



From seaway to fairway

One of the jewels in the UK's golf crown is undoubtedly The Alwoodley Golf Club. Steve Castle spoke to Course Manager Philip Taylor to discover how the Club's recent five-year restoration and ecological plans have come to fruition – and how a twist of fate led him towards a career in greenkeeping

PROFILE

Name: Philip Taylor
Role: Course Manager
Born: Hessle, 19 November 1953
Handicap: Hasn't played for 3 years
Hobbies: Shooting, fast cars and sailing

KEY EQUIPMENT

2 John Deere Fairway Mowers
4 Toro Greenmaster 1000
1 Toro GR3400
2 Toro Workman
1 Toro 3150 Petrol
2 Toro Greenmaster 3250
2 Toro Bunker Rake
Plus many others - most importantly an excellent team!



One of the first phrases I heard Course Manager Philip Taylor use in connection with Alwoodley was “it’s a very important golf course” and the evidence certainly supports this. In 1907 it was the first to be designed by Alister MacKenzie who was also the Secretary at the West Yorkshire club and famously went on to design Augusta National.

It maintains a constantly high presence in every ‘Top 100 UK Courses’ list you care to read and is also regularly described as one of the toughest in the UK with its unforgiving gorse and heather swallowing up errant shots which narrowly miss the tight fairways. It has hosted the British Seniors

Open, the Weetabix Ladies Challenge, the English Amateur, the Ladies British Open Amateur Championships, among countless other events.

The greenkeeping team have been heavily involved in two major five-year plans (one agronomic, one ecological) running in tandem. The first was a course improvement plan focusing on bunker restoration, installing new championship tees and putting in some new bunkers similar to those that were in place in MacKenzie’s original design. For the first three years the greenkeeping team worked alongside contractors before completing the vast majority of the agronomic work themselves during the last two years.

Philip said: “We needed an archi-

tect who would be sympathetic to MacKenzie and the course’s original design. Now, we didn’t want the course to return to exactly how it was 100 years ago, because obviously that wouldn’t be acceptable now, but we wanted a return to the distinctive style of MacKenzie.

“The bunkers – we have around 100 – all needed updating, they had become quite sterile over the years as they have been changed on spec rather than with any coherent strategy. We wanted to enlist the services of an architect who would not only plan the project but would be hands-on with it too, and we went for Ken Moodie. He really has got involved and even helped with some raking!”

Plans were drawn up and a presentation night was held for the





membership. The plans were discussed in detail and the members voted in favour.

Philip said: “We started on the work each year in October after the final large corporate day at the end of the season and we generally wanted that year’s work to be finished by Christmas. Occasionally we had to close some holes, which was not ideal even in the middle of winter but the members thoroughly understood that the work was being done for them.

“One particularly difficult hole to work on was the 11th, which is a short hole at the very end of the course and after the wettest summer on record, we worked on that hole using boards. The staff worked very hard and the work was a total success, given the difficulty

of the logistics of getting materials to the site and the waste off the site.”

Philip has been Course Manager at Alwoodley for 25 years and he has overseen plenty of work in that time. 15 years ago, all the greens were lifted and relaid to USGA spec. During that period, the entire course was also re drained although Alwoodley, which sits just north of Leeds, is on a predominantly clay base which has good natural drainage.

Philip confirmed “we hollow tine in spring, mini hollow tine in August and spike monthly for the rest of the year. We like to cut by hand where possible, although obviously we don’t have the manpower to do this daily. I just think it looks better and it rolls as well as it cuts. We’re currently cutting

at 6mm with the hand machines, and we will go down to 3.5mm in summer or possibly 3mm with a Triplex.”

The second five-year plan focused on ecological matters, and the Club employed the expertise of STRI’s Bob Taylor. They mainly concentrated on heather restoration and woodland management.

“It’s a heathland course, so obviously we try to preserve this. We try to restore heather by stripping the turf and thatch off the surface down to the black layer where the heather seeds are held. Eventually, and hopefully, within two to five years we will get new heather growth coming in.

“Part of my interview for this job was to play a round with a Committee member. We were heading



ABOVE: Steve Bennett, Ben Robertson, Chris Hall, Tim Minns, Matthew Brightman, Neil Horton, Philip Taylor

down the 5th and he said to me “we need to get rid of these trees”. It was a pine tree-lined fairway which I actually liked, so I was wondering if it was a trick question! I asked him why he would want to remove them. He replied “we don’t want to end up as a parkland course, we’re a heathland course” – and he was right. When the pines came down, you could see right across the heath with the beautiful heather and gorse and it was much improved.

“It is important to keep the work going in a consistent manner. Five year plans are very useful, so you end up having a balanced approach to your work and tick boxes as you progress over the years. It also means you have clear evidence to take to your committee and members to answer questions on what you’ve done and what’s still to do.”

It is clear the ecological work is encouraging local wildlife. On the morning of my visit, Philip revealed he had seen four deer and a red kite in the woodland on the course.

The clubhouse where we chatted featured a quirky circular dining room – and it was a quirky twist of fate that led Philip to embark on his greenkeeping career. But for a failed eye test, he could have spent his life on the high seas.

“I trained to be a river pilot at nautical college at Trinity House Nautical College but my eyesight wasn’t good enough. I wear contact

lenses which would be okay now, but in those days you had to have 20:20 vision to be accepted on the boats.”

“So I left to work as a greenkeeper on the site of the old Hessele Golf Club, before the Humber Bridge was constructed on it. I knew many of the members as I’d been a member there since I was 12 so it seemed natural to get a job there initially.”

“Obviously it was so different then. We cut the greens once a week, the wages were poor and there was no career progression – well, certainly not at that club anyway. So I went down to Kingston-upon-Thames and worked at the Holme Park Golf Club which was in the grounds of Hampton Court Palace before a spell at Beaconsfield Golf Club. I then got my first Head Greenkeeper’s role at Farnham Park Golf Club, then moved on to York Golf Club and had eight fantastic years there before moving to Alwoodley. I always used to say I would never work on the same golf course for more than seven or eight years, and of course I’ve ended up here for 25! I’ve been very fortunate.”

Philip does not have any greenkeeping qualifications in common with most greenkeepers of his generation, although he is fully qualified in seamanship and navigation! He has always been

particularly keen to impress the importance of training on his team. Alwoodley Deputy, Neil Horton, is working towards his Level 4 and another team member is on Level 2.

The Club are now looking forward to hosting the Yorkshire Amateur Championship later this year and the English Amateur Championship in 2015.

Philip concluded: “It’s a fantastic place to work, people tend to stay here for years. Everything we’ve done, we’ve done together. It’s all about a team here, and that includes all members of staff in all departments of the Club. We have carried out an awful lot of work over past years and it has undoubtedly been worth it, not to mention a privilege.”

