

# SHORT BUT SWEET

As golf facilities search for their own 'new normal' in an attempt to attract the next generation, Rob Smith returns to a club that is reinventing itself in the very best of ways

The 236-yard par-3 12th is no pushover



A few years ago I very much enjoyed playing in a Mixed Open at what was then Sunningdale Ladies. I was particularly taken by two very positive aspects: the charm and challenge of its attractive but short course, and the informality and lack of fuss in its modest but comfortable clubhouse. Big brother Sunningdale and its two

exceptional Top 100 courses are right next door, and this scaled-down version looked like the perfect introduction and breeding ground for golf on a grander scale.

The original club was founded in 1902 as an antidote to what was then a common problem – that its neighbour was open only to male golfers. A captain

of the club was keen to find somewhere for his wife to play, and this beautiful parcel of heathland right next door was the obvious and perfect location. Harry Colt had recently been appointed as secretary of Sunningdale prior to his metamorphosis into arguably the finest golf course architect of all time. He was already improving its Old course, and it

was he who had a key role in the design of this terrific and very sporty short course, more than two decades before he returned to design Sunningdale New.

Initially, only ladies, and at a push their husbands, could join. In 1932, the Queen Mother became the third female member of the royal family to become club captain. Following the war, men

were allowed to join as associate members, with the full membership option coming as recently as 2010. However, with a declining membership and limited resources in what has become an increasingly competitive market, the club was beginning to struggle a little and so began looking for ways to safeguard its future.

**New blood**

This is where Tom Reid and Kristian Baker enter the story. The two young, successful golf coaches met at nearby Wentworth, where they were based for several years. In the summer of 2018, they teamed up with two of their golfing students, Mark Catton and Dominique Lesourd, each of them a semi-retired entrepreneur. Together, with the quartet's perfect blend of golf industry knowledge and business expertise, they approached the membership with their proposal to purchase the club and transform it into something much more family oriented and inclusive.

Following several open meetings and the associated paperwork, they needed a 75 per cent majority in support to succeed. They were effectively asking the members, some of whom had been at the historic club for more than half a century, to entrust them with its future. Happily, the vote achieved a resounding 96 per cent in favour. Better still, the 4 per cent who were not so sure are still members; a very positive sign.

Following golf's post-lockdown restart in mid-May, they soon attracted 80 new members, many of them from the younger generation. There is a strong female presence, which is something they are keen to maintain.

This *Dragon's Den* project is very much a team effort, with Mark and Dominique far more than simply the financial muscle behind the scenes. Each takes a very active interest and contributes his own experience to the club's evolution. Announcing the launch at the start of this year, Tom said: "Our target is to become known as the epitome of how golf clubs need to be in the future, with the best short golf course in the world."



The 142-yard 9th



Kristian Baker (l) and Tom Reid (r)

**Something for everyone**

Supporting this inclusive, social and youth-focused approach, the cost of an annual subscription for a family is not dissimilar to that of an individual membership at many of the area's leading clubs. There are also plenty of very attractive options for younger golfers, and the club's Get Into Golf initiative is attracting new members and

new golfers all the time. As you would expect from Tom and Kristian's pedigree, coaching is a main focus. This applies both to improving the games of their members and visitors and to introducing newcomers to golf via The Academy.

The plan is to create an international-class outdoor golf facility with a special focus on junior golf, and this will complement the superb, indoor, state-of-the-art Ultimate Golf Studio. Such is the commitment to the future that Tom and Kristian run an Ambassador Programme for a few promising youngsters who they feel will represent the club in a very positive way while enjoying their golf.

Inside the completely refurbished clubhouse with its new kitchen, the head chef is Greg Lewis. He has worked at several Michelin three-star restaurants, including The French Laundry in California, which has twice been awarded Best Restaurant in the World. While you can enjoy excellent golfing sustenance at sensible prices, the aim is also to open the club up into a popular destination for fine dining. The wine list features some excellent Burgundies which are supplied by one of Dominique's businesses, while I can thoroughly recommend the Rebellion Brewery beers which have a slightly shorter journey from nearby Marlow.

The dress code at the club is designed to avoid stuffiness, with the

owners saying that: "It's essential people are made to feel welcome. When new golfers try the sport for the first time it can be expensive and intimidating, but we thrive on being open, inclusive and welcoming."

**"Our target is to become known as the epitome of how golf clubs need to be in the future"**

**Colt's compact classic**

As for the course itself, it is a very entertaining, varied and attractive mix of mainly par 3s and a few short par 4s. The shortest hole is 138 yards, but several of the one-shotters are well over 200 yards and it can still test every element of your game. Dame Laura Davies lives nearby and has enjoyed several rounds here this summer. She says: "There are no

pushover holes – you use every club in your bag and you can play it in less than two-and-a-half hours. It's becoming one of my favourite courses to play."

Once the deal was concluded, the new owners invested in a substantial maintenance programme and brought in Greg Evans, an agronomist who is one of only 70 or so Master Greenkeepers in the world. The course borders three holes on Sunningdale Old, while the 16th green is just 100 yards from its iconic clubhouse. It therefore naturally shares many of the



The 18th green, clubhouse and indoor studio



Another visitor this summer was Colin Montgomerie, who also lives nearby and was clearly impressed. "To say I enjoyed the experience is an understatement. The course was presented in superb condition, with a reminder on nearly every hole of its neighbour, which I consider to be the finest inland course in Britain. It is a true heathland test and every hole offers a new challenge. The new owners have transformed the club and there is a very relaxed and friendly environment."

In golfing terms, the new owners have got off to a flyer and are perhaps three-under after five. Despite one of the wettest winters in decades and the subsequent lockdown, they are already ahead of the game. There would seem to be little reason why they cannot keep this up and achieve their longer-term goals, which, according to Tom, are: "To have a full and happy membership. We want to see families enjoying themselves and creating memories at the club together. Ultimately, we want to be known as an inclusive, premium venue, where you feel welcomed and get strong value for your investment."

Green fees are remarkably modest for the area, and at a time when golf is looking for its next step, there are several elements that look likely to attract the golfers of tomorrow. These include a faster round, an attractive and enjoyable course that is a proper challenge but won't beat you up, affordability, informality and welcome. On all of these very vital ingredients, Sunningdale Heath scores top marks. Short in yardage and short in demands on your time, this thriving, friendly club is certainly not short on fun.

characteristics of its neighbour, especially the heather that looks so fabulous but can wreck your wrists or scorecard. There is a timeless quality here that makes you feel as though you have travelled back a century. It is, in essence, Sunningdale Lite.

**Ahead of its time**

The idea of playing a round in a little over half the time it takes to play on a busy day at some of our more demanding courses is a huge draw. As Kristian says: "Because of the nature of our golf course, you can start a company golf day at 4pm, have a full event and still be home by 10pm. You can do a day's work and have a golf day too."



The clubhouse has been completely refurbished



The club's Get Into Golf initiative has been a great success