expanded and the current work includes an extensive bunker renovation and the remodelling of

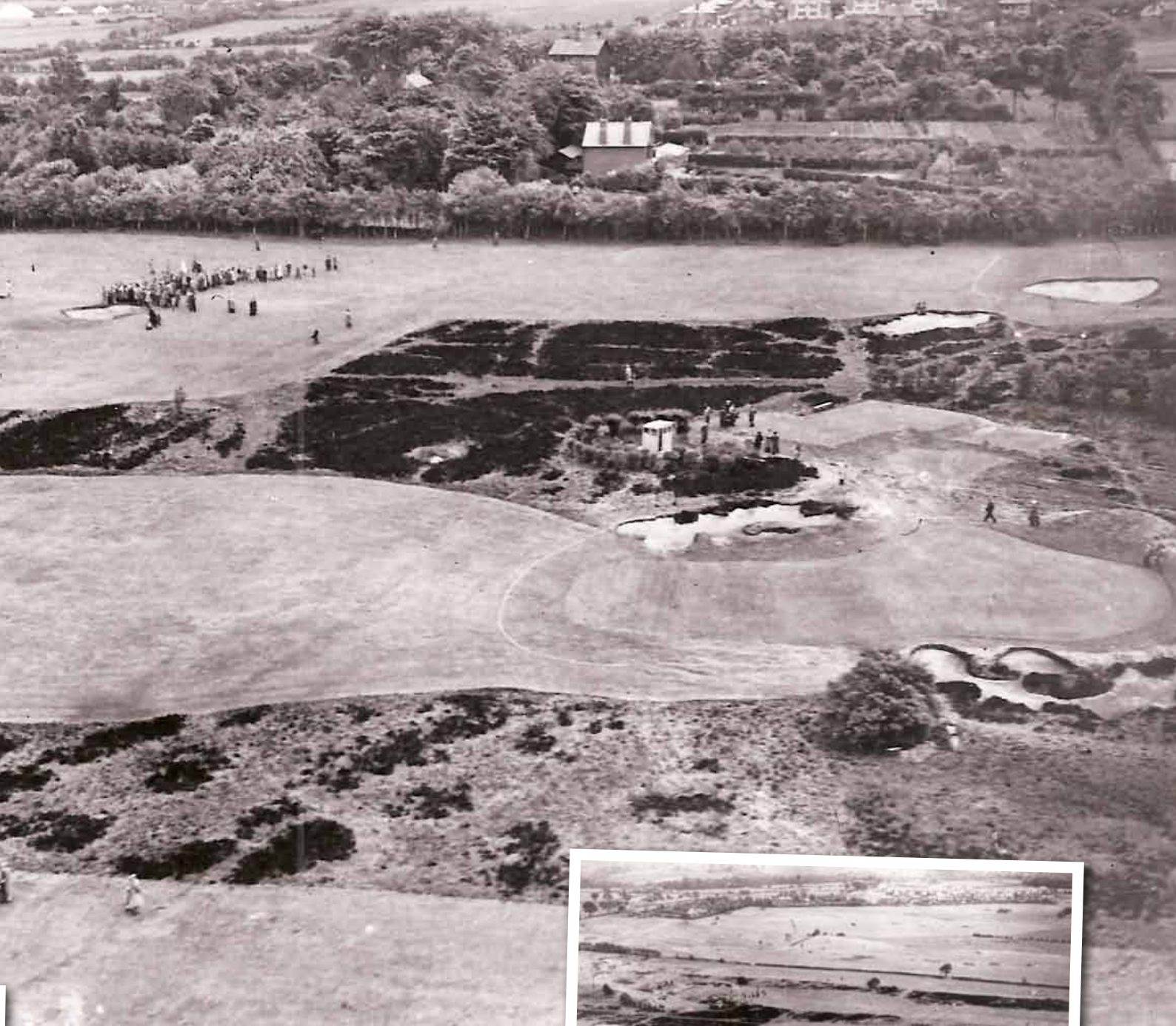


MAIN IMAGE RIGHT: 1937 Aerial Shot of Green's Nursery at the back of the 9th and 11th Greens with 13th fairway in the foreground

The Ryder Cup 1929, with Leo Diegel (BELOW) and Walter Hagen (INSET) driving from the 9th tee

“In war times, I don't think that the course would have changed much since MacKenzie last visited for the Ryder Cup in 1929”
Ken Moodie, Architect





two holes – the 6th and 7th – which will be concluded this spring.

“The impetus for the more recent work coincided with the arrival of Course Manager, Steve Robinson, and some key members of the Moortown Committee visiting other MacKenzie courses, including Cypress Point and Pasatiempo Golf Club, in California.

“They have seen the restoration work that has been done on those courses, as have I, and we wanted to do the same with Moortown,” explained Ken.

Mackenzie styling includes very distinctive longer noses on bunkers and much more intricate and interesting shapes, and the work has been carried out in-house with the assistance of a freelance shaper ensuring that Ken’s plans make the transition from paper to play.

The results so far are stunning.

As a starting point Ken had acquired a 1948 aerial photograph



INSET ABOVE: The Ryder Cup 1929, Scoreboard after the first day, and Ryder Cup Teams (RIGHT)



MAIN ABOVE: 1937 Aerial Shot of Green’s Nursery at the back of the 9th and 11th Greens with 13th fairway in foreground

INSET ABOVE RIGHT: 1937: The Moor Holes seen from above Green’s Nursery



of the golf course which had been taken by the RAF when they flew the country after the war.

"I don't think that the course would have changed much from when MacKenzie had last visited for the Ryder Cup in '29 to then, so we could be fairly sure that it was close to his original design," he explained.

Steve arrived at the club five years ago from Blackmoor, in Hampshire, where he had managed a similar renovation programme.

"After the War, to cut down on costs, many bunkers were filled in and we earmarked where many of these were," explained Steve, who also added that there were some large "waste area" bunkers for which it would have been a step to far to re-produce, while others were in areas which would no longer be in play.

"Since I started in 2007 we've filled in four bunkers and built 29. We've gone from 66 to 91," he revealed.

Steve and the club took the decision that they would undertake the bunker rebuilding work in-house aided by a locally based freelance shaper.

"We felt that given our particular situation with peat subsoil and our weather conditions that it was better to employ a freelance shaper who I could call on, once I've checked the weather forecast for the following day, rather than being charged for big plant and men not being able to work because the conditions don't allow it, which is a downside of employing an outside contractor," said Steve, who added that his team were doing a superb job and that their skills levels were rising all the time.

"It's not purely the cost, it's the damage that can be incurred when you feel obliged to let the work go ahead rather than have men and machines sitting idle."

The outcome has been that the team has done a great deal of the work by hand which has been very

Mackenzie styling includes very distinctive longer noses on bunkers and much more intricate and interesting shapes, ensuring that Ken Moodie's plans make the transition from paper to play

much in keeping with the MacKenzie style and it has meant that skills have developed.

They have also derived great satisfaction from beginning work on what would be a reinstated bunker, which Ken had sited using evidence from the aerial photograph, and discovering sand which had been there since the days of the original bunker.

"It's a bit like archaeology - Time Team stuff," said Ken, who is on site at least once a week during the project.

The Moortown soil structure has caused them a few issues however.

The 11th bunker as it used to be (LEFT) and how it is now (BELOW)



Mackenzie's Bunker (11th hole)





MacKenzie's Mound (12th hole)

"We are built on peat and we would have situations where the whole base of a bunker would be on the move," explained Steve.

"We would dig out a bunker but if it rained between Ken's visits it meant that the team had to wade into bunkers, which resembled duck ponds, to dig them out. I've got pictures of the guys in wellies and waterproof clothing taking bucket-fuls of what looks like peat soup out and decanting it into Pro Gators. It was stagnant horrible stuff.

"If Ken said he wanted it another four inches deeper we'd then need to go down that, plus an extra four or five inches to accommodate the several inches of angular 25mm-40mm stone which we'd discovered was the best way to firm up the bunker," said Steve.

Ken wasn't unsympathetic, however, and worked with both the land and the crew to find solutions.

"We compromised on some of the bunker depths and built up the banks a bit higher instead. What we are trying to do has got to be achievable and you have to create something that is going to work in the long term. I'm sure MacKenzie



MAIN ABOVE: The 12th bunker and **INSET ABOVE:** How it used to be

OTHERS: The Moortown staff carrying out work on bunkers beside the 6th green



would have done the same,” said Ken.

Part of the project is the re-designing of the 6th and 7th holes, which have long been recognised as the weakest on the course. They had been a late addition in the late 80s and early 90s, following boundary issues and the removal of other holes on the edge of the course, but restrictions in place at the time meant there was a limit to what could be achieved by the replacements.

John Nicholson has been instrumental in ensuring that the work required to create the new holes is in keeping with the heathland/moorland nature of the rest of the course while at the same time conforming to Forestry Commission demands.

The new holes will benefit from the removal of trees and the introduction of heather which will open up the holes in keeping with the other 16. The new bunkering will also blend in with the others.

Indeed, a couple of days earlier a beech tree had been removed from the side of the 7th green and replaced with wonderful new bunker.

“The club acquired a felling

licence last year and we work closely with the Forestry Commission to ensure that they are comfortable with everything that is being done,” explained John, who also has some interesting views of gorse.

“The reason we’ve got gorse on these courses is that it was introduced in the Middle Ages as fodder for livestock. Women and children collected it in the summer and made it into a rich porridge for their animals. It was man-made and imported from Spain and it has become very invasive and is now probably the biggest danger, along with trees, to the heathland/moorland environment,” he explained, adding that they had already taken out a lot of gorse at Moortown.

When assessing a site John considers the agronomic, strategic and the ecological elements but there is another issue which takes precedence.

“The genius loci – the spirit of the place – is what you’ve got to assess on day one. You’ve got to take on board that whatever we do has to be in keeping with the landscape.”

As we spoke the construction work was around 50% completed but Steve was well aware that it would take time for the results of



INSET BELOW: The 7th (before) and MAIN RIGHT: the 7th as a photomontage for the new design, being held up by Ken Moodie (MAIN BELOW)

much of what has been done to come through.

“Members do appreciate that trees can have a negative impact on keeping and introducing heather, but they also think that once the trees have been removed the heather will come back on its own.

“They don’t always realise that the tree removal is only the first stage and that it still requires work to bring back the heather. We scrape back the soil to expose dormant heather seed, some of which have been buried for 80 years.

“You can be looking at a mini-



“After visiting MacKenzie courses, Cypress Point and Pasatiempo Golf Club, in California, and seeing the restoration work that has been done on those courses, we wanted to do the same with Moortown”

Ken Moodie, Architect (left) who is remodelling the 7th hole (as shown)



mum of two to three years before you see results. It's not like growing grass," said Steve, who has learned to highlight out of play areas for the initial plots.

"If you choose areas in play which are then GUR for a long period of time you will get members coming up to you in 18 months saying, 'It's still not happening, forget it. It's not going to work,'" said Steve, who carries the confidence of knowing that similar work at Blackmoor produced the results and that patience is rewarded.

So what does the third man in the Ken Moodie, John Nicholson, Ken Brown partnership think.

As the only one to have actually played in a Ryder Cup Ken brings a professional golfer's eye to a project, and the experience of having broadcast from 100s of the world's finest golf courses.

"There are three ways of undertaking a project – restoration, renovation or revolution – but by far the best approach is restoration," said Ken, who was key in determining the position of the bunkers on the two redesigned holes.

That is a task which is not as straightforward as the average golfer may believe as Ken is very aware that the one piece of kit not possessed by any golfer or archi-

tect, but which would make life much easier, is a crystal ball.

"You have to look ahead and anticipate how far the ball might be travelling in 20, even 50, years time but that will be determined by a combination of technology and regulation, and really no-one can know for sure.

What we do know is that the tees at many clubs have been pushed right back as far as they can go, but if we were to plan for today, bunkers could be in the wrong place tomorrow and we have to do what is best in the long term interests of the golf course."

We often come across situations where golf club members have



John Nicholson



Steve Robinson,
BIGGA Member for 18 years

made decisions on the golf course and while a lot of them are good ideas, it can be more haphazard than bringing in professionals, who can take all considerations on board," explained Ken.

With its rich heritage and unique link with the Ryder Cup the Moortown members have taken the decision to embrace the professional advice they have been given.

Those interested in all things Ryder Cup, who choose to visit Moortown in this year of the latest match, will receive a warm welcome as well as a wonderful opportunity to play an updated version of the course which faced Cotton, Duncan, Sarazen and Hagen.



Moortown GC Clubhouse