

ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

Photography JAMES LOVETT, EDDIE JUDD

Rob Smith enjoys a return to the New Forest
and its bucolic, peaceful and varied charms...

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he New Forest is a beautiful and largely unspoiled area of woodland, heathland and open pasture that covers the south-west of Hampshire and eastern edge of Wiltshire. It was proclaimed a royal forest by William the Conqueror and features in the *Domesday Book*. Designated as a national park in 2005, it makes for an excellent destination for nature lovers and golfers. Entering the New Forest just west of Southampton, you will find the charming village of Bramshaw, at the heart of which is its golf club. Nearby, in the hamlet of Brook, lies the Bell Inn.

The Forest course

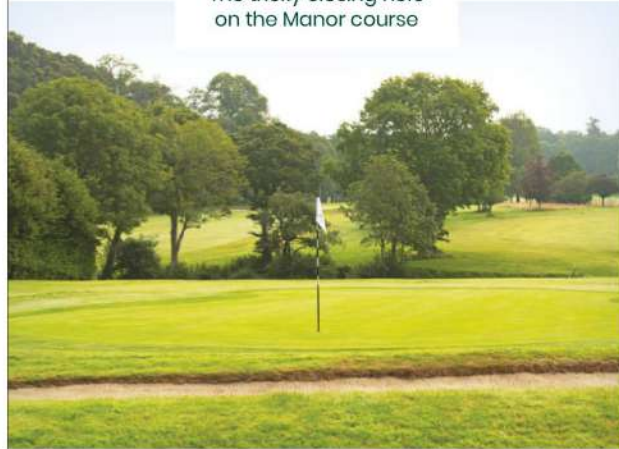
The Forest course at Bramshaw Golf Club is believed to be the oldest in the county. While still a nine-holer in the 1890s, an alliance was formed with a similar layout at Lyndhurst. This effectively created an 18-hole course, but with the two nines actually five miles apart! The Forest course was extended to a full 18 during the following decade, and as you play it now, it would be very easy to believe that nothing significant has changed since.

It starts with a tough par 4 that calls for an elevated approach over one of the abundant

At one with
nature on the
Forest course

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The tricky closing hole on the Manor course



The 10th and 11th take you back almost to the clubhouse, with the latter very much favouring a right-to-left drive round the corner. A drivable par 4 at 12 is followed by a medium-length par 3 and then a very pronounced right-to-left dogleg. The 15th is the longest hole on the course, the 16th plays up to a two-tier green and the penultimate hole is a fine, gently downhill par 4. The Manor course closes with another sharp dogleg, this time to the left, where it is all too easy to get blocked out. Here, your approach calls for a final carry over one of the many streams that characterise both courses at Bramshaw.

Paultons Golf Centre

Now a part of the same group, Paultons is just a few minutes from Bramshaw and is an informal, friendly and very welcoming golf development. It features a full-length par-71 course, a six-hole par-3 academy course, a state-of-the-art driving range and much more. It is situated in attractive parkland that was laid out 250 years ago by Capability Brown. The course opens with a gentle par 4 and then a 536-yard three-shotter, where big hitters will have hopes of reaching the green in two as it follows the prevailing breeze. The 4th and 5th skirt a lake that ought not to come into play, but which frequently does. Back through the trees, the next three holes run parallel to the well-screened theme park that borders to the south. The front nine concludes with another par 5, up the slope to the clubhouse where refreshments await.

life-giving and ball-taking streams. Next comes a longish par 3, all carry to a green that slopes upwards away from you. As you head out into the furthest wilds, there is a blind approach down to the stream-protected green at the par-5 6th. This is reachable in two for some, but full of risk. The front nine climaxes with an absolutely cracking short par 4 – a hybrid up the middle, hopefully, before a short-iron into the green. The King's Garn stream is more in play here than anywhere else.

A straightaway par 5 and then a very tough par 4 take you away from and back to the brook, before a delightful tiddler down the hill to the only sand-protected green on the course. The approach to the 13th is over a deep gully, and the 17th is another lovely little par 3 where you simply mustn't come up short or right. The closing hole is a tempting short par 4 where the bold and the foolhardy will need to wait for the green to clear before driving. A round here offers exceptional value for what is an engaging and delightful course in a wonderfully rural and natural location.

The Manor course

The Manor course is by far the younger of the two at Bramshaw, having reached its half-century just last year. It is also the longer, stretching to 6,400 yards from the back with a par of 71. An early highlight is the par-4 2nd. The green nestles in a glade among the trees, but to reach it you must carry an intimidating gully through which runs the Shepherd's Gutter stream. A strong par 4, the first short hole and then two left-to-right doglegs lead you to the northern end of the course.

By now, it is abundantly clear that this course is remarkably different from its near neighbour; all the more surprising as the two are so close. You now turn back to play a strong par 3 with tall pines short and left, and the front nine concludes with another short hole, The Bell, that features a very clever tribute to the adjacent inn. It is 188 yards from the back tee and plays to a bell-shaped green. Just short is an oval bunker which effectively represents the clapper!

The back nine opens with an almost 90-degree right-to-left par 4, where it pays to be as close to the trees as possible. The 12th is a tiny par 3 and the next two are tree-lined, making positioning from the tee vital. The 15th is the final short hole; a scenic carry of 161 yards over a lily pond. The 16th and 17th are two very strong par 4s that will keep you on your toes, while the closing hole may be drivable by some, but it has a deep

bunker crossing at the front. This attractive course is lightly bunkered, but still calls for a strategic approach. It is capable of challenging the better golfer while still welcoming the higher handicapper. The 18-bay driving range is fitted with the latest equipment and there are plenty of teaching options. The centre is family-focused and unfussy, and the very reasonable green fee is reduced for juniors.

There are plenty of other courses nearby, as well as attractions such as the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu, the theme park at Paultons and riding, sailing and walking. All of this makes the Bell Inn (see below), the two courses at Bramshaw and the golf centre at Paultons a compelling and very affordable destination for golfing groups of all sizes.

The Bell Inn

Right on hand and enjoying a wonderfully peaceful location, despite being only minutes away from the M27, the Bell Inn dates back to the 18th century. It has 26 comfortable and stylish rooms and makes for the perfect golfing destination for couples and groups. Both the inn and the two courses are under the same new ownership, having been acquired last



Deer roam at Knole Park in Kent

Communing with nature

One of the delights of golf in the New Forest is the frequent and occasionally quite unexpected facetime with wildlife. At Bramshaw, you may come across horses, cattle, deer and even pigs. And while for some golfers this may be an inconvenience, for most of us it's a joy. This is their environment more than it is ours, and it's a privilege to share it with them.

Happily, this is a common occurrence and there are courses all over the UK&I where the local inhabitants are a welcome part of the scenery. In Scotland, Askernish on South Uist has sheep and cattle grazing in the winter months. Clyne is just one of many courses in Wales where you share your time with horses and sheep. In England, you will find beautiful deer at Knole Park in Kent, Wollaton Park in Nottinghamshire and many other courses. And if you counted all the courses with sheep, you would probably fall asleep! You will find them from Brora to Cleeve Hill and from Kington to Tavistock.

There are even Top 100 courses where you can commune with nature. Lahinch has its goat population, Royal North Devon is on common land and Pennard has cattle roaming in the summer.

Paultons Golf Centre



A stream protects the 6th green on the Forest course

