

# The North Gloucestershire Golf Club, 1910 - 1922

By Eric Miller

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*This article is based largely on research carried out by Peter Smith, with additional material provided by Alan Gill and others*

[Illustration]

The Golf Course, with Crippetts Lane in the middle distance.  
The house marked with a cross is Ferncliffe

## ***1910: plans first mooted***

Plans to open a golf course at Leckhampton were first publicised in the Autumn of 1910, when it was announced in the *Echo* that Mr A J Hobley, the professional of the Cheltenham Golf Club at Cleeve Hill, had selected the various holes at the proposed new club, originally to be called simply 'The Leckhampton Golf Club'. The first tee and the club house were to be on Leckhampton Lane at the Crippetts turning, with the first five holes and the last four on comparatively level land 'to suit elderly or non-strenuous players'.

In December 1910 the Blackhedge Farm estate was sold to Messrs E Baring and Harold A Webb and Roland J Webb<sup>1</sup>. The estate comprised 267 acres, including pastures, Common Furze Wood, The Bittams, Blackhedge Grove and three acres of pasture in Shurdington. In the preceding month trees to the value of nearly £1,000, which might have been an embarrassment to golfers, were auctioned and cut down. The Webbs, from their office at 10, Colonnade, took the opportunity of advertising for sale 'Building sites commanding unrivalled views and abutting on the New Golf Links on Leckhampton Hill'.

By mid-January 1911 the links were nearly ready and the secretary of the club, Major Estcourt Harrison, was dealing with enquiries for membership and advised anyone visiting the links to take the tram to the Malvern Inn and then walk along Leckhampton Lane. A later advertisement stated that the club house was 'two miles from the Town Clock'.

[Illustration]

The Golf Club House at the corner of Leckhampton Lane and Crippetts Lane  
later known as the Red Bungalow, today Green Acres

In March 1911 an article in the *Echo* gave a description of the course. It referred to Crippetts Road as being 'celebrated as the prettiest walk or drive near Cheltenham ... if no one be endangered [a player might] "fire" over it and the parallel stream'. 'A short mashy stroke' would reach the 4th green – a strenuous hole with a rise of 150 feet. Just opposite Hill Grange on the Birdlip Road an iron would put the ball on to a 'most romantic and nature-provided green with high banks on all sides'. At 600 feet above sea level 'the exhilarating air bucks the player to a high point of energy'. Expense was no object in creating the 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th holes but 'a badly pulled shot may hit a passing motor car'. A bay in the Blackhedge Woodland offered 'an ideal spot for a picnic and just the place to open the luncheon basket and boil the kettle'. Three

good shots down the Great Breach brought a fair player to the 15th and in sight of the club house across the woods, where 'nothing but a restful field separates the player from the 18th hole, the golf house and tea.' Certainly it is difficult today to envisage how the course looked in its heyday, though the photograph on the previous page gives some idea. One Leckhampton resident recalls that there used to be bunkers where Burley Fields Ponds have since been created.

In the Society's 'Bendall Archive' is a large map of the Blackhedge Estate on which an unknown person has drawn roughly in red pencil the 'plan of new golf course to be formed at Leckhampton'. The document thus appears at first sight to be the vital piece of the jigsaw which the County Record Office lacks. However, the layout of the eighteen greens differs in detail from that described in the *Echo*. Doubtless there were several attempts to devise the best route before Mr Hobley gave his final recommendation, and in any case there were subsequent reports of alterations and improvements to the original course. The map on page 28 therefore traces the general circuit followed by the golfers, based on all available sources.

Work proceeded apace during December 1910 and January 1911 to make the course ready. Although wet weather held up the laying of turf, draining, hedge-cutting, tree-felling, mole-catching, ditching, building the golf-house and the professional's shop and 'gravelling the motor-car enclosure' all went ahead. By April 1911 the links were in full swing and open too for play on Sundays, though no caddies were allowed then. The professional was a Mr Cecil Hobley (presumably a relative of Mr Hobley of the Cheltenham Golf Club) and he was busy coaching pupils. A steward was appointed in the club house.

A committee was formed, comprising Messrs F F Leaver, L W Barnard, G P Hopcraft, W H Hudson, T Bence, A Milne, S H Healing, W Bell Haworth and P Haddock, while Major Estcourt Harrison acted as Honorary Secretary and Treasurer. In April 1912 a private company was formed with a capital of £2,000 and a registered office in the Colonnade, Cheltenham. The name of the club was changed to the North Gloucestershire Golf Club and the directors were E Baring and the Webb brothers, A J Vereni (who was also Honorary Secretary of the club). It was reported that the 'revised' links were much appreciated, with easier gradients and larger greens. Improved drainage and the use of horse-drawn mowers 'made an enormous difference' to the fairway. A new professional, Mr Lloyd, was appointed, and competitions were held for men and ladies. Later in the month an ex-champion golfer, Mr Hutchings, visited the course. He liked the alterations and 'astonished the natives' with some tremendously long drives.

During 1913 there were reports of more competitions and a silver cup was competed for monthly. The officers of the North Gloucestershire Golf Company Limited and the club's officials were by then

Directors: Messrs Edward Baring (Chairman), A J Verini, A Webb and E J Webb.

Company Secretary: Mr Edward Baring, Office, Montpellier Chambers, Cheltenham.

Captain: W Bell Haworth

Hon Secretary: Colonel Newall, Club House, Leckhampton

Committee: Messrs W Bell Haworth (Chairman), E M B Joyce, A Milne, W Baring, H A Webb, R J Webb and A T Verini

Professional: Mr C Lloyd

1914 was probably the most outstanding year in the history of the club. The club house (said to have been formerly a brick-built barn) had been completed and for Easter Monday an exhibition match was arranged between two famous champion players and the club professional, who was now a Mr Pearson. Mrs Pearson, the stewardess, had arranged lunch and tea for 200

hundred people. Then in July came the highlight of the club's history. A 36-hole match between Harry Vardon, famous British and American Champion, and Edward Ray, another champion. Edward Ray won the competition in the presence of what the writer called 'a motor car crowd'. Ray completed his morning round with a score of 62, said to be 16 strokes under bogey. The *Cheltenham Chronicle Graphic* printed some marvellous pictures of the play at the April and July matches including one of the members outside the club house. Another photo shows the players crossing the bridge – over the ravine which can still be seen below The Bittams on the way up to the Crippetts. The late Jean Bendall related that her father, Alfred Bendall, acted as a sort of 'honourable caddy' for Vardon.

### ***1915 - 1918: decline and decay; part of course sold***

The First World War all but finished the club's existence. During 1915 play continued but there are few reports of activities. In early 1916 (and again in October) 100 acres of land abutting Church Road and Crippetts Road were put up for auction. Two small lots were to be grazed by sheep only and the golf club was to retain the right to play over the fields and to cut and mow them if necessary. Grazing was allowed on the remaining five lots, without concession to the golfers. In July over 200 trees, mostly in Common Furze Wood, were auctioned as timber.

In July 1917 it was announced that the entire freehold estate of Blackhedge Farm – 107 acres, including the former club house – was to be auctioned. It appears that this was the end of the club, though there was then no announcement to that effect.

In July 1918 another sale was announced in the *Echo* of the remaining lower portion of Blackhedge Estate and again the club house ('Golf Bungalow') with a description of the accommodation showing that it was by then a private dwelling. Amongst the relevant legal documents at the Gloucestershire Record Office is a Purchase Agreement dated August 1918 and headed Baring-Webb Building Estates, which shows that Mr William David Farrar<sup>2</sup> had purchased three of the lots. There was no mention of the bungalow, but according to the *Echo* some of the lots were withdrawn from sale and negotiated privately. It was evidently then that Mr Farrar bought the bungalow. Land Registry documents dated 1928 showed that he had absolute title to woodlands and land in Crippetts Road as well as to what was by then called Red Bungalow.

### ***Creation of a nine-hole course***

Following the end of the war a letter appeared in the *Echo* in June 1919 appealing for the golf club in Leckhampton to be resuscitated. In reply, Mr Farrar, writing from the Red Bungalow, said that if a committee could be formed he would award a competition prize and invited anyone interested to a meeting at his bungalow. As a result a strong committee was formed with Mr A Milne of Fairlands, Leckhampton Road, as secretary. An advertisement in the *Echo* invited membership and announcing that nine holes of the old golf course would be opened on August Bank Holiday – surprisingly quick work!

A further advertisement in September said that subscriptions up to March 1920 would be 2 guineas and that Mr C Lloyd had returned as professional. There was no further news of the club in the *Echo* until 1921 when it was advertised again with the old title North Gloucestershire Golf Links, now sporting a nine-hole course opposite Hill Grange Hotel, a fact which the hotel itself mentioned in its own publicity. In June however, the hotel was sold and the location of the club ('a sporting course on the level') was pinpointed as being opposite Rockholm.<sup>3</sup> These buildings are marked on the map on page 28.

The last local mention of the club was in October 1921, when it was described as being opposite Rockholm and 10 minutes up from the tramway terminus. It was not listed in *'The Golfer's Handbook'* after 1921, though a photograph of the course, similar to that shown on page 29, appeared in the Great Western Railway's travel handbook *Holiday Haunts* for the 1922 season.<sup>4</sup> On 7 December 1922, Edward Baring and Harold Arthur Webb gave notice that the company was in voluntary liquidation. 1922 therefore saw the end of the club and of golf in Leckhampton. It was in 1922 that the Lilley Brook course was opened, and its secretary was the above-mentioned Mr W A Milne.

### ***Postscript***

Today, opposite the house called Leckhampton Grange, across a five-barred gate and beside a track leading over fields and down the hill, is a ruined wooden summer house, some 33 feet long, 15 feet wide and twelve feet high to the apex of its roof. It incorporates a concrete-floored verandah next to which is a flat area of grass, now invaded by nettles, edged with a rockery. It is sturdily built, with oak pillars and some attractive architectural details, such as the carved finials at either end of the roof. On one side, windows would have offered a view of the valley (now obscured by trees) and there were also windows at the verandah end. The cream and brown paint scheme of the interior, separated by a black line, can still be plainly made out. This must have been the hut to which members reported before teeing off on the nine-hole course, perhaps hiring clubs too and maybe drinking tea prepared on a stove near the inner entrance whose flue still hangs loosely from the wall near the inner entrance. It is nevertheless possible to imagine how it might once have looked (see below).

It is not absolutely certain that this was the actual or only club house, however. Further along on the same side of the road is a house called Shrublands, which Mary Paterson (who was brought up nearby at Craigside) recalls was traditionally known as the 'Club House', though no written evidence that this is so has come to light. Close to the summer house is an even more ruinous hut, in which groundsman's equipment could have been kept.

### Sources

*The Gloucestershire Echo*, 1911-1922; *Cheltenham Looker-On*, 1910-1911; *Cheltenham Chronicle and Graphic*, 1914; *Annuaire*, 1913; Nisbit's *Golf Year Book*, 1914; *Golfer's Handbook 1921*, pp 393-4; *Who's Who in Cheltenham*, 1911.

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> The latter were coal merchants with other business interests in the area, including (as we have seen earlier) the Battledown Brick Works and the Cheltenham Golf Club. A photograph in *'Battledown Tiles – the story of Webb Brothers'* shows a fireplace at the North Gloucestershire Golf Club made of Battledown fireplace tiles.

<sup>2</sup> Also a coal merchant: see following article

<sup>3</sup> Hill Grange is now known as Leckhampton Grange, and Rockholm is the next house up the hill.

<sup>4</sup> With acknowledgements to Geoff North.