



Lovely atmosphere, no great hassle... and according to one league table, the best nine hole course in the world. Bob Gee of Royal Worlington and Newmarket Golf Club explains why he thinks he's got the best job in greenkeeping



Royal Worlington's Martin Law, left and Bob Gee: they plan to stay at the course all their working lives

The only way we'll leave is by being carried out in a box

These men admit they've got the easiest job in greenkeeping. There are only two of them maintaining one of the world's top 100 courses, but they wouldn't swap it for any other position. They wouldn't swap it for a course with an irrigation system, or one with USGA-spec greens.

Bob Gee, 52, has been the head greenkeeper at the Royal Worlington and Newmarket Golf Club, eight miles north-east of Newmarket, for 36 years and Martin Law, 46, has been assisting him for 27 years. They both joined the club from school and plan to stay there for the rest of their working lives, just as the previous team of Harry Rutter and Claude Rutherford did.

"No one leaves, they carry you out in a box. No one wants to leave, it's got a lovely atmosphere and there's no great hassle," says Bob, summing up the appeal of the club, which was founded in 1893, three years after the course came into existence.

You can tell Royal Worlington is special

'Colour is secondary. Greens should be firm and fast. We're growing a putting surface, not a crop'

as soon as you drive up and find the course virtually empty, yet there is a notice on the first tee stating 'No three or four balls permitted'.

Royal Worlington is the only nine-hole course in Golf World magazine's top 100 courses, and it has been decried by The New Yorker magazine as "far and away the best nine-hole course in the world". Much of its prominence is due to the fact that it is home of the Cambridge University golf team whose ranks have been filled with such influential characters as Bernard Darwin, who used to refer to it as "the sacred nine", Harry Colt, Henry Longhurst and Donald Steel.

Money alone will not buy you membership of this exclusive club. You have to know someone or be a Cambridge Blue to get in. This has led to accusations of it being snobby, but we saw no evidence of this during our visit to the club. The atmosphere was very relaxed and friendly and one member bought a round of drinks for the greenstaff and me.

The 102-year-old club has just 350 members and many of these only play once or twice a year. One member was playing his first round there for 30 years. This is one reason why Bob and Martin think they have it easy – Royal Worlington must be one of the few courses in the country that is under-played. Another reason why they are lucky is that the club was built on a superb parcel of land. It's in the middle of Suffolk, 55 miles from the sea, but the soil is a sandy loam that many links courses would love to own. "It's a fluke of nature. It's perfect for a golf course but not much good for anything else," says Bob.

The original plan in 1890 was to build 18 holes, but some of the acreage was rather marshy, so on the advice of Captain AM Ross, an experienced local golfer, the founders of the club chose to lay out nine holes on the sandy soil at the southern end of the plot and let it go at that. Captain Ross is credited with designing the original nine holes on the 60-acre site. A few changes were made in 1906 by an up-and-coming architect called Harry Colt. Over the last 89 years, no alterations of any consequence have been made.

Members appreciate that. In a



One of the toughest greens in golf: the 5th at Royal Worlington

fast-changing word it is a refreshing constant. As you drive down the road to the clubhouse, an old brick farmhouse painted cream, it is like entering a time warp.

I could just as easily have been meeting Harry and Claude as Bob and Martin. In fact, I would have liked to have talked to Harry who, during his long reign, set the standard of maintenance for the course. Rutter's secret was a minimum of watering, no fertiliser, and plenty of common sense.

Rutter had some unconventional but effective means of taking care of the course. One was the use of a squareboard rake, an implement whose head is a thin slab of wood through which nails have been driven so that their points protrude. Each March, employing these rude rakes, he tore the famous greens to pieces. A fortnight later, fresh young fescue grass of the finest texture would begin to establish itself. The rake may have gone but many of Rutter's principles are still being followed today.

Original greens

As far as anyone knows, the greens are those laid out by Ross

or Colt, and have no drainage system. Yet they drain superbly. One minute they could be flooded, half an hour later they will be dry. "It's nothing we do, it's nature," says Bob appreciatively. He has hollow-cored them once and verti-drained them twice in the last ten years. But they are spiked a lot.

The greens are one of the main reasons why people remember this course. They have some of the most wicked contours in the world. Donald Steel describes the green on the famous par 3 5th as being shaped like a vaulting horse. The narrow green falls away abruptly on both sides – on the right, to a stream and, on the left, to a basin of thatchy rough 20ft below the green. There are no bunkers on this 170-yard hole. None are needed. From either side it takes a very deft recovery to stop the ball on the putting surface and prevent it from slipping down the slope on the other side. Tales of good golfers "ping-ponging" their way to an 11 are common.

The greens are not just renowned for their undulations, they are also famed for their

speed. They are always fast (measuring 10-11ft most days on the stimpmeter) and they are in superb condition.

They do not always look green but Bob says: "Colour is secondary. Greens should be firm and fast. We're growing a putting surface, not a crop. It doesn't matter how it looks as long as it putts well."

The sward is 45% fescue, 45% bents and 10% rubbish (Yorkshire fog and annual meadowgrass). Last year they were overseeded for the first time in 100 years. Bob chose Barenbrug's Bar 1 mixture containing Baruba/Bargreen chewing fescue and Heriot/Bar-dot browntop bent.

The greens are hand-watered when necessary. There is no irrigation system. Bob believes this is an advantage: "We don't need it. It's ruined more greens than anything. Not through the greenkeeper's fault, through members. They say, 'We've paid all that money for that expensive watering system – turn it on', whether the greens need it or not. 'They're looking a bit dry, put the water on'."

Bob says it is much easier to

ruin a good green than to make a bad green good. And the easiest way to ruin a green is by overwatering it and overfeeding it. At Royal Worlington they will never overwater their putting surfaces. "We can't. No one's going to stand there with a hosepipe for too long at 6 in the morning. Too little is always better than too much."

Hand-watering also means they can see which areas need it most.

Neither Bob nor Martin have had any formal greenkeeper training. They use the techniques they picked up from their predecessors. Bob was taught by Claude Rutherford, the head greenkeeper for 20 years, who was, before that, Harry Rutter's assistant for many, many more years. The only thing that has really changed during Bob's 36 years at the club is the machinery that's used.

When he came as a boy he used one of the original Ransomes Overgreen walk-behind triples; now he uses a Jacobsen Greens King Mk4 "because members like the greens cut before they play on a Sunday and there's no way I'm getting up at 4am."

They are cut every day in summer (never lower than 3/16ths and never striped) and once a week in winter (1/4in).

There are no temporary greens and you get the feeling 'temporaries' are as alien a concept at Worlington as change. "There should not be temporary greens anywhere in this country," says Bob, without meaning to sound arrogant, "because the weather is not that bad. If you look after the greens in the summer, you will not need temporary greens in the winter."

The course only closes if there is snow or if they've had rain on top of frozen greens and the top 1/4in thaws. "If we close the course, they know it's for the good of the course and we're not just being Bolshie."

They no longer mix their own topdressing, they buy it in. But since they've been doing this, they've had dry patch problems. To combat this they are using a wetting agent twice a year on

advice from the STRI who have been making annual visits for the last six or seven years.

Four times a year (April, May, June, July) they mix a little sulphate of ammonia, potash and iron with the topdressing.

No trolley ban

Trolleys are allowed all year. "Trolleys are banned from 9am on January 1 to 9.01am on January 1," jokes Bob. "It's a con, they tell people to buy wide-wheeled trolleys and then as soon as there's an ounce of rain they say you can't use them on the course. That's ridiculous. There's as much weight on the bottom of the trolley as there is on the bottom of your feet. You can use markers. But there are a lot of old people who can't play golf without trolleys. There are no trolley bans here," adds Bob, who admitted he uses a narrow-wheeled trolley to cart the hole-cutter around while changing the holes.

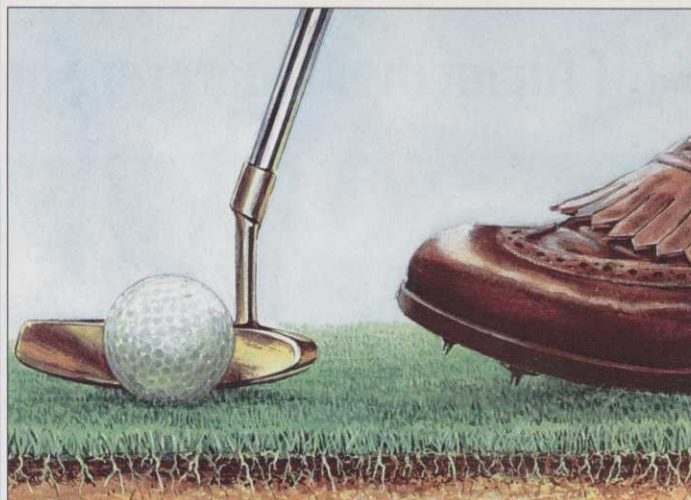
Another reason Bob feels lucky is that he has a superb chairman of green. Derek Rains has been in his post for five years and often lends a hand on the course. "He gets out on the tractor and pulls a dragmat across the greens. But he's not very good with a shovel," says Bob with a smile. One of his farm workers, Brian Hobbs, helps out on the course too, bringing a JCB with him to construct tees.

New tees are one of the few signs of change at the course. While other courses move bunkers to take account of technological advances in the game, many bunkers at Worlington lie in wait in case anyone turns up with a gutta-percha golf ball. But Bob was quick to point out that not all the bunkers were as obsolete as they appear. The bunker by the putting green, which you're not allowed to practise out of, comes into play if they swap the 9th green and the putting green.

One of the most famous throwbacks to the olden days is the small hole in the wall of the clubhouse lounge. That's the bar!

Although they don't like change, one change is imminent for Bob - his first contract of employment is being drawn up!

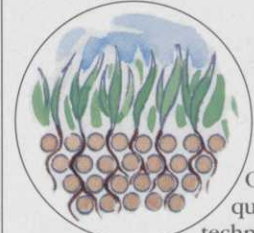
TIP
"If you've got a patch of moss, put the pin there in the winter and let the golfers scratch it out for you"
- Bob Gee



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