

New jewel in Cheshire's golfing crown will be mounted at Portal . . . Keith Brain reports



The short 13th

To someone like myself, born and raised in agricultural Cheshire, it is sad to see the once flourishing farming industry going through hard times. As a golfer, and someone who has made a living from the royal and ancient game for over two decades, the decline in farming in my native county is, however, now producing some startling and exciting prospects for our golfing future.

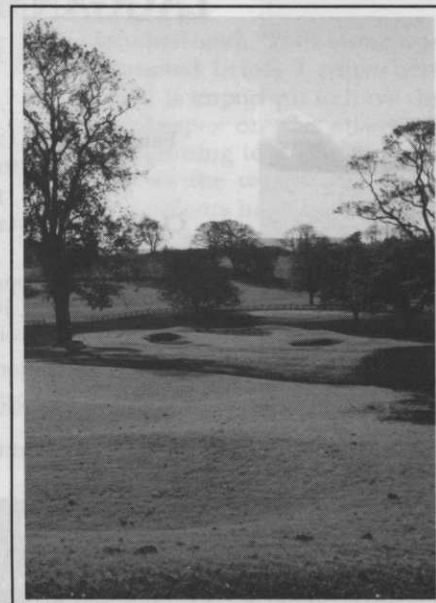
The last five years have produced some unforeseen changes for dairy farmers. To some degree they have become victims of their own success by producing a more efficient cow and creating tremendous surpluses around the world. E.E.C. regulations have been changed drastically to such an extent that it is now estimated that around half of Britain's dairy farmers are looking for alternative uses for their land. Many of them, particularly in Cheshire, are turning to golf, and creating new courses as a solution to their problem.

Take the ancient borough of Vale Royal, right in the Cheshire heartlands, for instance. The area boasts two fine championship courses at Delamere Forest and Sandiway, used as pre-qualifying tests the last time the Open Championship was held at Royal Liverpool, when Roberto de Vicenzo had that emotional victory over the Hoylake links.

In addition, there exists another private members club at Helsby and a

nine hole municipal complex at Knight's Grange, near Winsford. For decades it has been virtually impossible to obtain membership of any of the three private clubs. But all that seems set to change in the next couple of years. In the borough of Vale Royal alone there are currently plans for the establishment of no less than seven new golf courses, a new driving range has been built and opened, and others are planned to follow.

Maybe, in the ensuing years, the area, so close to the historic city of Chester and within easy reach of the connibations of Manchester, and Liverpool,



View of the short 3rd

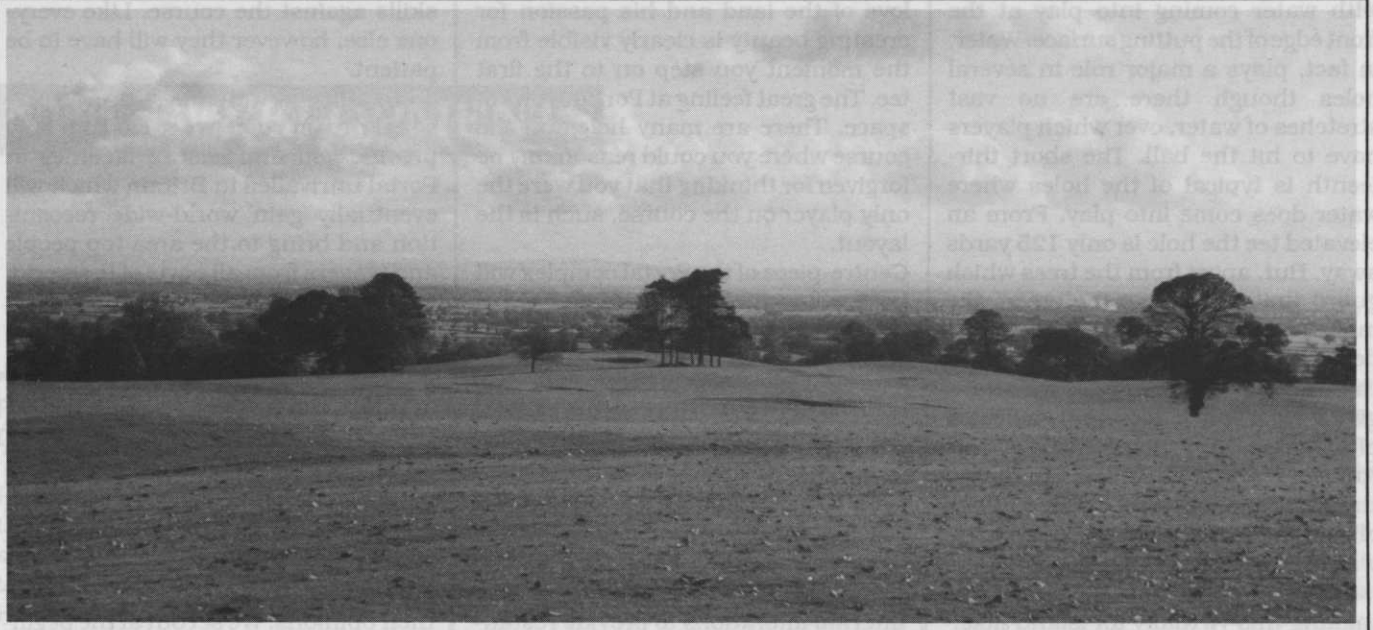
will become something of a golfing meccas, perhaps destined to rival some of the traditional Scottish haunts of English golfers who in a week would be in a position to play a different golf course every day and still have some to spare yet never travelling more than half-an-hour to any one venue.

Whether that actually happens or not, there will certainly be a great deal of golfing traffic heading for the village of Tarporley near Chester. For it is there, on the Portal estate, that the jewel in the Vale Royal Borough Council's golfing plans, is being created.

John Lilley moved to the area twenty years ago after a long and successful business career in which he built the giant Norwest Holst construction company into one of the biggest and most successful concerns in the land. At Portal, and on the adjoining Arderne estate, he created a thriving farming empire which became one of the biggest operations in Europe, with eventually the largest Freisan herd under one roof in the whole of Europe.

Like all his farming colleagues, however, he was forced to examine other possibilities when the new E.E.C. regulations were announced. There were many options but in the end he opted for the golfing syndrome.

"This is a beautiful part of the world and I want to retain the character of the area but at the same time create something really special. Meanwhile I hoped that the creation of new jobs



View from the 1st tee

would help to stop the decline of rural job prospects in the area", he said. What has already happened is that the first of two eighteen hole championship courses has been created. Work on the second course starts this spring as does the hotel project which will see the creation of a 100 bed hotel and a leisure complex which will incorporate the best of off-course facilities more readily associated with an American type country club than a European golfing complex.

The first course, designed by Donald Steel and constructed by Brian Pierson, has already been acclaimed by a number of golfing scribes. Covering over 200 acres of rolling countryside and with a huge number of mature trees on the site, it comes as no sur-

prise that Donald Steel said before starting the project: *"This is one of the best pieces of land I have ever seen. It is so full of variety and character that it has the potential of becoming as fine an inland course as we currently have in the United Kingdom"*.

He must be delighted with the creation of the course which, although now completed and virtually ready for play, will not be open until the middle of next year, because of the desire to allow the new course time to settle and mature. An unusual feature of the construction was that the entire course was seeded, not just tees and greens but rough and fairways. Hunters of Chester supplied Olympic Supreme for the greens, Olympic Sovereign for the rough and a special mixture of

Agram, Wintergreen, and Lustre Chewings Fescue together with Baron Poa Pratensis and Highland Browntop for fairways and tees. The result has been a superb cover and excellent uniformity in all the playing surfaces.

It is the variety of golf holes and the avenues of trees which line some fairways which immediately appeal.

But among the collection of memorable holes are two in particular on this 6,955 yard course which may well be talked about more than any others. They are the 540 yard par five fifth which will be one of the longest in European golf. The drive, from an elevated tee through an avenue of trees must be perfect, followed by a wood or long iron, leaving a good position for the shot to a tightly bunkered green

The house



with water coming into play at the front edge of the putting surface. Water, in fact, plays a major role in several holes though there are no vast stretches of water, over which players have to hit the ball. The short thirteenth is typical of the holes where water does come into play. From an elevated tee the hole is only 125 yards away. But, apart from the trees which guard the entrance to the green, the major hazard is a pool, beautifully designed and sculptured right across the front of the green with waterfalls giving a cascade effect from each side of the green into the pool below.

Anyone looking for a safe route and thinking that by going up a couple of clubs and playing big would be rewarded, would be mistaken. At the back of the green is another pool making this virtually an island hole. But it would be wrong to give the impression that Portal is an artificially made golf course with water everywhere. Where pools have been introduced they have been done carefully and tastefully to enhance the hole and its surrounds. But beauty is in essence the keyword at this course and one of the major reasons for that is that John Lilley, surprisingly a non golfer himself, has a passion for the land and for gardens.

He readily admits that he sees Portal not simply as a golf course but as a huge extension to his gardens. His

love of the land and his passion for creating beauty is clearly visible from the moment you step on to the first tee. The great feeling at Portal is one of space. There are many holes on the course where you could reasonably be forgiven for thinking that you were the only player on the course, such is the layout.

Centre-piece of the Portal complex will be the fine timber-framed courtyard house which, although built in 1906 was copied from Tudor mansion times.

**Architect Donald Steel
Constructors Brian D. Pierson
(Contractors) Ltd, Head
Greenkeeper Mark Proctor**

The house is now a listed building and externally will not be altered in any way although there will be extensive internal alterations to provide restaurants for golfers and hotel guests. From the great south facing bay windows guests will have a panoramic view over the extensive gardens and beyond, right through to the Peckforton hills. European Tour stars Derrick Cooper and Denis Durnian planted commemorative trees at the ceremonial opening of the new complex to signal the start of the development in the spring last year. Since then they have both been back to inspect the course. Like everyone else who is involved in golf and associated with the Portal complex they can't wait to tee up and test their

skills against the course. Like everyone else, however they will have to be patient.

John Lilley is watching his own personal dream come true. His aim is to provide golf and leisure facilities at Portal unrivalled in Britain which will eventually gain world-wide recognition and bring to the area top people and players from all parts of the world, who like everyone else, will have the chance to play either of the two courses on a pay-as-you-play basis rather than a membership type club.

"We have taken expert guidance from a number of people and we have had as our guests many influential and knowledgeable people from the world of golf. They all assure me that at Portal I have something which is really special and I am delighted to hear their opinions. We set out at the beginning of the operation to create something that was different and memorable and everyone tells us that we have succeeded. But we don't want to ruin everything that has been achieved by opening too early", he said.

Therefore everyone will have to wait another twelve months or so, before the Portal complex and its courses become generally available.

There can be little doubt, however, according to all experts, that this latest jewel in Cheshire's crown will be well worth waiting for.

I, for one, cannot disagree.



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