



GETTING

HOW ENGLAND'S MOST UNSPOILT COURSE

BACK TO

IS USING SCIENCE TO MOVE FORWARD

NATURE

A new programme of course conditioning has helped this historic, bunkerless golf course, deep in Winnie-the-Pooh country, shoot up the rankings. Duncan Lennard reports.





There are many things we might get rid of to improve the game of golf – probably starting with anybody who thinks ‘mashed-patata!’ is an appropriate response to a golf shot. But could a case also be made for eliminating the not-so-humble bunker from our beloved game?

Yes, of course it’s heresy. After all, sand shots have been part of golf’s fabric ever since a shepherd appeared on the duneslack one day with the leading edge of his crook mysteriously filed away. But think about it for a moment. Ninety per cent of the time we golfers moan about the golf course, it’s to do with a bunker. It’s in the wrong place. It is too deep. It has too much sand in it. . . or not enough. . . or it’s the wrong sort of sand. Sand bunkers are expensive to create and maintain. They damage greenkeeping equipment. Sand splash creates inconsistent playing conditions and throws an invisible army of grains and stones on to the green, each one trained to kick your perfect putt off line.

Bunkers, of course, are the created representations of the linksland sandy bluffs, exposed naturally by wind erosion or grazing sheep. As such, they can look contrived on landscapes that are not sand based. Perhaps, just perhaps, these courses might be better off without them. And for Exhibit A we give you the Old Course at Royal Ashdown Forest, a layout that makes you question if the game has got it wrong all along.

It is true that the course’s bunkerless state has been enforced. Draped across common land in an historic royal hunting forest, it is subject to a charter forbidding man-made alterations or excavations. And yet so far from hampering the playing experience, this covenant has surely enhanced it. Dramatically rugged hummocks and pits join heather-clad banks, awkward gradients, devious streams and relentless run-offs in delivering 18 green complexes of sensational variety, challenge and interest. On the wide open, shelving surrounds of the 2nd green, you can be lining up a 25-yard putt across the expansive apron; 10 minutes later, on the par-4 3rd, you can be perched on a greenside pinnacle, hacking out of the Ling. Such is the diversity of greenside protection that traditional sand-defended greens feel one-dimensional, perhaps even lazy, by comparison.

The fascinating green surrounds at Royal Ashdown Forest have given rise to the club adage that you don’t notice the lack of bunkers till someone reminds you of the fact after the round. That may be a stretch. The true clubhouse revelation is that you’ve played a round on a course without bunkers, and not once felt the experience was poorer for it.



Who needs sand? Heather and hummocks protect the green at the par-4 15th.



Balancing act

For a game so connected with elitism and general snootery, golf in England had a remarkably democratic genesis. Common land typically provided its earliest playing arenas – as it did at Blackheath, Wimbledon, Clapham and indeed Westward Ho!, England’s first golf course. Golfers, then, played through and around anyone else wanting to use the land for their own recreation; golfing on the Greenwich Heath in the 1880s, Royal Ashdown denizen Horace Hutchinson grumbled about park benches, lamp posts and prams getting in his way.

In the High Sussex Weald between the North and South Downs, Ashdown Forest is also common land – and at 6,500 acres, the largest stretch of it in the south of England. Though mostly a glorious whispering sea of oak and birch, vast areas of it had been cleared to feed the furnaces of the burgeoning iron and steel industry, exposing muscular heathland below. With new rail links to London, some 25 miles to the north, this dramatic elevated landscape – its slopes reach 700ft above sea level – was perfect for the growing legions of middle-class Victorians looking to escape the city and eager to pursue a game hitherto the province of the gentry.

The essence of golf at Royal Ashdown Forest is

‘Royal Ashdown’s founders set out to create a course that lived and breathed as part of the forest’

rooted in its creation. With no legal recourse to alter the ‘forest floor’ – and given the superb blank canvas available, no inclination to – the club’s founders set out to create a course that lived and breathed as part of the forest that buffered it from the world. Though the layout has evolved from the original 4,206-yarder, the commitment to that aim has never wavered. The result today is a joyous 6,500-yard ramble that takes golfers back to nature like no other.

Yet the course’s intensely natural presentation has not always been to its benefit. “This layout has always been managed in a very traditional and sustainable way,” explains club manager Neil Darnell. “We’ve always been against overwatering and overfeeding, and this has no doubt contributed to the fine-grass dominance we have here, and the resilience of the course; our fescues held up fantastically throughout last year’s hot summer.

“However, this legacy of course management did not always lead to the best-conditioned playing surfaces. It also allowed the heather to flourish to the extent that we were getting a lot of complaints that it was over-penal. That led to it being cut down, and us losing some areas. ▣



“There is a balance to be struck between keeping things natural and using science sparingly to improve the playing experience. We were on the lean side of that.”

The installation of lateral drainage across 14 of the course’s greens, a process that began in autumn 2016, presaged a new focus on course presentation that made the Old Course the third-biggest climber in *Golf World’s* latest ranking, rising 18 places. Central to the new works is the regeneration and management of heather. The club has invested in machinery to trim the invasive grasses that were starting to swamp it. Several areas of the course have been ‘scraped’ – removing surface to expose heather seed banks. A 10-year tree clearing program, also begun

The devilish, sloping approach to the par-4 17th – the hardest hole on the course.

adds Darnell. “Our pathways need attention and one or two tees need levelling. But we all committed to our goal of premium playing surfaces within a natural environment. This will give Royal Ashdown Forest the presentation its status and setting deserve.”

Reigning it in

Despite the growing presence of the likes of Harry Colt and Alister MacKenzie, Royal Ashdown Forest owes most of its fine current layout to Jack Rowe, an early professional who served the club for 55 years from 1892. His 1896 revisions may have only taken the course up to 4,900 yards and been superseded by a steady stream of others, but his course was the first to be routed around the current clubhouse, and generally runs over the same noble slopes as today’s layout.

Despite having little experience of golf course design, Rowe demonstrated a talent for using the landscape. “I think what you see at Royal Ashdown Forest is that someone has had a choice of a first-rate landscape, and not wasted it,” says club professional Tim Cowley. “The way it crosses this scenic terrain into the heathland, maximising views over the forest while making full use of natural plateau and ditches, is amazing. Its design means you must pay it respect. It’s just 6,500 yards off the back, try to overpower it and you’ll come unstuck. This is a course for the strategist, not the bomber.”

While there is something of a throat-clear about the first four holes – medium-length par 4s designed to ease you into the round, as was the custom in days of yore – the course begins to warm up at the par-5 5th, a fantastic challenge that asks your second shot to avoid not only a drainage ditch but also a stream – complete with that rarest of golfing hazards, a ford – that fronts the green.

Then comes the superb 125-yard par-3 6th, (see signature hole), all the argument you’ll ever need for ▶

‘Our overall course vision is to return definition to Royal Ashdown Forest by reviving its true heathland character’

in 2016, has been designed to encourage heather regrowth, with areas between the 3rd and 4th and 5th and 6th already showing the purple roots of recovery.

“Our overall course vision is to return definition to Royal Ashdown Forest by reviving its true heathland character,” adds course manager Dominic Lewis, who joined the club earlier this year. “There are fairways here that should be framed by purple heather, and we want to restore that. Inside the heather, the fact the course was kept so lean has given me the perfect platform – just the lightest feeding with a low nitrogen fertiliser has made a massive difference to the course’s playing surfaces.”

“We know there is still plenty of work to do here,”

SIGNATURE HOLE

THE 6TH: PAR 3, 125 YARDS

With its extraordinary panoramic views across four counties, the elevated 249-yard par-3 11th typically draws the focus at Royal Ashdown Forest. Yet for the club's head professional Tim Cowley, it's pipped by the shortest hole on the course.

"The stepped green at the 6th is 33 yards long but only eight yards wide," he describes. "It's also somewhat of a hogs-back, pushing balls off either side. Miss to the right – the safer side – and your ball drops five feet below the level of the green,



leaving you an awkward chip. Miss left and you'll be lucky not to find the stream that wanders across the front of the green before framing the length of its left side. "Former club pro Hector Padgham, cousin of 1936 Open Champion Alf, always

bumped a 7-iron on to the lower tier of the green. I prefer to use more loft, even though this hole often plays into the wind. Either way, this is the perfect example of why you should not judge a hole by its length. You just have to hit a perfect wedge shot."



anyone who thinks adding distance is the answer. The last time Open Qualifying was held at Royal Ashdown Forest, in 2009, a Spanish hopeful arrived on the tee three under par. He arrived on the tee of the 387-yard 7th seven over par. Throughout qualifying, the 6th averaged 4.5 – a full shot-and-a-half over par.

Named Island for the perched nature of its green, which shelves off both sides – usually into water on the left – this magnificent short hole heralds the start of a stretch of golf few courses worldwide can match. Jagging confidently back right up the hill, the 387-yard 7th invites you to take on the thick heather up the right to cut the corner – the very definition of a risk-reward tee shot. Opening this autumn a new green, perched some 40 yards behind the existing putting surface, will make this hole worthy of its stroke index-1 rating.

In many ways, the 495-yard par-5 8th sums up what Royal Ashdown Forest is all about. Flanked by timber and heather, the hole gives you the marvellous sense of tranquility and isolation that defines the playing experience. And you would be well advised to bring that sense of calmness into your shotmaking. While you may be tempted to turn the hole into a two-shotter, its fairway tapers into expanses of heather both at driving distance and before the green, while the higher land to the right of the green will not so much kick your ball down as trap it in the Ling. As so often at Royal Ashdown Forest, bravado will be ruthlessly punished.

The ticklish par-3 9th – no putts given on a green so



‘Flanked by timber, the par-5 8th offers the marvellous sense of tranquility that defines the playing experience’

steep you feel yourself leaning into it – and the demanding if straightaway par-5 10th take you out to the tee of the 249-yard par-3 11th. Physically the highest point of the course, this is for many the pinnacle of the round too. It is probably fair to say, though, that the cachet of this hole is based more around its sensational setting, looking north across a gorgeous forest-canopy canvas painted different colours throughout the year to the distant north downs, than the golfing challenge, which amounts to a fairly routine crack up the right with a hybrid.

Certainly the 11th is instantly trumped by the fantastic 12th, the fourth par 5 in eight holes. Arcing gently left, its views are no less remarkable but its challenge, complete with a Tillinghast-style ‘Great Hazard’ of heather sweeping across the fairway 150 yards out, is far more dynamic and engaging.

On the tee of the par-3 14th a plaque reminds you of this club’s storied past – Abe Mitchell, the man depicted on top of the Ryder Cup, grew up in a cottage neighbouring the tee, and became a leading light in the club’s artisan section, the Cantalupe. The hole itself – the last of four fantastic one-shotters – is a pleasing downhill blow demanding a carry of 180 yards or so to carry the thick heather fronting the green.

While 15 and 16 keep up the pace, the course’s climax comes at the momentous 486-yard par-4 17th. The fairway kicks the ball forwards from a blind tee shot, but

Skirting the clubhouse, the final hole brings a rare natural golf experience to a close.

here the good news ends. Gradients make the short grass hard to hold, while the approach to the long, narrow green asks you to skirt a dangerous heather bank on the right. While the target is probably too exacting for an approach of this length, the hole’s sheer drama puts you in a forgiving mood. Chances are you’ll still be thinking about it as you tackle the last, somewhat of a join-the-dots affair back to the clubhouse. A solid-enough hole, its fate is sealed both by the majesty of what’s gone on before, and by the modern-day architectural mania for ending the round with a bang. Anticlimax it may be, but after such a thrilling ride through some of England’s most beautiful countryside, it really doesn’t matter.

Royal welcome

Perhaps it is the setting, its forested environs giving it a sense of separation. But traditional as its course is, there is just something different about Royal Ashdown Forest. Of course, the bunker-free challenge is unusual. But it’s not normal to have a kestrel using the clubhouse as a base to patrol neighbouring lawns. Neither does it seem quite right to have one clubhouse building which is home to two clubs; Ashdown’s second course, the West, was originally home to a ladies’ club before a complicated sequence of events brought it in and out of the main club’s stewardship. Today, Ashdown’s second club is called the Society of Ashdown Golfers. It plays only on




the West and has a separate membership of 150. A clubhouse extension has given it its own area within the main building.

Even the landscape, its historic woodlands made famous by AA Milne through his Winnie-the-Pooh books, is a little odd. "This is a heathland course on a thin clay subsoil," says Darnell. "We keep being told by the Sports Turf Research Institute that we shouldn't have heather, fescues and so on. But we do."

Neither is the culture of the place what you'd expect from a traditional, historic private member's club with 'Royal' in the name. The club was awarded the prefix in 1893 in response to the warmth with which it had accommodated military manoeuvres. While 'Royal' golf clubs might have the reputation for being exclusionary, Royal Ashdown Forest is anything but.

"The main difference here is the environment the members create," Darnell asserts. "It is without question the friendliest club I've ever known. Golf can take itself too seriously, but here the members just want to enjoy themselves and the game, and they want visitors to as well. We've been told our weekday green fee of £79 could be a little higher, but the club wants to keep it down because we want other people to come in and experience this special course and location."

And as the course continues to improve, that is looking increasingly like a bargain not to be missed. "The world would be better if more Ashdown-type designs that strictly adhere to nature would be forthcoming," says respected architect Tom Doak. Amen to that. 

HOW WE RANKED ROYAL ASHDOWN FOREST

