

**Nick Bayly** envies the residents of **Kings Hill** in Kent, who have a cracking golf course right on their doorstep that is both affordable and enjoyable to play

**F**or those of us who are used to living in largely unplanned towns and cities, with little thought given to how we actually live our lives, your first visit to the Kings Hill estate, near West Malling in Kent, offers a real insight into the future of contemporary living.

While the 800-acre 'community', located a few miles off the M20, won't be everyone's cup of tea, the concept of creating a managed development, where business parks, private housing, schools and leisure facilities exist cheek by jowl, has certainly been a successful one. Its emphasis on sustainable living, with eco-friendly housing designed to cope with the demands of modern lifestyles, has proved a winning combination.

Current statistics from local estate agents reveal that there are over 5,000 people working for the 100 or so businesses located on the estate, while upwards of 6,000 people are living in the 2,750 private properties, which vary from one-bed apartments to large detached family homes. With around 15% of the community both living and working here, the dream of ending the drudgery of commuting is very much a reality for many of Kings Hill's residents.



Living, working and playing is at the heart of the Kings Hill enterprise, and besides the supermarkets, shops and pubs, leisure facilities include a 90,000-sq ft David Lloyd Leisure Centre and a popular 18-hole golf course, Kings Hill Golf Club.

Built on the derelict and disused West Malling airfield, which spearheaded the British air defences during World War II, Kings Hill Golf Club first opened for play in 1996, two years after the first houses went up, and since that time it has become one of the central social hubs at Kings Hill, for golfer and non-golfers alike. While many of the members live on the estate, the majority live 'off-site', drawn to the club by the quality of the well-designed and equally well-maintained heathland course.

Built by English architect David Williams, the 6,622-yard course occupies a 200-acre hill top site, with stunning views over Kent's North Weald to the south, and home owners paying top dollar for a cherished view over the fairways. Although predominantly a mixture of woodland and heathland, there is also a linky feel to the layout, especially when the gorse and heather are in full bloom. The rough edges to the bunkers have a very seaside feel, as do the gently undulating fairways.

Built to high specifications and boasting USGA-standard greens and



tees, Kings Hill has been laid out in two loops, with the 9th and 18th greens finishing directly outside the clubhouse. Owing to a wise investment in drainage from the outset and free-draining sandstone, the course is always in good condition, offering a consistent playing surface 356 days a year. With the dry winter we've had so far, the playing conditions are among the best seen for many a season, and course manager Duncan Kelso and his team are constantly looking to maintain and improve the playing experience for all golfers.

From a pure playing viewpoint, Kings Hill is not the pushover that it might first look like on the scorecard, with its elevation making wind a factor. The opening hole is a reasonably straightforward par five, but after that things get much tougher, with the

stroke index one hole, the 433-yard second, coming rudely early into your round to ruin any preconceptions you may have had of maintaining par. With out of bounds all the way up the left, the only saving grace is that there are no bunkers around the green, which goes against the general design of the course, which is heavily bunkered.

The downhill third is a cracking par four. Although it will only be a short iron to the green, anything left will be blocked out by the trees and the putting surface is heavily guarded with bunkers front left and right with a large u-shaped back bunker hugging the green and snaffling up anything that is slightly over-hit or off target.

Sand plays a significant role on the first short hole, the 171-yard 6th, which has three traps on the right, and will play havoc with faders off the tee.



The seventh, at just over 300 yards, is reachable given big shoulders and a favourable wind, but the narrowness of the fairway, encroaching trees, and the small matter of nine well-positioned bunkers makes this a much harder hole than looks off the tee.

Long holes come back-to-back at 9 and 10, with the latter being a 550-yard beast that most players will be more than happy to reach in three blows, especially as the fairway narrows considerably at a point where you'd be expecting to land your second shot.

The short par 15th is another great strategy hole, with two bunkers guarding the landing area off the tee some 100 yards short of the green. Should you aim to carry it with a driver or lay up short with a hybrid or a long iron? You decide.

After negotiating the short 17th, the 18th is a searching finishing hole, playing 460 yards off the back tees, which leaves a very long second shot to find the putting surface. Most players will be happy to chip on in three, and hope to one-putt, before retreating to the clubhouse for well-earned refreshment.

A feature of the course is the quality of the greens, which are very contoured, but exceptionally true. A further bonus for all players is that the club never uses temporary greens.

Practice facilities are superb too, with a full-length practice range, a short game practice area, and putting green, while a fantastic purpose-built teaching facility offers two covered bays fitted with the latest GSP swing analysis systems, three outdoor

bays, and an expanded custom-fitting service for many of the major equipment brands.

The club boasts no fewer than three PGA professionals, David Hudspeth, Ben Blackburn and Peter Remy, and when not giving lessons out on the range, or custom-fitting equipment, the team can be found in the club's buzzing pro shop, which is a veritable Aladdin's cave of equipment, clothing and accessories, all offered at extremely competitive prices.

Upstairs, the clubhouse facilities are second to none, with a light and airy colonial style building offering superb views over the golf course, where members, guests and visitors can enjoy the relaxed and comfortable club atmosphere. The dining area is as popular with local residents and businesses as it is with golfers, with a wide range of hot and cold meals to be enjoyed throughout the day.

The club currently boasts 600 members, although there are limited vacancies for new members, which are made all the more attractive by the current suspension of a joining fee. Categories include seven, five and a unique three-day membership, which allows play Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays for £550 a year.

Green fees are £35 during the week and £45 at weekends, although golfers can enjoy a great value midweek green fee of £27.50 plus breakfast up until the end of April. Society and corporate guests are welcome at all times.

So while you may not be in the market for a house at Kings Hill, you really don't need to take out a mortgage or pay a king's ransom to be a member or to play here on a regular basis. Live the dream for £27.50!

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