



“The courses have been maintained by three generations of ‘Mitchells’ dating back to just after the end of WW2”

Course management in a natural environment

Laurence Pithie travelled to the heart of Sussex to find out more from Course Manager Chris Mitchell about his working methods in managing Royal Ashdown Forest Golf Club

The 36 hole club at Royal Ashdown Forest dates back to 1888 when the Old Course was laid out by golfing enthusiasts on undulating land within the confines of the forest, a former medieval hunting area in south east England.

The 'Royal' title was given to the club five years later following a visit by the Duke of Cambridge who was a cousin of Queen Victoria.

Royal Ashdown is unique in many ways. There are no sand bunkers, it is registered as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and the land is leased by East Sussex County Council.

Also, it's governed by an independent body of Conservators to ensure that all land that falls within the confines of the forest is maintained within this natural environment.

As well as two adjoining clubhouses, a small pavilion exists for the benefit of the Artisan section, who in return for reduced annual membership fees and limited golf carry out fairway divoting work throughout much of the year.

But perhaps one of the most amazing aspects of the club is that the courses have been maintained by three generations of 'Mitchells' dating back to just after the end of WW2.

Chris was born and brought up on site, therefore greenkeeping and the love of the natural environment was a way of life since childhood, with an abundance of turfgrass knowledge passed down the generations.

Walking the course with him, it is clear he possesses tremendous knowledge of the flora and fauna throughout the site and how each forms part of the ecosystem within the 9.5 sq miles of forest, 60% of which is classified as open heath.

Chris was also one of the first greenkeepers in England to gain City and Guilds during the late 1970s which furthered his knowledge in turfgrass management.



Course Characteristics

The Old Course has regularly played host to a variety of national amateur tournaments as well as being used as a Regional Open Qualifier. Despite the absence of bunkers, great use has been made of the numerous water courses that traverse the site plus the ridges, mounds and slopes, many of which are covered in heather. With the highest points of the course at over 600 feet, there are several vantage points offering magnificent views in all directions. The main trees within the forest are Oak and Birch, with Alder in the wetter valleys and also Scots Pines that were planted in the early 19th century. Indigenous grasses comprising Bent and Fescue mix freely with other native grasses such as Molinia or Purple Moor Grass, Field Woodrush, Ling and Bell Heather and Dwarf Gorse, with Bracken present in the more peripheral areas. The acidic nature of the soil contains varying mixes of silt, sand and clay throughout both courses and in general, drainage is fairly good. A number of old clay drain tiles which were mostly installed in the 1960s still perform very well. The Old Course is by far the longer at just over 6500 yards whereas the shorter West Course is a tough challenge and requires a premium on accuracy from tee to green.

Fundamental Requirements

The management of the course falls under the auspices of the

Conservators who have responsibility to maintain the majority of the area as open heath, because as a National Park it is open to the public. Chris has formed a good working relationship with them, largely working for a common goal and supported by the club who are in the process of drawing up a Course Policy Document, adding to their existing Environmental Plan.

So what does this mean in terms of turfgrass management and any restrictions placed upon the club? Chris explains: "In basic terms, no buildings or structures can be erected on the site, other than those which currently exist.

"Even the maintenance building which is on two levels had to be built into the adjoining clubhouse and it's barely large enough to accommodate the range of necessary equipment. Fortunately it is centrally located to both courses although the site extends over a large area. Water is provided to both greens and tees with new polyethylene pipe and cable being fitted to all main areas, replacing the 30-year-old system. To ensure future water availability, an 'off-site' reservoir was built last year which can store almost two million gallons of water. For many, this may seem insufficient, but I have rarely used more than one million gallons per course in any given year, such is the resilience of the turf. Water can also be pumped from various areas on the course which makes us virtually self-sufficient in terms of this valuable commodity.

"Turf maintenance is just one



Low OM content and healthy ameliorated rootzone overlying the indigenous soil

BELOW: 12th hole in winter on open heathland following previous scrub clearance



"The basic objective for the 'Old' course is to maintain as much of it as possible as heathland"

Maintenance

In brief, the main playing areas are maintained as follows and relate more to the Old Course;

Greens:

Bent/Poa surfaces in varying amounts: Indigenous native soil, no drainage
OM content minimal, root depth 75mm on all but shaded greens
HOC Summer 4mm triplex, Winter 5mm pedestrian.
Frequent grooming, brushing and periodic 'vibrating' rolling
Top dressing: 80 tons per annum, 40 tons on West course
Fertiliser input: Max 40kgs N per ha. Primo Maxx monthly
Water input minimal: Only when required, staying on the dry side.
Fungicides: Spot treatment for Fusarium only. 1 - 4 lts max per year per course
Aeration: Mix of slit, deep and solid tine. No coring or deep scarifying

Tees:

Bent/Fescue/Poa surface, depending on shade and size of tees. Indigenous soil
HOC 10mm all year
Fertiliser input: 65kgs N per Ha. Two feeds per year with 11-5-5
Over-seed twice per year with standard non-rye mix

Fairways:

Fescue dominated with varying amounts of Bent, Poa and Field Woodrush
HOC 14mm all year
No fertiliser or chemicals applied, just deep tining

Surrounds:

Mix of 'above' grasses, depending on the degree of wear and level of shade
No fertilisers or chemicals applied unless required

Semi-roughs:

HOC 50mm. Limited to moderate sized areas between heather rough and fairway.

Out of play heather/grass/gorse:

Cut and cleared late Autumn to 6 inch height



aspect of site management, since much work involves preventing tree and scrub encroachment, thereby increasing the amount of open 'heather-clad' heath. A key requirement for managing any site is resources; namely manpower and equipment. The former comprises eight full time staff including myself, although some help is provided by the artisans for divot filling. Each member of staff needs to multi-task and this means being suitably trained and qualified; something which I believe is essential for this club to succeed. Also, without good and reliable equipment, the job would be impossible and we employ a qualified mechanic with a suitably equipped workshop, complete with Jupiter grinder. It means we have the right tools, when required, along with trained staff able to use them in a safe and efficient manner."

Work Plan

Chris continues: "This is split into two distinct areas - fine golfing turf and the environment since both must be in harmony with each other. Members and guests need to understand that we act as custodians - the objective being to provide good, year round playing surfaces while preserving the natural heath in the most sustainable way possible. A balance and understanding is required by all who are involved with the management of

the courses. This is what makes our club unique."

Heather Regeneration

Chris continues: "the basic objective for the 'Old' is to maintain as much of the course as possible as heathland. This includes removing scrub vegetation such as bracken and birch saplings and to fell those trees which are regarded as being unimportant to the forest or the golf course."

Bearing in mind that heather does not grow in the shade, the growth of trees needs to be controlled but in a manner that meets the requirements of both the club and Conservators.

Heather regeneration is a key part of this agreed policy and after much discussion and trials they now use the following procedures...

- Cut and collect heather 'brashings' during December to early March from an area of the site previously agreed. A Ryetec flail and collecting unit is used for this purpose set at 6ins.
- Prepare the 'new' designated area by clearing all vegetation down to a depth of anywhere between 3 to 5 ins. This includes any tree & stump removal.
- Once cleared and marked as GUR, the ground is 'scratched-up' and the 'brashings' are spread over the area and left to nature. Rolling is optional.

- It can take up to 5 years to be successful, requiring adequate sunlight and protection from any traffic. Patience and communication are essential.

There is always a quantity of dormant seed lying within the top few inches and this too can regenerate when the above vegetation is scraped clear.

Summary

Royal Ashdown is a unique golf club and frequently listed within the top 100 courses in the UK. It is maintained in a manner that befits this environment which is largely down to Chris and his passion to preserve the courses for future generations. With a lower than average labour input and minimal use of fertiliser, water and pesticides, it is clearly a course that is environmentally sustainable and economically viable, while offering firm and consistent playing surfaces for both members and guests.

As Chris concludes: "Without the support and ongoing commitment from the club and in particular the Club Secretary and Chairman of Green, the members, my staff and the Conservators, the successful transition of the course from consisting of overgrown woodland to more open heath would not have been possible. There remains so much more to be achieved and it is encouraging to receive the support of those around".



MAIN ABOVE: Ground cleared and surface prepared ready for heather brashings.
INSET ABOVE: Spreading heather brashings over prepared area

about the author



Laurence Pithie MG

Laurence Pithie MG runs his own training and consultancy company, Turf Master One Ltd. Previously he spent 17 years managing multi-site golf operations in the UK. With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.

Laurence is grateful to Chris Mitchell and RAFGC for their help and input in producing this article.