

Keeping heather on course

For West Hill Course Manager, Ben Edwards, heather regeneration is a passion and golf greenkeeping a way of life, as MIKE BEARDALL reports

BEN EDWARDS is one of those individuals you immediately empathise with as a sportsturf professional.

As Course Manager at West Hill Golf Club, a Surrey heathland course near Woking, he has very rigid criteria for maintaining the course “to the very highest standards possible.”

At the age of only 31 he has certainly fast-tracked in greenkeeping, becoming a course manager when he was only 23 at Sand Martins Golf Club in Berkshire.

West Hill, an 18-hole course founded in 1909, is kept looking incredibly smart. “It has to be at its best, as a good advertisement for the club and for the greenkeeping staff,” says Ben, who has been at the club for a year and a half.

His current demanding job is a far cry from his original plan as a teenager to join his father in his printing company in London.

“After three hours of driving every day I just decided there had to be more to life,” says Ben, who now lives only 20 minutes away from work at Binfield in Berkshire.

“I went off to America at 18 to work with a friend running a pool-cleaning business and started playing golf most days. That’s when I developed a deep affection for the world of golf.

“When I came back to Britain I saw a job advertised for a trainee

greenkeeper at Sand Martins Golf Club and applied for it. I have never looked back.

“After 18 months I was made deputy course manager and at 23 became course manager. I know I was young but I took it very seriously and went on training courses at Merrist Wood College in Surrey and joined BIGGA. I was fortunate to be given the opportunity at such a young age and owe a great deal to Andrew Hall, the owner of Sand Martins Golf Club.

“I think I have only missed one Harrogate show in all that time and I have been to the US shows for the last six.”

West Hill Golf Club is a typical Surrey heathland course with the lucky advantage, in times of drought, of having two boreholes from which the club is allowed to extract water for irrigation.

“The Environment Agency simply asked us to cut down a little during the drought period,” says Ben, who says the club is planning to build a reservoir to further help with irrigation and sensible water use.

A sprinkler system is controlled from a central computer which Ben can operate from his mobile phone, using data supplied from the on-course weather station.

The course is on typical clay-sand for the area and, ironically, suffers from wet greens which Ben is tackling through a programme





of severe scarification and double coring. This is to make the greens playable the whole year round.

“We used a Koro on the greens and were quite amazed at the amount of thatch we lifted,” he says. “The greens are of original construction, but we are gradually going to introduce more sand to change the profile.”

With 82 bunkers on the course, most remodelled about 12 years ago, Ben is keen that they retain the look and shape suitable for a heathland course.

But his major work is on heather regeneration, which has been paying dividends. Vast swathes of vanishing heather have been revived through a process of rotavating, scarifying and turfcutting to bring heather seeds to the surface.

The main problem with heather is that if it spends any length of time under leaves it will die off as the leaves release nutrients – which heather hates.

“We spend a great deal of our time from autumn to spring clearing leaves from the heather with blowers,” says Ben. “Because we are surrounded by trees we also do a lot of thinning in the woodland, removing as many of the oaks and silver birches as possible to reduce leaf drop damage to the heather.”

This thinning also promotes air movement across the course and helps to allow light through

to greens and other areas of the course.

“This area was once called New Copse,” says Ben, “so it is not surprising that we have good tree coverage. They do act as a wind-break and certainly add to the look of the course.”

West Hill is keen to encourage wildlife on the course and in the woodland there are owl boxes, with some tawny owls currently nesting. Hawks and deer are regular visitors and the diverse habitats encourage butterflies and smaller birds.

The 450 members of West Hill are anxious to keep the heather regenerating. “It is the one thing that crops up in most conversations, because some of the members have been here for many years and have seen the heather go through various stages,” says Ben. “When it is all in flower it is a beautiful purple that looks spectacular against the mown grass areas.”

Ben has eight staff, including a mechanic, and his deputy, Matt Foster, was also previously at Sand Martins. “He is also my best friend, which helps when you are in the same profession,” he says.

“We have a very young staff here, all members of BIGGA, some of whom have very good single figure handicaps and our latest recruit, who’s only 20, plays off three.

“I don’t play as much as I should do but my handicap is about 16 – I



play football three times a week, but when my legs tell me to stop I will certainly play more golf. I really believe you have to play golf to appreciate what a golf course is all about.

“I know there are many greenkeepers who don’t play golf, and that’s understandable – but golfers who are greenkeepers look at the course from a different perspective.”

Ben believes that golf is all about

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people. “This is one of the nicest sports to work in and I have a very good relationship with the members and the staff,” says Ben.

Chairman of the greens is David Hargreaves, who has been a member of West Hill for about 30 years. “We have a major meeting about twice a year to make a plan of action,” says Ben. “But David and the club secretary, Gina Rivett, rely on my experience to keep the course running smoothly.

“This is an incredibly busy club



BELOW: The team...

Back row: Richard Kuban, Jack Cleaver, Adam Mortimer, Matt Foster, Ben Edwards

Front: Simon Bonner, Sean Bullock and Honey the dog. Missing team members are David Alexander and Adam Wicks



and we host so many society events that there is never a week when there is not a tournament of some sort.

“Our biggest event of the year is a famous father-and-son tournament which takes the best part of a week and has been running since the Thirties, with 156 pairs starting off on the first day.”

West Hill has a strong artisan membership – members who help with divotting and tidying.

Ben is not short of equipment at West Hill having a fleet of Toro mowers and Workmans, including pedestrian mowers for the greens including Triplexes and Toro five-unit Reelmaster 55-10s for the fairways.

He also has a John Deere tractor and two New Hollands. In the workshop he has three Bernhard grinders including an Express Dual and an AngleMaster.

“We have been tied in with Toro equipment for five years through John Shaw machinery and we do review the situation from time to time,” says Ben. “The service from David Cole and his team has been fantastic since I have been at West Hill.”

Grass seed suppliers for the course are Rigby Taylor using their Mascot brand mixes from Top Green.

“I went with a party of greenkeepers to see their trial grounds in France with Stephen Alderton of Top Green and we were incredibly impressed by the amount of research and work done on perfecting seed varieties for golf and other sports,” says Ben.

“This business is all about networking which is why greenkeepers tend to head for Harrogate to meet up with old friends, attend seminars and see the latest products.

“I went to Las Vegas with Murray Long from Sunningdale and Chris Lomas from Worplesdon Golf Club, and we had a good week catching up with all the latest news.

“I usually attend a few seminars at the US show and visit a few of the local golf courses. It is important to see what greenkeepers are doing in other parts of the world.

“The one thing about greenkeeping is that you are always learning and that is a very important lesson in itself.

“Greenkeeping is about doing your homework, knowing what works best on your course and seeing problems before they happen – if you are able to see them.

“Being in BIGGA has been a major advantage for all our staff because they go on training courses, get the qualifications and can use them to develop their careers.

“Working outside in fantastic surroundings is a privilege and I never dread going to work. I always look forward to reaching the course.

“There are very few jobs which you can say that you look forward to doing every day.”

The next year will be busy because the club hopes to get planning permission for a new practice range.

“We are always looking forward and the members know that we have their interests at heart,” says Ben. “This is a superb course and we work hard to keep it that way.

“The greenkeeping staff are dedicated and passionate about golf. It makes all the difference.

Ben has a busy year planned for himself – he is getting married in September to Alice.

“She’s not really into golf so we won’t be arguing on any golf courses,” laughs Ben.