

Council – 7th September 2023

Notice of Motion: Belfairs Park

There has been a massive increase in use of the course by non-paying golfers and the rest of the park by the public.

When challenged over why simple maintenance jobs are not carried out we are told lack of funding.

Within Belfairs Park lays one of the best golf courses around. A Mr Harry Colt of Messers Mc Kenzie Colt and Allison designed golf course with today some of the best maintained greens in the country and as a lot of people believe, one of the best municipal golf courses in Britain. Once described by Peter Alliss the international golf commentator as a "hidden jewel" it is a picturesque, easy walking course within a woodlands setting but the wide fairways on the front nine are deceptive as the back nine is tree-lined and narrow with many varied challenges. In his 4th book Peter Alliss describes the 14th as one of the best.

When the course was officially opened in 1926 it was rated as the top course to play in Britain and King George Vth was to play there. The course hosted open championships, records show international competitions and was played by many champions of golf.

In the 70s huge queues formed every day to play the course (that I can remember). In 1997 it was proposed Belfairs Park be closed to the public at weekends so golf may take place. The course and the park were patrolled by park keepers in uniform. The gardens in the park were maintained to a high standard. Belfairs Park generated more revenue than the pier and the crematorium.

Cost cutting caused park keepers or as they are called today rangers to be slowly withdrawn. Summer seasonal rangers are no longer provided. People playing golf discovered that they could, as there was no one to check they had paid, simply walk on to the course and play.

The majority of those playing golf at Belfairs have not paid. They start from as soon as it is light through to dusk and even into the darkness, summer 4.30am to 10pm. The course officially opens in the summer at 7 am and closes at 7pm. In the morning for two and half hours golfers are playing without paying as there is no one to challenge them. At £22 a round weekday and £27 weekend and bank holidays just in the morning easily £500 goes uncollected. That is on 20 golfers and simple observation would confirm that is an under estimate. During the day golfers walk on to the 2nd, 4th, 9th, 6th and 13th jumping in gaps of those who have paid and frustrating their games. Although not playing full rounds there is still a loss of income to the council of £300 to £400 a day. Then the evenings after 7pm; in fact as soon as the starters hut closes there is a queue for the 1st tee which I witness daily. A twilight

ticket is £12 weekday and £13.50 weekend and bank holidays. When golfers are challenged the answer is "Every one knows it's free after 7pm". It is estimated and many have witnessed and can confirm that there will be 30 to 40 golfers on the course after 7pm in the summer months. On Sunday 13th of August there were 18 golfers teeing off before 7 am, therefore not paying, playing for free. A loss to Southend city council of £486 in just a few hours.

Observations of numbers in 2016 , 2017, 2018 and questions to the then cabinet holder it was estimated that the course lost in uncollected revenue £30,000 a MONTH. Add to that tennis fees, bowls fees and the amount increases.

With no effective park warden cover to police the golf course and park, regulars are leaving to go to other courses frustrated that their games are being ruined that they have paid for, with people jumping on in front of them. Season ticket sales have dropped massively. Why should regular golfers pay for a season ticket at £850 a year when others do not pay at all. This could be changed.

A person policing the park as a full time park warden for Belfairs Park would not only collect lost revenue. They would reduce council costs from vandalism, assist lost people, ensure emergency gates were not blocked, stop fires and barbeques, reduce speeding cyclists, ensure dogs were under control, help prevent unplanned activities such as mass dog walks. With the withdrawal of Essex Wildlife parks officers a warden would also cover the duties that Essex Wildlife have failed to carry out. Reporting dangerous trees, stopping teams collecting fungi, chestnuts, hazel nuts, apples, blue bells for example. Not forgetting guiding emergency services to put out fires, ambulances to aid persons in trouble. Four people have died from heart attacks on the 14th green as there was no one to guide the ambulance crews to get there in time.

To sum up, the pier as an example has recruited extra staff to ensure fees are collected and had investment and is now receiving record numbers and therefore revenue to reinvest in the pier. The same is clearly possible for Belfairs Park in the future to start the regeneration, all that is currently being asked for is a full time park warden that would be self-financing.

The shocking fact that a number of councillors play golf but when asked if they play at Belfairs the response is no, preferring to play the private course of Garons. Even our own Mayor refusing to support Southend city's only golf course by holding his civic golf match at the private Garons course.

For the benefit of the rate payers of Southend city to safely enjoy cleared footpaths, playing sports, cricket, football, walking dogs, riding horses, especially Riding for the Disabled, children to play safe and secure in the excellent play areas. Those who wish to just enjoy peace and quiet, walk with friends or sit on a bench listening to the beautiful varied bird song or simply read a book or if you are very lucky watch the deer, please support this Motion. Those who do not support should have no issues of being named.

Therefore this Council resolves to:

The motion is set down in a skeleton argument to request a full and concise investigation is carried out to the unacceptable loss of revenue on Southend City Councils only golf course and the security and wellbeing of all those who use Belfairs Park by employing a full-time park warden dedicated to Belfairs Park.

This is to reverse the revenue loss and other costs and reinvest in the Belfairs Park infrastructure, wildlife preservation and history. Belfairs Park and golf course is suffering and has seen a steady descent of maintenance to a point where it is now unacceptable.

Proposed by Cllr Stephen Ayles
seconded by Cllr Christopher Walker