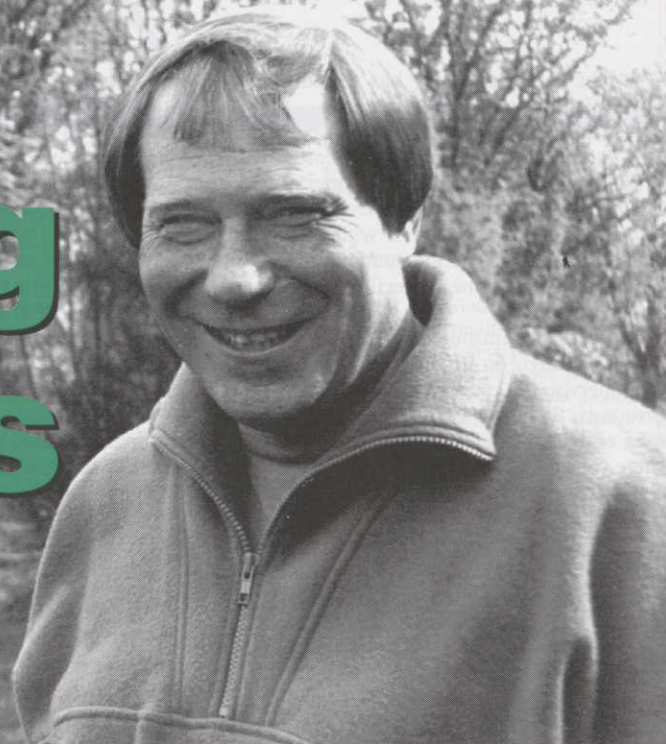


Watching the grass grow



You've got to admire the way some people drive a tractor. I have an image of Bob Hornegold trundling up and down a fairway pulling a roller behind him. At the time, he was furious because someone hadn't finish a job and if it was to be done in time, he had to do it himself. So he did, working his anger out on the job – and the tractor.

Bob is not a greenkeeper, he is a specialist finishing works manager. He works on a contract basis for golf course construction projects. He may work directly for a developer – as part of a project management package with his colleague Ian Martin – or he sometimes sub-contracts to the main contractor.

A qualified greenkeeper for many years, he set up his own business five years ago, and owns £40,000 worth of specialist machinery which he uses intensively for bringing new courses into play and then rebuilds and refurbishes as necessary during the months following completion. This sounds a tall order but it comes easily to a trained mechanic, which he is, having once had a passion for motor racing. He took it up competitively for a while, retiring after a 'near thing' nearly finished him off. I'm sure he brings racing skills to his tractor driving.

Construction and maintenance consultancy forms the backbone of his company. He has been consulted by clubs all over the country and in Europe. When he undertakes finishing works, though, it is a more long-term affair and calls on all the combined skills and experience of his 30 years in the business. It is the final stage of construction.

Project management is the framework within which Bob is usually employed, and in concept, it is a good-value, high-quality alternative to contracted golf course construction. It offers greater financial control to developers who want more direct involvement than if they employed a contractor to build the course. This is because

You'd be hard pressed to find anything that Bob Hornegold (pictured), hasn't done.
MAJA MIHAJLOVIC catches up with the greenkeeper turned specialist finishing works manager

the contractor has to concern himself with making some profit and covering his administration costs, and this will inevitably influence the way he runs the project. Whereas if the developer takes the administration on himself and employs Ian and Bob, for example, as project managers, he will pay them a time-related fee, and together they will negotiate prices for materials directly with the suppliers, making the choices themselves of how best to balance quality and cost on each essential item.

At West Park, a brand new 36-hole course at Silverstone, Ian Martin project managed the construction and Bob Hornegold took on the finishing works and maintenance contract. The developer, Jeff Sargeant, is quite clear that having his course construction project managed was by far the best option, but then he was prepared to wade into the hard work of co-ordinating the whole thing himself. To be effective he needed the close collaboration and support of the project managers. It's an intense relationship at the best of times, even if those involved are meek – that's not a word you'd apply to Hornegold, though. So if the developer is determined enough, and not too sensitive to a little friction, great things can come of it, as they obviously have done at West Park.

Jeff Sargeant, politely noting that Bob doesn't suffer fools gladly, unreservedly acknowledges Bob's skill and professionalism. "He knows his

job inside out... and he has produced for us some of the best greens in the country. When people come here, they think they're playing on a much more mature course than one which only opened its last nine holes two weeks ago."

You can't get much higher praise than that and it is due to his thoroughness – Sargeant calls it perfectionism – and eye for detail, based on a rigorous understanding of construction principles, that he achieves such fine results.

The finishing works begin after the construction manager has built the first green or tee in its subsoil form, establishing the contours according to the architect's drawing. Ian will also have installed and backfilled the drains and spread the gravel drainage carpet. At this point, Bob begins by spreading the blinding layer with a 360° tracked excavator. It is hand raked to mimic the contours in the subsoil base. He then spreads the rootzone mix, which is normally an 80:20 sand and fensoil mix – specified by the architect and approved by the agronomist – also with a tracked excavator.

These three layers – drainage carpet, blinding layer and rootzone – form a drainage system recommended by the USGA for the construction of putting greens. The next stage is to prepare the rootzone for seeding, and this is begun by compacting the mix in several ways, first, with the flotation tyres of a mini-tractor, then with a Wessex Grader attached to the mini-tractor. Bob usually carries out this operation himself, as the contours have to be carefully maintained through what is now about 400mm of drainage material.

The compaction continues with 'heeling in' – it takes some time, is an old-fashioned, laborious, monotonous process, but one which Bob believes is the most effective method of ridding the greens of compaction irregularities. It involves the whole team shuffling on their heels like penguins all over the greens and ➤ 30

29 ➔ tees and supposedly has the additional benefit of creating a good team spirit.

After the pub or a quick nap, out comes the Toro Sandpro, with groover, to create a tilth. Fertiliser is scattered with a Cyclone Spreader and the sowing is done with a seeder, followed by travelling over the green with a Sandpro minus the groover. The indentations created by the tyres provide some protection for the seed until it germinates.

While this painstaking process is being worked through on greens and tees, Bob will also supervise the cultivation of the fairways and surrounds. Stone 12mm and larger is removed using either a Harley Power Rake or a Blec, or where the stone is especially bad, a Rotadairon or Buryvator. This process will in itself create a suitable tilth on which to spread the fertiliser and sow the seed. Finally, the seeded surfaces are rolled. He also ensures that the irrigation system has been correctly installed and primed ready for when the seed is sown.

To help him complete the work he says he needs a good assistant. In the past he had a young foreman called Keith Cracknell. Keith ended up staying at Golf de Chantilly where they had been employed on the finishing and maintenance contract, so Bob lost a valuable colleague. Apart from his assistant, he will employ local contract labourers, so that, for a project like West Park, Bob and his foreman will each head a team of about five men.

"So how do you get a whole load of people to do what you want them to in the time you want them to do it?" I ask. He smiles and says he thinks fairness is very important, firmness nearly so, but also, "training can only do so much to make a good manager, but when it comes down to it, I think it's something you've either got or not. Not everyone can do it".

Knowing how to start and keep the team working hard and using the right methods is fundamental to co-ordinating any contract. An essential skill for any head greenkeeper, strong man-management becomes all the more crucial when big budgets and strict timetables are at stake. Jeff Sargeant also paid tribute to him on this score: "He works his men hard, but he leads them from the front, which is a rare thing. He expects no more or less of them than of himself – but he's a good motivator, and most importantly, he gets the job done." I thought of Bob steaming up the fairway in his tractor...

Bob's facility with construction is certainly based on good experience accumulated over many years and seems to come also from a special aptitude for understanding form and structure in a 3-dimensional way. His experience in construction has included employment at Lords and Leyton Orient FC. At the end of each football season, the whole pitch is stripped and rebuilt. He sometimes feels that old golf courses could benefit from this kind of treatment. Instead they are expected to go on forever under thousands of feet and trolley wheels.

His time as construction manager for the Alliss/Thomas partnership at the Airlinks Course, Heston and at Old Thorns was testing but very valuable experience. Airlinks was built on a landfill site and there were problems with methane. They were also experimenting with pure sand greens and Penncross bent grass. Not as much was then known about the necessary regime for this kind of green, so the need for intensive feeding and scarifying programmes

was not really appreciated or catered for in terms of staff. To add to the misery, the course was a pay-as-you-play and suffered heavy use. They faced the consequences, and lost all the greens. Experience comes in many forms.

This seems particularly true in Bob Horne-gold's case, and when it comes to the final, perhaps the most exciting stage of the creation – watching the grass grow and establish – it is worth noting that he has been a head greenkeeper on courses all over the country for a total of 12 years. These include Dyrham Park, Chigwell and the Harry Colt-designed Thorndon Park. And throughout his work in construction and maintenance, he has worked in collaboration with the best agronomists in the country.

'Fair enough, learn all the different theories, know what they are, but then don't just stick to one'



Sowing the seed marks the end of the finishing works. On some projects he is not brought in at all before this point is reached, undertaking only the growing-in and maintenance of the course. There is apparently nothing relaxing, though, about watching grass grow, since the first signs of germination spark off a period of feverish activity. Bob will need to check on the growth of the new crop every day, keeping watch over the sward and looking carefully for signs of disease. He needs to be able to recognise the signs and know how to remedy any problem at its earliest manifestation before it gets the chance to devastate the whole crop. This is the time in its life when grass is at its most vulnerable, so the regime is very intensive. Apart from other diseases, the presence of worms and rabbits can also cause serious problems and have to be dealt with one way or another.

The first mow is done when the height reaches 25mm on greens and tees, 37mm on surrounds, 50mm on fairways and 75mm in areas of rough. The regime is from that moment on as intensive as that on any course, and is co-ordinated with a still constant programme of topdressing, fertilising, treating with pesticide, fungicide, lumbricide, herbicide etc. This is also the time Bob likes to bring in a new head greenkeeper. He will brief him thoroughly and be available to help and guide for as long as he is needed.

Given ideal conditions, the new course can be open for play within a year from seeding. This obviously depends on a number of factors. So I asked Bob about the effect of budget and time constraints, always more apparent at the closing stages of a project, on his work. After all, the pace of growing grass would seem to be incompatible with the pressure put on new projects by the financiers. In answer, Bob can look you in the eye and say that if he manages the growing-in he knows he can produce high quality grass by opening day. He accepts that it is a commercial venture and he's realistic about that, and confident of his ability. He has brought a green

from seed into play in a matter of four months, from May to August, and in the face of this, he is left little convinced of the value of using turf at all. It was working in the USA that taught him how fast a good quality grass crop can be made to grow, and he has always been prepared to put into practice the things he learnt over there, when appropriate.

A theorist however he is not. Neither does he seem retrospective in his views. He is really much more a pragmatist. "Fair enough, learn all the different theories, know what they are, but then don't just stick to one. He has, himself, what amounts to many years educational training – being dyslexic made it that much harder for him to express himself in writing, but he overcame the difficulties and came out with the highest national marks for his City and Guilds, Stage 2 (as opposed to Phase 2) Greenkeeping Option. Since then he has gone on to Myer-scough College where he finally completed his training in 1982. You could say stubbornness is another of his strengths.

His success in getting appointed to such jobs as West Park depends greatly on his having good contacts among the architects who are in a position to recommend specialists to developers. He has worked with Donald Steel, Cameron Sinclair, Tom Macauley, and Jonathan Gaunt. He has an eye for design and can apparently recognise the above architects' drawing styles one from the other. One of his favourites is Tom Simpson, original designer of Chantilly where he worked a while ago, and Jonathan Gaunt has suggested that greenkeepers of 'vintage' courses by the likes of Colt or Mackenzie will look instinctively for similar qualities in a new golf course.

Bob confirms that a good dialogue with the architect is very necessary to success. In return, architects can be sure that they will see their construction drawings correctly interpreted on the ground – no routine thing, it's not a skill many have perfected. He is able to visualise what a contour will look like when it has been built up with the blinding and rootzone layers, and how it should marry-in with the surrounds and how it will affect maintenance in particular, but also, play.

There again even his knowledge of the game itself is the product of experience gained at the most competitive levels, having once played to a low handicap and having caddied on the Tour. You'd be hard-pressed to find anything, in fact, that Bob hasn't done at one time or another.

If he sounds a hard nut to crack, it's probably true, but it would be unfair not to acknowledge that he has a warmth and loyalty that have won him great respect among his friends and admirers, even among less committed acquaintances.

But the thing that strikes me most is his incredible range and adaptability. He has done so many things, gone in so many different directions. Although he would seem to have the solid career behind him that contains the makings of the well-respected professional, he is in many ways a non-conformist, and there is a sense that he could still head down another path entirely if the opportunity arose. Or, if the mood ever takes him, he could go from strength top strength in his burgeoning golf course management practice.

■ The author, Maja Mihajlovic, is a writer whose speciality subjects include golf course architecture, design and maintenance practices.