

# A golfer's guide to... HAMPSHIRE

A one-time resident of Jane Austen's county, Alex Narey heads back to his old roots to take in some of the tracks in the south-coast sunshine...



The beauty of the beast: Old Thorns

Words Alex Narey, Michael Weston Photography Old Thorns CC

**R**unning from Sunbury-on-Thames to Southampton, the M3 motorway has for years become institutionalised with the term 'commuter belt'. This 59-mile stretch of tarmac has been at the heart of ferrying the workforce from Surrey and Hampshire to their duties in the capital since its construction progressed throughout the 1970s. Thankfully for myself, such a hike is tackled only in pursuit of golf; a touch of weekend therapy to escape my London base with a visit to see the parents thrown in for good measure.

Despite one of Europe's busiest carriageways cutting through their heart, Surrey and Hampshire blend seamlessly

together as you head down to the south-coast. Towering pines, silver birch, heather and gorse share the landscape. However, such are neighbouring rivalries that there has always been an acute level of competition, especially where sport is concerned.

Those who champion the cause for Hampshire's podium position can take heart that the border separating the two counties is not ten miles further south, since laying a rightful claim to North Hants Golf Club will be heartening to devout Hants loyalists. Indeed, North Hants is a club that surprises with its subtle charm and solid reputation. Greg Norman used to practise here when he first started out on the European Tour. The course was a regular for Open

Championship qualifying from 1992-97, as well as final qualifying for the Women's British Open in 2004.

Most famously, this woodland gem was where a young Justin Rose oiled his game as a junior. Much to the club's delight, the-then 17-year-old's colours were still firmly nailed to the North Hants mast when he raised his arms to the heavens after canning that famous wedge on the 18th hole at Birkdale in 1998. Since then, both Rose and North Hants have progressed nicely. The former has won an Order of Merit and broken into the world's top 10, while the track where he once shot a course-record 65 as a 14-year-old continues to rise to the challenge of being the county's premier course. ▶



Basingstoke Golf Club will favour the more creative

The workforce has been kept on its toes with the annual hosting of the Hampshire Hog – a prestigious 36-hole amateur tournament created in 1957. As a result, there can be no excuse for a slip in standards. But all the same I was quite blown away by the course's condition when I visited in mid April.

At just under 6,500 yards, North Hants is unlikely to trouble the longer hitters. There are a number of 'shortish' par 4s, but what these lack in length they make up for with

can score well. Take the tempting par-5 3rd: five hundred yards, slightly downhill and reachable. But the rare sight of water comes into play short right of the green! To suggest I chose to lay up here would be bending the truth somewhat, since I was forced to hack my way through a posse of silver birch after 'shaping' my drive left.

Developments at North Hants are proof of the club's ethos on standards. James Braid designed the original layout in 1904, before a

charms of old. For that the club members and polite ambience they create must be applauded. It's all part of keeping up appearances, something North Hants Golf Club does extremely well.

A little over eight miles down the road, Tylney Park Golf Club can be found in the quaint village of Rotherwick, just to the west of Hook. Though not affiliated, the course winds its way through the grounds of Tylney Hall Hotel – excellent for a weekend getaway. On top of that, there are numerous cross-country walks to enjoy in the area and ale lovers should sample a drop in the local Coach & Horses pub – lovely on a warm summer's day.

Measuring a full 7,017 yards off the backs, Tylney is a thorough examination of one's ball-striking. Playing from the whites is far friendlier at 6,608, but with towering woodland and deep clag, there is no margin for error and anything that veers off the fairway will be punished.

With four par 5s on offer, there is the opportunity to level out the distance in your scoring. But control is crucial. Take the opening hole at 528 yards, a sharp dog-leg left. Overcook your drive or worse, push it right like I did, and you could be cursing your decision to leave the 3-wood in the bag. A very grumpy start...

Photography Basingstoke CC, Pete Fontaine – Golf Image Library

Basingstoke Golf Club is a 700-strong members club situated off junction seven on the M3. Despite numerous other course developments around this London overspill town, it remains the number one track in the area. The course celebrated its centenary in 2007, although the current location did not open until 1928 after design work by Braid. Set in over 100 acres of parkland, its key features are mature tree-lined fairways with fast-rolling greens.

Playability adds to the appeal. But this is not to suggest matters are made easy. Such is Basingstoke's set-up that no two holes are the same and fortune will favour the more creative – rather than the brave.

As a child I would spend many rounds here walking the course with my father, himself a member since 1986. Happy days. Favourite holes would be the testing par-4 4th; a slight dog-leg right with a huge green, and the 14th, the course's stroke index 1 that is characterised with an eerie crater that lingers to swallow up any topped drives. Nasty...

As for the facilities, renovation work in the late 1990s saw the development of a new clubhouse. The move with the times may not suit all considering the classy old-school haunt it has replaced. But you can still expect a friendly welcome, and the pro and teaching facilities are excellent.

contention. Well-placed lakes also add an element of difficulty with holes 15 and 18 ensuring a tricky run-in – the last a typical risk-and-reward par 5 over water, finishing in front of the clubhouse.

Further south, heading down the A3 towards Portsmouth, you'll come across Old Thorns Golf & Country Club. Completed in 1981, this par-72 course is protected by woodlands and lakes. To score well you'll need to know when to attack, as out-and-out power will be punished. The course is often remembered for its elevated tees with some stunning views of the surrounding Hampshire hills. This is epitomised by holes 5 and 16, the latter of which is one of several excellent short par 3s.

Founded in 1897, Barton-on-Sea features three loops of nine holes, many of which are originals from Harry Colt's 1932 design. Named Becton, Needles and Stroller, each offers spectacular views across the Solent to the Needles on the Isle of Wight. Those wanting to combine a break in the New Forest with a round of links will find this a perfect location on the coastal cliff between Highcliffe and Milford-on-Sea.

Becton, a parkland-style loop, offers the most forgiveness. But beware of Becton Bunny, the stream after which this nine is named. The Needles loop closes with a par 3



North Hants: the county's premier inland track

Just a mile from its Royal neighbour, South Winchester opened in 1993 and is an inland links style course designed by Dave Thomas and Peter Alliss. At over 7,000 yards, scoring well is not easy, although visitors will be encouraged with a layout that offers forgiveness from the tee.

If your driving is long enough and the wind is not swirling, you will be able to pick up shots. However, a number of large greens bring the dreaded three-putt into

to an island green in front of the clubhouse. A terrifying finish, although the pain was eased with a fantastic Sunday roast.

As for that podium position, Hampshire may not have the overall prestige of Surrey when it comes to the final count of must-play tracks. But if good value is what you are looking for, you could do a lot worse than jump in the car and scour the land on that famous commuter belt. It beats driving to work, that's for sure.

## HAMPSHIRE ESSENTIALS

### NORTH HANTS

**T:** 01252 616443  
**W:** northhantsgolf.co.uk  
**GF:** £55wd per round, £75wd for 36 holes, £65we per round, £85 for 36 holes

### TYLNEY PARK

**T:** 01256 762079  
**W:** tylneypark.co.uk  
**GF:** £45 per round any day

### BASINGSTOKE

**T:** 01256 465990  
**W:** basingstokegolfclub.co.uk  
**GF:** £42wd per round, £52 per day, £20we per round (only with a member)



Plan your attack at South Winchester

### SOUTH WINCHESTER

**T:** 01962 877800  
**W:** southwinchestergolf.co.uk  
**GF:** £30 per round Mondays to Thursdays, £35 per round Friday, £40we per round

### OLD THORNS

**T:** 01428 724555  
**W:** oldthorns.com  
**GF:** £45wd per round, £50we per round

### BARTON-ON-SEA

**T:** 01425 615308  
**W:** barton-on-sea-golf.co.uk  
**GF:** £44wd per day, £55we per day



Stung by the Needles at Barton-on-Sea

## WEDGE ONTO THE UPPER DECK ON NORTH HANTS' PAR-4 4TH, AND YOU'LL BE FIST PUMPING LIKE SEVE IF YOU KNOCK IT DOWN IN TWO

well-guarded greens. Accuracy in approach play is rewarded naturally, no more so on the 300-yard 4th hole – originally a par 3 until some design tweaks in 2001 by Donald Steel – which has a vicious two-tier green. If the pin is on the lower deck and you misguide your wedge onto the upper, you'll be fist pumping like Seve if you knock it down in two. Severe, but great fun!

While you do not have to be arrow straight off the tee, those who take caution

redesign by Harry Colt some nine years later. A further rejig came from Tom Simpson in 1930 and in 2001, Steel's work saw changes to the opening four holes – most notably the reduction of the 1st from a par 4 to a par 3.

On top of the course, the original clubhouse faced demolition in 2003, replaced by a more modern model the same year. Taking a full view of the 1st and 18th, as well as the exceptional putting green, the new construction has maintained the