

Digging up the course to

How Pinner Hill GC handled 'major surgery' and lived to tell the tale

London's water supply has long been the cause of headaches and heartaches. Demand has outstripped supply and the ancient piped network, incapable of sustained volume, has on occasion caused pressures to drop to little more than a dribble, with flow capable of being stemmed by nothing more than a finger plugged into a hosepipe.

Putting the matter to rights has long been a priority and after years of deliberation the water authorities have at last begun the colossal task of replacing the worn-out system with a new ring-main, the pipework eventually planned to encircle the whole of London, providing a grid system that will leave nothing to chance.

Logic suggested that where possible the environmentally correct course for such a huge undertaking be made over land that was either green belt or, as has happened recently at several London golf clubs, tunnelled or open trenched through their fairways!

The pretty rolling hills that make up Pinner Hill Golf Club's course have been the most recent recipients of what is a colossal upheaval by any standards, and last month I met Chris Nicholson, the club's course manager, to see how they were coping and the problems they had encountered.

For the record, Chris Nicholson, whose experience includes a decade or more as head greenkeeper at Mid Herts GC., joined Pinner Hill as their course manager only some 18 months before the upheaval, having returned to the UK following extensive experience working in golf course construction at the prestige Vines course in Sydney, Australia, seeing the championship course through from

turning the first sod to completion. Though it was not for this reason alone that Chris was hired, his extensive construction knowledge was to prove priceless, as readers will learn...

Chris was under no illusions as to his task on joining Pinner Hill, for the course had been neglected: greens rife with *Poa annua*, heavy thatch, no proper pathways, nothing done by way of construction, no indication of a concerted aeration programme, – a classic case of 'on with the fertiliser, don't the greens look lovely and green.'

Since his arrival the course has been a hive of activity, a new maintenance building erected, clapped-out machinery replaced, new tees constructed, drainage improved, full tee/green irrigation installed or upgraded, with the greens receiving mega attention, Vertidrain, overseeded and Hydrojected (with added wetting agent the results with the Hydroject were, in his words 'incredible'). An almost unbelievable transformation is the happy result.

For something like 12 years the possibility of the ring-main has been mooted, though cynics opine that the government waited until water privatisation was a fait accompli before saying in effect – 'right, there you are, get on with it – it's your headache.'

Being the sixth club to suffer the indignation of such major surgery has had its compensations, for prior to arriving at Pinner Hill, clubs such as Knebworth, Mill Hill, Uxbridge, Haste Hill and Grim's Dyke have all experienced excavations of one sort or another, though it is true to say that none save Haste Hill, a municipal course that actually lost six holes, had suffered in such a big way, the 'cut' on this

occasion going straight through Pinner Hill from end to end, butchering six fairways and hacking through woodlands.

Work began October last, and the anticipated completion – earth reinstated, Agraflex drainage installed and linked with the lateral drains that cross the fairways, open scars big-roll turfed – is thought to be June. Chris made the valid point that had the club been allowed to go ahead with their own reinstatement, without the inevitable water board deliberations, the work might well have been completed already – but the way of bureaucracy is such that everything must wait for official approval! As it is, the 13,750 square yards of Pinner Hill that have been disturbed have still to be turfed before a crawler irrigation system can be utilised to give growth a headstart.

Turning to club secretary Jeremy Devitt for numbers to add to the equation and seeking advice for others that might find themselves in the same boat, Jeremy was in no doubt that being sixth in line was a bonus. "We were lucky not being first, and the first thing we did was visit every course that had been earlier victims.

It's the same in all golf clubs, 'there are them that talk and them that do' and in the final analysis the do'ers have to be the full-time staff. On the course it's the course manager and in other aspects it's the secretary. Effectively we had a dry



Chris Nicholson with 'the pipe'

run, for the water board – armed with their Act of Parliament – are bound to advise three months in advance that they are coming. Whatever rumours may circulate, until then, the advice I would give is – do nothing! The club had notice of intent in 1989, before I became secretary, and an initial meeting took place between the water board and club management. Following, the club selected a surveyor to represent them and minutes reveal that they were then interested purely in the golf aspects of it, demonstrating no real concern for the ground, even though it was essentially a ground problem.

Moving to 1991, notification was

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again served, a board meeting again convened, but this time we were careful to select a surveyor who had experience in this field, not only with the pipeline situation but also dealing with other clients on the pipeline run. We appointed Strutt & Parker, who are dealing with seven other clients and one other golf course. The immediate side benefit of this appointment was that we couldn't get a dividing rule by the water company and if Strutt's were looking up a point for another client we would get side benefit. Chris visited all the other courses, learned everything of their problems and returned with invaluable information.

Fundamentally it appeared to us that the water board appoint a PR team to make the first sortie, a sort of 'we'll do this for you, we'll do that for you' soft approach that can possibly give a false sense of security. That's fine, and any club would leave such a meeting feeling that things would be OK. However, we were advised to pay attention to various aspects of what had happened at other courses. Then came a long pause – nothing happening – and they hadn't yet appointed contractors. The three months were running down and we became anxious: there were society bookings, fixtures to be ratified, to say nothing of the work on the course. Then a contractor visited us direct to view the site and we went out of our way to be accommodating, making sure we were available. We looked after them and we helped them. In hindsight this was to our advantage as they subsequently won the contract.

Our key area of concentration was to be co-operative: there was nothing we could do to prevent the work, so we helped by guiding them toward local specialists, tree surgeons and the like, we were totally supportive.

In the meantime it was necessary to do some serious forward planning, advise members – in a positive way – and this was done. The promised starting date came and went, no activity took place and then suddenly a site meeting was called and we were confronted by a whole new team – both water board and contractors – the operators. Apparently the contract had been granted on the basis of a straight run, with no 'single fairway at a time' as had been intimated, and we ended up with some tough negotiations taking place in the woods. There was no chance that

our board members could be present, but Chris and I could – and it was very important that we were and we had our surveyor there too. Immediately we conceded the 'straight through run', on the basis of wanting to be co-operative, whilst wanting them in and out as fast as possible. We conceded, but said 'it's going to cost you more because we're going to need six temporary tees instead of the one originally bargained for!' Advice to others? – be ahead of them and think smart, which is easy to say as we were not first – thankfully".

At this time Chris spotted an obvious 'gaff' – the contractors proposed to charge through without prior stripping of the turf. Being on clay and with precious little top soil this seemed criminal, so the club set about stripping and saving the precious topsoil and with a few 'phone calls the word went out that Pinner Hill had turf available for free – on the old boy basis of 'you'll owe us one'.

Once begun, the contractors moved at astonishing speed. Land staked out in a single morning was soon overrun with spider-like diggers and a swath the width of a major highway was soon transformed into a deep, deep channel. Granted that lousy weather took its toll, with inevitable hold-ups, but both Chris and Jeremy expressed genuine admiration for the speed and efficiency of the crew.

Compensation is a word charged with emotion. Each party will seek to protect their corner and here again Jeremy stressed the importance of keeping on top of the problem. For smaller amounts – roping off tees, temp. tees, numerous new signs and all other immediate emergency needs – the club sent claims direct to the water board for payment, whilst for larger amounts, eg. reinstatement, the rule is for the water board to contract the work – which they wanted to do by simply digging out, backfilling and seeding the scar! Again Jeremy stressed how essential it is that the club know who is doing what and to ensure (by seeing that proper experts are included in the tender list) that it is carried out by experts rather than by any old contractor – the rule always is to be on guard and defend your corner. By digging in their heels Pinner Hill have won the turf versus seed battle (including roughs) and have seen an expert who they know and trust appointed to reinstate the ground.

"There is no profit in this, but the secret is to make sure there is no loss", Jeremy continued. "I'm almost certain that other clubs have lost out, most of them. For example, we would not have had a drainage contractor in unless we had pushed for it. Right at the onset I established that Chris should be the on-site project manager and with his vast experience this has proved valuable beyond measure. He dealt direct with all site personnel and if any problem could not be solved on site we established that every single communication be via our surveyor, no direct letters from us – we established that principle from day one.

Other attributable losses include green fees, pro shop sales and lessons, catering and bar revenue, together with an important issue that has yet to be resolved, lack of facility. We've not yet reached agreement, but as a basis for negotiation I have used the loss of 17% in course length over the winter, 24% in season, and used that as a figure across our playing member-

ship. Whether we win or not I don't know, but we will have to show that the sum is either returned to our members or shown as a reduced subscription. To substantiate our claims I have built a computer model that goes back four years – claims can be backed up with hard facts".

Costs thus far are 'guesstimated' at something like £50-100,000 for reinstatement, and at this stage £60-70,000 for loss of revenue. The point has to be made however that revenue does not instantly return to its former level, so there may well be a further claim. And one final cost which must never be overlooked is the added cost of both Chris's and Jeremy's time – with all the extra work these two stalwarts have put it, this also will be a substantial sum.

Next time the reader draws a glass of water from the tap he will do well to ponder the hidden cost. We all know that privatised water is going to cost more – now we can see where some of the money is being spent.

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