

When Bob Savine and Chris Gilroy spent more and more time building tees and bunkers when they were assistants at Mid Herts Golf Club they saw an opportunity to combine their 22 years of experience and start a business of their own.

That was seven years ago and was the start of S&G Ltd which has slowly developed into one of the best regarded small construction companies in the country.

At the beginning of this year they were joined by Chris Foreman who added Project Manager experience and opened the door to potentially bigger contracts and possibly their own 18 hole golf course to construct.

"Our aim as a company is to construct an 18 hole golf course but we're quite happy to do the work we're doing at the moment," said 35 year-old Bob, as we surveyed the nine new greens and surrounds the company was building at Hessle Golf Club in Hull.

"Then I think we'd feel ready to compete with the big contractors. We are tendering for 18 holers at the moment and if we get one I would feel we were on our way."

Chris and Bob started the company as finishers and with the introduction of Chris Foreman as Project Manager, one of them can go with Chris to construct, finish, grow in and maintain a golf course leaving the other to carry on the work which they have always done."

In many ways the arrival of 29 year-old Chris Foreman has meant that the company has reached a cross roads and given the two founders much to contemplate.

The works which we can now compete for are bigger, larger contracts. We would compete with Southern Golf but on the other hand we couldn't because we don't have their labour force or their back-up. If we did want to compete we would have to say to all the small jobs, I'm sorry we can't do them but these are the jobs which S&G has been brought up on. These are the jobs we enjoy doing," explained Bob.

The benefits of being first and foremost greenkeepers are enormous according to Chris Gilroy.

"As greenkeepers we have a



Bob Savine, Chris Gilroy and Chris Foreman

ON THE WAY UP

'As greenkeepers we have a good eye for the finishing of greens and, for cutting purposes, where a mower can get round and where it can't from a maintenance point of view.'

good eye for the finishing of greens and, for cutting purposes, where a mower can get round and where it can't from a maintenance point of view.

"We also have the knowledge that we are being paid by the golf course to do a job and we respect the fact that the members pay a large amount of money to play golf on a private golf course. We appreciate the fact that they want to play golf and they don't want to see people working in front of them stopping them from playing.

"We also work alongside the Head Greenkeeper so as we can give the job that the Head Greenkeeper and the committee wants. At the end of the day, when we finish on site, it is important everyone is happy - most of all the Head Greenkeeper because what we leave he's got to maintain," explained 30 year-old Chris.

In the last few days on site we go out with him and ask if it's how he wants a particular job left," he added.

The downside is that greenkeepers are sometimes wary of having other greenkeepers on their course.

Some greenkeepers get intimidated by Chris and myself because from a greenkeeping aspect we know as much as they do but from a construction point of view we know more than they do because we've been out here for seven years and learned a hell of a lot in that time - especially as specialist finishers and in

growing in. We've picked up tips from the likes of Chris Foreman as contractors and the like and we use their techniques to make ourselves better and a lot of greenkeepers feel intimidated by us," said Bob.

Both began their greenkeeping careers in the '70s.

Chris Gilroy started as an assistant at Welwyn Garden City GC and remembers seeing Nick Faldo practising there before he became well known. He then moved to Wheathampsted GC Mid Herts and went to college and passed his exams. He stayed there for three or four years before moving on to the Japanese-owned Hatfield London Country Club.

Bob started at Mid Herts then went to Welwyn Garden City as an assistant before going to Hatfield London as Assistant Head Greenkeeper.

"I'd known Chris for a while but we ended up together at Hatfield London and in the early days were doing regular greenkeeping but then a new company, Tokyo Leisure, took over and they wanted to revamp the whole golf course," remembers Bob.

"The Japanese took a shine to us because of our work rate. It must have been the Japanese work ethic. We were putting the hours in, doing the overtime, chasing money reconstructing tees, greens, bunkers, doing ditching work and draining and they gave us more and more to do. Eventually we thought we could combine our experience and give it a go on our own."

It was a major step to take as Bob had a mortgage and although Chris didn't he had the usual living expenses.

'It's a case of getting the course in play as quickly as possible'

"We discussed the idea for about a year before we went out on our own. It was a big gamble and we lived on our savings which got us on our way for the first three years which was a struggle.

"We went blind we didn't sound out the guys we knew to find out if there was an immediate supply of work. There was one club which gave us work the rest didn't want to give us work for fear of upsetting the Head Greenkeeper/Course Manager so all our work was away from our regular area. We took a job in Stratford we picked up work at Hanbury Manor, doing remedial work then we got all the bunkers to shape up and sand on the front nine. That was five years ago.

They then wrote to all the big construction companies asking for finishing work to be subcontracted to them. The only company which gave them work was Southern Golf.

"We've got a good relationship with Southern Golf. In our opinion they are one of, if not the, best constructor in this country. Through Southern Golf we've met

Jack McMillan and George Shiel – some of the big boys in our industry," said Bob.

The newest member of the team has great respect for his two new colleagues.

"Without a word of a lie I believe they are the best finishers in the country and where major constructors fall down, almost without exception, is in their finishing," said Chris Foreman. "They just can't finish a golf course. They don't know how to but ex-greenkeepers do because they know what it should look like. Most of the big companies are not geared up for that.

"We thought that by my joining the company we could become a major force in the country. We feel that we have something a little bit unique to offer. I really do believe that," said Chris Foreman.

S&G has six full time staff who have each been trained in the ways of the company by Bob and Chris Gilroy. "They would sooner get things right the first time than have us come and tell them to do it again," says Bob.

"At Hessele we have 10 people on site, including Chris and

myself, two shapers on big machines who are owner drivers tied to us but if we have nothing for them have to find their own work – it is the most economical way of doing it. It is not worth us buying two big machines and having them sitting around.

Not that anyone connected with S&G will spend much time sitting around. The company has portable bedrooms which are moved on site to allow the teams to work from 6am to 9pm to get jobs completed.

"We have enough people so we can run three jobs at any one time. We'd like to do more but wouldn't want to spread ourselves too thinly," said Bob, who readily admits to have got it wrong on one occasion.

"We were offered a job at Penina recently which I jumped at but having spoken to the two Chrises I realised I was wrong as we would be overstretching ourselves."

"Unlike the big boys we can still send our "A" team to every job we do," said Chris Foreman.

The company has worked in Ireland and France and in future would like to do more interna-

tional work.

S&G picks up a lot of its work from word of mouth and it is testimonials from clubs like Hessele which lead to more work.

Hessele GC has been extremely impressed by the quality of the work done by S&G.

"We are an ambitious club and wanted the quality of the greens and the course to match the quality of golf we wanted to play on them," said Chairman of the Greens Committee, Geoff Hardaker. "David Hemstock re-designed the greens and surrounds and we chose S&G for the construction work."

"We were extremely pleased with S&G as they struck us as a growing company with a good pedigree. We were impressed by their initial presentation and they took the trouble to send both Bob Savine and Chris Foreman to take a look at the site before we interviewed them.

"We had an excellent relationship with them while they were on site and cleared up the site superbly at the end. Also they finished on exactly the day they said they would, having taken nine

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One of the re-designed greens and bunkers at Hesse

weeks to complete nine greens," said Mr Hardaker.

Another avenue for business comes when the company is brought in to finish work which has been left incomplete through disputes between other developers and contractors.

"Mid Sussex - another of the company's recent works - was a case where the developer ran out

of money and the banks took over and sold it on to the company we worked for. We'd worked for him previously and he knew what we could do and wanted us to continue. He was the third owner and he's the one making the money. He has a great golf course," said Chris Foreman.

"It's a case of getting the course

in play as quickly as possible and it's a case of the devil you know and getting in people they know do a good job and not going out to tender," he added.

Another good provider of work has been the VAT windfall which is producing money for work on courses and an area which S&G has a policy of chasing.

"It is opening a large sector of

the market up and hopefully the big boys aren't interested in it. It's work that Chris Gilroy and I have been doing for the last six years," said Bob.

Speaking with the Bob and the two Chrises it is hard not to be impressed not just by their work ethic and commitment to excellence but by their ability to carve a place for themselves in a very competitive market.

WHAT I'D LIKE FOR CHRISTMAS

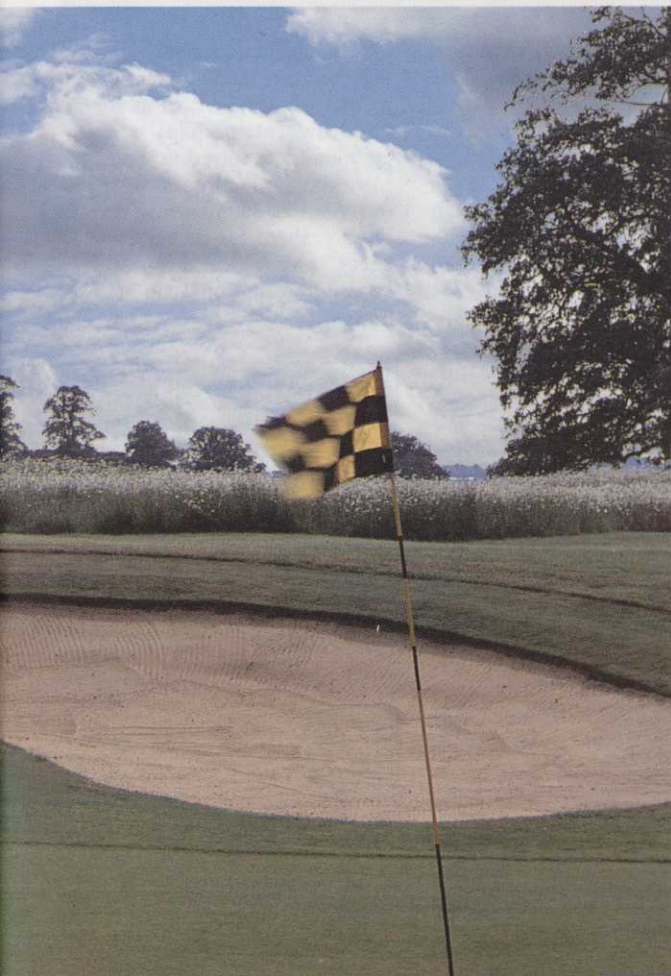


Paul Tatlow, Kedleston Park GC:

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