

WEST END COURSE REVIEW

Members Presentation and Q & A

February 2021

Introduction

The Greens Committee decided over a year ago that we should conduct a full review of the course, not least because it is something that clubs should do from time to time in any case but also because we were concerned that West End's heathland heritage was in danger of being obscured. So after a lengthy and detailed process and much research, we have produced a report which makes recommendations on how and where the course could be improved. The Greens Committee's Hole by Hole Review will be published in the week beginning 8th of February. The recommendations are open for comment to all members of the club and we hope you will like what the Greens Committee has come up with on your behalf. **Central to everything is that the process should be transparent and open to scrutiny by all our members.**

In carrying out its review, the Greens Committee's two main focuses were:

1. Firstly, to ensure the golf course was set up for the enjoyment of **all** members of the club, no matter their different abilities and
2. Secondly, to focus on our heathland heritage, looking at the course as a whole, to ensure consistency and to create a running golf course in the traditions of a heathland links.

The over-riding principle is that all the recommended improvements to each hole should provide a fair test for golfers of all abilities, while any proposed changes also need to consider the existing topography and the course as a whole. In formulating the course review, we have always looked to what the original design of the course would have been, to ensure that West End's heritage as a heathland course would be preserved for future generations.

There are other considerations of course, not least the need to make the course more welcoming for the handicap golfer and to increase the challenge for the scratch golfer. There are many instances on the course where the challenge has become unfair for our elder and younger members and those of us who are by nature short hitters.

Many of the greens at West End are raised and lend themselves to being transformed back into traditional links-type greens, ie large fringes which are cut to include slopes and allow the ball to roll into short cut hollows and swales, rather than be held in semi-rough, often feet from the pin. Transforming greens in this way wherever possible will also introduce an increased variety in the shots that can be played. It will also make maintenance easier and in doing so, help improve playing conditions. The greens at West End are as good as, if not better, than anywhere around in normal weather conditions.

A real positive is that the fairways in general are already fit for purpose. Because of the heathland turf, the original layout adhered to the principles of a running golf course.

The planting of trees all those years ago has produced as many disadvantages as advantages. When they were planted it was apparently envisaged that only around 50% would survive – in the event around 90% survived. On the plus side, the fir trees give definition to fairways and also provide some protection from wayward shots from other fairways. On the debit side, some trees have been allowed to grow unencumbered and in instances have materially changed how some holes now play, not to mention restricting the growth of natural heather.

We have a good golf course which is well maintained and the proposed improvements, which will follow the principles for a heathland links, can only make it better and more enjoyable for everybody. That is our aim.

Principles for a Heathland Links

The principles for a heathland course are listed below for members to reference:

- Fast running fairways from tee to green
- Entrances to greens accessible by a running shot
- Fringes and surrounds to raised greens cut short to allow wayward shots to run off into greenside swales and hollows
- Encourage growth of heather in existing and new areas
- Bunkers that direct play, not penalise less accomplished golfers
- Cultivation of wild areas where the rough and flowers are allowed to grow
- Longer rough in areas which do not affect play
- Make full use of the natural characteristics of the land

Q & A - What does this mean for West End?

1. Why is this review being carried out and why now?

It has always been the intention to conduct a full review of the course as part of a plan to maintain the course to as high a standard as resources and finances allow. Recent focus has been reserved in the main to re-balancing the books and establishing a solid base from which to operate. West End has not been immune to the far-reaching changes in the financial positions of almost every golf club in the land - annual subscriptions not meeting the running costs of the club, no longer cash rich, a falling membership (up until last year that is), falling income from functions and a general decline in use of the clubhouse are just a few of the reasons why budgets have been very tight indeed.

2. Who carried out the Review?

Part of our plan to overhaul West End's infrastructure was to establish a Terms of Reference for the Greens Committee which includes responsibility for a Course Plan. This has been done and so the Greens Committee began its review of the course last year and has now produced an assessment of each hole, with proposals for alterations where appropriate, based on the principles of a heathland links. Members of the Committee and members of the greens staff took part in several course walks and discussed all aspects of the course from both a visual and a technical stand-point, to ensure that any recommendations were not only desirable but also feasible.

3. What is so special about heathland links?

As is well known, golf courses were originally fashioned by the sea, using the sandy wastes between the sea itself and the better agricultural land further inland, ie the land linking the sea to the land. The major benefits of selecting these links, apart from being available and cheap, were good drainage, flat walking, natural hazards of sandy areas and dunes, excellent turf to produce running fairways and the facility to play unencumbered by the rest of society wandering over the course. As golf grew in popularity and more and more golf clubs were established, not every club was lucky enough to be based near the sea and so the next best alternative for inland golf was to find equivalent land with good drainage and excellent golfing turf. The answer was the establishment of golf on heathland and there are some famous examples of this, from Sunningdale to Woodhall Spa and from Ganton to Walton Heath.

4. What is so special about West End?

Members will know, not least through the club's postal address, that West End was established on ground which was previously used as the Halifax Racecourse, which chose this particular area because of its turf, much in the same way that Queen Anne selected Ascot Heath for the first royal racecourse in 1711. (Interestingly the Ascot turf is cut to a regulation 4 inches for flat racing, which equates to the usual level of the semi-rough at West End.) So the Halifax racecourse was perfect for golf because of the nature of its hardy fast running turf. Additionally, being heathland, it also had the advantage in that heather grows naturally, something which all of the famous clubs mentioned above have in abundance. Indeed the club emblem for Walton Heath is a sprig of purple heather.

5. I have read the principles for a heathland links but how will they apply to West End?

When golf courses became more and more established both by the sea and inland, the accepted blueprint for all early course designers was the Old Course at St Andrews. The main features included fast running fairways, using the natural characteristics of the land to shape fairways, greens and hazards; raised greens which could be approached by a running shot and surrounded by natural run-offs; and tees built next to the previous green. Before the advent of the massive programme of tree planting, West End was pure heathland, the course was open to the elements and the holes were constructed in the main exactly as described above. The principles of a heathland links are already there but in some instances have been hidden over time and of course, the planting of trees has altered the way some holes are now played from the original intention. Though camouflaged in some cases, the principles are already in place and the course plan will merely emphasise the traditional features which are already there.

6. Does this Review recommend the removal of trees from West End?

Trees have become an integral part of West End and provide definition of holes, protection from wayward shots from other fairways and offer scenic beauty. However, our trees, whether in copses, clumps or wooded areas, need to be constantly maintained and this has become less and less of a priority at times for financial reasons and so we need to address this issue. In some areas, it is recommended that clumps of trees need to be removed because of the obstruction that is caused and the Review also highlights places on the course where overhanging branches and unbridled growth of trees not only hamper shot-making but have also created added difficulties for less-accomplished players. This is not a blueprint to remove trees; trees have become an integral part of West End's canvass. It does not however preclude the essential thinning and removal of trees which are creating barriers, encroaching on tees and fairways, or indeed preventing turf growth and perhaps worst of all, inhibiting the growth of heather. You may have noticed, before the latest shutdown, that a lot of work has already been done by a small group of members who have cut down a lot of overhanging branches. The cutting of low branches, especially old ones, back to head height, also addresses an important health and safety issue and we will continue this programme.

7. What is the Course Plan and how will it work?

The Course Plan will detail how the course will look, how it will play and how this will be achieved. For example, players will be able to play a running shot onto every green where that is topographically possible. This principle will be embodied in the Course Plan which will act as a blueprint for now and for the future. The aim is to re-establish West End's heathland tradition and protect its heritage for generations to come.

8. What are the financial implications of implementing the Course Plan?

The work involved in carrying out the Greens Committee's recommendations will be phased in over several years. It's not going to happen overnight. Crucially, one of the important features the course review highlighted is that some of the recommendations will actually reduce maintenance costs. For example, the proposed removal of redundant bunkers will make maintenance cheaper and more efficient. Cutting back the length of grass in the hollows and swales around many greens will also make maintenance easier and by definition also cheaper. Thinning of trees and branches are already part of the green-keeping work plan and there will be no need to purchase any further machinery to carry out this work.

9. Where will I find details of all these plans?

The Course Plan is still in draft form but once agreed and published, it will include a General Statement of Intent, which lays out the guiding principle *that the course will be set up for the enjoyment of golfers of all ages and abilities*. The second principle is an economic one and the third principle is to maintain the integrity of West End as a fine example of a heathland links with heathery surrounds. We will publish the final version in due course and as you can imagine, it would not be a good idea to prescribe all the details within the plan before all the members of the club have had a chance to study and comment upon the Hole by Hole Review. The data collected in the review will be used in conjunction with the principles of a heathland course as the basis for a Course Management Plan. This will obviously involve discussions with the Course manager and his staff to produce a working document which will become a 5 year rolling programme of works which will be owned by Greens staff with progress reviewed monthly by the Greens Committee.

10. How will the Course Plan be carried out?

There is already a course maintenance programme in place. This is agreed and carried out by the Head Greenkeeper and his staff. The difference going forward is that this work will be clearly planned in closer conjunction with West End's overall financial plan and will be organised over a 5 year rolling programme of work, meaning that the roll-out will not all happen at once. The Course Plan and its progress will be monitored by the Greens Committee.

11. The club will be aware of comments about the bunkers. Are they included in the review?

Every bunker on every hole has been included in the review. We know there has been a lot of comment and some criticism about the bunkers on the course. Common themes are that many are too flat and some are too difficult to get out of due to the sand being inconsistent. Further investigation has found that some are in the wrong place, some have edges that have crumbled, some are marooned in the rough and some need to be removed completely. The plan is to create some consistency in bunkering, including the way they look. For example, where it is feasible, the backs of bunkers will be edged with heather.

12. Why is it so important to set down a Course Management Plan?

Part of the answer lies in the current layout that we have inherited. A lot of the course's heathland heritage has been lost over time and needs to be rediscovered before it is too late. Former generations have allowed fashions current at the time to introduce short-term changes which were not always true to the tradition of West End and whose consequences were not fully understood or even recognised. As well as improving the course for play, this is also an opportunity to define what the course should look like now and in the future, to create West End's individual DNA, which will provide the framework for future generations. This will help all officers of the club to understand what they have inherited and will assist greens staff who will also better understand the course and encourage them to embrace and own West End's course plan. It will also prevent changes to the course being made on a whim.

13. What is the role of the Greens Committee in this initiative going forward?

The next step is to publish the results of the Hole by Hole Review. Then the Greens Committee will consider all members' comments and suggestions before publishing a final version. The improvements and recommendations will then be introduced into the greens staff work programme, the Course Management Plan. It is for the Greens Committee to review the work on the course along with the Course Manager who will give monthly reports on progress to the Committee.

14. How do I send in my comments on the review's recommendations?

The Board of Directors have unanimously approved the proposition to improve the course based on heathland principles. We now welcome comments from all members. It is after all your club and although the Greens Committee has been elected to monitor the course on your behalf, your comments and suggestions are crucial to the whole process. Over the past 12 months, a plethora of general comments from members have already been taken into consideration and we are confident that the combination of improving the course in a traditional manner and ensuring it is playable by all ages and standards will be well received by members. Any suggestions to improve the recommended changes would be equally well received. Please send in your comments by 28th February 2021.

To register your comments, please email the Greens Committee at greens@halifaxwestend.golf or by writing to the Greens Chair c/o West End Golf Club.