

## **Sand Moor Golf Club – A Concise History**

### **The Early Years, 1921-1968**

The Club officially opened in 1926, but it was five years earlier that the club's founder, Henry Barran began to lay out a course, originally of 6 holes, 4 to the south of Alwoodley Lane, and 2 to the north, on land owned by the Barran Trust, probably bought from the Lane-Fox family of Bramham, as was the land of many of the surrounding golf clubs.

The wealth which bought the land, which was to become the Sand Moor Golf Club, was the result of the efforts of Henry Barran's father, John, who had come to Leeds in 1841 and set up a business in both ready-made and made-to-measure clothes, and he had a succession of factories in the City, the most famous architecturally being the "Moorish" building still standing on the south side of Park Square and on St. Paul's Street.

Tradition has it that Henry Barran was motivated to create the new private course by his wife's interest in golf, and friends were invited to join them. During WW1 the land was partly under the plough, and it appeared that Henry's original objective when he bought the land was to farm it. This farming was not successful because of the nature of the land, which was severely undulating in places, almost 500 feet above sea level, and very bare of trees.

Because the soil was mainly sandy and well drained (in contrast to many of the Leeds golf clubs) with suitable grasses already growing on it, a programme of harrowing and heavy rolling to smooth it out as a golf course was undertaken. This terrain makes Sand Moor, in places, like a seaside course, with any errors in shots to the greens being exaggerated and punished, as the ball runs very quickly into trouble.

The course was ready in only nine months. It opened for play in 1923, expanding to 13 holes and eventually to 18. Very quickly a move was made to turn the new course venture into a golf club.

The plans were well under way early in 1924 for construction of the original Clubhouse, which stood not far from the present Moortown Clubhouse and initially shared the driveway from the Harrogate Road.

The major influence in the design of the course was Yorkshire born Dr Alister MacKenzie, who designed the other three major golf courses in the area. Henry Barran knew Dr MacKenzie, as he was a member of Alwoodley Golf Club, and Henry also had connections with Moortown in its early years. The part played by MacKenzie and his brother, Major Charles, at Sand Moor, is confirmed by several facts.

Firstly, the photographs of the original course, and the recollections of members at the time, show that the greens were typical of MacKenzie, large and contoured (often on two levels) whereas other Yorkshire courses at that time, other than the MacKenzie ones, featured small greens. The greens were so severe and so large that they were too difficult to cut and maintain, especially as they had to be mown by 18" hand machines. The lower levels were useful for winter flag placings. All have been altered since the early days. The bunkers were extensive and fringed with penal rough grass.



*The original 2nd green - now flats (on the aptly named 'Sandmoor Green' cul-de-sac).*

Secondly, Dr MacKenzie was a member of the first Green Committee and was nominated as a Vice-President from 1926 to 1930, whilst his brother was a Director for 1926-7.

March 20th 1926, was chosen for the official opening. The legendary Abe Mitchell (the golfer immortalised on the Ryder Cup trophy) was invited to play and, against the bogey card of 76, scored 72. He was accompanied by three other professionals, Messrs. Gadd, Duncan, and Havers, and they were paid £20 each! The term "bogey" was at that time equivalent to "par" now. The word "bogey" then indicated the number of shots required on that day to complete the hole, allowing for two putts.

The first record of a 'Green' Committee is in the Council minutes of November 1925, when the members were Dr MacKenzie, Major Charles MacKenzie and Kolin Robertson. Their task, along with Ted Barnes, the club's first professional and manager, and the greenkeeping staff, was a considerable one. One of Ted's sayings was "laying out a golf course is never finished" and that was true of the 38 years he spent at Sand Moor.



*The 9th, now 10th green – note the size of the left-hand bunker.*



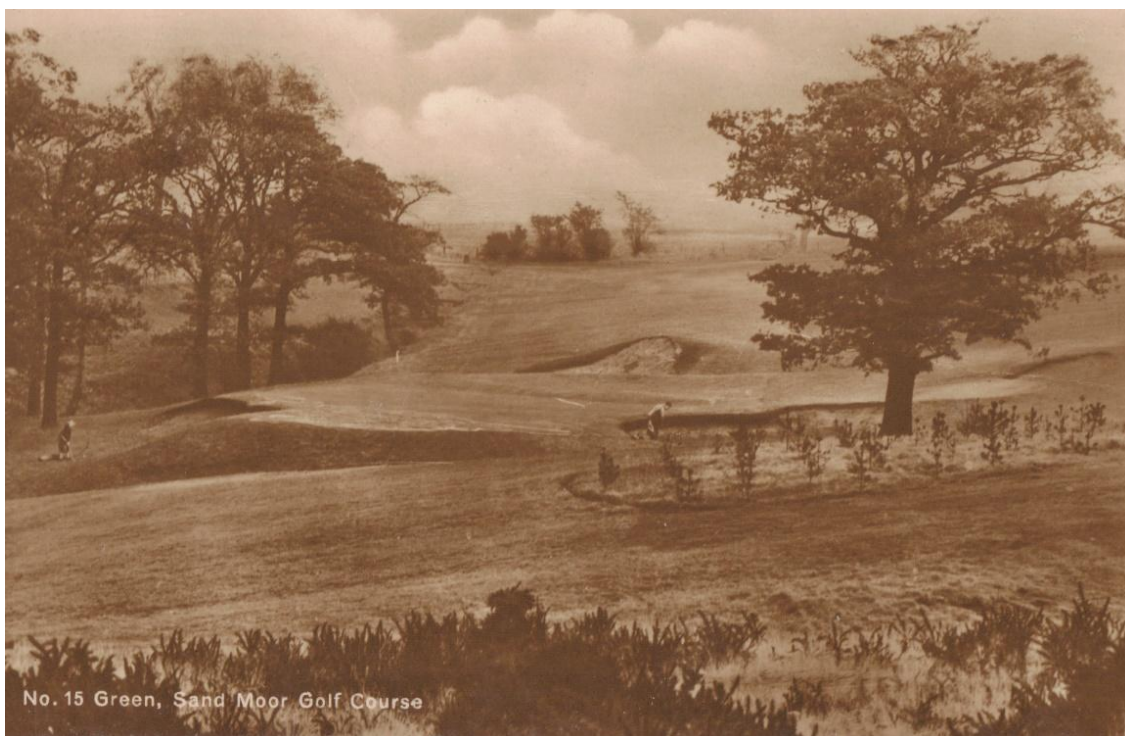
*View from the 10th, now 11th tee – there was no short hole, now 15th, to the left and beyond the Oak tree.*





View from No. 6 Green, Sand Moor Golf Course

*View from the 6th, now 7th green, towards the 15<sup>th</sup>, now 17th. Note the thatch roofed shelter.*



No. 15 Green, Sand Moor Golf Course

*View across the 15th, now 17th, towards the 16th, now 18th tee – there is no front bunker.*

By 1938, a short new hole, the 13th (now the 15th), was established, and two holes (the original 11th and 12th) were combined to make a par five (now the 12th), alterations being made to the fairway, bunker and green. The insertion of the 13th (now 15th) as an extra hole makes it easy to understand why there is a longish walk to the next tee from this green. When complete, these changes made the course 6,549 yards from the medal tees. Along with other changes they also established the pine trees and heather, which dot the course.

To quote an early history of Sand Moor (1947), "many of the greens were freakish" and "grass was a luxury denied those early Sand Moor golfers who spent most of their time hacking the ball along bone-hard fairways from tee to plateau green". As the *Yorkshire Evening News* writer put it in 1956, "All that vanished long since under the magical touch of Ted Barnes...", with the aid of head greenkeeper "Jack" Stephenson he gave the course the benefit of all his skill and imagination and, "proved himself a genius in the art of golf architecture and construction. The course stands as a monument to their skill and care".

Changing circumstances have necessarily resulted in even more significant alterations since that time.

Relevant in the history of the course was Alwoodley Old Hall, which stood between what is now the 14th tee and the 16th fairway. The original house is thought to have been built before Norman times by Saxon chief Aethelwald, the man who gave the Alwoodley locale its name. The Hall was first built in the 12th century, located on the site of a previous mediaeval house which had been recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086. A postcard view taken in the Club's early days carries the date 1640. Building of the Jacobean, cut stone, mansion was possibly the work of Sir Gervase Clifton, a friend of King Charles 1, who bought the Manor in 1638. The last rebuild was in the 1820's and, until it's demolition in 1969, from the early years of the golf course it accommodated some greenkeepers and their families.



*Looking back from the 14th, now 16th green to Alwoodley Old Hall – the extensive garden area projection was OoB.*

The public footpath from Alwoodley Lane alongside the practice ground, across the 18th tee and down through the wood and across the 16th fairway, was the road to the Hall. "The coaching turnpike between Leeds and Harrogate ran along what is now Sand Moor Drive,

crossed in front of the original 7th [now 8th] green and went down past Alwoodley Old Hall into a valley [now Eccup reservoir] then on to Harewood Bridge".

One of the most important scenic attractions of the course is the beautiful view over Eccup Reservoir, especially from the 9th tee, but also providing a lovely setting all the way along the 11th, 12<sup>th</sup>, and 13th holes. Until the 1830's all Leeds water was taken from the River Aire near Leeds Bridge, pumped up to the top of the town (now the St. John's Centre) and allowed to flow back down to the yards and streets where most of the population lived. Cholera forced a change of plan!

A water company was formed to create the reservoir at Eccup and it was completed in 1840, but only one third of the present size. The reservoir was enlarged in 1897, serving as a holding reservoir for water pumped from the Washburn Valley and more recently from the river Ouse. We should be thankful that the golf course land was protected from development because its slopes were part of the catchment area and housing might cause pollution.

### The Move North, 1969

In the 1960's the greatest upheaval in the history of the Club was put in motion. The aim was to move the Club totally to the north side of Alwoodley Lane, including the building of a new Clubhouse, the creation of four new holes, (by acquiring extra farmland and a cricket pitch), to replace those lost on the south side. There was pressure on the Club because the lease on the land was running short, expiring in 1976. The Barran Trust had indicated it would not be willing to renew it, as Mrs. Barran wished to sell at least some of the land for housing, namely that on the south side of Alwoodley Lane. It was a major decision, but the move north was essential for the future of the Club.

Help and advice was obtained from Henry Cotton, various golf professionals, and members, but above all from the Head Greenkeeper, Bob Barnes, who had to undertake the work. Henry Cotton was paid £100 for his advice. The newly designed course covered 110 acres and measured 6,429 yards with a par of 72 (the present 6th being a par 5 then) and SSS of 71. There were five new greens in total, the present 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 13th, and 18th. The first four of these were brand-new holes. The new 18th green was built from material excavated for the Clubhouse and the tee was moved back, hence the blind second shot. The present putting green was formerly the old 16th green.

The new Clubhouse facilities were officially opened on September 28th, 1968. At the same time the first moves were being made to obtain the present practice ground and this was achieved and brought into use during 1973. The lack of a proper practice ground must always have been one of the main drawbacks of the old course.

### Continuing Improvements up to the present day

Ambitions to have the best possible facilities were not yet finished, the Clubhouse remained a focus of development. In 1984, the Club proposed extensive internal alterations and refurbishment.





SMGC clubhouse circa 1995

Even this was not the end of the improvements as, in 1996-97, the need to cater for more visitors, to help the finances of the Club, led to further extension of the Kitchen facilities and Dining Room. Refurbishment of the Locker rooms and showers followed soon after. This regular process of improvement continues. A clear sign of the Club's ambition to create top-class facilities to accompany those on the playing front.

In 2001, it became apparent that storage for the increasing amount, and size, of specialised and expensive machinery deemed necessary to maintain the course was inadequate. The restricted 1960's concrete garage was too small, being supplemented by two steel containers. The facility shortcomings also required greens staff to change in a Portakabin, whatever the weather, and use Clubhouse toilets. Provision of new facilities and an extended greens yard resulted.

An increasingly uncoordinated approach to Course development and maintenance, by well-meaning individuals, led to the preparation of a 'Course Policy Document' as a future reference standard for the greens staff and the ever-changing Greens Committee personnel. Accordingly, it was considered an external consultant should be used for future Course development proposals and Andy Watson Golf Design were appointed to prepare a feasibility for the entire course. Subsequent work was limited to comprehensive bunker and sprinkler renewals, and after a well-received trial on the 1st hole, a phased 4-year programme through to 2015 rebuilt all bunkers, except those at the 18th green.

One practice ground innovation introduced was the provision of range balls, one of the earliest to appear at a member's club that was freely available. For many years the practice ground had lacked an indoor teaching studio and covered hitting bays that could be used throughout the year, the new facility was eventually procured and completed in 2015. The

facility was further updated in 2019, together with provision of nets, an extended chipping green, and prepared grass tee areas.

A caravan had originally served as the halfway house, then upgraded to a log cabin in 2000. This was burned down in an arson attack. Planning restrictions and drainage considerations informed the decision to rebuild on the existing site, with a more substantial structure, reflective of the clubhouse in form, and completion was achieved early in 2019

Trees, particularly deciduous species, that had been planted in abundance in the early 1970's were becoming a cause of concern. At the time of planting the future consequences were not understood. They had never been thinned out and, with the resulting growth and self-seeding over the following decades, they were having an increasing impact on the golf course environment and its maintenance.

Although featured on 'FineGolf' as one of the best 200 'running golf courses' in GB and Ireland, the original moorland and heathland qualities of Sand Moor were inexorably being lost as the course developed a parkland feel.

Successive Committees had been reluctant to court any controversy, but significant action was long overdue, also prompted by the obvious success of what other notable local courses had already done. Independent specialist advice was needed, and John Nicholson was appointed in late 2017 to prepare an arboriculture report on prospective tree works, which served to bring prevalent problems into sharp focus.

The tree work undertaken in 2018 ultimately had a transformative impact in restoring views across the landscape. Importantly it allowed subsequent action to improve the greens and other in-play areas of the course to proceed, with better prospects of a successful outcome, given the increased sunlight and airflow resulting from the more open aspect. Other problems, such as invasive plant infestation could also be better addressed, particularly Himalayan Balsam, first identified as a major problem over a decade earlier, with nothing meaningful having been done to stop it spreading exponentially.

The removal of trees had also laid bare the bland perspective of some of the new holes introduced at the time of the move north. Ken Moodie of Creative Golf Design (CGD) was initially engaged in 2018 to suggest improvements to the 18th hole. The CDG remit was expanded to prepare an outline report for all 18 holes, as a blueprint for future course development, with more detailed designs for those holes of most concern. Works to holes 2, 6, 11, 12, 13 and 15, comprising variously, bunkers, mounding, and tees, have been progressed since.

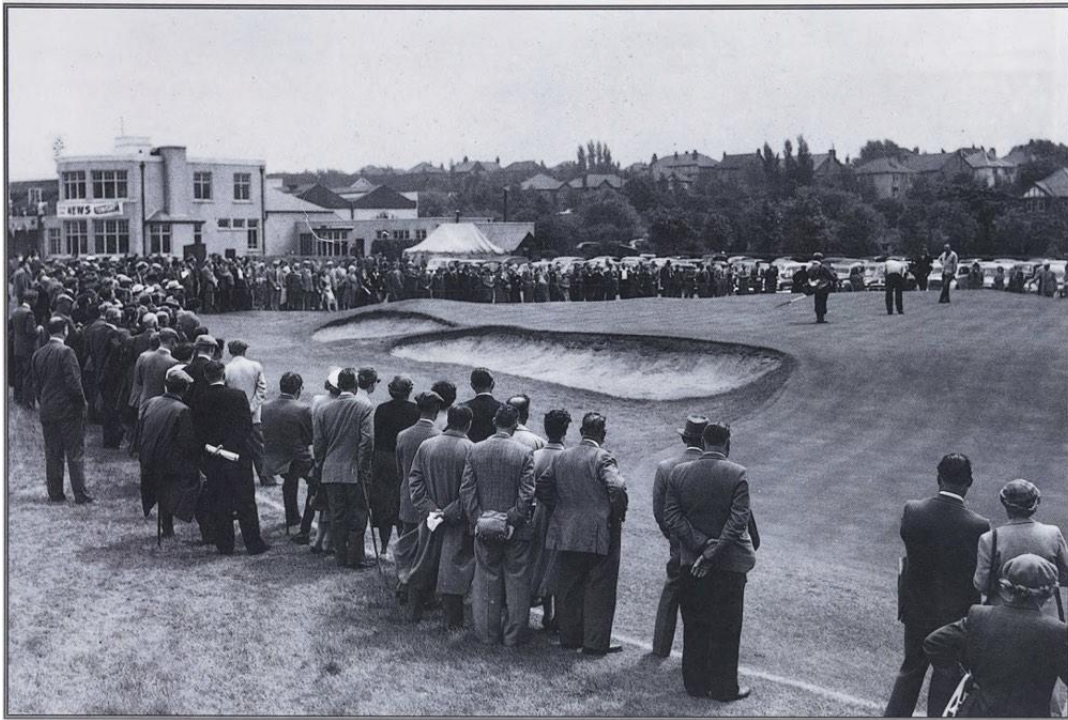
The golf course is currently rated in the top 10 in Yorkshire, and it is hoped further planned developments will serve to maintain this status.

### Significant Professional Events

In 1930, the *Yorkshire Evening News* asked permission to stage its £1,000 professional tournament at the Club. Through to the late 1950's Sand Moor continued to host this event



alternately with Moortown. The events attracting considerable crowds. Many of the top professionals were attracted to enter because the tournament took place just before the Open Championship, providing excellent preparation for the greatest challenge.



*Crowd scene on the final green of a Yorkshire Evening News Tournament.*

There were also important exhibition matches, including one in 1951, involving professionals Bobby Locke and Max Faulkner (Open Champion at the time), playing against amateurs A.T. Kyle and R.J. White.



*Exhibition match, 1951, the four players, R.J. White, Bobby Locke, Max Faulkner, A.T. Kyle.*

The year 1983 saw the recognition of Sand Moor's claims to be a championship course with the staging of the £60,000 Car Care Plan International. Top golfers playing included Seve Ballesteros, Bernhard Langer, Sandy Lyle, Tony Jacklin (newly appointed Ryder Cup Captain), Ian Woosnam, Sam Torrance, and Manuel Pinero. The winner was Nick Faldo (272), very narrowly from local boy, Howard Clark (273). It was Faldo's third victory in as many weeks. Regrettably, the event did not return in subsequent years as the demands of tournament organisers, such as removal of the hilltop on the 18th hole to avoid a blind second shot, could not easily be met.



*Nick Faldo with the Car Care Trophy.*

### Significant Amateur Achievements

The Club has a proud history in this regard, for teams and individuals, at County, National and International levels. Twice English Champion Club. Two Amateur Champions, an English Amateur Champion, and four Walker Cup players. The representative and playing achievements of the Club and its members are catalogued on the impressive honours' boards in the Clubhouse entrance foyer.



Stuart Cage, English Amateur Champion 1992; Mrs J. Groombridge, Lady Captain 1993; Mr R. Wilcock, Captain 1993; Iain D. Pyman, The Amateur Champion 1993.