Phil Rowbottom combines running a busy farm with managing a proprietary golf club at Woolley Park near Wakefield. Steve Castle spoke to him to discover how closely the two work together.

I arrived at Woolley Park on a grey April day, but with the course, clubhouse and farm buzzing with activity. After some thought, Phil gave his job title as “Course Manager and Farmer” but it’s immediately clear that everyone gets involved in both sides of the business.

Phil explained: “No one here is just a greenkeeper or just a farmer. There’s a couple of the greenkeepers out of the five staff but they don’t do a lot of farming but they’ll muck in when needed. One of them rolls all the corn when we sow it in the autumn. My colleagues Andy Scaman and Richard Thompson came through the farming industry with me. Andy is a farmer’s son who wanted to work on a larger farm, so he came here twenty odd years ago. He’s vertidraining today. Myself, my son John and Andy are the key farm staff and the others – Stuart Mason and Peter Colley – help out.

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**Profile**

**Name:** Phil Rowbottom  
**Position:** Course Manager/Farmer  
**Born:** Wakefield, 13 February 1960  
**Handicap:** 12  
**Hobbies:** Clay pigeon shooting (Has won a gold medal for Great Britain in the World Championships)
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Farm hands are a very adaptable group. They’re happy to drive a
small mower or a large tractor and they can generally mend things, and Andy and Richard achieved their NVQ2 Greenkeeping at Myer- scough.”

The farm’s main function now is drying and storing grain for merchants and local farmers. This started 25 years ago when father and son built a new grain store.

It turned out to be too big for their requirements, so they stored some oil seed rape as a favour for a neighbour and it grew from there.

Two years ago they constructed another grain plant and 9000 tons of grain went through the drier there last year.

Phil’s grandfather was a tenant at Mount Farm on the site, which lies close to the M1 in Wakefield. His late father David bought the farm in the mid seventies, and after years as a successful crop farm, David then made a decision which initially seemed surprising.

“Around 1992 my dad decided to build a parkland golf course. He didn’t play golf but the sport really was booming at that time.

“We had 150 acres of farmland which we earmarked for building the course. You have to bear in mind that none of the family knew the first thing about golf course construction. I’d studied Agri- culture at college but had no real interest in golf.

“We had a friend who was an architect, so we talked to him about planning. Before we knew it we’d bought £12,000 of grass seed to sow it all down and we got stuck in. When you looked at the landscape, it was actually perfect.

“We didn’t need to excavate or move any trees, we just got on with planting grass seed. We tried not to overcomplicate things and that’s the attitude we try and retain today where possible.

“We bought three shipping containers to act as an office, a shop and the maintenance facility. In reality one had some paperwork in it, one a coffee machine and one a mower.

“My mother took the course fees, my father mowed the lawns and my wife Jane – a schoolteacher by trade - was the first greenkeeper because I was busy running a fertil- iser business at that time.

“I bought Jane a second-hand Toro mower at auction and she used that. We ran it as a family top to bottom, and that continues to this day.”

“It wasn’t until four years after the course opened that they removed the shipping containers and constructed the clubhouse which houses a bar, dining area and pro shop.

“The family connection is continu- ing with Phil’s son John working on both the farm and the course. Phil said it’s been a pretty straightfor- ward few years although he recalled one mistake which they had to deal with promptly.

“We did have an incident a good few years ago where some weed killer was accidentally sprayed on the greens, and we had to move play to winter greens in August. We reacted straight away by getting hold of three loads of topdressing, deep scarifying through the turf, reseeding it in a week and they were back in play in three weeks. It was a genuine error and it’s all about how you react to things – life is never plain sailing as everybody knows.”

The undulating parkland course is now nicely complemented by a nine-hole par three course, which is close to the grain store and farm- house.

Phil explained that Wakefield has a huge catchment area, and they decided to respond to the need for people to have a quick round of golf after work.

Phil said: “Apart from laying the rootzone on site.

“With the best of intentions we laid the greens in a week and they were pretty new and vulnerable to drought.”

We get dads and lads playing, then they want to play the 18 hole course, and some become members. We opened it right in the middle of the recession but it’s been a real success and kept a steady stream of new golfers coming through the doors.

“Any budget left over is spent on the golf course, not the locker room. The customers come through the door to play golf and you have to get repeat customers – so the golf course is the most important thing, and always will be.”

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So what about the future? Phil smiled and said: “My attitude is to tell the lads the golf course looks fantastic today, but I want it better tomorrow.

“If they say they need a new piece of kit I will do my utmost to source the budget for it.”

“We're planning a huge project to get the course up to date.”

Innovation corner

To save hours of labour, Phil took two seven-foot Sisis slitter and welded them together to create a 14-foot slitter!

He added that the slitters were very useful and highly reliable, but this unusual solution obviously allowed his team to slit larger areas of the course at a time.

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“The undulating parkland course is now nicely complemented by a nine-hole par three course, which is close to the grain store and farm house.

“Phil explained that Wakefield has a huge catchment area, and they decided to respond to the need for more golf, not to build greens and good drainage.

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