

# The sands of time

Laurence Pithie MG met up with Matthew Nutter, Course Manager at the East Berkshire Golf Club and a BIGGA Section Secretary, to find out more about the recently completed bunker renovation project

**Now celebrating its centenary, East Berkshire GC is largely tree lined, with housing and a main rail line to London around its perimeter.**

Although relatively short by today's standards at just over 6,200 yards, playing the course requires accuracy with numerous ditches, bunkers and heather awaiting an errant shot. Most areas of the course are blessed with fine indigenous turf, overlying an acidic soil which although not sandy in nature, does provide reasonable natural drainage and sufficient growth.

In terms of layout, little has changed in a hundred years except for the inevitable growth of trees, loss of heather and the impact this has had on the character and playability of the course. Both shade and limited air movement are issues that constantly have to be addressed and achieving a balance between the needs of the turf and the wishes of the golfer can be a constant challenge at any club. Trees apart, turf conditions have remained relatively consistent on most playing areas of the course. However it was the 54 bunkers which were increasingly bearing the brunt of members' concerns. As turf conditions have generally improved at most clubs throughout the UK, it is bunkers that are often at the top of the agenda for improvement. The three main criticisms at East Berkshire were inconsistency in sand depth caused by irregular shaping to the bunker bases, poor internal drainage caused by a membrane wrapped around drainage pipes, and an uninteresting style and loss of shape over a period of time. On a number of holes, the location of the odd fairway bunker

## 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.

RIGHT: Typical bunker style prior to renovation work

BELOW: Matthew (4th right) and his team who carried out the finishing work





was also not relevant to the modern game although this was generally regarded as less of an issue.

In 2008, Matthew Nutter was appointed as Deputy Course Manager, having previously gained an HND at Myerscough College while working at The Wisley Golf Club. After a spell at Pelican Marsh in Florida, under the auspices of the Ohio State Program placement scheme, Matthew progressed to East Berkshire and became Course Manager in 2009.

He says: "With continued improvements to the course, in terms of turf conditioning and presentation as well as project work on tees and paths, the bunkers were the one area of the course which fell below the standard expected. After initial consultation with the club, Howard Swan from Swan Golf Designs was appointed as Course Architect to make an assessment of the golf course and form a strategy for bunker improvement. Having received his in-depth course report and recommendations for all bunkers, the club then presented the plan to the membership, receiving full Board approval to complete the work on 11 bunkers over three holes with the remainder to be completed in a further two years.

"The plan included the appointment of John Greasley as the external contractor to carry out the main renovation work, while

all turfing and final sanding of the bunkers was to be carried out by the six greens staff. Work started in 2009 and the 11 bunkers were completed largely as planned for a total cost of just over £30,000. The basic objectives were to produce bunkers that were more in keeping with the natural character of the course, being better shaped and giving consistent playing standards throughout the year. They also had to be as maintenance friendly as possible in order to keep future costs to a minimum and that meant being well drained and free from wash-out and sand contamination.

"After initial success and positive feedback from the members, full consent was given to complete the remaining 40 or so bunkers over the next two years. Completely remodelling 20 bunkers per year was no easy task and it meant that all other winter course work over those two years would be kept to a minimum. Member competitions in 2010 and 2011 would finish on 30 September, enabling work to commence in October when ground conditions were still favourable.

"We estimated the contract work would take three months with final turfing to be completed around six weeks later. This worked out at one bunker being completed every three days. Snow cover and very low temperatures throughout December and early January delayed the work



**MAIN ABOVE:** Greenside bunkers largely completed and ready for turfing

**ABOVE MIDDLE:** Bunker shaped, drained and turf wall inserted

**ABOVE:** Extensive turfing work around the bunkers carried out 'in-house'

for six weeks. However, work was finally completed in late March just before the start of the season. With over half the bunkers now completed and the membership pleased with the results, the third and final phase started in October 2011 and

was completed on time by the end of February 2012. A much more favourable winter with low rainfall certainly helped to make life easier.”

All shaping and mounding was carried out by the contractors with soil being retained on site. Fortunately most of the soil was used ‘in-situ’ which meant very little had to be moved any great distance. As a result, any damage to the turf was restricted to small designated areas which were then re-turfed. Existing bunker drains were replaced with standard plastic perforated pipe and stone and connected to existing outlets, except for a few that either had to be replaced or have new laterals installed. This ensured each bunker would drain efficiently. The method used within the bunker was to shape the base with existing soil, sloping gently into the drain and to consolidate the entire area with a wacker plate. Fortunately the soil was of reasonable quality and free of stone which negated the use of any liner, saving time and money. A turf wall formed the

fully re-turfed with heather added to a number of bunker banks to give a more natural look. During the first phase of work, existing and designated areas of heather were removed by the excavator in large sections but this was difficult to work with. Afterwards, areas of heather were cut with the turf-cutter at 50mm depth, removed and laid as per turf. Once the newly laid turf had established, sand was placed in each bunker and spread to a consolidated 100mm depth. It took approximately one day to complete the turfing on each bunker using four staff. For the entire project, around 500 tons of Kingsley Washed Sand were used, 50 tons of drainage stone, 500m of plastic drain pipe and about 10,000m<sup>2</sup> of Bargold Classic turf from Inturf. 10 bunkers were relocated and six removed or amalgamated into one. The total cost of the project was just under £150,000 which worked out at less than £3,000 per bunker - this included architect fees, contractor cost and all materials.

**Drainage and playability have been fully tested this year following record levels of rainfall and the work completed by Matthew and his team have served as an indication for other clubs as to what can be achieved**

perimeter and gave each bunker a distinctive shape and defined edge.

The native soil was then replaced to form the newly shaped mounding in line with the architect’s recommendations. The style of the new bunkers consisted of a ‘rolled’ turf edge with moderate sand faces featuring a short but moderate slope and visible from the main playing area. Each bunker surround was

This was an ambitious project to undertake but one that was well planned and completed to an excellent standard throughout. Along with fairway re-shaping to accommodate the renovated bunkers, the project has been an outstanding success and greatly appreciated by both members and guests.

Drainage and playability have been fully tested this year follow-



**ABOVE TOP:** Fairway bunker complete and base consolidated prior to sanding

**ABOVE:** Raking the ‘new’ 18th bunker after heavy rain. No wash-out or sand contamination

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Greenside bunkers on 6th

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Bunkering by 17th green

ing record levels of rainfall and the work completed by Matthew and his team have served as an indication for other clubs as to what can be achieved. Bunkers are no longer an issue at East Berkshire and the work completed has raised the standard of a club that continues to have a waiting list and an entrance fee for membership; an investment that has clearly paid off.

Laurence is grateful to Matthew Nutter and East Berkshire GC for their support in producing this article.

