



The insiders' view on golf club membership



Want to know what some of our industry's most innovative and highly qualified professionals think? From the grass roots of the game to some of our most **exclusive clubs** we canvassed opinion and **real-life experience** from far and wide to **gain a deeper understanding of this nuanced subject**

ROB'S STORY: The work we have carried out in recent years under the stewardship of Martin Ebert,

including renovating the entire course and the practice facilities, was all about looking to the future. We have a limit of 425 members. This, we feel, gives us the balance needed to service daily fee, lodge guests and members.

Like most clubs we have seen a significant increase in membership applications and as we stand we have 315 on the waiting list.

Prince's is in a position where we don't have to rely on membership revenues but we still like to have a small membership.

There are not many links courses which have accommodation on site and being situated just an hour-and-a half from London is an added bonus.

The big driver for us is making sure people stay and play. What we find is that if the hotel is full, then we can keep the membership subscriptions to a level that the members are happy with.

The cost for full membership is £2,200. This represents fantastic value considering we have 27 holes of championship golf. I know that a number of clubs have struggled to cope with the demand for golf brought on by Covid but the fact we have 27 holes gives us the flexibility and additional availability needed to manage members and guests.

What does the future of membership look like?

At present golf clubs should have a pretty strong membership base but it is important to ensure that this increased interest in golf is not taken for granted.

Green fees should not be discounted to a level where members feel they have no value in their membership.

If clubs are struggling it may be worth looking at reciprocal arrangements or discount rates with local clubs. This gives variety and increased value to a membership.



GENERAL MANAGER



Name: Rob McGuirk

Role: General Manager at Prince's Golf Club

About: Rob and his team oversee the running of the historic Kent links and its three 9-hole loops: Dunes, Shore and Himalayas

DIRECTOR

Name: Chris Knight PGA

Role: Director at The Revenue Club

About: Chris and his team offer independent visitor expertise to 120 clubs in the UK and Ireland to help maximise value and revenue through technology and customer data



CHRIS'S STORY: Golf clubs now have more data around tee bookings due to Covid and one of the big things is how they use that data to improve their membership offering and the general golf offering

overall. If you have, say, a seven-day member paying £2,000 a year and an intermediate member paying £800, and they are both trying to book a peak time – i.e. a weekend morning – then I don't think it's fair that someone who pays £800 has the same booking rights as someone who is paying £2,000.

In that case, if your tee-sheet is at maximum capacity, the club may want to look at changing the lead time based on the member category to ensure value is provided to that member. Now that golf clubs have all this data, they can't just say 'we are busy on Saturday!'

Clubs have had a massive swell in membership enquiries over the last year but are they capturing the details of all those enquiries and re-marketing to those people even if they don't join? At a lot of clubs, you walk in and ask about membership but they don't take your name, number or email. That information needs to go into a sales funnel and that customer needs to be managed. You can't wait for someone to walk in waving £1,000 at you. I expect a lot of clubs have missed opportunities because they have not managed the sales. I think there's still work to do on that front.

What does the future of membership look like? For me, a membership, at its core, is still about the course. People often forget that. And it needs to be a place where you want to go. There will be places that survive on the back of being an old boys' club because they are great courses but, for the wider market, it has to be more than just a golf club.

Name: Kevin Fish

Role: Business owner of Contemporary Club Leadership Ltd

About: Kevin's unique background in the industry – he is an experienced club manager in his own right – gives him a detailed understanding of the impact of lockdown. His work with thousands of club managers reveals the granular detail of what is impacting clubs in the UK

KEVIN'S STORY: Everyone acknowledges the decline our clubs were suffering from prior to this crisis, and for a while it looked like the lockdown was going to take many clubs under. That fear in clubs was real, where frankly the elected committees had just fallen asleep at the wheel, failing to do what was necessary to secure their club's long term health and viability. The surge of interest in golf over the last 18 months has been a lifesaver for a large proportion of clubs, and what is interesting is that those clubs are now calling to ask how they can make sure they never have to look over that cliff edge again.

Perhaps this is the wake-up call that elected committees needed to take a longer term view. I saw, for instance, a great process in action at Muswell Hill which has a hugely successful academy introducing people to the game, backed up by a range of membership categories that suit each age and stage of the new/returning golfer. What sets this club apart is that the existing members fully embrace their role in welcoming those newcomers to the club, so that they feel like they belong.

I'm afraid to say that there are examples of the opposite being the case, where the long-term members really don't like this influx of members, even when they have helped to secure the future viability of what was previously a club in decline. That is the key battleground that must be won.

What does the future of membership look like?

The value of anything in life can be calculated by comparing the experience you receive against the price you pay.

We know definitively from our research exactly what three things members want from their club: 'Give us a great golf course, show us the club is in safe professional hands, and then make us feel special.' I know BIGGA have truly helped clubs achieve one of those main ingredients – it's down to the rest of us to make sure we deliver in the other areas now.



CONSULTANT

“ We know from our research exactly what three things members want from their club: "Give us a great golf course, show us the club is in safe hands, and then make us feel special.



GENERAL MANAGER



Name: David Scott PGA
Role: General manager at
 Dumbarrie Links in Fife

About: Dumbarrie
 opened in the pandemic
 but its pay-and-play model
 has thrived and it hosted
 the Trust Golf Women's
 Scottish Open in August



D **AVID'S STORY:**
 We were always
 focussed on being
 pay-and-play,
 purely on the basis
 of the course's
 location in the St Andrews area and
 the sheer demand for quality links
 courses.

Our targets were the tour operators
 and overseas guests but we were
 certainly not forgetting golfers
 at home who wanted to treat
 themselves to something a bit
 special.

We have three price levels. The
 regular green fee is £259, then £125
 for Scottish residents and £98 for
 Fife residents.

When we opened on May 29, 2020,
 we had no clubhouse and no car
 park.

We changed our plan after Covid
 hit to target 7,000 rounds during the
 season.

We actually doubled that figure
 by the end of it. What was looking
 like a disaster at the time ended up
 being not too bad at all.

The most important thing was the
 marketing we got through social

media from people who played and
 returned to play.

It has surpassed everybody's
 expectations.

A couple of days after we opened, a
 gentleman sought me out and said
 that he was going to be a resident
 in Elie over the summer due to
 Covid.

He said he'd like to buy 100 rounds
 and gave me a cheque for £11,500.

Then he got to September last
 year and called me to say he was
 running out of rounds and he
 bought another 25.

This year, himself and a friend
 both put down £10,000 each. That
 certainly helps.

**What does the future of
 membership look like?**

Golf has had a massive shot in the
 arm because of Covid and people
 have seen the benefits.

It's up to clubs to embrace the
 demands, to modernise their
 thinking and not have a 20th-
 century mindset.

I still think, though, that pay-and-
 play only has a future in areas
 where there is high demand.

FAME'S STORY: We had a vision and we transformed a dying club that had closed into one that has started to thrive again. Internally and externally, it wasn't in a good shape and we had to implement change very quickly. One of the big challenges was making people aware that the club had re-opened. For any business that has folded, to get back out in the local community and shout about it is tough. We set about delivering a message that we were going to transform the club and not let it carry on as before.

We have created our own little community here. The golfers are more than just members. Everyone is greeted by their first name, they check in at reception and we spend time with them, they don't just go to the first tee. It's about more than just coming for a game of golf. If you're a customer, you want to feel special. That's a basic for any business. It's not rocket science. We now have about 250 members, with capacity for much more. But I don't want our members to be waiting on times. I introduced online booking so I have the data on how many times people play a week or a month. I don't want them queuing up on a Saturday.

We have attracted people who perhaps would have been playing football or rugby but, due to Covid, they are now engaged in a sport that they possibly thought they would never play. The golfer has changed and the industry has to change with them.

What does the future of membership look like? I think there will always be a place for membership. Being a member is more than just playing golf. It's the added benefits of what a membership entails; the social element, the ability to play when you want, the feeling of being part of a community. That will always stand as long as you look after your members.

GENERAL MANAGER

Name: Gary Beves

Role: General Manager of Golf At Goodwood

About: Goodwood was the first club to introduce a points-based membership back in 2006 and has flourished



GARY'S STORY: We were fortunate that the people looking after Goodwood's future were forward-thinking in their approach to what golf might look like. We had The Downs course and The Park course.

The estate took them both in-house to create Golf At Goodwood in 2006.

We have different bundles of credits.

For occasional golfers you'd buy 30 credits, with your annual fee, for £435. A really regular golfer would buy 300 credits at £1,440.

It's a sliding scale; the more you buy the cheaper it becomes and the credit rolls over each year. You are not paying for time, you are paying for golf. That's what makes it such great value for money.

This flexible type of membership is significantly better for the majority of younger adults. It's a

scheme that's based on the exact amount of golf you play.

We have a younger demographic and our future, I believe, is in safe hands because of the credit scheme we have adopted. We have a huge portion of members between the ages of 28 and 56. For many clubs, that's where the gap in their membership tends to be because those are the peak working years and people are trying to balance family life and working life and can't commit to a traditional, full membership.

What does the future of membership look like?

We are experiencing a real boom in the industry but, long term, I don't see the viability in clubs that can ask for a large joining fee just to get in the door. There will be certain clubs that will be able to do that but I think more people will move to a credit-based scheme where they are paying for what they use.

FORMER PLAYER

Name: Fame Tate PGA
Role: Owner and director
of Stanedge Golf Club in
Chesterfield

About: Fame, a former
Ladies European Tour
player, has resuscitated
Stanedge and transformed
it into one of the most
progressive clubs in
England



FLEXIBLE MEMBERSHIP

Goodwood were the standard
bearers for a new type of
membership model that has
become increasingly popular



The cost of entry-level
membership. The more you
play the more you pay – but
also the more cost-effective it
becomes

2006

When Goodwood unveiled their
new membership scheme

28 to 56



The age range of the majority
of Goodwood's members – way
younger than industry average

£1,440

The amount that annual
membership costs avid golfers
who play several times a week
on average



CONSULTANT



Name: Eddie Bullock PGA

Role: Business owner

About: Eddie Bullock Golf Consultancy provides boutique consultancy and advisory services throughout the golf industry. He's worked closely with several clubs including Goodwood and Royal Norwich

EDDIE'S STORY: Golf has an amazing opportunity – something that we've all been waiting for. It was fantastic last year to see so many people returning to golf, and people who have been playing once or twice a year, playing once or twice a week. We actually got a younger dynamic playing the game. To my antennae, that really creates an opportunity to start to sell the game to families. I do think a lot of clubs pay lip service to this. Golf courses had to put a business hat on very quickly. It was quite interesting how many clubs were calling the software companies

about tee booking. From a managerial point of view, that means collecting data and it is essential for the development of the operational process of a golf club. While that was a challenge for how you manage the club, from a point of view of being able to get the right data and being able to manage your costs and participation levels accurately, it was brilliant. Clubs talk about data. But in actual fact, very few of them know much about it in terms of capturing the right data. I've just done some work for the PGA of Canada, helping with their customer service and experience. They are going to do a persona identification to ask people why

they come to your club, what made you decide to invest into us, was it social media, was it somebody speaking to you? We've got to know more about them. We've got the opportunity to do something better. I think golf is too cheap, on the whole. Visitors are getting some amazing value. A lot of that comes back to the days of clubs being pressurised into the two-for-one schemes. Clubs are frightened to put that price up. But you've got to be proud of what you've got and be different to everybody else. At Royal Norwich, they could see golf was declining, that they were going to potentially go out of existence. And so they



Eddie is a non-exec at Royal Norwich and has helped to shape the club – innovative features include the club having its own brewery while the clubhouse vibe is contemporary



needed to change. There's some excellent leadership there from David Coventry as the chairman. He wanted to attract younger members and so he created young membership focus groups and started to understand. He bought in the right expertise. They invited me as a non-exec director, and invited somebody else who was key in hospitality.

So what did they do differently? Well, they've got their own brewery. They brought in an interior designer.

They decided they needed to have some form of flexible membership. Now a number of them have seen that this is a quality product, and want to enhance their membership status.

The next thing is to make it a destination for tourism. You've got the Norfolk coastline, some wonderful golf courses, so you've got to collaborate.

One of their USPs is they've got a lovely six-hole golf course. And they've got another course within that Academy course where the maximum length is 95 yards. People don't want to spend hours and hours learning the game – they want to get out there and this gives them the opportunity to do that. So it's a forward-thinking club, that is prepared to invest into the future.

What's the future of membership?

Find out what your membership want: Don't be afraid of doing surveys, because people will be honest. And don't take it personally. You've got to respect your members – you mustn't take that for granted. People will choose a club where they feel comfortable and find aspects of a commonality.

I would say really look at your rules. You don't need rules anymore. People are well behaved in the golf club. Some clubs have a dress code to a certain extent but we've got to work with the next generation. I love tradition, I love the history of the game, but I also value diversity and have a strong sense of reality when it comes to changing times and minds.

The kind of golf club that Eddie would like to create

The first thing is that you need to have a great location. Then I'd look at a flexible membership model.

We've been fairly successful at Goodwood with the flexible membership we devised 12 or 13 years ago.

We took the opportunity to attract that younger market and it proved very successful.

Now you've got their sons and daughters who have grown up here and the opportunity of creating that family environment.

I think you have to nurture that flexible membership, not just go for one particular flexible membership, but find out what's going to suit your business, what is going to suit your location.

I'd put something different there like tennis, for example. I'd use the outside areas.

I'd have nature walks, if possible.

We've all been talking about getting more women to play. We need to continually push this. Women have a significant influence on what is spent at a club.

D **AVID'S STORY:** The purpose of The Carnegie Club is to create a feeling of "heaven on earth" for our members and guests, which is how Andrew Carnegie described Skibo Castle when he bought the estate in 1898. We're quite a small operation in that we've only got around 400 memberships, with an average of around 40-50 people staying with us at any one time, so that gives us the luxury of time to spend with each of them.

The club is a country estate set in a truly beautiful location and which has the most fantastic golf course. However, we're lucky enough to also offer a wide range of activities including horseback riding, a spa and pool, shooting, fishing and tennis – I think this helps to differentiate us from other clubs in the UK. It's then finding ways to provide the little touches that you may not get anywhere else. A butler comes out to greet you on the 18th green with a dram when you hole your final putt, while during your round, you're looked after by our snack cart with bacon rolls, boozy hot chocolate, beers and so on.

This year, with Covid, we've been a bit quieter than normal, and so we've tried to take advantage of this with my team taking more time to play a few holes with members. This adds to the unique Skibo experience because it isn't every day you get to play with a pro. It also gives us the opportunity to get much closer to our members; it's more of a friendship that we build up over time, which I feel is important because we don't have the transient visitor traffic that you get at most resorts. We know everyone's name, they know our names and that is what helps to create a feeling of real service.

Out on the course, one of the aspects that really sets us apart is that you never really see anybody else during your round. Even if we have a busy day, there is only ever 20 or 30 people playing golf and so



DIRECTOR



Name: David Thomson PGA
Role: Director of Golf, The Carnegie Club at Skibo Castle

About: David has worked at the world-famous Carnegie Club in the Scottish Highlands for 22 years. He grew up in Edinburgh and is a former tour player. Skibo Castle is perhaps the most exclusive golf destination in the British Isles





43 Number of bedrooms at members-only Skibo - they stay in the castle and in luxury lodges



195 Miles (most of them north) from Edinburgh to the Carnegie Club, just outside Dornoch



Men's locker room

“ Our whole purpose is **creating heaven on earth**, as Andrew Carnegie said. ”

you feel like you're the only people on the course. This gives a sense of tranquillity and of never feeling rushed, so you can take your time. You don't even have to play 18 holes if you don't want, and there are umpteen different loop options that members can take instead. It's having that freedom, rather than having fourball after fourball with a ranger telling you you're taking too long to get to the turn. If you want to take six hours, take six hours, we don't mind – as long as you don't hold anybody up, which is a rarity.

I had a couple of members recently say it was almost spiritual out on the Links with the place to themselves. You're dealing with people who have stressful, busy lives. They get here and it's just what they need to switch off. We

call it “Skibo time”, which basically means you don't have to check your watch. There's no rush to get round for lunch or dinner. Just take your time and enjoy the day.

What does the future of membership look like?

The club has always maintained itself with a member-gets-member approach, with by far the majority of new members being introduced by existing members. This has worked very well for us, as it helps to keep the atmosphere consistent. Over the past couple of years, we have seen an increase in members bringing friends and family to visit the club, with some choosing to join in their own right, which is why it is so important that we keep the experience we offer here at Skibo so unique and personal for each member.

What could other golf facilities learn from the way you do things at Skibo?

One thing we pride ourselves on is anticipation of our members' needs. Pre-empting a request from somebody, whatever it might be, can make all the difference to how you make someone feel. We get to know our members' likes and dislikes so, for example, if they request a rental set, we know exactly which clubs they like and what size of shoes they wear, and we'll have these laid out in their locker for their arrival.

Even the locker itself will have their name on it, and we offer this for guests too. If we see somebody struggling on the range, one of the team will go out and give them a 10-minute

lesson without charging them. It's about giving of your time to help someone out.

I'm lucky that I get to stay in some very special places, and I make sure I take notice when I travel. It gives you the chance to experience service from the other side of the coin, as the member, and so I always keep note of what works and what doesn't. If I see something that would make what we do better here at Skibo, I'll try to implement it in our own unique way. Overall, we're very privileged to be time rich, which is a luxury that a lot of clubs perhaps don't have. However, it's taking those couple of minutes to try to get to know your members a little better. I think that's the key!”

DIRECTOR

Name: John Grant
Role: Director of Golf at the St Andrews Links Trust

About: John joined the St Andrews Links Trust in 2007 and oversees golf operations at the Home of Golf, including on the courses and at the state-of-the-art Golf Academy



JOHN'S STORY: We don't have members at the Links Trust in the traditional sense, but we have a very close relationship with our thousands of Ticketholders, many of whom are members of local clubs in St Andrews or beyond. Over the past two years we have seen increased occupancy on the course from Ticketholders, partly because of the resurgence of interest and appetite to play golf but also with a reduced number of visiting golfers in St Andrews. Those numbers have also been boosted over the past two years with greater numbers of children joining our junior golf association (SALJGA) and students, who stayed in St Andrews during the pandemic, turning to golf as a pastime. We

pride ourselves on being open to all at the Links and provide many different pathways for people of all ages and abilities to get into golf on the course or at the Golf Academy. Our ambition is to develop and deliver memorable experiences for every person at the Links, whether they wish to play, learn, shop or relax. With regard to our core product, the courses, during this Covid period we have learnt a great deal about making golf more accessible for Ticketholders to book online as well as the importance of engaging with them, trying to improve awareness and understanding of the courses and facilities, making sure that we let people know what's going on, when the courses might be busy or identifying dates when competitions are being played.

We hope to see visitors returning in increasing numbers in 2022 and will continue to work to maintain the equilibrium of visitor and ticketholder play at the Links. We don't differentiate between those customers and want them all to have the best possible experience.

What does the future of membership look like? How people consume golf is changing, digitisation and technology continue to grow in importance. We've really begun to look closely at how that customer experience in a digitalised world is going to drive things differently in the future. There's work for us to do over the next few years and we're committed to making sure the Home of Golf continues to develop and deliver memorable experiences.



CEO

Name: Colin Mayes

Role: Chief Executive of Burhill Group Limited

About: Colin oversees Burhill's portfolio of UK courses while the company's Adventure Golf division encourages fresh blood into the game

COLIN'S STORY:

From a Burhill perspective, the traditional business has done very well during the pandemic, thanks to very solid membership activity. Our pay-and-play business, meanwhile, has been booming. In that sense, you can say the whole picture is rosy but, sitting behind that, is the fact that we've not had a lot of competition. Golf has boomed but it's boomed because there's been a relatively limited market for people to do anything else. It's still done golf the world of good, though.

Golf membership has taken a significant step upwards and that bodes well. The value of being outside in a pleasant atmosphere has been appreciated more than ever during Covid. The decline of the last decade or so has been stopped. My point on Adventure Golf is that the industry is getting a ball and a putter in the hands of a young person and they are experiencing the core base of the game. They are engaging with a club and it's helping bring new people to golf. The number of Adventure Golf rounds at our facility at Hoebridge, for instance, was up 15% in the summer.

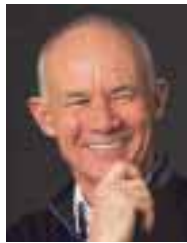
Whether they are hitting towards a pirate's face or a loop-the-loop to get the ball in the hole, they are doing it with a smile on their face. I think people in traditional golf miss that point. People remember those experiences as being fun and those of us in the industry have to make sure golf remains fun.

What does the future of membership look like?

I'm quite optimistic. People have fallen back in love with golf.

Now the challenge is to maintain this interest and keep these people in the game. People don't want to be told what they can't do, they want to be told what they can do.

Clubs have had to take a hard look at themselves. And that's been for the better.



PGA PRO

Name: Anders Mankert PGA

Role: PGA professional and owner of the Leicester Golf Centre

About: Anders has breathed new life into what was formerly Oadby Golf Club and his facility was named one of the top-three driving ranges in the UK by BBC 5Live

ANDERS' STORY: There was a course there for 40 years that the council owned but in 2011 they locked the door and it was just left to overgrow. I thought I'd have to have a go with it. I made it a 9-hole course with a Toptracer range and I took away all the rules, regulations, dress codes, everything. If two people want to go out with one bag, then they can. All I ask is 'please look after the course'. I tried to make it a members-quality course but one that's open to everybody. As it happens, it's helping the local member clubs. New golfers are getting started at our place and going on to join other clubs. We have a tie-in with three courses in Leicestershire; a kind of you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours relationship. There are some real mutual benefits for the local golfing community.

We don't have members. Everybody is a customer. And customers need to have a good experience. I've had enquiries from former members of the old club who wanted to re-join but they are nearly all seniors and, in all honesty, that's not the market I'm pitching at.

"We get loads of women and juniors. I just want people to play golf and enjoy it. All I tried to do was open a facility that I'd like to come to myself. Clubs can be very intimidating places for non-golfers. I wanted to do away with that.

What does the future of membership look like? There will always be a demand for private members clubs but they have to evolve and evolve quickly. Covid saved many clubs but I see a big rise in pay-and-play golfers and clubs will need to get more creative to hang on to the younger audience. Senior golf is a ticking time bomb for membership. Until that is addressed, then we'll have problems.