

Enville has a long term improvement plan

John Lelean visits a Staffordshire gem where the hospitality is matched by the surroundings

One of life's great enjoyments is to combine business with pleasure and although some of our readers might insist the labours of a golf journalist are just one long round of pleasure, unfortunately this is not always the case.

There are exceptions and a visit to Enville Golf Club in the West Midlands certainly fell into this category.

My own club at Wetherby, through our past Captain John Fitton, has struck up a rewarding relationship with Enville, where we play a twelve aside team on a home and away basis. We go there in April, they come to us in September, with overnight accommodation of course. There is no way anyone is going to drive home after a surfeit of such extra-ordinary hospitality!

Enville must be one of the best kept secrets in British golf. Mention the name outside a 50 mile radius of Stourbridge and no one has heard of it. We all hope it stays that way.

For your ears only, and I trust greenkeepers will keep the news in the family, it is 36 holes of classic golfing country, carved out of pine forest and developed into a predominately heath land course.

The two courses, inter changeable when necessary for maintenance work, are the Highgate and the Lodge. The Highgate is longer, 6451 yards with a SSS of 72, the Lodge, slightly shorter at 6207 yards, SSS 70, but by general agreement much tighter, with some outstanding holes.

The Head Greenkeeper is John Palmer, who has been on the staff since 1972 and succeeded to the top job some 18 months ago.

He runs the course with eight full time staff. Two of the younger greensmen have completed the first and second year stages of the City & Guilds equivalent at Elmwood College in Scotland, but are continuing a block release for the third year module.

"We have not done a great deal of training in the past, but this is changing", said John Palmer. "During the winter we have had workshop training on our various items of equipment. The Agriculture Training Board sent in a mechanic to train staff on tractor maintenance and a dealer from Derby instructed staff on mower maintenance and the Kohler engines".

"Two have also been away on a chain saw safety course".

"This year we serviced four machines ourselves at a cost of only £250 each and this saved the club a great deal of money".

The club subscribed to the STRI and the Bingley based agronomist, David Stansfield visits regularly to check progress and offer advice.

"We view his recommendations more as a guideline than a tablet of stone", added John. "I don't believe it is practicable to work to a three year programme. There are too many factors to take into consideration such as the weather, the amount of play the courses receive in a year and most essential the money we have avail-

able".

"To achieve what I have set out to do could take two years, three years or even five. If the job is done correctly the courses will come right but in their own time".

Capital expenditure at Enville is now planned five years ahead, based on the assumption that machinery in constant use will last about five years before the cost of spares makes them uneconomic to retain.

John Palmer, conscious of running costs, plans to replace all the petrol driven machinery with diesel over the next six years and that includes his triplex mowers. He already has one diesel Toro GM with groomer units and says the improvement in the putting surface has been quite remarkable, despite the fact he is no longer cutting at the previous club policy of one eighth throughout the summer season.

"This was too low," said John. "The bents and fescues were struggling and only the poa could survive. Now cutting at 3/16ths or higher the groomer units have increased the green speed considerably".

Similarly, to encourage good growth he has reduced the pH from 7.0 two years ago to about 5.8 by applying nitrogen. This he believes is about the level to maintain otherwise his finer grasses could be adversely effected.

Asked to identify his main problems, John was quite definate; drainage and thatch. He said he was now working to a much stricter slitting programme for the greens, tining down to 6 inches, verti-cutting regularly and hollow tining to one inch centres. The verti-drain used last year broke through the pan and now root growth is down to 9 inches and he is aiming at eleven.

The day we played the course John was hollow tining and had not top dressed, but although there appeared to be more holes than green, no one complained because the putts still ran reasonably true.

When the top dressing is applied it is a 70:30 mix of sand and Fendress on the principle that a little and often is far more beneficial than a once a year heavy dosage. A top dressing of pure sand is used in the Autumn only.

He gives the greens a feed of seaweed extract and liquid iron and has cut out granular feeding completely.

During the winter, in common with most courses he had a couple of outbreaks of fusarium and treated with a Mascot Contact Fungicide. Next year he will probably vary the product, not because it was unsuccessful, but to ring the changes so the disease does



One of Enville's most spectacular holes, the 16th on the Highgate Course

ON THE COURSE

not become immune to a specific treatment.

Mechanical aeration is also the policy for the fairways. John recalled that when he joined Enville in 1972, the fairways were so thin on grass cover they were mown just once a month. Now due to regular winter slitting and verti-cutting the sward has thickened to require cutting weekly during the season.

Although this has created extra work, the finer grasses have become dominant, there is less need to divot and weeds have been almost eliminated. Fairway aeration is also helping his other problem - drainage. There are a number of water catchment areas on the course that come into play and these will need lifting and draining into one of the numerous streams that criss cross the fairways. Because the course was developed out of woodland, rather than agricultural land very few drains were already in existence. Trees soaked up the rain water and the surplus ran off into the ditches. As most greenkeepers now find, the areas laid out for tees at Enville are proving to be far too small for the amount of all year play that his courses receive. To overcome the problems created by excessive wear, last winter

John added length or width to five tees and has ten more planned for increase in the future.

The fashion in the 1960's to have two tier tees, when the backs were only used for weekend competitions has created considerable difficulties with both wasted ground and awkward maintenance. John has already started to level off his tees, but encountered one big snag at his fifth hole when he discovered the elevated layer was built on sandstone and it had to be broken up with a JCB.

He is now aiming to have around 600 square yards of teeing ground for all the short holes, though the course layout causes certain restrictions on some holes. Spreading the wear is the only answer and this is achieved by moving the markers daily.

Bunkers are the least of his worries. He uses Moneystone White from Cheshire, has no mechanical bunker raker, just manual raking on Mondays and Fridays with encouragement to the members to keep them tidy. A neat idea seen at Enville were their moveable bridges. Instead of a fixed bridge across the fairway streams concentrating wear to a focal point, the wooden structure, wide enough to pull a golf cart can be moved by two

men a yard to the left or right on a weekly basis.

They are easy to construct from two base timbers of equal length, tapered at either end with a high point in the middle. Slats are nailed across the two beams to form an attractive humped back design. The structure is strengthened with stretchers and lifting struts at either end.

As to the future? John Palmer sees his primary objective bringing the greens to perfection for all year round golf and that means a continuous programme of slitting, tining, coring and verti-draining.

At some time the irrigation system installed in 1972 will need updating, but this is likely to involve a major capital project.

Meanwhile my club have already made plans to welcome the Captain and his team from Enville in September and we in turn are anticipating our return to the West Midlands in 1990.

I might then be tempted to give you an update on how John Palmer is getting on, though this is dependent on whether I make the team. If the improvement in my game matches the promises given by our professional when he sold me my new clubs, then read these columns next year!



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