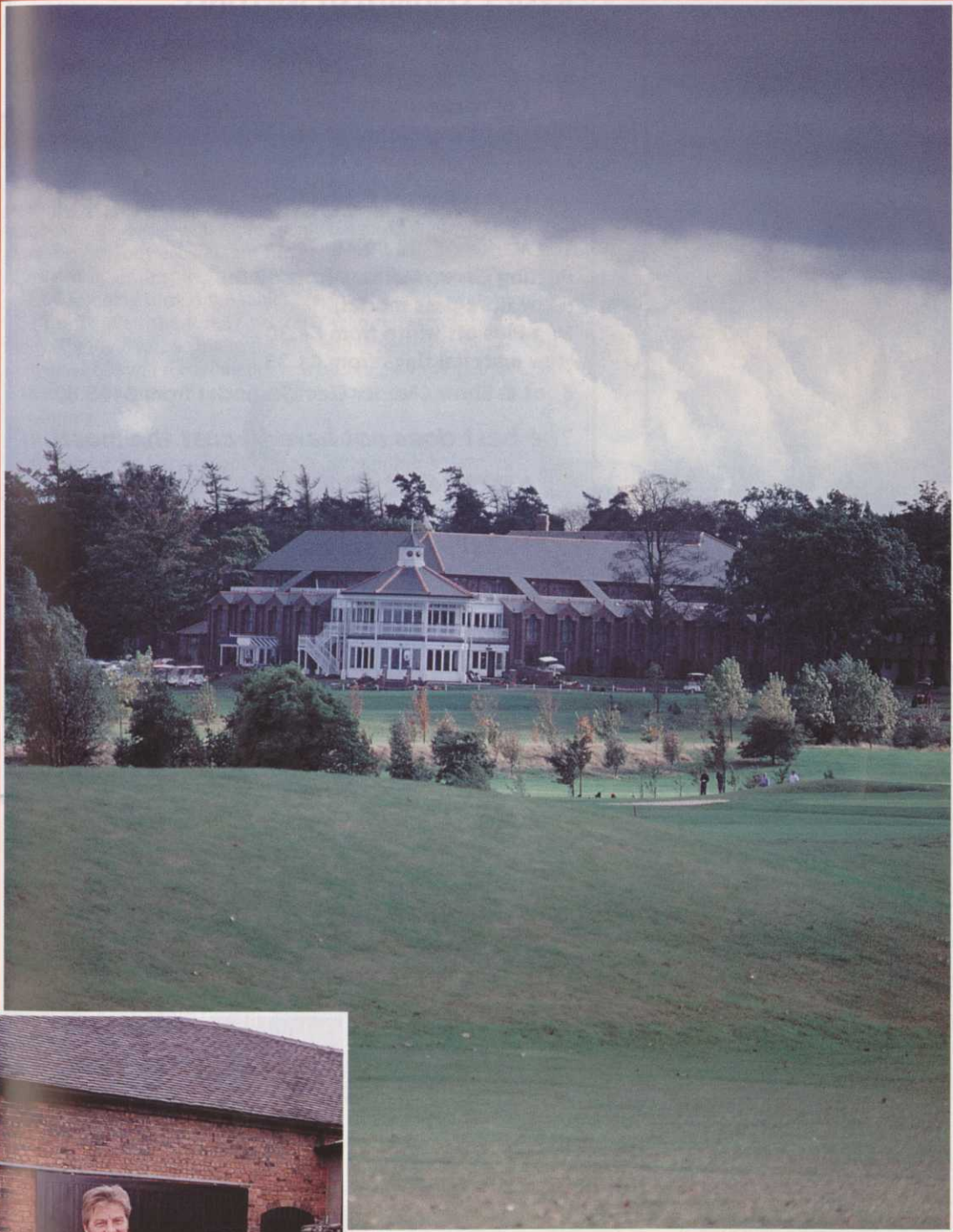


BATS *about The*

BELFRY



Derek Ganning BEM (left) isn't just preparing his course for the Ryder Cup, reckons DAVID WHITE. With golfing passions running high, he may just as well be getting ready for World War III

From 1927 until the mid-eighties it smouldered and spluttered, on occasion appearing in danger of dismissal by the Americans as of little consequence. For the better part of fifty years it might as well have been played in Outer Mongolia for all the interest shown outside the minuscule bunch of rah-rah's who waffled on about it being character building, an exercise in stiff-upper-lipmanship, of being 'good for golf! There's no doubt about it, a huge amount of piffle has been written in the past about the Ryder Cup matches generating international goodwill between the Yanks and the Brits, when in truth the British until 1985 had

£2.5m spent on major redevelopment

25 • been well and truly stuffed far too often, winning just three times in 25 attempts over 58 years.

What changed it? Well perhaps the Nicklaus gift to Jacklin of a two or three footer for a tie at Royal Birkdale in 1969 set folk thinking that perhaps there was something in this pukka sportsmanship caper, though I like to think that there were two, maybe three, other factors that swung the world into Ryder Cup ferment. The rule change to include European players, first in 1979, turned the hitherto exclusively Brit bashing into a much more evenly balanced contest. The captaincy of Tony Jacklin, our first modern super-hero, who time and again inspired 'our' players to unknown heights and by so doing turned the tables, gave us back our dignity. The third? Well there may be some who will scoff, but I fancy The Belfry, essentially the Brabazon, turned from her early days of bitch teeny-bopper into becoming a voluptuous princess, evolving in the process into a national monument to winning.

Derek Ganning, B.E.M., has been course manager at The Belfry since its very inception, masterminding a host of 'majors' and two hugely successful Ryder Cup matches. When I visited him recently he was in the throes of preparation for what promises to be the biggest sporting spectacle this side of Mansell's Formula One World Championship bid. There is no doubt, the world's hottest ticket for 1993 has again seen Ryder Cup mania reach fever pitch before a ball is struck, and Derek is leaving nothing to chance in his personal bid to outdo anything that has ever been done before.

Criticisms voiced in the past, not of Derek's management regime but of the course itself, were of a constructive nature, a sort of 'wouldn't it be nice if we had such and such', for without exception folk could see the potential, admired David Thomas's design concepts and wanted the place to be successful. Granted there were early construction specifications that justified adverse comment, the rootzone structure in particular, but nothing that couldn't be put right. It is to the great credit of De Vere Hotels, owners of The Belfry, that they have taken such critique on board to the extent of investing something like £2.5 million in a major redevelopment programme, the whole Belfry arena now a cauldron of activity as workmen and technicians put every effort into dressing the princess in her niftiest party clothes.

Before talking me through the new developments, Derek spoke of the pride he and his team have in being able to boast a near 100% complement of British made machinery, mostly sparkling new Ransomes kit supplied by ET Breakwell and finished in traditional British Racing Green. The patriot in him went further by suggesting, "it wouldn't do for us to be seen waving any flag but the Union Jack and I believe that by opting for this fantastic Ransomes machinery we'll be seen as having a two-up match advantage before the first blow is struck, certainly in the eyes of the Americans."

Things have changed since the Ryder Cup first was staged at The Belfry in 1985, for, as Derek recalled, in those days the Belfry greenkeeping team worked in unison with the PGA's Tony Gray and John Paramor, a time when the PGA European Tour was in its early stages. They learned one from each other, bouncing ideas and suggestions back and forth, taking on board the best of both sides. It all seemed good fun, nothing was impossible, there was no measurable intensity. Came the time for TV cameras to roll and the world was suddenly taken aback – could this really be the course that everyone thought of as 'ordinary'? There were flowers and shrubs in profusion, there was pattern and definition in cutting regimes that had never before been seen in



Bridge building at The Belfry.

Above:
from this...

Left:
...to this

Below:
...to this

Britain, certainly not on TV, something like 80,000 trees had been planted, this was course presentation like never before, a show-place on view to the world.

The 1989 event saw still more changes, the event even bigger, American interest hugely increased – they wanted the damned cup back! In Derek's view the event had intensified somewhat, an agronomy team headed by Bruce Jamieson and George Shiel was appointed and tournament condition regimes were more rigidly enforced. This regime has grown apace and for 1993 the PGA European Tour's new agronomy department, linked with IMG, have an even closer involvement, with Derek, Bruce Jamieson, Richard Stillwell, Mike Tate, De Vere's Mike Maloney, and the new head greenkeeper and Derek's right-hand man, David Norton, holding regular meetings to discuss such things as throughput of golf, capital projects to be instigated, deadlines that must be met. For the first time ever the course will shut ten days prior to the Ryder Cup, a move that pleases Derek in that it will allow last minute tuning without the problem of club golfers encroaching and holding up activities.

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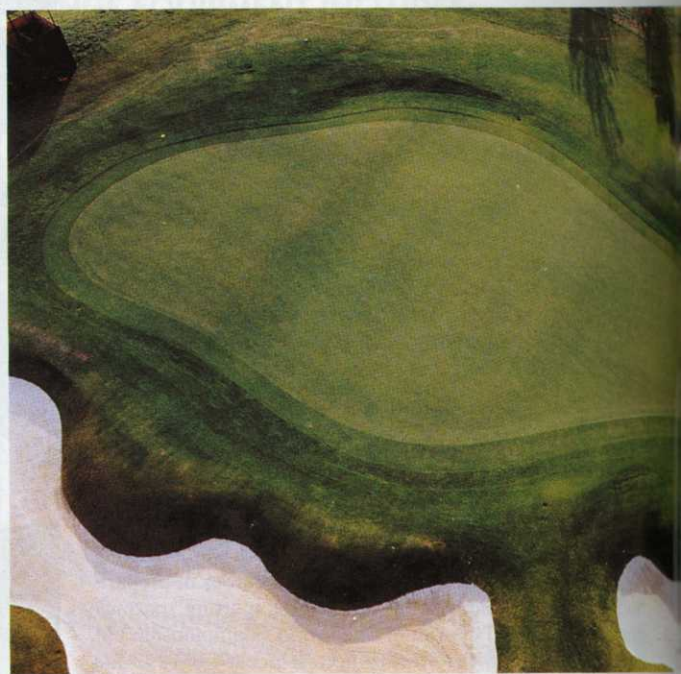
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A Rolawn green at The Belfry



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27 ➔ for the 600m² driving range, a new teeing area and levelling of the 450m² 10th tee, a new vehicular and pedestrian path between the 7th tee and green, renewal of irrigation pumps, including sump, pumphouse, tanks and aeration pumps on lakes at five, six and eighteen plus specialised chemical treatment. Several bridges are being rebuilt and sleeper linings applied to water courses, trees are being removed to facilitate spectator movement, thousands of yards of new turf will be laid to the 8th fairway and driving range, plus turf displaced by new reservoir pipelines. On the Derby course installation of 18,000 litre effluent storage vessels has taken place within the hospitality area.

All this may seem more than enough, but all greens (now pure bent Cobra after being sown originally with Penncross) additionally have been intensively Vertidrainning with tines to a depth of ten inches, slit at four inches, followed by heavy top dressing using 80 tons of an 80:20:20 (sand/peat/loam) mix. Further, the construction of an 11 million gallon capacity reservoir is complete, essential in safeguarding irrigation on the course at all times and dramatically increasing lake levels to

allow extraction at a higher and therefore cleaner level, avoiding silt and eliminating any possible recurrence of anaerobic conditions on the greens.

One would expect someone honoured by the Queen to be pro-British, and Derek Ganning, holder of the British Empire Medal, had some pretty firm comments to make on that subject: "I'm certain that my award was due almost entirely to my having a wonderful team around me. My crew's as good if not better than any in Europe and I am immensely proud of them, every one. With the addition of several bright young HND students on short-term placement I'm truly blessed." Will everything be alright on the day?, I asked. "No doubt about it," came the emphatic reply.

I cannot subscribe to the view that the Ryder Cup is just another game, nor do I see it as 'just a friendly', played for the honour of the old country and all that eyewash. The Ryder Cup in 1993 will be staged like a Third World War, for it's we Europeans who now want the damned cup back, nursing the feeling that 'we was robbed' at Kiawah Island.

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