

CLUB THAT JACK BUILT

PAUL COPSEY examines one of the largest
golf developments in Europe – the Jack
Nicklaus designed London Golf Club



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Earlier this year members of the Kent section of BIGGA visited the London Golf Club, a new 36 hole development situated on the Kentish North Downs close to the Brands Hatch motor racing circuit, perhaps best publicised as the latest course 'that Jack built'. Yes indeed, Golden Bear Inc. heads the architectural team responsible for both courses and Jack Nicklaus personally has designed one of the 7,000 yard courses, the par 72 Heritage championship layout. Rumours, of course, have abounded regarding the total cost of the finished project: could it really be £40 million, was this going to be another luxury, Japanese funded, American bent grass experiment and, inevitably, questions were raised regarding the merits of this type of project and construction in the UK?

This visit seemed an incredible chance to see for ourselves one of the largest golf developments in Europe, so with the help and enthusiasm of the course manager, Joe Paulin, a visit to look at aspects of the site was arranged. To over-simplify the itinerary, Joe greeted us with a brief talk on the details of the site, its construction and technical specifications, whilst irrigation and science supremo, Colin Sainsbury, talked about and demonstrated aspects



of the million pound irrigation system and showed us the newly delivered laboratory equipment for on-site leaf analysis. Dennis Exell, the club's chief mechanic, showed us the extensive machinery storage and maintenance facilities, followed by Steve Marsden, LGC's assistant course manager, taking us on a guided tour of the site, showing us stages of

both on-going and finished construction.

Many of this country's 'experts' may have already prejudged other, similar, constructions of this type and have appeared all too eager to knock and scoff, but the open-minded purpose of the visit was to see which aspects, if any, were relevant to our present or future British greenkeeping practices. The LGC is on a huge

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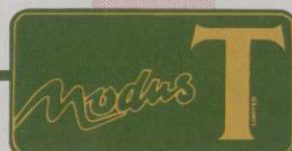


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'The greens at LGC, despite being very large, were all hand mown and at our own courses this would be an ideal daily objective. But...'

— Paul Copsey

site and in every way is a very big project, comprising some 560 acres, 11 lakes, USGA Spec. greens and tees, creeping bent and more traditional seed mixtures, high staffing levels, and the very latest in machinery.

We were, perhaps, somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the operation, but I am sure in our minds we began to draw comparisons with our own courses, especially bearing in mind Joe's opening address: 'the attitude and objectives of my team – to deliver a top class golfing facility for their client – with the assembled machinery and equipment being the tools to aid in achieving that task.' Well for the 'traditionalist', like it or not, this is perhaps what we should all be aiming for on our own courses, though what seems lacking in our own cases, more often than not, is that 'our' clients – the golf clubs – seem unable to grasp this simple but essential fact.

As an example, various members of our group commented that the greens at LGC, despite being very large, were all being hand mown, and that at their own courses this would be an ideal daily objective. The fact is that we could all do this, given the equipment and (more importantly) the extra staff with which to carry out the task. To extend this

approach to all other areas is obvious. Many of us admire the use of lightweight fairway mowers to regularly mow and stripe fairways, but in general, one pass a week with a trusty (and often rusty) set of gangs has to suffice. In simple terms, many of us are being forced to make cost compromises on the condition of our courses in just about every aspect of maintenance. What we need is for this fact to be fully understood by our club members, especially when they complain of poor course conditions compared to the 'bigger' course they played 'up the road'. It's the same in all walks of life –

you can have anything, as long as you can pay for it!

Staying with the subject of machinery, at the LGC this is cared for meticulously and maintained to perform at its optimum, always ready for use at the crack of dawn each day. With all equipment now being so expensive, shouldn't more clubs be taking this attitude toward extending the life and maintaining the performance of their machines, perhaps by hiring an on-site mechanic, or by improving workshop facilities?

Now some of you are probably still asking the question, 'why do you need on-site lab equipment and why analyse grass cuttings?'. Well, one of the key points that strikes the visitor at LGC is the coupling of site maintenance practicalities with those of science. Joe was at pains to point out that greenkeeping basics never change, no matter how big or small the project, that bigger projects often have bigger and more complex problems, and that greenkeeping will always be an art or skill. Linking these, however, he pointed out the ever-increasing need to understand the science of greenkeeping. The science, he believes, has to be used as a yard stick, as another tool.

I need not elaborate further, for the argu-

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'It's a glimpse into the future'

ments on testing and analyses have already been, and will no doubt continue to be, aired in this publication. As for the much publicised use of creeping bent, the greens and tees on the Heritage course are sown with 100% Providence creeping bent, whilst the other course, the International, is using a more 'traditional' mixture. Again, may I state my own open-minded approach to these 100% bent grass greens by saying that if the limitations of and the precise way to manage such surfaces are known; and the funds for their intensive upkeep are available, who is to say that it is wrong so to do? The base fact is that if the client specifically requires this type of surface, using this variety of seed is one of the tools to achieve such aims.

To illustrate by way of personal example, on a busy nine hole course with restricted teeing areas, especially on par 3 holes, I must use a Dwarf rye grass seed if I am to stand any chance of achieving year-round play in the context of my particular budget. I will also admit to having successfully revived some very flagging, compacted, *Poa annua* and Rye dominated greens by extensive turf maintenance work, plus overseeding with a 100% Egmont bent. Why? A specific job needed to be done



and Egmont was my tool to crowd out the undesirable species and restore good surfaces. With that achieved as stage one, I am now able to use a more traditional mix and see fescues returning to the sward.

I feel sure those who attended this visit, rather than being completely overawed, viewed some of the techniques employed as perhaps a glimpse into the future. Think of the following practices, common 15 to 20 years ago, and see how they now relate to your current thinking and maintenance policies. Slitting, scarifying, and top-dressing was once an annual operation, the mowing of greens just

three times per week (even in the height of the season) was common, rough and bank mowing was a very occasional practice and 'presentation' was of secondary importance. Look also at some of the materials available. Back then we slogged over areas many times with little more than agricultural fertilizers, now a single pass with a coated, specialised, high nitrogen product will do the job for eight months.

To conclude, I would suggest that everybody retains an open mind; there is no expert who knows it all. Greenkeeping methods and practices have developed over the years through this type of exchange of ideas, although the

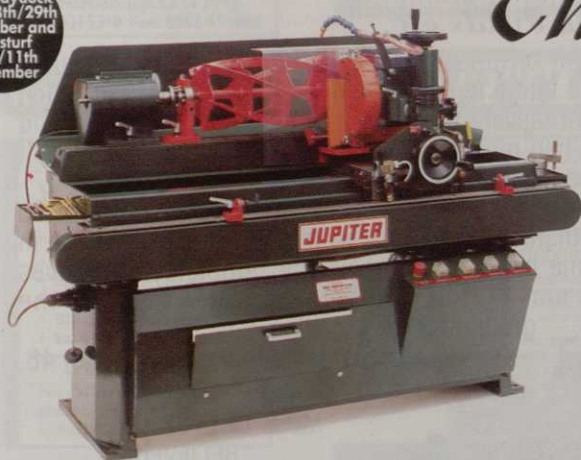


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'The quality and scale of the project is bound to create both national and international attention'

basic principles never change. Joe Paulin is eager to admit that this is still the case and perhaps we have as much to teach those who manage courses of the LGC type as they have to teach us.

As financially successful businesses, some of the early multi-million pound projects had their fair share of problems, but the LGC has some simple advantages over its predecessors. Opening later this year, the recession hopefully will have passed. In addition, the course is much better sited and served by major road and air links than many others. In the ever shrinking world of golf, the quality and scale of the project is bound to create both national and international attention and the sheer challenge of the courses will be a major attraction for Tour events and 'championship' organisers. Many, no doubt, will comment airily that courses of this nature have in the past had their heads in the clouds, but I think the greenkeepers of Kent appreciate that in practice the management team at this project have their feet firmly placed on the ground.

Concise and clear cut objectives, coupled with the raising of practical and presentational standards applied to our own situations, are perhaps goals that we should all be striving for



in the near future. Take a look through Greenkeeper International and you will see the latest equipment and materials advertised. Being able to correctly use them in practice and to be allowed to do so by our 'clients' is perhaps the greatest challenge in greenkeeping, especially

when we come under ever-increasing pressure to raise standards in the face of increased levels of play.

■ The author, Paul Copsey, is course manager at the Barnehurst Golf Course. He is also Kent's ace reporter for section news in *Around The Green*.

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