



Fairway irrigation keeps the grass growing on the final approach to the 18th green

Collingtree Park, the executive course that brings a new dimension to golf in Britain

John Lelean has a privileged pre-view of sculptured fairways in a lakeside setting

Just two years ago, work commenced on the outskirts of Northampton to develop one of the most exciting new golf course projects anywhere in Europe.

Now, spot on schedule, the first stage, the 18 hole golf course is nearing completion to a standard that even a hard bitten golf writer who has attended many a press conference announcing a new venture, must confess has more than lived up to the smoked salmon, white wine publicity launch.

To sum up this latest addition to a golf starved country - its a Cracker!

There have been some internal management changes since the project was first devised and now International Resort Holdings, have sole controlling interest, but this has not affected the building of the golf course to a signature design, by former Open Champion, Johnny Miller. Sited partly in the grounds of a former stately home and incorporating surrounding farmland, the course now known as Collingtree Park has been laid out with meticulous design skill over every inch of its 275 acre site.

Mature trees within the old parkland have been cleverly incorporating in the sweep of the fairways, the flat, partly boggy meadows, completely reshaped to provide not only a fine test of golf, but a vista which is unrecognisable to previous owners of the land.

It is a golf course, designed with imagination and sculptured by bull-dozers.

Much has been written by the purists that the "American Concept" of man made courses based on the original Scottish links or the later sandy heathlands in the Surrey stockbroker belt is pure heresy. But golf has become a truly international game and in the same way that golf courses developed in parkland when the linksland was exhausted, so other tracts have needed to be developed to satisfy an every increasing demand for somewhere to play.

What has been done at Collingtree Park is the forerunner of the fourth stage in golf course development in the British Isles. If the land is unsuitable, then move it about until it is.

Mechanisation has provided the

opportunity to build today the equivalent of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Pyramids of Egypt or the Great Wall of China. The architects in ancient times had at their disposal an army of dispensable labour, modern designers use one man at the controls of an earth moving machine.

Management trainers advance the theory that problems do not exist. Every problem they say, presents an opportunity. Certainly there were plenty of opportunities at Collingtree Park.

Local residents expressed the view that part of the site was quite unsuitable for a golf course because low lying wetlands frequently flooded and a slow flowing stream, burst its banks at the mere hint of a storm.

In conjunction with the local water authority this "opportunity" was examined with the result that eight man made lakes, were incorporated into the course design, inter linked and controlled by stone weirs. They not only come into play on eleven of the holes, but it has solved a potential flooding problem for the surrounding area.

ON THE COURSE

The sluggish stream has been opened up, silt traps constructed, the banks landscaped, picturesque waterfalls add aeration, encouraging a thriving fish population. Black and white wagtails skip across the stones, herons patrol the banks and both flora and fauna, are flourishing.

The contractors, Southern Golf have now left the site, leaving only the arborists to plant new trees and shape those around the fringes of the fairways. In the words of Course Manager Peter Jones, "We are now growing the course in".

Peter joined Collingtree Park just over two years ago and has seen it take shape as the months progressed. Originally involved in golf course construction at Woburn with the development of the Dukes Course, he gained further experience in the building of nine holes at Harrow School and the Abbey Hill course at Milton Keynes. Later he joined the greenstaff at Woburn and was involved in the re-

construction of ten holes and the "in-house" laying out of the subsequent Duchess course.

At Collingtree Park his brief was to prepare a total maintenance budget, negotiate the purchase of machinery, recruit and train a greenkeeping crew and have the course ready for play by the Autumn. All this he has achieved. His greens are Pencross, sown between July and September last year on 12" of pure sand and all are in magnificent condition. It is possible to find a stalk of poa annua, but it is almost like searching for the four leafed clover.

Admittedly the only putts currently stroked over the surface are those played by the greenkeeping staff, but as the opening of the course has been put back until Spring next year, to coincide with the opening of the first tee complex, there is still another nine months of grooming and maturing to come.

The original plan was for 185 luxury houses on 60 acres skirting the fairways and this development is now

underway as is a block of sheltered housing and nursing home. The construction of a hotel overlooking a lake and the island 18th green, will start shortly but is not expected to be ready for occupation until 1992.

However, in time for the April opening of the golf course, the Golf Academy building will be completed, to dual as the temporary golf house in addition to its main role as an indoor teaching school.

Three outdoor specialist "Academy" holes, now maturing, will complete the training complex, backed by a grass two tier driving range, and sheltered cubicles on astro turf, illuminated by floodlighting.

The greenstaff, headed by Robert Gilbert, previously at Billingham Golf Club in Cleveland are with one exception not far out of their teens, but all show a keenness and enthusiasm that Peter has little difficulty encouraging.

Two of the staff, working on equal terms with the men are Paula and Angela. Both in their 20's Paula has a background in horticulture and Angela is fast acquiring an intimate knowledge of the complex Watermation irrigation system.

In the sheds another young man, Dominic is the course mechanic, responsible for keeping all the machinery in top class working order. As little as possible goes out for repair and all the grass cutting machinery is sharpened in house on their own grinding equipment.

Last month he recruited four school leavers to the staff. They will they gain maximum benefit from on job training, but will receive a first class greenkeeping education, attending a block release course at a college to be chosen.

Peters Jones said, "We are developing a team each responsible for achieving part of the overall jig-saw. Irrigation and mechanical problems are full time jobs for two of the staff, they in turn are training colleagues responsible for other tasks."

Peter added, "I am pleased with the way the greenstaff communicate with each other and I am sure there are worthwhile career prospects in greenkeeping for those who have shown an enthusiastic approach to the job."

The policy of International Resort



Left: Collingtree Course Manager, Peter Jones inspects the root growth on the Pencross sand greens. The seed was sown twelve months ago on 12 inches of pure local sand

ON THE COURSE

Holdings is one of growing and developing their own staff to be available for the future expansion of the company's interests.

Just prior to the Open Championship at Royal Troon, BBC sports commentator Renton Laidlaw chaired a discussion with Jacklin, Norman, Floyd and Nicklaus, all of whom have moved into course design in varying degrees. The "confession" extracted from Jack Nicklaus is particularly pertinent as he admitted that in his early days of architecture, he laid out a course to suit his own game, not necessarily playable by golfers of indifferent ability.

How many of us can drive 250 yards from the tee with a slight fade? His more recent designs cater for all levels of golf, by a judicious siting of a number of tees for each hole, each one lining up a variety of approach shots to the green.

Such is the concept of Collingtree Park, where a minimum of three tees for each hole have been placed in such a way the course can be set up for any type of event, from a professional tournament to an enjoyable day out for a category four golfer.

The short par threes have up to five teeing off grounds, demanding anything from a full blown drive to nine iron.

They have also moved away from the square or oblong tee areas to shaped tees, visually attractive but low cost maintenance, as all can be cut by machine. There is also the advantage of taking one or more tees completely out of play for essential remedial work.

Another so called American influence is the laying out of cart paths throughout the eighteen holes. Although some may believe this is a trend to be discouraged, golf has to be developed along commercial lines if anything like the necessary new courses are to be built in this country and that means developers must be looking for a maximum return on capital once the operation is underway.



A pair of swans have taken up residence on the lake guarding the 18th island green. Blanket weed encouraged by the hot weather has created a problem, but the owners are taking advice on clearing it

Collingtree Park is intended to be a golf course catering for the company golf day, society golf or hotel visitors. They require the best facilities that can be provided and if this necessitates the luxury of a golf buggy it should be available.

From a business point of view there is the additional advantage of speeding up play and subsequently increasing the number of rounds per day.

A decision is yet to be finalised on the formation of a member's club, but hardly a day passes without a written application or a telephone enquiry from golfers who are prepared to join without asking the price of a membership fee.

Each application is carefully filed on to the computer and if it is eventually decided to form a club, then all the applicants will be informed.

But to return to that superb course, mounded, grooved and shaped to sweep away from the tees, to the hole in the putting green.

The engineered drainage system not only gathers underground water, but can cope with a sudden storm when surface water runs off the moundings and channelled to the lowest point in the fairways. Here, storm gratings have been installed in the swales to pick up

surplus water to be carried away to the lakes and streams and alleviate any danger of flooding.

The developers have used designers from the USA, because with the experience of similar constructions in Florida, they can accurately calculate the technique of cut and fill to give contractors the exact drawings to fix a contract price.

Peter is enthusiastic about the way the golf course construction has progressed with little disturbance from the accompanying building development taking shape around the course. Project management, headed by Richard Skene, has ensured that the necessary roads and services have been installed with the minimum disruption to the delicate task of seeding fairways and growing the grass.

There is little doubt this privileged pre-view of one of the most exciting golf course developments in Britain has more than lived up to expectations.

Next Spring when the paying customers arrive, they too will discover a fine course with many challenges. My only advice is to bring a bag full of old balls, as many a card will show a penalty shot for a lost ball in one of the lakes.

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