

# PREPARING FOR SPRING

at Brocket Hall



# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

Elizabeth I learned she was to become Queen whilst in the grounds of Brocket Hall. There are high aspirations too for the golf course built on the same site just three years ago



# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

**Lord Brocket is rarely out of the newspapers these days, so why should his course in Hertfordshire be any different? David Stokes talks to course manager John Wells about the course, his maintenance programme, and its furniture...**

**T**he furniture around a course is like a well dressed man – you only notice it if there is something wrong. I visited John Wells, course manager of Lord Brocket's beautiful course at Brocket Hall near Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, to see what he's got on the Melbourne course. John has a policy of the fewer notices the better. "Golfers will walk right past notices and they are a hazard to greenkeepers, who have to cut round them," he said. "It's best to put most of the information on the scorecard and our members are the sort of people who don't need to be told how to behave. The less notices, the better the atmosphere the course has. People don't like to feel they are back at school."

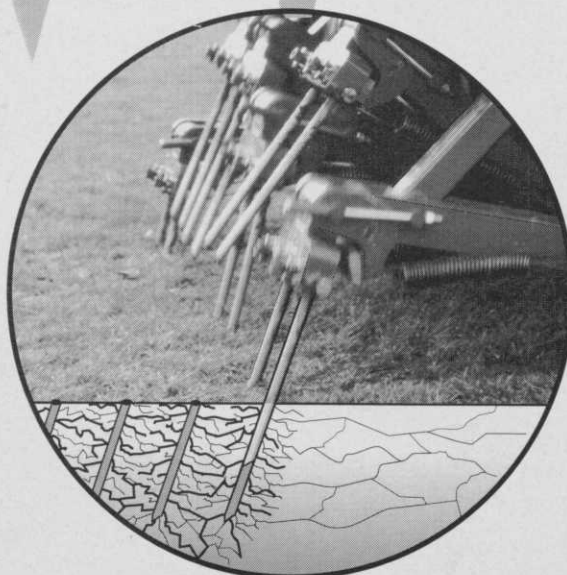


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# 'At Bocket Hall everything must be just right, to meet the company's high standards and this often means that items are specially made'

The course at Bocket Hall is less than three years old and while John was working out his notice at Welwyn Garden City Golf Club he attended many meetings to decide certain aspects of how the new club was going to look. "I learnt a lot at those meetings," he recalled. "We had a rep round and he showed us some signs made of slate. They were beautiful, excellent quality and in the room we held the meeting they looked wonderful. When we took it outside and put it on the tee it looked very much out of place, it just did not belong. I found out then that you can never buy things out of a brochure, you must see them in their context. Then and only then can you know that it will work.

"English Heritage has a say about many things the club does and they were particularly interested in the course furniture. It had to fit in and not be in any way garish. For the signs we had a look at plastic, marble, and brass, as well as slate, but in the end we plumped for wood – oak that had come from the estate. They were cut to size on the estate and sent to a sign writer and carved there."

## Historic site

Almost cutting the course in two is the Broadwater, a man-made lake created by a weir near the bridge. John told me that many balls are lost in the Broadwater. Part of the kit of many of the 330 members is an extending pole to net their submerged balls.

Elizabeth 1 – then Princess Elizabeth – was sitting under an oak tree overlooking the Broadwater in 1558 when she learned of the death of her sister, Queen Mary, and thus her accession to the throne. The oak still stands near the first tee and the hole is called Elizabeth 1 to mark this moment in history. Other holes at the 235-year-old hall also have names associated with the place – like Caroline Lamb, Palmerston, Byron and Paine (the architect of the hall and beautiful bridge that crosses the lower end of the Broadwater, both built in 1760).

A touch of common sense is that every sign on the course is not set in concrete, instead it's set in a plastic tube. This enables the greenkeepers to remove a sign and cut over the hole instead of cutting around it and

strimming up to the posts. The main sign has a map of the hole, its par number, length and the SI number. The Elizabeth 1 hole for example has the number 1 and the name, the map showing the Broadwater and the tees, trees and green. Plus par 4, 330 yards and an SI of 13.

To mark the white, yellow and red tees there are pearshaped wooden markers which are easily removed and replaced for mowing. The greenstaff have to repaint these four times year owing to scratches (caused by squirrels that abound in the park). There are also secondary signs on the yellow and red tees giving the hole number, the par, the length and the SI number.

The club spent a lot of time looking at ball washers and settling on the American make, Par Aid. These are in cast metal and will not break when a ball or the frost hits them. They come in two colours as stock items to this country but the committee didn't like those and opted for 'Hunter Green'; these took longer to be delivered as Rigby Taylor had to order them from America. "But we felt it was





# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

worth it, they certainly 'fit in'," said John. "At Brocket Hall everything must be just right, to meet the company's high standards and this often means that items are specially made."

To cross the Broadwater at the clubhouse end, Brocket Hall has what must be unique, a chain ferry, or cable in this case. Splasher plates from a Great Western Railway Hall Class Loco 'Brocket Hall' grace both sides of the ferry with its number plate, 5987, (scrapped in 1964). The ferry can accommodate two golf carts and their passengers with ease.

Walking around the 6584-yard, par 72 Melbourne course, you are struck by its grace, style and taste. Lots of time has been spent on making sure nothing offends the eye and it has all paid off.

Of course the furniture and fittings are just the finishing touches to the Alliss/Clark-designed course. To bring the course up to the present high standard from the construc-

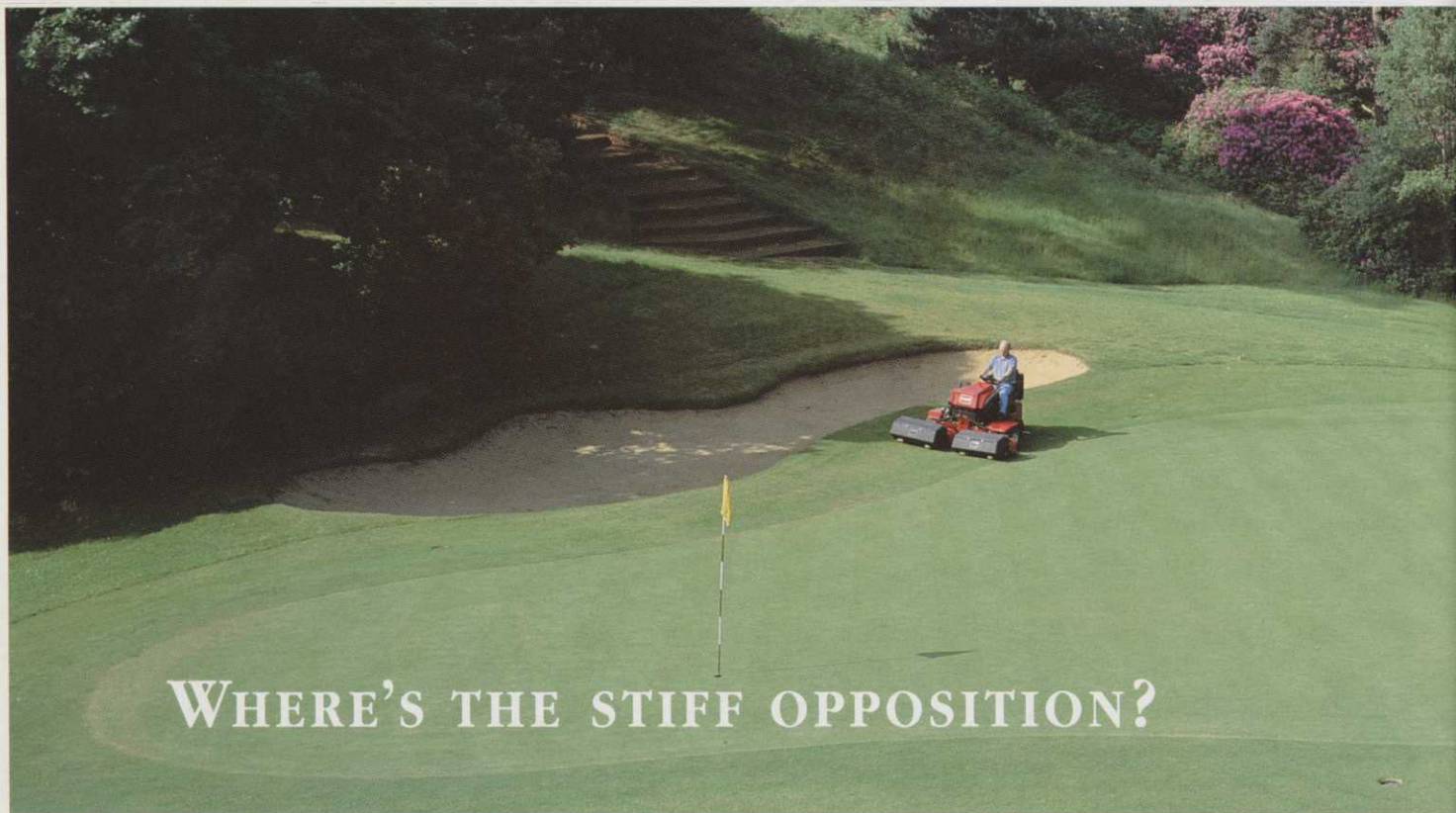


John Wells, course manager

tion in 1991, has required a lot of hard work. This has been carried out by a highly motivated greenstaff of 10. Staff training and welfare come very high on John's list of priorities. As course manager John feels the club's best

asset is a greenstaff with pride in their work. All the staff are encouraged to play golf and are all members of BIGGA. This is paid by the club, out of the training budget, and time is given off to attend lectures and golf tournaments. All Brocket Hall staff are trained to provide a service where nothing is too much trouble.

From a 1991 construction, the course opened in June 1992. This didn't leave much time for the course to grow in and iron out any small problems. One of the early problems was poorly draining bunkers - now they have all been drained and complement the free-draining greens. The greens are built with a 12-inch layer of 90% Kingsley washed sand and 10% fensoil which overlay 2 inches

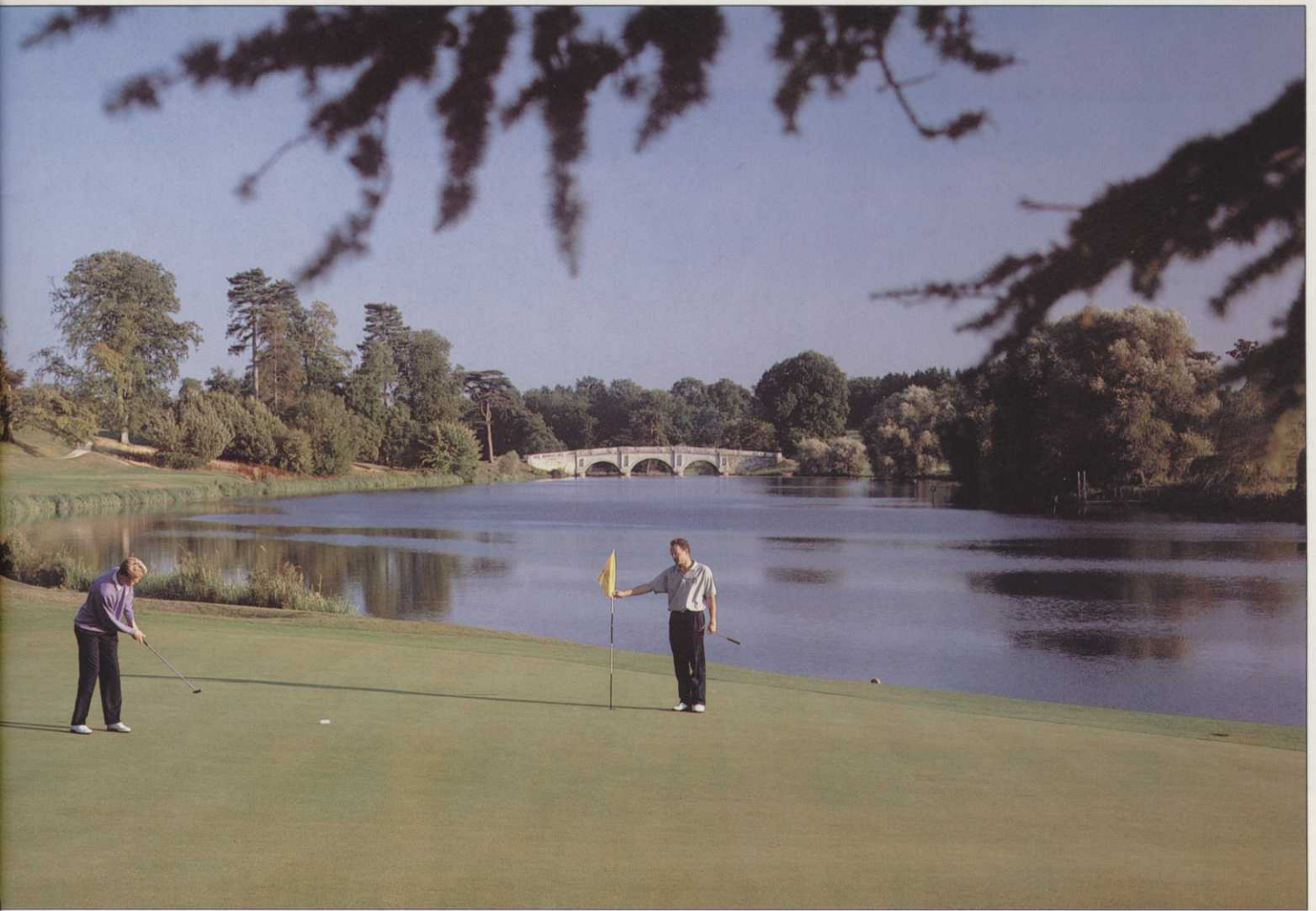


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of sharp sand and a 4-inch layer of pea gravel (10mm in size), with a draining system set into the subsoil. The grasses sown in construction were 80% fescue split between 60% chewing fescue, 20% slender creeping red fescue and 20% browntop bent. After three years, the total fescue is now 60%, the bent 30% and the other 10% is *Poa*. "This is my biggest disappointment on the course," says 35 year-old John.

The greens are contoured to shed water and have never held surface water in the three years since construction. They are firm and true 12 months of the year, which has enabled the course to stay open every day since the opening, apart from a fall of snow.

Although all the course requires a great deal of attention, the greens are the most important to John. A careful maintenance programme is carried out throughout the year. Spring maintenance starts in early March with a feed of 4-0-8 + 2FE 2MG 35g/m<sup>2</sup>. A total of six feeds are used throughout the year, finishing with a late autumn feed being the most important on such high sand content greens. Totals for the year are between 200-250 kg/hectare of N 20-30 kg/H



of P and 180-200 kg/H of K. Feeding is based on mini granule slow release methylene urea, and some summer liquid feeds of urea. "It is important to feed at the right time, and rate, to keep the grass healthy and to protect from wear. On sand more damage is caused from under feeding than over," said John. "This is also true with watering."

To control the build up of fibre, John advocates light grooming and occasional verti-cutting throughout the growing season. Aeration is in the form of solid tining at the start of

every month, alternating between 3/8in tines at a depth of 1 1/2ins and 1/2in solid at a depth of 3ins. At the beginning of October, hollow tining is carried out with 5/8 tines to a depth of 2ins. In between the tining programme, light sorrel rollers are used to keep the surface open. Because of the good quality sand used in construction there are no signs of compaction. No slit tining is carried out because a slit in sand will just close up after the next cut.

Top dressing is applied from March to

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October inclusive with the Kingsley washed sand straight after the solid tining (100 tons per year).

The rootzone is kept moist at all times, to guard against dry patch, and regular use of wetting agents from early March also helps.

Adjusting to sand-based greens was a novelty for John, as the principles of feeding and watering them were so completely different after 12 years of tending soil-based greens. But he must be getting it fairly right as in the three years since the course opened, only one application of fungicides has been used, to control fusarium patch. That was applied in October of last year.

As we completed our tour of the course and took in the view of the 18th 'Broadwater' hole – a vista framed by trees falling away to the Hall below with the lake just visible between – John concluded with this thought: "People think that sand-based greens are expensive to maintain because the cost of fertiliser is more, however the saving on fungicides and the lower cost of sand dressing makes the costs comparable. The major benefit to any club of sand-based greens is the 12 months play a year on smooth, firm, green surfaces."



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