



With massive investment by its new owners in the golf course and the clubhouse facilities, **Gatton Manor** is now ready to test the best golfers throughout the year

To the Manor reborn

BY NICK BAYLY

You only need to pull up to the smart new entrance to Gatton Manor to know that a wind of change is blowing down the leafy lanes of this most picturesque of Surrey golf clubs.

The coat of paint on the new boards that welcome you through the club's portals still has that fresh look about it – a telltale sign that there is a new name above the door of the clubhouse's licensed bar.

Gatton Manor's new owners, Irish businessman Patrick Kiely and his wife Belinda, have clearly spent their money on more than just paint. As you make your way up the driveway towards the 18th century building that houses the hotel and the clubhouse, the newly-laid tarmac under your wheels and the tasteful oak wood signage on the course, all offer a clear indication that this is a club on the move.

Located on the Surrey/West Sussex border, some five miles south of Dorking, Gatton Manor's incarnation as a golf club came in 1969, when the hotel's original owners decided to expand the range of leisure facilities on offer. Experienced Canadian architect John D Harris was called in to carve out an 18-hole championship course from the mature Surrey woodland, and his vision and skill has ensured that the course remains as true an examination of ability today as it did when it opened 37 years ago.

As is often the case in these scenarios, after over three decades of successfully

managing the business, the owners ran out of inspiration, and the investment that was needed to keep both the course and the clubhouse in tip top condition evaporated with it.

When the whole operation came up for sale in 2004, there was, not surprisingly, a huge amount of interest in Gatton Manor, whose potential was there for all to see. The ultimately winning bid came from the Kielys, who were delighted to find a residential golf property in the Home Counties that was affordable and, as Patrick himself describes, one that 'ticked all the right boxes'.

And it's not hard to see which boxes he means. Located within a stunning 200-acre estate that would be a delight to walk through, even without a set of clubs on your back, the setting is hard to better. With a set of clubs on your back the view changes somewhat, but the 6,629-yard layout presents no less of an endlessly enjoyable challenge, with no two holes alike.

Tree-lined fairways of an ever-changing narrowness help concentrate the mind right from the off, while a multitude of natural hazards, including lakes, ponds, streams and ditches, place a further emphasis on accuracy and comprehensive course management. Add to that some notoriously small greens – many of which are tilted and contoured to varying punishing angles – and you have a course to quicken the pulse at every turn.

Highlights are too many to mention here, but few will forget the signature 6th, a 370-yard par four that looks fairly innocuous off the tee. It's only when you reach the landing

spot of a perfectly-struck drive that the reason for its stroke index one is properly revealed. With a stream crossed by two bridges meandering down the left-hand side to avoid, and a raised green heavily-guarded by bunkers to negotiate, only the purest of approaches will yield up the potential of par or better.

With par threes coming in quick succession at the second, fourth and seventh holes, you need to have your irons in order from the word go at Gatton, while big hitters will want to open their shoulders at the first of the course's four par fives, the 510-yard 8th, while the 443-yard 9th is one of the longest par fours to be found.

Gatton's new owners are clearly taking pride in going the extra distance to keep their guests happy, but now they are making them do the added yardage, following an extension to the club's notorious par five 17th. It wasn't that short before, at 585 yards, but following the creation of a new teeing area the hole now measures a whopping 645 yards. It can justly lay claim to being the longest in the South East again, having held the record when the course first opened in the 1970s. US Tour pro Scott Dunlap recently played the course and took driver, driver, 7-iron to reach the green, so that gives an idea of the challenge facing us mere mortals!

The par four 18th is widely regarded as one of the best closing holes around, with BBC commentating legend Peter Alliss understood to be one of its most fervent supporters. There's only a narrow margin of error off the tee, thanks to encroaching



trees on either side, while the raised green is guarded by a phalanx of tall pines that almost threaten to encircle the green entirely.

The changes that will be most apparent to past visitors – and which have resulted in the arrival of 60 new members to the club

since last year – include measures to tackle the perennial problem of winter golf. In years gone by, the club gained a reputation as being a wet course, largely due to the clay subsoil that holds in the water, despite being serviced by a plethora of ponds, streams and rivers. The new management team

recognised this issue and have invested a six-figure sum to address it. In early September 2005, a substantial programme of drainage works began, with the objective of providing a drier course for winter golf. Seven months on and huge improvements have been made, including the reinstatement of two existing

ponds, the re-opening of a number of old ditches and the creation of new ones, and the excavation of existing ponds. As well as improving drainage during the winter, the new works will also help to improve irrigation during the drier summer months.

The team at Gatton is being further strengthened next month with the appointment of new course manager Paul Hobden, formerly of The Wisley.

Other golf-related improvements include a new chipping green, which comes into play in April, while planning application has been submitted for a 12-bay covered practice facility on the club's existing driving range. The club's new PGA professional, Rob Humphrey (ex-Richmond GC) is just the man to get your swing back in working order, while the pro shop is stacked with a wide range of branded clothing and accessories.

With weekday green fees from April to October starting at just £27 per round – and £14 for a twilight round – it is not surprising that this welcoming club is a popular draw with visiting golfers and societies, as well as providing a comfortable home to a growing and loyal membership.

The golf course is only part of the attraction at Gatton, where the on-course investments have been matched by money spent on the 18-bedroom, 3-star AA rated hotel and clubhouse facilities, including the complete refurbishment of the bar and restaurant areas, and the redecoration of the changing rooms, where new lockers have recently been installed.

The manor itself was originally the Dowager House of the Abinger Estate and

today retains much of the character of the 18th century, with oak paneling creating a truly country house atmosphere. The hotel also boasts extensive business and conference facilities, function rooms for weddings and private family events, and a fitness studio.

The club also has future plans to offer further residential accommodation and extend the golf and leisure facilities.

Patrick and Belinda Keily are clearly an ambitious couple with ambitious plans, but with a keen eye for detail and a fine sense of what makes golfers tick, I have no doubt that the future of Gatton Manor is in safe hands for current and future generations.

CLUB OPEN DAYS

Gatton Manor is hosting a series of Membership Open Days over the coming weeks - March 19, 22, 26 and 29 - comprising a free round of golf, complimentary coffee and bacon roll and a golf clinic. To pre-register for any of these days please call the golf reception on 01306 627555.

CLUB MEMBERSHIP

Throughout March, the club is waiving the joining fee (worth £375) on all new memberships. For enquiries on membership, society bookings or tee times at Gatton Manor call 01306 627555, email golf@gattonmanor.co.uk or visit www.gattonmanor.co.uk.