

Designed by Rees Jones to championship standards, the Oxfordshire Golf Course is the second Nitto Kogyo course in the UK (the first being Turnberry) and the first they have built outside Japan.

The architect's design philosophy is quoted as "to create an environment for the game of golf that is challenging, fair and aesthetically pleasing," while Nitto Albion plc, the UK operator, gives its objective as "to meet the cultural and business needs of Britain and Japan and form a bridge between the Japanese and British people and corporations."

Opened on July 4 1993 at an estimated cost of £22 million, the Oxfordshire is a 7187 yard par 72 course with sufficient options to tax golfers at all levels and an exceptionally well appointed clubhouse. Membership is by debenture, with a seven day debenture costing £26,000.

However these statistics are only part of the impressive credentials of the course.

Built on 250 acres of gently sloping ex-farmland just outside Thame and overlooking the Thame valley, the course is officially described as a modern American style parkland course. Course manager Martin Jones suggests that "inland links" is perhaps more accurate and gives a better indication of the design which is extensively landscaped.

Contours give additional interest, both visually and to play, and also ensures that all (rain) water is rapidly shed to drains. Martin is very proud of this, stating categorically: "we don't have puddles – if I saw a puddle during construction it was a cock-up – and notifiable." Of course there has been some minor settlement since, but he added, "rectifi-

Big time here we come

Hugh Tilley explores the ambitious Oxfordshire Golf Course where puddles are a major crime in the pursuit of championship status. Pictured right: the 14th hole

cation has been quick and simple."

The basic layout is two loops of 9 running out from the clubhouse, and a driving range. Part of the brief was that the Oxfordshire should have championship potential – and this justified using the highest specifications.

I suspect that the requirements of spectators and media were also fully considered during the planning because there are some very exceptional vantage points and such detailed

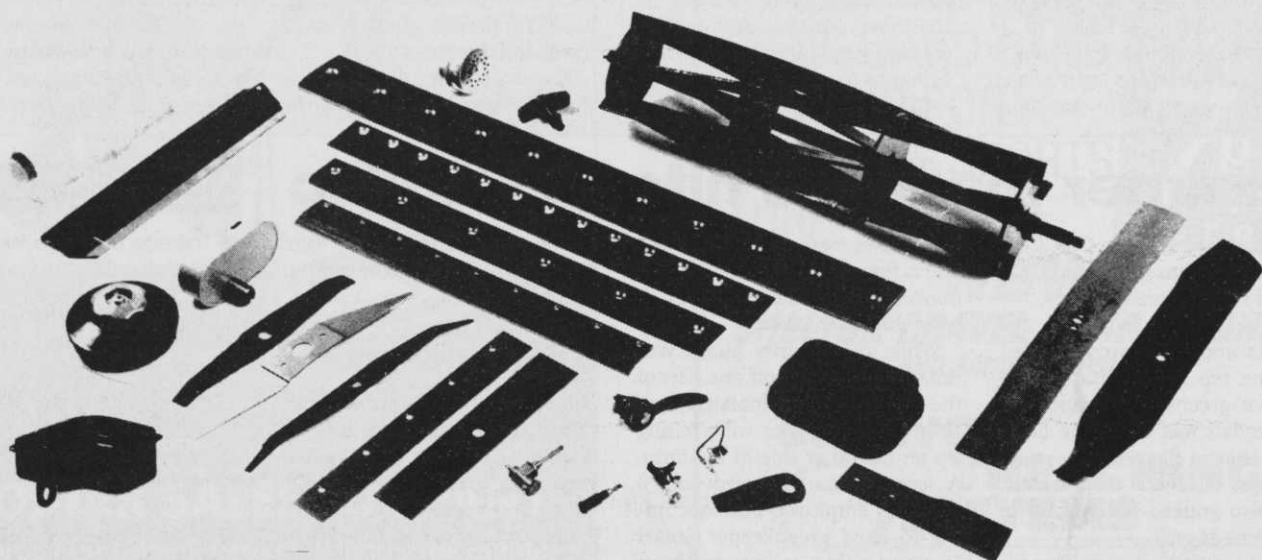
thinking and foresight appears to be a hallmark of this course architect.

The clubhouse, nearly 40,000 square feet of it, is positioned on the high ground with a commanding view of the course. Its design claims to be based on traditional 19th century English architecture but with a luxury interior built to suit individual guest and corporate hospitality. I have to admit to being overawed by it.

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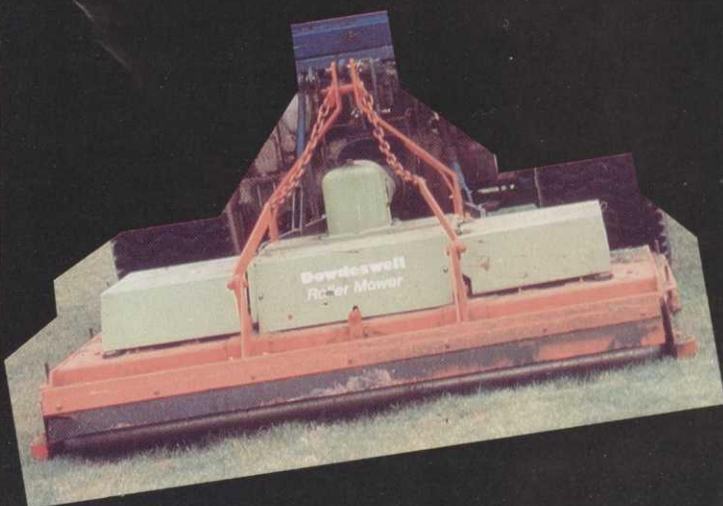


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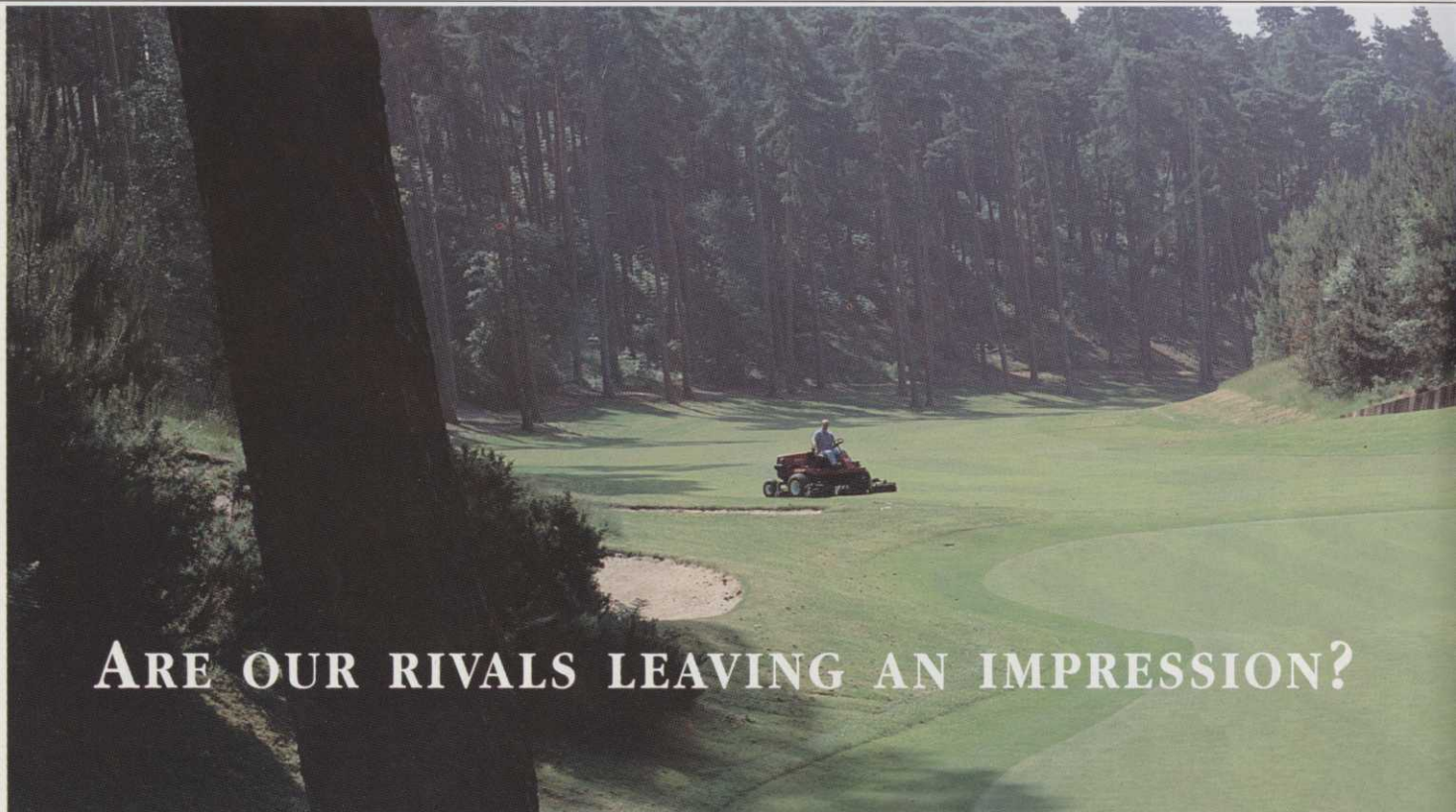
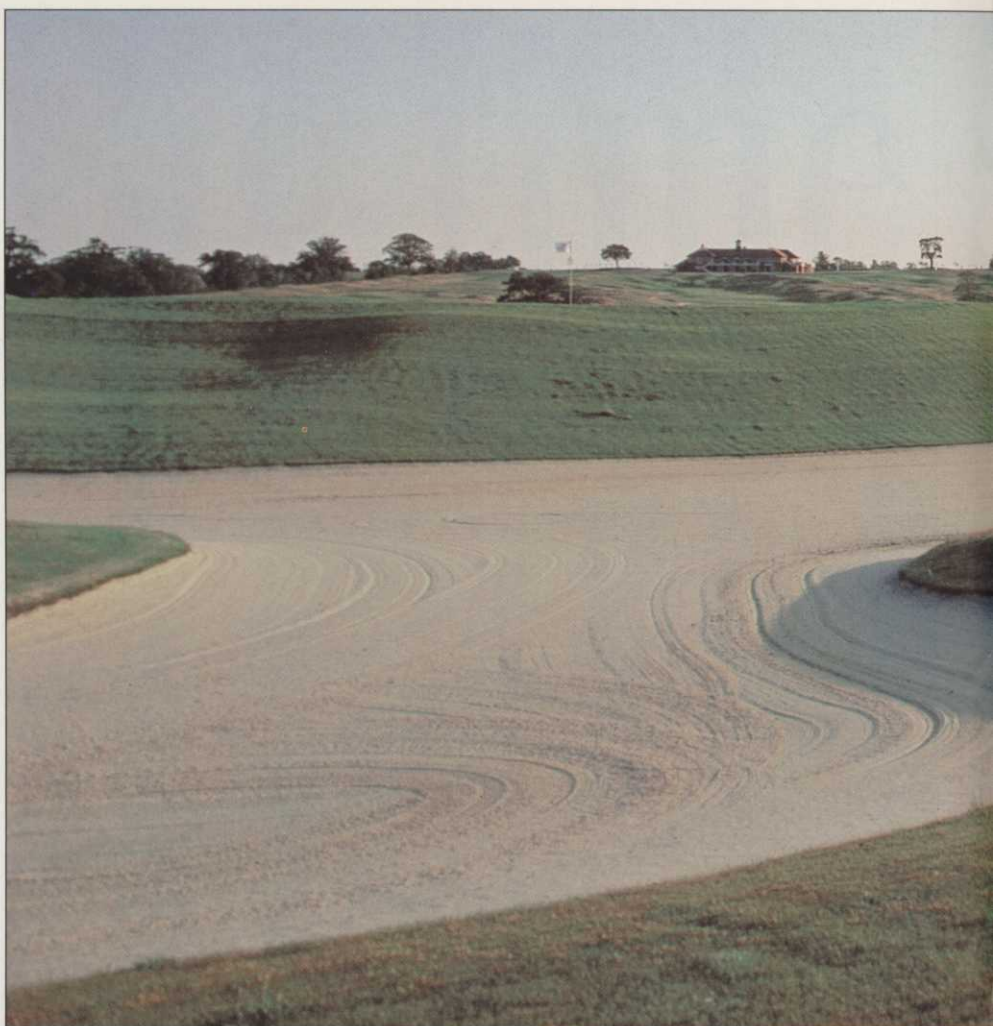
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Big time here we come

As could be expected, the ground was previously poor farmland on difficult soil with considerable clay – hence, perhaps, its availability.

There was a field structure with hedges and a number of mature trees, mostly oaks, some of these had obvious potential as ‘features’ and have been retained, with the course built around them. In fact the landscaping has enhanced them so that they are now vital to their surrounds, both from the golf point of view and visually. Their new-found importance led Martin to consider schemes to protect some of them, and in particular to protect them against lightning. Unfortunately such protection is very expensive involving multiple electrodes and conductors, and in addition there is the dilemma, as Martin observed, “just which trees do you protect? You can be certain if a tree is hit it won’t be one which has been protected.” As a result, to date no trees have actually been protected.

No less important to the course is the water. This is used extensively with four separate ponds and lakes providing the most challenging of hazards, although most of the six holes driven over water do offer a dry route for the faint hearted.



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*Bringing perfection
to play.*

Big time here we come

From the greenkeeper's point of view the most important value of the water, unless you are a cynic who considers water as a space which does not need mowing, is that it forms a reservoir to contain rainfall for recycling in summer via irrigation – and the Oxfordshire does have a formidable irrigation system. For those who thrive on statistics, two lakes are used specifically for water storage and they have a 198,000 m³ capacity. There are nearly 1400 pop-up sprinklers fed by three pumps capable of outputting 1050 gallons a minute, and controlled individually by a Toro Network 8000 electronic controller through 46 satellite stations.

Every square foot of the course is drained – either as in the case of tees, greens and some fairways with underdrainage or elsewhere by virtue of gradients which shed surface water into catchpits, culverts and ditches, and there are some massive concrete culverts to conduct the water when an open ditch is inappropriate.

The ability of this catchment system can be judged by the fact that it has proved able to cope with the heaviest thunderstorm and in shedding this to the reservoir has lifted the level by 8" overnight.

Tees, up to seven per hole, allow for three levels of play as well as providing for winter, renovation and resting. All are fully drained and covered by irrigation, have 100mm drains at about 7m spacings, the 'sandy' root zone mix is laid to a 150mm depth.

Martin said that Rees was very much the artist who visited the course regularly during its construction but left the day to day work to his 'shapers' who were resident and very able.

Detailed drawings were made after the work was carried out, as a result Martin knows exactly where drains and irrigation lines are – not just where they should have been. The work was carried out by Southern Golf Construction of Warwick.

Greens, to the latest specification, have closer spaced drains than the tees, plus a drainage carpet, sand blinding and a greater depth of rootzone. In general the fairways rely on surface drainage, using catchment pits and culverts, all are fully irrigated usually with three lines. The roughs have similar treatment in terms of water shedding, but because many areas of rough are considered as features in their own right some of these are also subject to irrigation.

Both greens and tees were seeded at a rate of 9g/m², using British Seed Houses' Pencross creeping bent, while fairways were seeded with a mix of Freda chewings fescue and Cobra creeping bent at a low rate of 17g/m².

A mix of creeping fescue, chewings fescue and smooth stalk meadow grass was used for roughs at the same rate.

The fertiliser regime overall is based on controlled release compounds to provide a basic level of nutrient for all grass except the heaviest rough with rates being adjusted according to the location. This level is then 'topped up' by applications of a liquid fertiliser as required. Both soil and tissue analysis is used regularly, the former twice a year as routine, the latter – leaf analysis – carried out monthly.

Martin's records revealed application of 329, 49 and 278 kg/ha each of N., P₂O₅ & K₂O respectively to his greens and tees, while 266, 29 and 72kg went onto the fairways which have all clippings boxed off.

Mowing, and removing the clippings, has become a well organised logistics operation using a five man team, four operating mowers and one with the clippings trailer. Greens and tees are almost exclusively mown with pedestrian machines while ride-ons are used twice or three times a week on the fairways.

Plastic boxes are used extensively as intermediate containers for clippings – allowing the mower to work uninterrupted by the need to have a trailer to hand.

The clippings are an embarrassment, Martin admitted. "We compost them." However 'composting' tends to mean tipping them in a heap to heat and rot. He is hoping to acquire additional 'rough' grassland ground close to the course so that they can be spread finely for better decomposition. One

avenue he explored was to offer them to a local major grassland drying company, but they politely declined explaining that they expected their feedstock in considerably larger amounts and in longer lengths.

Electronic control of the irrigation is backed up by electronic weather data collection – Martin admitted that he has become a weather junkie – however he is unrepentant, saying that the weather station yielded invaluable information such as transpiration rates, and this is a considerably more accurate basis for irrigation than his judgement and it allowed for winds, day length and other parameters which are not usually included.

This variance from his own judgement has been something of a revelation. Programming the Toro Network 8000 was undertaken by the installers, but they said that it would take about three years for the club to get it tweaked to obtain its full potential. This three year learning curve to get it just right Martin thinks was about correct.

For the first two seasons the club employed

Autumn grass cutting: the Oxfordshire way

GREENS MOWING

Using Toro 1000 pedestrian mowers – 6 cuts per week September at hoc 4.5mm; 4 or 5 cuts per week October at hoc 5mm; 2 or 3 cuts per week November at hoc 5.5mm; grooming for half the frequency of mowing; grooming omitted following dressing.

TEES MOWING

Using Toro 1000 pedestrian mowers – 3 cuts per week September at hoc 8mm; 2 cuts per week October at hoc 8mm; 1 or 2 cuts per week November at hoc 8mm.

VERTICUTTING

Prior to dressing if possible.

NUTRITION

Sierrablen Mini (22-3-7) resin coated applied at 350 kg/ha in October in conjunction with coring, surface aeration and dressing. Peters Bentgrass High K (20-5-30) sprayed at 50 kg/ha every 14 days September, every 21 days October, every 28 days November. Vitax 50-50 Soluble Iron at 12 kg/ha tank mixed with Peters from October onwards. Maxicrop Triple Seaweed at 12.5 l/ha tank mixed in September and October.

GREENS THATCH CONTROL

Week 37 – Light surface aerate, topdress, roll; Week 40 – Verticut, 3/8in core, topdress, roll; Week 41 – Light surface aerate, topdress, roll; Week 43 – Verticut, light surface aerate, topdress, roll.

TEES THATCH CONTROL

Week 37 – Verticut, 1/2in core, topdress, roll; Week 38 – Light surface aerate, topdress, roll; Week 39 – Verticut, 1/2in core, topdress, roll; Week 40 – Light surface aerate, topdress, roll; Week 42 – Verticut, 1/2in core, topdress, roll; Week 45 – Light surface aerate, topdress, roll.

HAND WEEDING

Hand weed or plug patches of *Poa annua* in collars.

DISEASE AND PEST CONTROL

Control fusarium patch outbreak with Rovral or Quintozene. Control superficial fairy rings on tees with Fairy Ring Destroyer. Control leatherjackets with Gamma Col.

HUSBANDRY

Remove dew on days when mowing is not practised. Repair pitchmarks daily prior to all operations. Change pin positions two to four times per week. Move tee markers daily. Rotate use of tees where possible. Repair tee damage by divotting and/or plugging weekly.

'Electronic control of the irrigation is backed up by electronic weather data collection'

Big time here we come

an irrigation specialist and he has been responsible for the system, checking its function and re-programming run times for each sprinkler – however Martin is now satisfied that such a specialist is no longer needed. While the system is exceptionally sophisticated, Martin reckons it is also very easy to use.

The machinery line-up is extensive, with everything phased in new as required. The majority of the mowers are Toro, because, according to Martin, their specifications matched requirements at the time. Of course there are also Kubota compacts, the UK company being Thame based. A full time mechanic is employed, this keeps machinery in top condition and also allows the course to run with a lower level of machinery. He undertakes all the mower sharpening, the policy being to both spin grind and back lap regularly, and having asked around "which is the best machine?", the Oxfordshire ended up with Atterton & Ellis grinders.

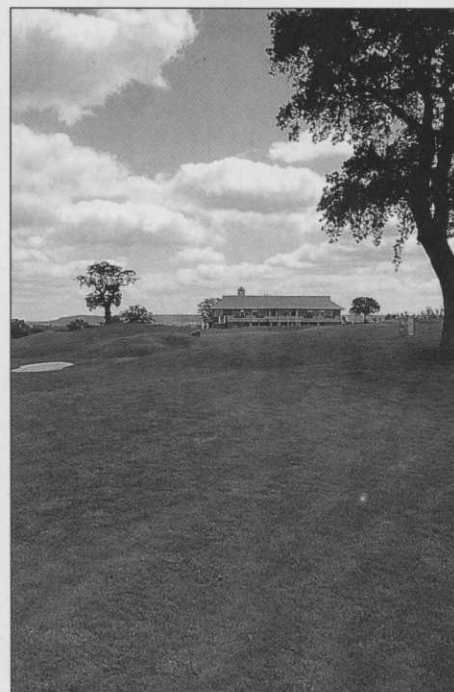
The greenkeepers' complex is situated close to the fourth and a useful distance from the clubhouse. It provides a full and almost lavish range of buildings and facilities, from Martin's

office through rest rooms to workshops and machinery storage, all facing a large yard and car park.

First impressions suggest that it is too large, particularly when it considered that the Oxfordshire is only an 18 hole course. However with the emphasis on perfection it is well staffed – staff numbers from 12 out of season to a high of 20 in summer. If this seems excessive perhaps it should be remembered that the Oxfordshire aspires to championship status, that it is not far from having been farmland and that the only acceptable 'weed-killer' for greens and tees and some of the fairways, is handwork.

In summary, from a management point of view the Oxfordshire is impressive – very impressive. From the aesthetic viewpoint I would certainly say Rees Jones fulfilled his aim and it has to be said that the landscaping works, although to be critical I find something unsettling about the sight of a parkland course full of dunes.

As to the challenge and fairness of the course, take Martin's word, even if he is not unbiased, that it does offer something for everyone.



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