

# Iron and sand keeps fusarium under control at Tudor Park

John Lelean meets the helmsman, on course for a successful season.

**O**n the outskirts of Maidstone near the village of Bearsted, the new Tudor Park Hotel Golf and Country Club fits majestically into the rural Kentish countryside.

Built on the site of the Tudor House Restaurant, gutted by fire some years ago, together with the adjacent former deer park of Milgate Estate, Country Club Hotels, a division of the Whitbread Group, have created the first of a new generation of hotel golf and country clubs, which they justly regard as the flagship of the present ten similar hotels and golf courses operated by the company.

But more about the superb hotel and leisure facilities later. The objective of my visit was to meet the man responsible for the upkeep of the eighteen hole Tudor Park Golf Course, course manager Derek Keen.

Derek is well known to many greenkeepers in the Midlands, having moved to Tudor Park from Telford Golf and Country Club to take charge at the construction stage in 1985.

Prior to his appointment at Telford in 1974 he had a four year stint as head greenkeeper at Shrewsbury where a new course was built to replace the original 1891 design.

He has always taken an active part in the affairs of the Greenkeepers Association and was one time secretary of the Midlands Section, always to be relied on to produce newsworthy items for publication.

His interest in the advancement of greenkeepers is still strong, though Derek now confesses to taking a less demanding role in the organisation, understandably because of the responsibilities he has undertaken with his new course, though he has accepted a committee position for the Kent Section.

**T**he parkland course, designed by Donald Steel was never intended to be a champion-

ship course. Acreage restrictions demanded the 6,041 yards from the back tees had to be set into the land available, but nevertheless Steel achieved his objective to produce a pleasant hotel club course which gives every golfer, regardless of handicap a more than fair chance to beat the standard scratch.

The course winding round the rear of the hotel has two par fives, 12 par fours and four par threes. Two ponds at the fourth and tenth add a feature to the course, but unless one over clubs at the 177 yard tenth, they do not come into play.

There are only 26 bunkers on the course, one way to cut back on maintenance costs, but these are made up by an increasing use of moundings and grass hollows, formed in such a way they can be cut mechanically. The greens in January were in superb condition. Firm with a good grass covering, well drained and hardly a suspicion of poa.

Derek said they were constructed with a herringbone drainage system overlaid with a blinding layer of pea gravel on a gravel carpet. The growing medium is a 70:30 mix of Leighton Buzzard Sand and Fen Soil.

All the greens were seeded rather than turfed with a mixture of Chewings Fescue and Browntop Bent and since the course was opened for play in May last year he estimates there has been less than 2 per cent incursion from other species.

This has been achieved by a programme of intensive cultivation, slitting every two weeks (though this was not too noticeable on the putting surface) and hand cutting with Ransomes Auto Certes. He is cutting every two weeks throughout the winter.

Over the last few months careful use of iron and sand as a greens top dressing has kept the dreaded fusarium at bay and he has had no need to apply any fungicides. Earlier he fertilised with small quantities Farmura and Seamac but now only applies a dilute solution

on weak areas of the fairways.

The fairways, like most courses constructed on open parkland are inclined to be sparse in the initial stages. Derek is attempting to overcome the problem by regular slitting and keeping traffic away from areas with a tendency to wear thin or become muddy, though drainage is not a serious difficulty as the underlying layer is Kentish ragstone a material which has fissures and cracks allowing water to run through.

With hindsight, the tees could have been built larger and some may have to be extended to give greenstaff the opportunity to effect repairs if the number of rounds of golf increase. Winter golf is played off mats and Derek invested around £1,600 to put an artificial surface on every tee, but even these have not saved the immediate surrounds from intensive wear.

The opening of the course at Tudor Park created an interesting situation, which new golf course owners might consider. Although guests at the hotel may use the course as part of the daily tariff, a club was formed to include membership of both the golf course and the leisure facilities, including the indoor swimming pool.

**B**ecause it was a new course, the majority of applications came from nearby residents, who previously had not been able to obtain membership of a golf club with the result that quite a number were beginners at the game.

The thought of three hundred 'hackers' let loose on a new course is enough to turn a greenkeeper's legs to jelly, but this was overcome by insisting that golfers had to reach a required standard before they were allowed out on the fairways.

Although this was an added bonus for club professional Marc Boggia, Derek Keen has said the policy has worked well and not only are the new members reasonably

# MANAGEMENT



competent, despite high handicaps, but they have been taught the etiquette of the game. Divots are replaced, pitchmarks repaired, there are less hold-ups and cards are marked correctly.

When the course was planned, trees played a major part in the layout, that was until the hurricane of 1987 struck the South of England. Between 50 and 60 were lost, including ten mature specimens intended to be a feature in the playing of a hole. However these were cleared and in time others will take their place.

Even now visitors to Kent and Surrey are shocked at the total devastation of woodland in the countryside, which will take years to cut and clear, let alone replant.

Derek's pride and joy at Tudor Park is his greenkeeping 'shed'. Shed is hardly the word to describe the magnificent long low L shaped equipment area, hard surfaced in front of the high security up and over doors, with a roofed open area to the left of the building where he is able to store sand and compost and do his own mixing.

The maintenance building includes Derek's office, which also houses the computerized control centre for the Watermation irrigation system and a rest area for the seven greenkeeping staff.

Most of the equipment is Ransomes. In addition to the five Auto Certes for the greens, there are three hand operated Marquis for tees and approaches, three Ransomes 180s, one five blade and two seven blade.

For the fairways he has a Hydraulic 5, with a five gang Magna and a three gang Magna for rough cutting. Power is provided with a 45hp Kubota, a Massey Ferguson 135 and a Ford Tractor with a loader.

For fairway slitting he uses a SISIS TDF 32 and for greens maintenance a Cushman system. Extra equipment includes a screen and shredder and a couple of 36" Bobcats for awkward rough areas.

But to return to the hotel and leisure complex. Derek Keen met me in the poolside grill and bar alongside one of the best private heated indoor swimming pools in the country. The pity was we did not

have the time to enjoy it!

Nor the saunas, jacuzzi, squash courts and snooker tables, though I can sing the praises of the hotel's Garden Restaurant where the food was of excellent quality, beautifully presented by the staff, who perfectly blended the balance between professionalism and friendliness.

As for breakfast . . . that was a treat that had most of the guests gasping for breath as they were confronted with the vast range of tempting dishes from oriental fruits, several types of fish to good old English bacon and eggs accompanied by as many of the extras one could put on the plate.

All the bedrooms have their own bathrooms, most look out over the golf course.

In time the views will be even better as Derek Keen's responsibility includes the hotel gardens. He said the company policy is to create colour and interest throughout the year by planting banks of flowering shrubs.

In his words it is "to create a visual experience", a task I know he will enjoy.