

# GOING BACK TO NATURE

THE CLUB'S TWO GOLF COURSES AT WOODCOTE PARK ARE IN THE MIDST OF A MAJOR PROJECT TO RETURN THEM TO AN AUTHENTIC DOWNLAND LANDSCAPE - AS WELL AS IMPROVING THEIR GOLFING QUALITIES.

*Words by Adam Lawrence | Photography by Kevin Murray*



When the Club bought the Woodcote Park estate in Epsom in 1913, and hired golf architect Herbert Fowler to transform it into (at the time) a 27-hole course, the estate was mostly the open chalk downland it had been since time immemorial, when it was grazed on by both livestock and wild animals.

Chalk down is ideal terrain for golf; the thin soil atop the underlying rock is of poor quality, and therefore well suited to growing the fine-leaved grasses that make for the best golfing turf - where the soil is richer, broadleaved weed grasses tend to out-compete the fine fescues and bents that thrive in poor ground.

The great architect Pete Dye once defined golf course architecture as 'making drainage look good'. This isn't a problem here: this ground drains brilliantly as chalk is hugely permeable - the problem that arises for course managers on chalk is often retaining enough moisture in the soil profile to keep the grass alive. As such, this sort of ground enables the architect to be more creative, building holes solely for their golfing value, rather than focusing attention on drainage.

Fowler's courses opened in 1915 to great acclaim from his contemporaries. The renowned golf writer Henry Leach, for example, described the property as "a glorious breezy sweep of uphill and downhill land" and said that the courses were "the best work of [Fowler] that I have seen" - quite some praise for Fowler, who also created the lauded Walton Heath. About £1,000 per hole - an enormous sum



at the time - was spent to build the courses at Woodcote Park, and Leach wrote that £2,000 (equivalent to £150,000) went on grass seed alone.

Fowler built the 27 holes at Woodcote in three loops of nine, but the property was extensively altered during the

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early 1950s to form two full eighteen-hole courses, now known as the Old and Coronation Courses. Despite the alterations, the courses remain relatively true to the vision of their creator - only two greens on the Old Course, the fourth and seventeenth, have been rebuilt since Fowler first designed them over a century ago.

Since then, though, time has been the main perpetrator of change. In particular, tree growth - inevitable when a property ceases to be grazed - has altered the environment ©

from open downland to a more parkland look and feel. However, under the leadership of Course Manager Lee Strutt, and with the assistance of Tom Mackenzie of Open Championship architects Mackenzie & Ebert, the Club is now committed to returning Woodcote Park to a more authentic downland experience.

The original soil is certainly still to be found at Woodcote. Strutt says the property averages six to eight inches of silty loam topsoil, which explains the rate at which the courses achieved a browned, burnt off look after a period of dry weather this spring. This creates a challenge for Strutt and his team, especially as the greens are mostly still Fowler's originals, constructed over a century ago. Nowadays, putting greens are generally built – except on naturally sandy properties – on imported sand and gravel, which ensures consistent levels of drainage and water retention. Architects of the past, however, built their greens out of whatever material they had on site. “At Woodcote Park, Fowler extracted topsoil from pits or hollows close to his intended green sites and pushed it into the shapes he wanted. Golfers can still see the lows [ditches] where he got the material from,” says Strutt.

Mackenzie has led a comprehensive bunker reconstruction process to add some consistency and a vintage appearance that suits the course's age. Bunkers deteriorate, with sand becoming contaminated with chalk and stone. The work on the Old Course now provides golfers with a much more consistent surface to play from, with the correct depth of sand in each bunker. With the manicured surfaces members see from all over the world on television, members' expectations have been lifted considerably, and the course is now able to meet those expectations and offer a much improved playing experience.

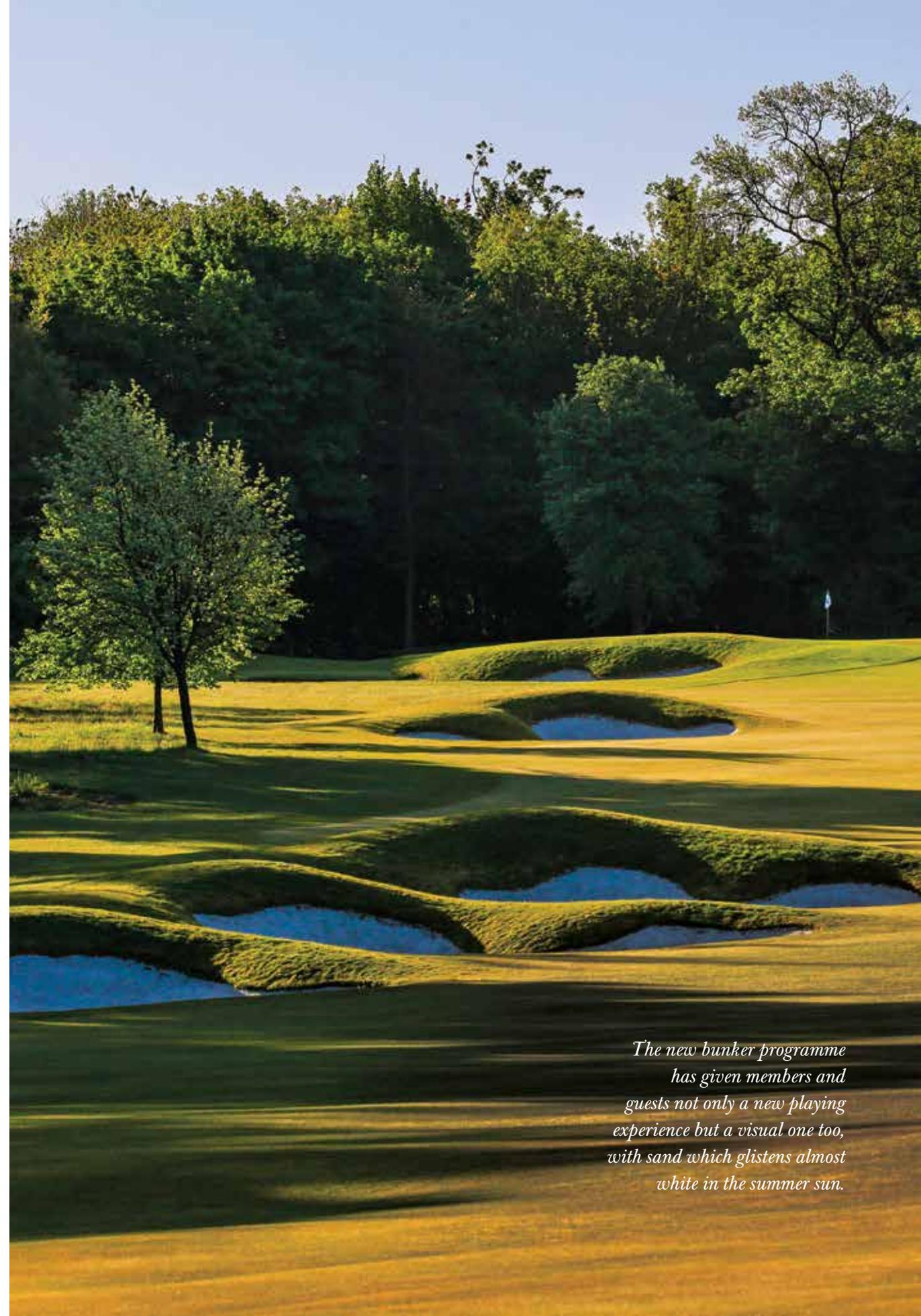
Although the Old course has been played since April 1915, the new bunker program has given members and guests not only a new playing experience but a visual one

too, the sand glistens almost white in the summer sun, and the shapes and positions of the bunkers create a need for a change in playing strategy for even the most regular golfer.

A new par three thirteenth hole, which is currently growing in, has also been created by Mackenzie. The new green has been constructed to mirror the other seventeen, rather than importing sand, something Strutt felt strongly about: “We were very keen to keep consistency. We mirrored the best performing green on the course and replicated that specification.”

Tree removal, while controversial, is an essential part of the downland restoration project, and has been undertaken with the utmost care: “We are working with a tree consultant and our golf course architect to restore the golf courses and estate back to their downland identity, opening up views of the landscape and our beautiful clubhouse,” says Strutt. “Our intention is to remove non-native species where they do not support the estate. Trees will remain in places, but they should be native, naturally occurring species wherever possible.

“By taking out the underbrush and some of the smaller, less healthy trees, we should open up the sightlines, not only of the landscape and clubhouse, but also of the specimen trees that remain. When you take out poor trees, the good ones stand out all the more. Perhaps we can say that we struggle to see the trees for the wood.” ●



*The new bunker programme has given members and guests not only a new playing experience but a visual one too, with sand which glistens almost white in the summer sun.*