

Tandridge Golf Club

Recreating a

Masterpiece

Words Rob Smith | Photography Toby Pocock, Frank Pont, Kevin Murray

No club can afford to rest on its laurels, but investing in a major course upgrade calls for money, brave decisions and a long-term approach. Rob Smith takes a look at what happens when the custodians of Tandridge, an established Harry Colt course in Surrey, decided that it was time for a change...





Harry Colt is considered by many as one of – if not the – greatest golf course architect of all time. He has a larger presence in our Top 100 UK & Ireland list than anyone, and his work has an enduring influence. Colt's portfolio includes Muirfield, Royal County Down and the course often cited as the best in the world, Pine Valley.

There is also enormous strength in depth, and one such less well-known course is Tandridge in Surrey, which has recently benefitted from a lengthy and in-depth upgrade. Tandridge's transformation can be traced back to the club's marketing committee, who deliberated why the course was a gem that was still hidden after 85 years of existence. This echoed thoughts by the long-term planning committee that an upgrade using an external architect should be considered, in order to give a competitive edge both for the satisfaction of members and to continue to attract society and corporate business. The confidence in so doing was buoyed by the arrival of an ambitious new course manager, Neil Baker, with a former club captain, Mark Elliott, taking on the role of course director.

Once the club's general intentions had been agreed by the committee, one

of Elliott's first tasks was to oversee the selection of an architect. A shortlist of four was drawn up, and each was asked to present proposals for the third hole before being interviewed. In late 2009, Dutchman and Colt aficionado Frank Pont was appointed. He had already worked on a number of Colt courses in his native country including Royal Hague and Kennemer, and had been recommended by Henry Lord, the author of *Creating Classics; the golf courses of Harry Colt*.

Together, the two worked on a masterplan, and this was shared with the membership via a series of presentations in the summer of 2010. At the heart of this was the idea of bringing the Colt principles into the 21st Century. These included working with the natural features of the site, ensuring that any landscape changes should be in keeping, the application of links playing characteristics, and playability for golfers of all standards. The impact of time on what had originally been a heathland course was also a factor, and the plan increased the full length to just over 6,500 yards and the par to 71 from all tees.

Standing trial...

With the membership on side, it was agreed to trial the project on three holes with the get-out clause that any

Tandridge Timeline

- **APRIL 2006**
Long-term Planning Committee consider the use of external course architect
- **JUL-AUG 2009**
Invitation to tender for project
- **SEPTEMBER 2009**
Shortlist of architects – presentations and interviews
- **JUNE 2010**
Presentations to members by Frank Pont
- **OCT-DEC 2010**
Work on three trial holes – phase 1 - 3, 4 & 5
- **FEBRUARY 2011**
Feedback from membership on trial holes
- **APRIL 2011**
First issue of bonds – £300,000
- **AUG-OCT 2011**
Phase 2 – work on remainder of front 9
- **JAN-FEB 2012**
Phase 3 – work on holes 10-13
- **OCTOBER 2012**
Phase 4 - work on holes 11 & 12, 16 & 18
- **APRIL 2013**
Second issue of bonds – £126,000
- **AUGUST 2013**
Phase 5 – work on holes 14, 15 & 17

changes could be reversed if deemed unsuccessful. A steering group was formed; its key roles being to work on the proposals, engage contractors for the physical work and keep a close eye on costs and everything related to the project. Work on holes 3, 4 and 5 was undertaken in late 2010 and lasted several weeks. In order to offer a full round, whenever one hole needed to be closed, the club's short-game practice area was used as a replacement par 3.

Over the years, the 3rd had evolved from a relatively straight hole to a dogleg right. The original fairway bunkering had been changed and was no longer in Colt's style. Pont widened the fairway by 10-15 yards to the right by removing several trees, and the original fairway bunker pattern was re-established using Colt's shaping.

The 4th is a typical Colt par 3 with a plateau green surrounded by bunkers. Their sand faces had been lost over the years, and a bunker at the back of the green had been closed. Pont restored the original, high-sand faces and the back-left bunker, giving the hole a far stronger appearance without substantially changing the playing characteristics.

Finally, the par-4 5th had lost several bunkers, and others were no longer in the Colt style. Here, one bunker was removed and all the others re-shaped.

Trees had been allowed to grow in from the left so that the green wasn't visible from the tee. The original Colt style rough-edged sand-face bunkers were all restored, and the view of the green re-instated by pruning and the re-siting of some small trees.

After a few months, feedback was invited from the membership. This gave the committee the confidence and remit to go ahead with the full project, with the major work being conducted off-season over a number of phases. As work continued, the editor of *Golf Course Architecture*, Adam Lawrence, described the project as "Perhaps the most dramatic restoration of a Golden Age golf course yet".

Some of the holes required little change, whilst others received substantial makeovers. One of the most dramatic changes is the new back tee on the club's signature hole, the 14th. Repositioning of the other tees means they are no longer in view whilst playing the previous hole, and the green is now framed by bunkers, some of which had been removed.

"At the heart of all the changes was the idea of bringing the Colt principles into the 21st Century"

According to Iain Dye, who took over as course manager towards the end of the works having been involved all the way through, the new tee was the greatest construction challenge: "This area underwent huge transformation, with thousands of tonnes of soil moved to create a new pathway and the new back tee."

The short hole that follows this now has a far more challenging back tee that adds 40 yards, and the tees on the final hole have been repositioned so they are now at the top of the hill, creating an attractive and dramatic tee shot with the clubhouse in view.

To ease costs, the club split the work between one major contractor and its own greenkeeping staff. Whilst the former worked on landscaping, tee building and the shaping and drainage of the bunkers, the Tandridge team did much of the finishing work, such as the sodding and the sanding.

Battling on...

The unpredictable British weather was perhaps the biggest physical challenge. In August 2012, strong thunderstorms resulted in more than an inch of rain in a day. Some of the bunkers suffered damaging wash-outs resulting in



Above – the 13th's Evolution

Top, the green as played in the 1920s; Middle, the view from the tee prior to the recent upgrade; Bottom, rebunkering work adds much to this character-filled one-shoter

Opposite – The signature 14th

A new back tee was built, and bunkers now frame the green

RINGING THE CHANGES

The following five are just a handful of the clubs all over the UK & Ireland who are also investing in change...

Bearwood Lakes

Even fine new courses are not immune from change. This Martin Hawtree design has undergone remodelling by Guy Hockley on most holes, including new bunkers and tees. The greatest change is the augmentation of the lake between holes 8 and 9, which has made the latter a tough par 3 across water.

Broadstone

The expertise of Frank Pont is in demand, and this classic Colt design from 1914 is another to be benefitting from his assistance, particularly the bunker shaping, tee complexes and some of the green sizes.

Delamere Forest

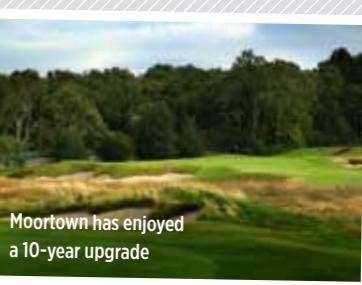
In 2012, the club decided to strengthen the course and reinstate its original heathland character. Mackenzie and Ebert have returned every bunker to the original Herbert Fowler design, and all of the greens have been increased in size to provide additional pin placement options and run-off areas.

Prince's

Overseen by Gary Johnson from European Golf Design, Prince's has been upgraded at a cost of £250,000. More than 90 bunkers were renovated and revetted to encourage the ball to run towards them, and there are two new fairways, the 4th on the Dunes and 6th on the Himalayas.

Moortown

This former Ryder Cup venue has been the subject of a 10-year upgrade by Creative Golf Design. The most recent work has seen the removal of some non-deciduous trees and minor bunker adjustments, and there is some heather regeneration ongoing.



Moortown has enjoyed a 10-year upgrade



A strange law of construction economics is that no matter how high you estimate, it will always cost more. Tandridge paid for the work with the support of its membership through two issues of interest-free bonds. The first raised £300,000, and the second a further £126,000. The reason for the second tranche was that there had been some under-estimation of costs compounded by the storm damage that necessitated a revised approach. By getting the club's own greenkeeping staff involved, these two sums paid for the external work, and

"I'm very happy with all we have been able to do. The course is starting to look better and better"

with visitor income up 10% in the year since completion in what is generally a declining market, the club is already beginning to pay these back.

Although the restoration was undertaken to ensure the long term future of the club, it was inevitable that not everyone would be satisfied with so many changes. Happily, it seems the vast majority approve of most. The club has already had the honour of staging the 2014 English Women's Open Amateur Strokeplay Championship, and the feedback and

Above, before & after...

On Tandridge's attractive par-3 4th, Pont focused on restoring the high-sand faces of the green's surrounding bunkers that had been lost over the years (inset), as well as reintroducing the bunker back left of the green

comments from competitors and spectators alike was overwhelmingly positive, as has been the response from societies and visitors all year. The feeling amongst the members is also very positive, although some have expressed short-term frustration that the effort on the changes has meant the course has not always been in perfect condition. This is perhaps also because members will always be more critical than visitors as they get to see the course 'warts and all'. Therefore, the challenge now faced by Iain Dye and his team is to get everything into a condition that consistently matches the excellent new design. Looking ahead, he says: "Tandridge is unique in my eyes. We are built on sand and perform like a links course. Our land topography offers some fantastic views."

Mark Elliott agrees, adding: "I'm very happy with all we have been able to do. Where the work has settled in on the holes completed first, it's starting to look better and better. Now we need high-quality presentation and maintenance to ensure the gem is polished!"

Whilst the immediate impact is obvious, as with anything that involves disruption, re-modelling, planting and growth, the full glory will only continue to improve with time. For all involved it's certainly been a journey. ■

Frank Pont... The man with the plan

Any restoration project has two key components: analysis and process. At Tandridge, the analysis was easy because we had an old aerial picture of the course when it had just opened, plus on-the-ground historical pictures showing the bunkers' original size and style. We were lucky that many bunkers in the past had been grassed over (the equivalent of mothballing) so it was easy to bring them back. Tandridge is unique for a Colt course in that it originally had close to 250 bunkers, more than any other Colt course I have ever seen. Even Muirfield has about 100 fewer. Not only that, but many of the bunkers were absolutely huge. The greatest challenge was to get the committee and membership to realise what a very special asset they were custodians of, and to convince them that for the real character of their Colt course to re-emerge it was crucial to bring back both a large number of bunkers, but also to restore them back to their original style and sizes.

