Mentmore Golf and Country Club is a new golf club with a big future if Mark Ellis and his team have their way. Scott MacCallum came away convinced.

You could almost hear the “Mission Impossible” tune in the background as Mark Ellis described his job at Mentmore Golf and Country Club. All that were missing were the words. “Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to turn Mentmore’s two golf courses into one of the finest golfing developments in the country; solve the acute drainage problems; improve the design and keep the membership, who have paid significant membership fees, happy while the work is being done…” this tape will self destruct in ten seconds.”

If Mark is daunted by the job he took on as Head Greenkeeper in March of this year he conceals it very well and in his own mind it is not so much “Mission Impossible” as “Mission Extremely Difficult But We’ll Get There in the End”.

“The lads are doing a tremendous job and we are all striving for high standards every time we go out and do work. I’m never going to leave this place. I’ve invested so much time and effort into it,” explained Mark.

The main problem at Mentmore and its two courses the Rothschild and the Roseberry is the heavy clay soil.

“The fairways are heavy clay and you can imagine how compacted they get. When we first opened up they were so muddy that we had to put in drainage. We put in so many drainage channels that it works too efficiently and it dries out now. This causes the fairways to crack open. The more we filled them in the more they cracked open. It was just like an hour glass. Last year we used more than 700 tonnes of sand but when we seeded over the top by the time the seed had come through it had sunk again. It was a never ending cycle.

“Now we have moved on from using pure sand to an 80/20 or a 50/50 mix but we have got to be careful that we don’t cap over what we’ve already done because the drainage is working.”

With the benefit of hindsight Mark feels the job would have been tackled a little differently.

“We should have waited and let the water find its own forms of moving away and then worked on the areas which needed drainage but the commercial pressures of getting the course ready meant a lot of sand bagging had to be done,” explained Mark who joined Mentmore as Deputy Head Greenkeeper in early ’92, when construction was under way.

The Director of Golf at Mentmore is ex-European Tour player Pip Elson who has been on site since day one.

“Working out of a Portakabin at the entrance and initially I spent me time driving people around in a 4x4 giving people an idea of how the course would eventually look,” explained Pip, from the splendid clubhouse which is currently being extended to take in a leisure complex.

The course is owned by Invicta Leisure, a major company which also owns Maple Durham, near Reading, built the same year as Mentmore, and Chelsfield Lakes in Orpington.

“The 36 holes here were built by CJ Collins in the space of seven months but much of the work was beset by weather problems. We had an inch of rain a week midweek for four consecutive weeks. The men had to be sent home on the Tuesday. The rain actually tore out the root-zone.”

It is a time both men obviously remember vividly and the lows they describe then mean that the pride in what they have achieved...
The Montmore team with Mark Ellis in the front row, centre

is all the more tangible.

“The 9th is 616 yards and the water washed all the way down taking the soil with it. We had that on several fairways which we have now remedied. We built them up, originally seeded them, then turfed them and we had to do it again and again,” recalled Mark.

“When we used to get rain our 360 was up to its windows with water and you couldn’t wade across it with a spike to release the water,” he added.

“We’ve come in on a Monday after rain on the weekend and had to scrape back all the silt which had blown or washed out. We’ve had to do the same on the Tuesday and the same on the Wednesday. You just kept on and going knowing the water just can’t get away.”

It is all part of an on-going improvement to the course which is overlooked by Mentmore Towers, home to the British National Law party and is just a few miles from Chequers, the Prime Minister’s country residence.

As Pip Elson explained there is much work to be done with regard to fairway bunkering while all 120 of the existing bunkers over the two courses were built by the current greenkeeping staff.

“Since March we have come on in leaps and bounds and with the commitment the team has shown, if we can keep going and get some decent grass coverage around the greens we will see even more improvement,” said Mark.

Montmore is particularly proud of its greens, which stimp at 10 for a pro-am held at the club in October.

“In March we hammered the greens. We double scarified them, double verticut them to a millimetre, then hollow cored, seeded and dressed it all out. It took ages for them to recover and it wasn’t until Easter that they started to recover but it paid off.

“The greens are fantastic and we are always complimented on them,” said Mark, just as he had to assist one of his staff who had uncovered another minor problem to overcome. Terraspiking the greens it was impossible to know where the root zone finished and the clay began and several of the tines were broken.

“I really do have a good team. I’ve got a file full of ideas which have come from them about improving the course while one of the team leaders, Gavin Sowden, saved us quite a bit of money the other day just through his irrigation knowledge and was able to pump water from our main lake into a reservoir without us having to dig a trench.”

Since taking over as Head Greenkeeper Mark has injected some of his own enthusiasm into his team and it is paying dividends.

“I just love greenkeeping. I could be doing other jobs but I do this for the love of it and I love being connected with BIGGA,” said Mark, who is a regular on the Greenkeeping Support Team at The Open.

“The clubhouse here is run like a five star hotel and the course has the potential to be in the same class. When I left Woburn I didn’t want to do myself down and move to a lesser club and I feel I have achieved that.”

“The tiger tees were originally constructed at ground level and we are raising them by about a metre to a metre and a half – at the moment the water just can’t get away”.

FACT FILE

Original Fairway and Approaches

Seed Mix
40% Poa Pratensis (Baron) 20% Chewings Fescue (Frida)
30% Creeping Fescue (Boreal)
10% Agrostis Tenuis (Highland)

Mentmore Greenkeeping Staff
Mark Ellis, Head Greenkeeper;
Eamon Slattery, Deputy Head Greenkeeper;
Mark Whittle, Team Leader;
Gavin Sowden, Team Leader and Irrigation; Sean O’Connell, Bill Lewis, Russell Howson; John Frampton, Mechanic; Lee Rance; Lee Staggs, Gardener; Michael Dunleavy, YTS; Naomi Janes, YTS; Danny James, YTS, Danny Gilbert

Equipment Inventory
Two John Deere 2243 greens mowers
Two Ransomes GT Classic greens mowers
Two Ransomes Auto Certes pedestrian greens mowers
One Ransomes 1800
Two John Deere 2653A
One Ransomes 300
Three John Deere bunker rakes
One Honda TRX700 ATV
One Yamaha ATV
Two Honda 6522 compact tractors
One Kubota B700 compact tractor
One John Deere 1070 tractor
One John Deere 7334 tractor
One Zeta 5245 with front loader
One Jacquesen Turf Truck with attachments
One Hardi Sprayer
One Top Dress Unit
One Tipper Top Box
Two Ransomes leaf blowers
One Stihl knapsack leaf blower
Two Allen Fmys
Two Flying GT
One Victoria Rotary Mower
One Ariens 911 Rotary Mower
One Kubota KH101 striимер
One Komatsu GTHC striимер
One Lawnfill brushcutter
One IBA vacuum cleaner
One Stihl chain saw
One Echo lawn edger
One compact roller
One Turfcut turfcutter
One Sisis Mult Mower
One Sisis Rotorake
One Weidenman Terraspike
One Sisis snowplough
One Charterhouse Muleplough
One Groundsmen 800 Pollermower
One Wessex leaf sweeper
One Multi Core TM1000
One Charterhouse Top Dresser
One Grader Bar
One landscaper
One Charterhouse Dragmat
One DW Tomlin Rotorake
One Gravel Cart
One Farnam back box
One Farmach back box
One Warwick trailer
One Hudson trailer
Two Logic trailers
One Sisis overseeder
One Gandy dropseeder
One Charterhouse Discseeder
Two Scotts fertiliser spreaders
One fertiliser hopper
One Ransomes golf leader cylinder grinder
Two copper Pegler knapsack sprayers
One walkover sprayer

The face looks familiar...

Now there may be some of you out there who look at Mark Ellis and say, "Now that face is familiar." Any you would be right – particularly if you were a fan of one of the best British-made films of the last 20 years – because Mark was an extra on Quadrophenia. Not only that, he appeared in the film on his scooter with Toyah Wilcox riding pillion.

"I was on the front cover of Time Magazine," recalls Mark from those heady days.

A music fanatic he was also part of The Jam’s entourage, travelling around Europe with them and is a friend of Paul Weller, meeting him again only recently at one of his concerts in the Royal Albert Hall.

"Those were the days. I’ve even been interviewed by Garry Bushell of The Sun," he said.

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