



Twin oaks at the final green at Leeds Golf Centre

High flier comes back down to earth

It must surely be unique for a man who has ruled the skies to set his sights on trying to become equally proficient on the earth as well and yet that is the proud ambition of Robert Bailey, a 46-year-old Leeds businessman.

During the last decade or so, Robert has twice been world hang-gliding champion and he also led Britain to two world championship team successes in 1981 and 1985.

He set up a successful hang-gliding and microlite coaching school and the money he made from this, plus income from buying and selling parts of Rufforth (near York) and Dalton (near

Malcolm Huntington visits Leeds Golf Centre (Wike Ridge Golf Course) at Shadwell, Leeds, to see how the 27-hole development, which includes a driving range and a golf academy, is faring under its new head greenkeeper. First, he talks to owner Robert Bailey

Thirsk) airfields at a decent profit, enabled him to think of something completely different.

And that something was building a golf course on what he describes as "a perfect site" on Wike Ridge Lane, Shadwell on the outskirts of Leeds and just off the road to Harrogate.

"I had received support from my bank manager at Nat West and managed to put together a package which enabled me to start looking at potential sites,"

says Leeds-born Bailey, who is married with three children and lives close to the new golf development.

Formerly part of the Harewood estate, consisting of heathland countryside, the land on which the golf course now stands was sold to a farmer in 1952, but it was found to be only moderately good for growing crops.

This led Bailey, after his extensive search, beginning talks in 1989, although it wasn't until

April 1993 that the first sod was turned.

Work progressed so rapidly that the nine-hole par 3 Oaks Course was opened in September last year along with the David Leadbetter Golf Academy (which recently moved to Kent), plus the driving range.

Then, in May of this year, the 6,620-yard par 72 18-hole Wike Ridge course was unveiled.

It is an impressive package and Bailey and his club manager, Chris Brockbank, are determined to make the centre even more impressive and successful.

A fine purpose-built clubhouse, constructed from Yorkshire stone,



An under cover driving range, complete with floodlights: easy to maintain and incredibly popular

There was a time when driving ranges in this country were built completely separately from golf clubs, which either hadn't the space or didn't feel the need for this facility.

But how times change as many of the new clubs being built these days are having driving ranges incorporated into their plans.

One such club is the Leeds Golf Centre near the pretty village of Wike just outside Leeds in an area which boasts some fine courses within almost a stone's throw – Moortown, Scarcraft, Moor Allerton, Sand Moor, Headingley and Alwoodley.

It is from Alwoodley that Arron Whitney, pictured, the Leeds Centre's new head greenkeeper came, taking up his new post on July 1. Whitney, 29, who was born and bred in Leeds, had only been in his post for just over a week when I talked to him about the club and its facilities.

It has not taken him long to gain tremendous enthusiasm for the centre and the new challenges ahead of him.

"I had been at Alwoodley for four years and I was at Moor Allerton as an assistant before that, but when I got the opportunity to join this new complex, it didn't take me long to accept the position," said Whitney.

"We have a nine-hole course called the Oaks opened last September and an 18-hole course – Wike Ridge – which was played on for the first time in May. But what I particularly – and more importantly the members – like is the driving range which is a tremendous asset to us.

"We have 20 driving positions, all under cover and all floodlit so that we can use the facility every day, 365 days a year if we wanted to.



"And I must say it is proving exceptionally popular. Often after play has ended for the day every single driving position is occupied so you can tell how much members and visitors enjoy the facility.

"One of the greatest things about it from a greenkeeper's point of view is that it is so easily maintained.

"Although we have been cutting the fairways on the golf courses three times a week and the greens every day, the driv-

ing range has only needed cutting once a week, so it is not labour intensive.

"We are properly geared up to deal with everything and the gang mowers pull three ball collecting discs which can be increased to five if we need to.

"A basket of 50 balls costs £2 and the facility is nearly always in big demand from what I have seen so far," he added.

Whitney, who lives in Middleton, near Leeds, heads a team of six other greenkeepers.

"We have had no problems to date and I am really delighted about the way things are going. We put on feed of 12-5-3 in the first week of July and we are getting there. It will take time of course, but my initial reaction is that things are going well," said Whitney.

Another of the club's excellent facilities is a large practice area, plus a smaller one for juniors and this is particularly well used at weekends when the youngsters have more time.

There is also a golf academy. Initially this was the David Leadbetter Golf Academy but this has now moved to Chart Hills, Kent, and the club are in the process of setting up one of their own in its place. As we went to press, plans were to open this in September.

was opened last November and visitors find hot home-cooked food served throughout the day and well into the evening. An on-licence means that the facilities can be enjoyed by both visitors and members.

In the clubhouse golfers will find a few things different to the 'normal' scene.

"I was determined to get rid of the snobbishness of what I call the Jag and gin and tonic brigade which is so elitist," says Bailey.

"While there will be no compromise on high standards, there won't be any question of ties and jackets being mandatory in the clubhouse after 6.30pm and ladies being discouraged as happens in so many clubs.

"We will also allow smart jeans because I believe it is what people have between their ears that counts most rather than how they dress. Sensible people know how to dress and also know they must not pull a trolley over a green. They also know that pitch marks need to be repaired and divots replaced.

"There have been quite a few courses built in recent years and this has led to smaller waiting lists for existing clubs, but I believe that the potential of golf is more in providing a facility for the bank clerks and the insurance agents etc, in other words the man in the street.

"And as far as Leeds is concerned, the major need has been for a pay-and-play course, as Roundhay has been the only municipal course in the area for many years.

"Our new facility takes care of both as we are going to have members in addition to pay and play. Beginners, women and juniors are equally welcome.

"I want to take out the silly element, the politics and the snobbery. Those who watched the TV programme about Northwood will know what I mean."

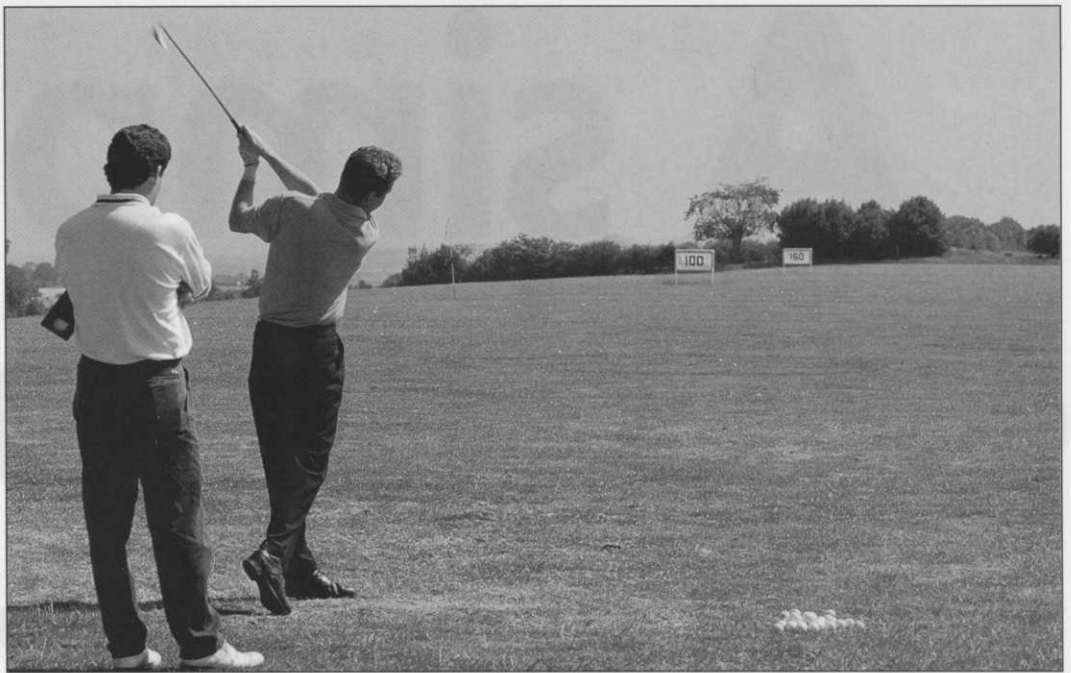
Bailey believes that what he is building and improving is "a dream come true", and after talking to him for some time in the clubhouse, there is no doubting the sincerity of this determined man.

He has left nothing to chance as he has sought the advice of experts.

The well-known international course architect and journalist Donald Steel was chosen to design the courses. Steel says: "The crucial ingredient of any good course is the mixture of challenge and enjoyment it provides for all classes of golfer. The Wike Ridge and Oaks courses will pass that test with flying colours."

Agronomist David Stansfield from Professional Sportsturf Design, Preston, has advised Robert Bailey. Inturf supplied the turf for the Oaks course and Rolawn for the Wike Ridge course.

The experienced Colin Geddes, formerly greenkeeper on the Jack Nicklaus Jr designed Hanbury



Manor, was asked to be clerk of works and consultant and he advised on the turf and seed to be used.

Bailey advertised in Greenkeeper International for staff and was pleased with the response. "Men applied from Scotland down to Kent, but in the end I opted for a local man," he says.

Country lover

Bailey is a country lover. "I potted about with gardening in my flying days when I had time, but now I have more of this vital commodity, my heart is really in the countryside.

"We have planted gorse and thousands of trees, including hawthorn, guelder rose, ash, alder, birch, sloe, holly and rowan.

"I am a lover of natural beauty and I am hoping that my ultimate

ambition of having the whole area maturing slowly will create something we will all be proud of, in addition to having a good atmosphere in the club.

Unlike many owners of golf courses, Bailey takes a very close and keen interest in greenkeeping and he didn't hesitate when I asked him about cutting heights on the course and other technical details.

"While I don't interfere with professionals who know their job, I love learning about the skills necessary.

"We are currently cutting the greens at 7mm, the collars at 15mm and the fairways at 15mm.

"We like to keep the semi rough at about 2in (5cm), the junior rough at 3ins (7.5cm) and the rough at 18ins (45cm).

"I learned a very early lesson about rough. I was told by some

low handicap players to keep the course tight and let the rough come in a bit, but I quickly found out that we needed a much wider fairway and semi-rough areas because the vast majority of players don't have low handicaps and tend to spray the ball about a bit.

"They were spending a lot of time looking for balls and you don't win friends that way or attract them back to the course, so we cut the rough back.

"In the early days we turfed fairways where needed and also overseeded them (there was already a lot of natural grassland) and also turfed the greens and overseeded them as well.

"All greens have been built to USGA specification."

Bailey was equally assured when I asked him which type of machinery was being used. He quickly rattled off: Three Toro GMs, two Toro 216 triples for fairways and surrounds, six Ransomes Auto-cert 22in greens machines, five hydraulic Huxleys, seven Ransomes seven trails, five Lloyds trailed, set of five Toro rough cutters, set of five Ransomes trailed sports cutters, Iseki compact tractor, Kubota compact tractor, two Ford tractors, National tractor.

The tees, greens and surrounds have a fully computerised Toro irrigation system. More than 20 miles of 80mm drains were laid 700mm below the surface with gravel to within 100mm of the surface by Holts of Pontefract.

But more important than all the details is what it adds up to – and that is an impressive complex of which Bailey and his team can be proud.



Club manager Chris Brockbank, left and Leeds Golf Centre owner Robert Bailey outside the clubhouse.