

## Shooters Hill Golf Club

# A bug's life

Built on what is believed to be the site of a mediaeval archery practice range, Shooters Hill Golf Club is targeting a more biological and sustainable approach to course maintenance thanks to Course Manager Craig Rodwell and his young team. Report by Greg Rhodes



Craig Rodwell

**S**even barrels of Foster's lager were downed in one weekend at Shooter's Hill Golf Club recently. No, that quantity wasn't quaffed by Course Manager Craig Rodwell and his team after a hard week's graft, although they could lay claim to merit such a chillout.

Rather, it was consumed by a gathering of the great and good at the Easter weekend unveiling of the freshly refurbished bar of this 18-hole parkland course, blessed as it is with commanding views over London and the North Kent countryside from its elevated vantage point.

The fact that Craig can relay the statistic testifies to his increasingly managerial role at the club; a duty that sees him attending board meetings to discuss every operational facet of this aspiring venue, whether tricky Thames Water or the blossoming weddings calendar.

From his on-site home - the Old Coach House - Craig lives and breathes this private members club.

Although "a bit short [5,900ft] and a bit hilly with no driving range", the course attracted record green fee income last year, an achievement Craig attributes to the state of his putting surfaces.

"They have very little thatch and are pretty much disease-free," he reports, "and that makes us unique amongst the other courses in the region."

Sited in the Royal Borough of Greenwich in South East London, the club is just a wayward drive from Blackheath, with the Canary Wharf financial powerhouse, historic maritime Greenwich and the O2 Arena on the horizon.

The name Shooters is said to hark back to the time when archers practised on the site hundreds of years before golf was ever played here.

Shooters Hill provided excellent cover for highwaymen, history reveals, whilst a fair few 'bandits' populate the club today, the club quips on its website.

In fact, golf was first played here in 1903, when a 9-hole course opened, just four years before course designer Willie Park laid out the 18 holes stretching across the heights today.

The freehold of the land was purchased several years later, along with the mansion of Lowood, and another twenty-five acres was acquired in 1924.

The advent of World War II saw the southernmost nine holes requisitioned to establish an anti-aircraft battery. A section of the clubhouse housed the Home Guard in the war years and part of the course saw action as a prisoner of war camp for some 1,000 German and Italian prisoners.

Despite the upheaval, the other nine holes were played through thick and thin, even





The signature 10th delivers a picturesque start to the back 9





Some parts of the course are 400 feet higher than others, creating microclimates

though the course sustained major bomb damage. Post-war, course and clubhouse were improved and reopened for play in 1951 - the year Bobby Locke and Alf Padgham tore up the course in an exhibition match that witnessed Locke setting a course record 65.

Harris and Colt completely remodelled the course in the 1930s and today it presents golf all year round, still offering a challenging Par 69 test of the parkland game, requiring accurate shots to high-quality greens to score well. The signature and picturesque 10th (lead image) delivers a delightful start to the back nine.

Shooters Hill is hitting the heights of late, reaching optimum member count and attracting more society days (averaging one a fortnight) as it captures business from courses located on both sides of the Thames

"Last year we brought in £107,000 in green fees at £25-£30 a round," Craig reveals, "that's a doubling in recent times."

Independent reviews by online resource Golfshake has helped swell numbers playing the course over the last five years as has social media - they have been Tweeting since 2009, blogging since 2013 and posting on Facebook over the last three or four years.

"A total of 19,000 golfers live within five miles of the club and we are only seven miles from London Bridge, so there are plenty of players to target," Craig notes.

The 700 or so members are top heavy with seniors though, so the club is introducing packages to attract a more diverse demographic. Under-35s can enjoy reduced membership fees, which rise by £80 annually until they hit full price when they reach their mid-thirties.

Packages for twilight golfers - those playing after 4.00pm - are proving popular and moves are afoot to speed up rounds.

"We are looking at a two-ball round completed in three hours," says Craig, mirroring golfing trends to quicken the pace

of the game to swell course footfall.

Craig, 43, arrived fourteen years ago at a club and course "in dire straights, bleeding members, and with greens choked with thatch and disease outbreaks".

"General manager Martin Bond employed me and together we devised a plan to wake up a sleeping club," Craig recalls. The strategy was to tackle the putting surfaces "year by year" with a fully funded programme of improvements.

"With four inches of pure thatch and little roots to speak of, the greens kept ripping up when we aerated, so we had to start from scratch to improve the roots and degrade the thatch." Martin left a year later, leaving Craig fully in charge of the masterplan for course recovery.

Following "a few discussions" with the greens committee, he pursued his vision of developing a beneficial fungal/bacteria-rich ecosystem less reliant on chemical applications.

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Looking through the trees to the 4th green



The 16th, with the recently refurbished clubhouse on the horizon

Hitting the greens with 25mm coring tines at 3.5in deep, 60 tonnes of topdressing and ridding the surfaces of an inch of thatch in one pass brought an instant gain. "The Ruffords No3's rounded sand particles helped keep air in the profile and improve the 'biology'," he explains.

"You should have seen the ball wobbling across the greens because the surface was so soft," he adds, "and they were always wet because the thatch soaked up water like a sponge. But, once we'd created a firmer

platform to work from, we could begin eradicating disease."

Symbio compost teas were part and parcel of his plan, recently augmented by Enhance fertiliser, which includes bacillus beneficial bacteria.

"By 2007, we were down to 7% thatch and that's reduced further to just two or three percent and we apply fungicide four times a year now instead of nine. The suppliers are not over the moon that we are applying less, but some golf clubs do just what sales reps

tell them without thinking. I prefer to try out more natural methods to keep the course disease-free. By doing that, we've broken a vicious circle by introducing beneficial bacteria and fungi."

Nurturing 'good guy' bugs is all well and good, but site constraints have stymied Craig's earnest endeavours. "The course is sited on the salt line of the Thames and is close to seawater," he explains, "which means we cannot have our own borehole whilst, two miles down the road, there's



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High chlorine levels in the water deplete good bacteria and fungi and, with its 7.5 pH, grass plants find it difficult to take up nutrients



The extent of tree coverage fosters fusarium



Typical greens core reveals how little thatch is now present

unlimited water.”

“High chlorine levels in the water deplete good bacteria and fungi and, with its 7.5 pH, grass plants find it difficult to take up nutrients. We need 5.5-6.5 for optimum conditions. I’m planning to trial a system to lower pH levels so the course is less prone to fungal attack.”

When you have a 400ft differential in gradient between your top green (the 18th) and the lowest hole (the 4th), you have multiple microclimates to contend with. “The ecoclimate varies dramatically with height as the degree of shade differs. It makes things quite tricky to get the balance right,” Craig explains.

Sloping surfaces make for challenging golf but they present the team with issues ensuring they are irrigated adequately.

A complex blend of London clay, flint and sand, with silty soil type on the top level places further demands on course management.

The extent of tree coverage across the course fosters conditions favourable to fusarium outbreaks, despite all the measures in place. Thinning and removal lets in light and air to discourage the bacteria from gaining hold. “We still have the odd patch, but a blanket spray in the autumn helps resolves any issues,” says Craig.

Over the years, he has introduced more

Bent grasses into the sward to replace Poa, which he knows is costly to maintain because the plant is less drought and disease tolerant and produces excessive thatch.

“Greens are half Bent, half Poa now,” he says. “Bent helps in the summer on the higher greens, which can really dry out. Drought resistant and a finer grass encourages better ball roll.”

Shunning the notion that there’s ‘a bottle for every bugbear’, Craig believes much of greenkeeping relies on commonsense and goes about his tasks accordingly. “I am very conscious about wasting money and feel no need for external consultants like agronomists. They cost too much in my view and are not always moving their golf clubs forward,” he states categorically.

Apprenticeships form the fabric of Craig’s team and he has good reason to believe in their benefits, rising through the greenkeeping ranks this way himself.

Taken on as a twenty year old apprentice in 1994 at scenic Sweetwoods Park Golf Club in the beautiful Sussex Weald, Craig rose to course manager in 2001, when his long-standing boss and mentor Wallace Wilson moved to Milngavie Golf Club, and assumed that role for two years before deciding that it was time to move on from the proprietary venue.

“I’d always wanted to work at a private

It’s difficult to employ other greenkeepers as often they don’t want to move so, over the years, I’ve sourced apprentices locally



The greenkeeping team - an emphasis on youth





Greens are half Bent and half Poa now

They want to move up as they feel they have outgrown the position. That's fine, as long as the career structure is there for them

members golf club," he says. "They want what you want and revenue is ploughed back into the business to develop facilities outside and in the clubhouse."

"In my area, it's difficult to employ other greenkeepers as often they don't want to move so, over the years, I've sourced apprentices locally," he explains.

Recruiting a young workforce has major merits, he believes and socially-minded Craig believes in apprentices big time, but with a twist. "I try to employ youngsters who want to get on the career ladder or even just land a job to give them the opportunity to get

into work. Hopefully, this gives them a good work ethic and chance to learn the skills needed in greenkeeping."

"Some are still here, others have left and returned. They all think the grass is greener elsewhere, but realise that's not always true. After five years in the post, they want to move up as they feel they have outgrown the position. That's fine, as long as the career structure is there for them."

With three of his team still to reach twenty-five, Craig is striving to create the rungs that will allow them to do just that.

His long-standing colleague and right-hand

man is deputy head greenkeeper Luke Jenkins, who came on board in 2006 at the age of seventeen. "He's starting to have a big input now, overseeing winter work, weekend maintenance and running things when I'm on holiday," Craig explains.

No doubt his role will extend further as Craig's involvement with Shooters Hill affairs deepens. He's one of a growing group of course managers who are entering the boardroom to learn more of the broader management issues of golf clubs.

When he's not attending greens and finance committee meetings, he's tabling



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### Beneficial bacteria are at the heart of Craig's programme of disease eradication at Shooters Hill Golf Club.

Under ever more pressure to perform as business booms at the club, Craig knows that minimising outbreaks of fusarium, anthracnose and other troublesome fungal invasions is critical to keeping the customers satisfied.

Since 2012, he's been applying compost teas to boost bacterial colonisation and fungal growth within the greens rootzones, recently boosting the programme by introducing Enhance fertiliser with added bacillus.

"I was searching for a product to tackle disease outbreak that would have bioactivity. I prefer biology and bugs to chemical treatments," says Craig. "We are winning the war against disease, and that's giving us a lead over other courses in the region."

Clubs nearby are "scarred by disease" by comparison, he claims. "Like chalk and cheese." So much so that their members are switching allegiance to Shooters Hill; at least ten are said to have defected so far this year.

"We have healthy greens but, by the autumn, disease such as anthracnose can strike, brought on by drought. It was dry last year and the quantity of pay and play can also aggravate the condition of the greens."

With the dry spell persisting - only 10mm of rain fell this March and April - Craig's campaign to maintain a disease-free golfing environment will remain a challenging one.

That's when Enhance comes into play, he says: "Even when the course is dry, our greens, tees and fairways look healthy - the fertiliser helps prevent them looking tired at the end of summer and encourages a robust rootzone."

Originally applying 55kg of granular product across seven greens, Craig had to take care not to green up some parts of the course more than others. "I needed to match the treated greens with untreated ones, so that we didn't have too much growth." An "educated guess" on the correct concentrations to apply was all it took for the right result.

The team treated all the greens in February to ensure they were in fine fettle for the traditional start of the season. "It is a regular component of the programme now and we will apply it across the course earlier this year than last - in August - rather than from mid-October to Christmas as he did last year, although the fertiliser is still working well into spring," he reports.

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Erecting signage for competitions and tournaments is one of Chris Witchlow's key tasks

ideas to take the club forward. "I have a vote now, so my voice can be heard to help influence the future here," he adds.

Holding on to a talented team is always challenging and Craig is bidding farewell to his first assistant greenkeeper, Chris Ward, 42, who is leaving to head up the greens team at Ilford Golf Club. "Chris had always wanted to become a head greenkeeper and the way we try to develop staff prepared him for the move."

Craig took on Chris Witchlow as an apprentice five years ago and the 22-year old has completed his NVQ Level 2 at Plumpton College. "He's currently working on his spraying qualifications, having attained his chainsaw certificates," says Craig. "Erecting signage and display boards for competitions and tournaments - like September's Greenwich Mayor's Day charity event with its shotgun start - is one of his key tasks. Giving specific responsibilities to each one of the team helps them take ownership of an aspect of course management."

Craig does view himself as something of a "babysitter", tending his youthful charges. "Remember, when you are managing youngsters who have come straight from school, you have to keep reinforcing schedules. Every couple of days I'll encourage them to remember their tasks as a way of motivating them to work productively."

Also just twenty-two, apprentice Jack Wade too has just completed NVQ Level 2, at Hadlow College. His specific duties on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays include the "everyday stuff", maintaining the footclean areas and machinery/kitchen facilities, Craig adds.

Completing the complement of apprentices is Ben Wise, 17, who Craig brought in last May and who is also going through his NVQ 2 at Hadlow College.

It's a young team for sure and Craig has introduced firm but fair management and operational policies to bring out the best in them.

Changing times are only adding to the

demands of course maintenance, he believes. "You cannot get away with just a 9 to 5, and have to be on the ball with everything as the expectations from members and players are so much higher now. We need to answer member queries about the course and they will shout and walk all over if you don't stand your corner."

A true believer in marginal gains to bolster efficiency, he has introduced a hygiene regime in a bid to minimise absenteeism - and it's paying off he reports.

"Days off through illness have reduced to just one or two a year for each of the team. The vomiting bug that struck in spring and autumn hit us a while back, and you cannot really plan for that, but we do all we can to keep those types of infections at bay."

Other forms of absenteeism are a different matter though and motivation is a major driver in limiting the urge to "throw a sickie" occasionally. When that does happen, team members are taken through a back-to-work interview to reinforce the importance of the work ethic.

"Procedures matter," stresses Craig, "and keep us all focused on the jobs in hand year-round. When one of the team decides not to turn up, that affects everyone else and duties have to be reassigned to ensure they are completed."

Other factors can strike from left of field to throw the system out of kilter. He's been "unlucky" with jury service over the years he says. "I've been called three times, but you can plan your time around it."

"A team member announced one day that he'd been called up and would be away for a week. He showed me his completed jury form he'd already submitted. Coming as it did, out of the blue, I was not best pleased I can tell you."

Environment figures strongly in Craig's management programme. "We are currently creating wildlife corridors for birds, bats and hedgehogs between us and Oxleas Wood, an ancient site that adjoins the course," he enlarges. "Kestrels are nesting on site and we have recently set up





Early morning mowing

When one of the team decides not to turn up, that affects everyone else and duties have to be reassigned to ensure they are completed

a nest cam to keep members up to speed on activity. Our questions and answers blog also helps inform them on what to look out for."

Under the winter projects running from Christmas to the end of March, the team tackle parts of the eight to ten hectares of mostly deciduous woodland in their care.

Arboriculture is an important aspect of maintenance, but Craig must handle it sensitively, he explains. "Self-seeding sycamores are a problem and impact on course playability. They do not support the

extent of wildlife diversity, as oaks do for example, but cutting down any trees can bring angry comments from members - that's why my regular blog, which is posted on the club website, is so useful, keeping members well informed of work planned in."

The new shed, opened last year, includes environmental measures that are already aiding course management. "We can collect about 120,000 litres of rainwater off the roof annually," Craig reports. "At pH 5.5, it's ideal for spraying on greens, tees and fairways.

We probably apply up to 6,500 litres of rainwater a month, containing compost teas, biostimulants and fertiliser."

Alongside, the Waste2Water washpad facility processes clippings and recycles treated water back into the system.

Firmly geared to John Deere machinery, Craig works closely with local distributor Farol. "They do all the parts and servicing for the entire fleet - we have no mechanic on site - and that saves us time and money. This winter, I'll be taking a replacement fairways

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“Restructuring five tees is next on the list. They are too small and have sunk and dipped through the level of footfall, creating an uneven surface



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mower and two more greens mowers under our rolling five-year replacement programme for machinery.”

With his wider interest in the club's day-to-day operation, Craig knows that spending wisely is key to delivering without breaking the bank. He sources buggies for the club - vital to allow elderly members to complete their rounds - recently buying the new AC drive Yamaha buggies. “Great value for money,” he states. “We are saving a fortune on fuel.”

The five-year plan is moving forward steadily, Craig notes, with major works earmarked. “Restructuring five tees is next on the list. They are too small and have sunk and dipped through the level of footfall, creating an uneven surface that we have to level up to allow more play.”

Enhancing the club entrance and enlarging the car park sends out the message that this is a club expanding its horizons. Recent improvements indoors reinforce that image.

Following transformation of its changing rooms to include more extensive storage options for both members and visitors, the newly extended kitchen allows Shooters Hill to cater for up to 120 guests at a time in the refurbished bar and lounge.

Sometimes, developments can attract a little too much interest, Craig reveals. “Doors

were locked and windows covered up during the lounge improvements because members were wanting to know what was happening and were trying to gain access during the work.”

Other recent moves have also improved operational efficiency, Craig says. “Bringing the catering in-house and appointing a qualified chef have improved income, we calculate,” - another positive factor in the equation of balancing income and outgoings.

Good food attracts the punters too, as Craig notes. “You can't find a decent Sunday dinner round here, but the new chef is working wonders and now I eat in the clubhouse.” Another conscript to the campaign for loyal customers.

The events manager and new club professional are helping boost the weddings business and society days, promoting a rise in demand for course time and, in turn, adding pressure on the greens team to deliver quality year-round on what is already a popular sporting focus for the region.

Celebrating its busiest-ever period over the last two years, Shooters Hill can continue to grow business on a challenging course that plays all year round with high-quality greens able to withstand tough treatment whilst remaining disease-free. The club can thank Craig's ‘good guys’ for that.

### Craig's bitter sweet taste of success

Craig Rodwell is tasting the price of success as his commitment to apprenticeships over the fourteen years in the post at the bustling members club has paid off in spades.

Two of his protégés have just landed top jobs at other courses, but leaving him short-staffed and struggling to cope in what is the most manic time of year.

Hard on the heels of first assistant greenkeeper Chris Ward's departure to Ilford as course manager comes news that Luke Jenkins, still only 29, is to take up the head greenkeeper's post at Woodlands Manor in West Kingsdown, Kent

“This is proof that the training system we have here works,” Craig says, “but I'm trying to fill two positions when we are mega busy out on course.”

The departure of two key players will unsettle the balance of skills, admits Craig, who has honed the team over his years as course manager, but it's the bitter sweet taste of success he is forced to accept, he says.

“We have had our money's worth from Chris and Luke for sure,” he comments, “and I'm delighted they are advancing their careers. Training for the future is what we focus on here and, if people are willing to learn, the rewards are there for them.”

Resigned to the facts, he adds: “I am sad to be losing Chris and Luke and wish them every success. The new additions to the team will introduce a new dynamic, but I'll certainly be kept busy trying to find replacements.”