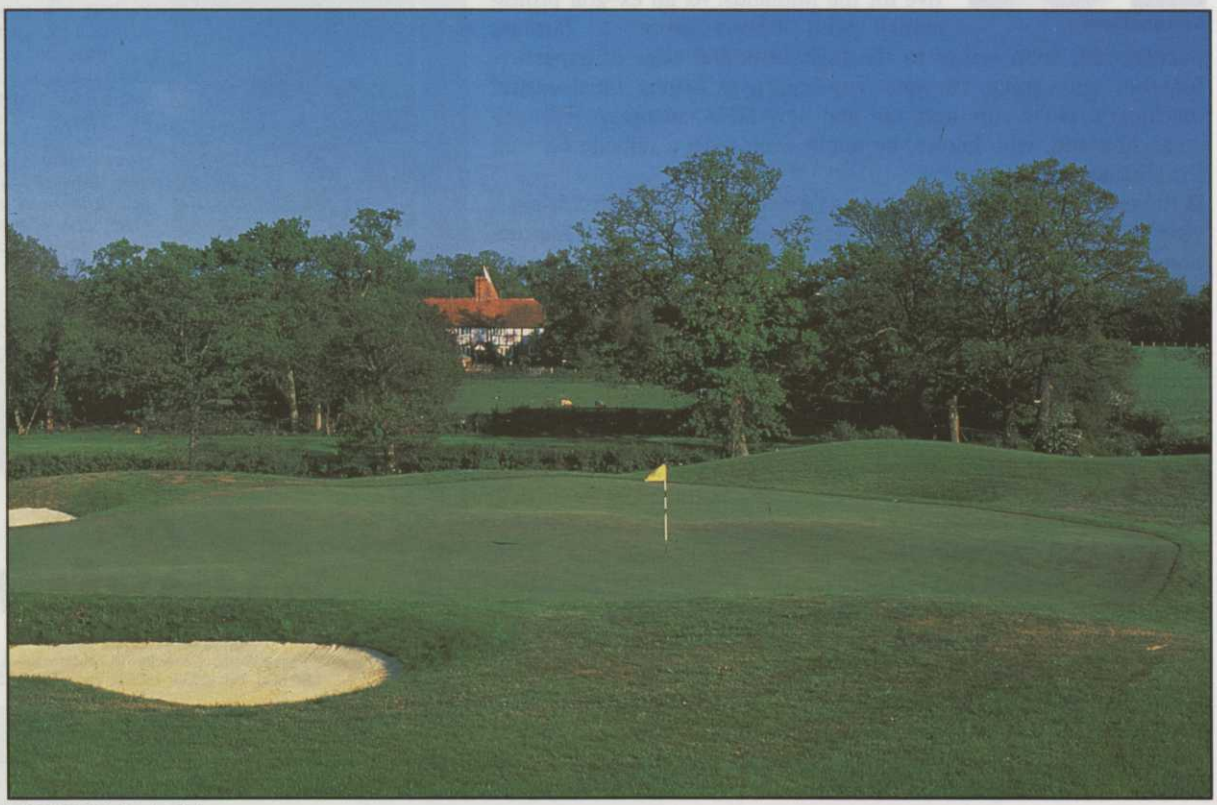
Nothing's i

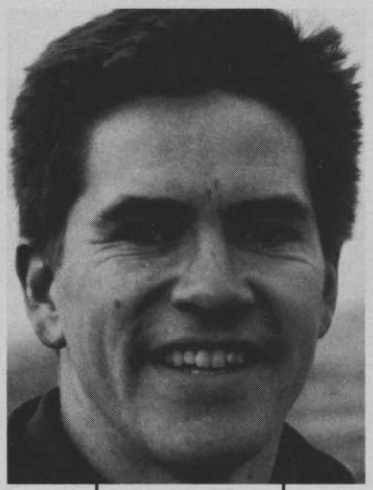
Above: The full splendour of nature's panorama shown to great effect here on the green and approach — 14th West.

Right: Pretty as a picture — the 3rd green East.



mpossible

Critics said the East Sussex National golf course would be impossible to achieve and impossible to maintain. DAVID WHITE reports on a dream which became reality



A common trait amongst certain members of the British public is to 'knock' that of which they are unaware or which threatens to dislodge long-held beliefs. Working on the premise 'don't knock it 'till you've tried it', there is evidence to suggest that hordes of doubting Thomas's may choke over their prejudices as the 36 holes of East Sussex National Golf club provide visual and dramatic proof that USGA spec sand greens planted with Pennlinks bentgrass can be a huge success in Britain.

The dream that became a reality began just three years ago when Brian Turner, a successful Canadian entrepreneur and self-confessed golf addict, became enamoured with a handsome tract of Sussex countryside and fired with the idea of creating a course which would stand comparison with the best in the world, perhaps – whisper it – in time becoming a mirror image of Augusta National itself, right in the heart of rural Sussex.

Designing the courses, both the tournament inspired East with its gallery mounding and the elegant and graceful West with distant views toward the rolling South Downs suggesting shades of Bonnie Scotland, was entrusted to the inspirational Bob Cupp, former senior designer for Jack Nicklaus. The results achieved may have put Cupp in the same league as MacKenzie, Colt, or Donald Ross.

The main contract was given to the Transcontinental Golf Course Construction Company, a group with a reputation for producing fine quality work. The results are truly evident at ESN.

Ken Siems, also a Canadian, was hired by Turner to nurture and train a staff capable of maintaining both courses to tournament conditions on a daily basis. Now, after three years intensive work in which the ESN courses have been built and maintained to championship standards which many said were impossible to achieve and totally impossible to maintain, the ESN team are happy to demonstrate the results.

Ken, pictured, is no braggart, yet is justifiably proud of the praise heaped upon the maintenance team by the British Walker and Curtis Cup teams, both having used the courses for intensive pre–match practice and both attributing their success in no small part to the use of ESN's Anglo / US user friendly playing characteristics.

'There are no certain recipes for turfgrass success and the grass species and sands utilised here are but two of the ingredients in providing such quality turf. A sound management programme is an equally critical element.'
– KEN SIEMS

Quizzed on why he thought most British consultant agronomists were so adamant in insisting that Bentgrass would not grow successfully in the UK climate, Ken intimated that growing Bentgrass here required a completely different management programme, different say to that which he would use in his former Toronto location. 'I think', he said, 'that people have the mistaken belief that creeping Bentgrass – or USGA spec greens – are only managed in one way, but the intensity and frequency of growth will vary considerably depending on the climate prevalent in the geographical area in which it is grown. There are no certain recipes for turfgrass success and the grass species and sands utilised here are but two of the ingredients in providing such quality turf. A sound management programme is an equally critical element.

'It is a complicated science, with improvements in the science of turfgrass moving as quickly as in any other high–tec industry. Nobody knows it all, but flexible thinking and experimentation are the keys to success for the greenkeeper.

'A small turf nursery should form part of a greenkeeper's course management programme, for it is a great idea to experiment with fertility, fungicide and disease prevention programmes and can prove useful when attempting to 'sell' an idea to a green committee. If a Club wishes to rebuild their greens using the USGA spec I would strongly recommend they authorise and encourage the building of such a nursery, using the USGA method, in order that first hand experience of the different management needed for such new greens may be studied and evaluated. It is a difficult transition to move from soil based greens to those which are sand based in one fell swoop.

'We spent many months testing and indeed rejecting many specimens before hitting upon the right sand for our type of operation. The sand/peat mix drains very quickly and consequently nutrient leeching is also very rapid. From the very start our thinking has been clear. If quality greens were going to be built then the USGA spec was – for us – the only way to go. It is our considered opinion that it is a mistake to build in any other way'.

On the vexing question of overplay, Ken takes a firm stance in stating that he sees this as the biggest single problem in the industry.

He continued, 'At ESN our target is not more than 25,000 rounds on each course. More than this and the quality will diminish. Of course the number of rounds played will vary from course to course, dependant on soil types, design and drainage. We are not above closing the course when frost is prevalent and our members not only understand our reasoning but appreciate it. They know that quality has a price'.

Reflecting on his maintenance team, Ken outlined the Club's commitment regarding training. Already Ken Barber, a head greenkeeper who came to ESN from Crowborough Beacon Golf Club, has been trained for greater

● Continued overleaf

'Commitment to excellence'

● From previous page

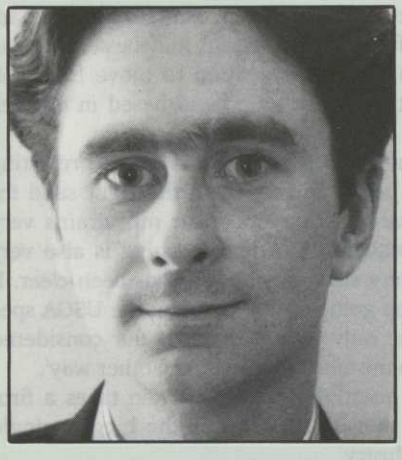
things and is away at this moment at the Pennsylvania State University. Their plan is for at least one green staff member to attend Penn. State's Turfgrass Programme each year. An after work lecture and maintenance 'think tank' is held each week and upwards of 20 staff attend. Although this is unpaid, it reflects the overall commitment to excellence held by every single greenkeeper.

As if managing two courses and upwards of 40 staff in the peak months was not enough, Ken is also working closely with David Blackmur at Plumpton Agricultural College. Here ESN are building sand greens on Plumpton's own little course and although the concept is a new one for Blackmur he is enthusiastic about the theory and understands and endorses one vitally important fact – a good sand does not compact.

Summarising, Ken Siems is in awe of the fine job British greenkeepers do within the limitations of the equipment and budgets placed at their disposal. 'With what they have they do far better than their American counterparts' were his actual words.

'There is however one thing that we would all do well to remember', he concluded, 'practices change, technology races ahead and with a bit more of the **I can do it** approach, nothing is impossible – certainly not USGA spec sand greens that work'!

Developing a golf course: from



by JONATHAN GAUNT.
The author gained his degree in Landscape Architecture at Leeds before joining Golf Landscapes Ltd as their golf course designer. His first design was the 27 hole Jack o' Legs Golf Centre at Stevenage and he is currently contracted to design 18 holes for Magnolia Park Golf Club, Bristol. He is one of a new breed of young architects and has recently formed his own consultancy practice in London.

PART ONE: Feasibility Studies

Over recent years many landowners have become increasingly attracted to the potential of selling their land for golf course development. They may not always be in a position to develop themselves, but selling land to developers with the magic words 'with planning permission for a golf course and hotel' often spells fat profits.

This however is not always wholly true, for developers are very choosy when it comes to buying a golf course site. There are a number of criteria that a site must satisfy before any decision can be made; for instance there is a world of difference between a site with full planning permission in the Norfolk Fens and a site that is just a few hundred metres from a junction of the M25. Location is so very important, for it will be the one factor above all others that will determine the success of the facility – access must be close to a major road or motorway and in addition there has to be a major conurbation within 15 or 20 minutes drive.

The wise landowner, especially one striving to be both planning seeker and developer, will want to ask many questions. How can I maximise on my available acreage? What kind of course should be built? How can I be sure it will be successful? How much will it cost? How can I get the local environmentalists on my side? Are there enough would–be golfers who will want to play?

Quality of land is not a major problem, except when finance is severely limited, for today a golf course can be built almost anywhere – on marshland, disused gravel pits, land-fill sites, or mountain slopes. Indeed some sections have even appeared on floating pontoons in the middle of a lake! The amount of land available will determine if the course is to be 9, 18, 27 or 36 holes and this has a direct bearing upon the amount of golfers who can play at any one time – which in turn effects the profit.

The course must be able to pay for itself and above all make money, so if other profitable leisure facilities can be provided in the clubhouse or ancillary buildings this becomes less of a problem. It must never be forgotten that the overriding factor most likely to prevent development going ahead is of course finance – or the lack of it – for building a golf course is never cheap.

Landowners and developers often steam ahead with planning applications without first

Death or glory – The par three, 190 yard 13th on the West Course

virgin site to the opening day

doing anywhere near enough research and in particular without having a feasibility study produced. Maybe in their early euphoria they are a little too keen on seeing the golf course built, but they must expect that when an application is brought before a District Council it will not reach 'committee' for at least 12 weeks, and then only if all the councillors have had an opportunity to at least read the landowners proposals.

There can be frustrating delays, perhaps caused by members of the committee being on holiday or by an applicant failing to provide enough information or simply because of bad communication.

The landowner who has the foresight to ask questions first and act later will be one who calls upon the services of a golf course or landscape architect to prepare a feasibility study, one who has experience in the preparation of such documents. The information included within the study is wide ranging in content and a number of sources are often required.

The feasibility study will identify sources of finance, a major bank possibly, or perhaps the architect will direct the landowner towards a broker. Brokers have their own contacts of course but will expect to collect a fee for their services – sometimes as much as 2% of the borrowed amount. The study will determine where the site is in relation to the market demand, by researching population levels in the locality and taking due regard of the number of existing Golf Clubs. Equally important will be a count of the number of golfers who may care to become members, perhaps already on waiting lists, and their expected waiting period.

The Sports Council often provide help with such information and the demand level can then be made by the consultant with recommendations, for example, for the type and scale of facilities that are most suitable.

One of the most important factors within the study concerns the physical characteristics of the site. For example, it may be that only 50% of a site can be used because of extreme slopes or because the soil is so poor that a massive drainage system is required which could be prohibitively expensive to install, thus making the development an unviable proposition.

Not only is it essential to produce a feasibility study at the outset when funds may not have been finalised but even after finances seem secure, for even some of the large and ambitious developments have come up against financial problems brought about by an uncertain economy or by insufficient planning.

Summarising, a feasibility study can save both money and worry. Making planning applications is both expensive and time consuming, especially when the whole exercise ends up being a complete waste of time. By having a study prepared at the outset a landowner will have a firm foundation upon which to establish a sound development.

He must also be prepared for other possibilities: that he may be strongly advised not to proceed at all, that he must look elsewhere for more suitable land, or indeed forget about making his fortune from golf altogether.

● Next month: When the planning application is finally approved, the real work begins...