

Mentmore Golf and Country Club is a new golf club with a big future if Mark Ellis and his team have their way. Scott MacCallum came away convinced.

You could almost hear the "Mission Impossible" tune in the background as Mark Ellis described his job at Mentmore Golf and Country Club. All that were missing were the words. "Your mission, should you decided to accept it, is to turn Mentmore's two golf courses into one of the finest golfing developments in the country; solve the acute drainage problems; improve the design and keep the membership, who have paid significant membership fees, happy while the work is being done... this tape will self destruct in ten seconds."

If Mark is daunted by the job he took on as Head Greenkeeper in March of this year he conceals it very well and in his own mind it is not so much "Mission Impossible" as "Mission Extremely Difficult But We'll Get There in the End".

"The lads are doing a tremendous job and we are all striving for high standards every time we go out and do work. I'm never going to leave this place. I've invested so much time and effort into it," explained Mark.

The main problem at Mentmore and its two courses the Rothschild and the Roseberry is the heavy clay soil.

"The fairways are heavy clay and you can imagine how compacted they get. When we first opened up they were so muddy that we had to put in drainage. We put in so many drainage channels that it works too efficiently and it dries out now. This causes the fairways to crack open. The more we filled them in the more they cracked open. It was just like an hour glass. Last year we used more than 700 tonnes of sand but when we seeded over the top by the time the seed had come through it had sunk again. It was a never ending cycle.

"Now we have moved on from using pure sand to an 80/20 or a 50/50 mix but we have got to be careful that we don't cap over what we've already done because the drainage is working."

With the benefit of hindsight Mark feels the job would have been tackled a little differently.

"We should have waited and let the water find its own forms of moving away and then worked on the areas which needed drainage but the commercial pressures of getting the course ready meant a lot of sand bagging had to be done," explained Mark who



Meeting the challenge head on

joined Mentmore as Deputy Head Greenkeeper in early '92, when construction was under way.

The Director of Golf at Mentmore is ex-European Tour player Pip Elson who has been on site since day one.

"I worked out of a Portakabin at the entrance and initially I spent me time driving people around in a 4x4 giving people an idea of how the course would

eventually look," explained Pip, from the splendid clubhouse which is currently being extended to take in a leisure complex.

The course is owned by Invicta Leisure, a major company which also owns Maple Durham, near Reading, built the same year as Mentmore, and Chelsfield Lakes in Orpington.

"The 36 holes here were built by CJ Collins in the space of

seven months but much of the work was beset by weather problems. We had an inch of rain a week midweek for four consecutive weeks. The men had to be sent home on the Tuesday. The rain actually tore out the root-zone."

It is a time both men obviously remember vividly and the lows they describe then mean that the pride in what they have achieved

The Mentmore team with Mark Ellis in the front row, centre



is all the more tangible.

"The 9th is 616 yards and the water washed all the way down taking the soil with it. We had that on several fairways which we have now remedied. We built them up, originally seeded them, then turfed them and we had to do it again and again," recalled Mark.

"When we used to get rain our 360 was up to its windows with water and you couldn't wade across it with a spike to release the water," he added.

"We've come in on a Monday after rain on the weekend and had to scrape back all the silt which had blown or washed out. We've had to do the same on the Tuesday and the same on the Wednesday. You just keep going and going."

Pip is working closely with Mark on the amendments to the course.

"In the original design there was no fairway bunkering so we are working on putting more in but we are restricted by budget. We can't run before we can walk," he explained.

"With a bigger subscription income coming in – at the time of writing almost 900 debentures had been sold – we will have more money to invest and I want it invested in our biggest asset – the golf courses. I have to fight my corner and promote Mark's position to the Directors if we need a new greens mower etc."

Mark has laid out a five year plan for the course and at the top of the list is to get rid of the rye grass tufts which shoot up around the greens and the approaches.

"Obviously any areas which are closely mowed are not too bad because they are mowed out but around the actual collars of the greens they are more predominant and they do affect the roll of the ball – we have to weed kill or trim them out.

"It is a laborious task so my main plan is to overseed all around the affected areas using short stem rye grass so it will blend in. We'll just keep dressing them out and cutting out the collars so there will be two widths and it will take the tufts away from the greens – we'll go outside the greenside bunkers. They will be scarified then we will overseed with a neat penncross because a lot of the approaches are penncross anyway.

The greenkeeping teams – they are broken into six on the Roseberry and five on the Rothschild under teams leaders – are working on constructing new

"The tiger tees were originally constructed at ground level and we are raising them by about a metre to a metre and a half – at the moment the water just can't get away."

It is all part of an on-going improvement to the course which is overlooked by Mentmore Towers, home to the British Natural Law party and is just a few miles from Chequers, the Prime Minister's country retreat.

As Pip Elson explained there is much work to be done with regard to fairway bunkering while all 120 of the existing bunkers over the two courses were built by the current greenkeeping staff.

"Since March we have come on in leaps and bounds and with the commitment the team has shown, if we can keep going and get

some decent grass coverage around the greens we will see even more improvement," said Mark.

Mentmore is particularly proud of its greens, which stimped at 10 for a pro-am held at the club in October.

"In March we hammered the greens. We double scarified them, double verticut them to a millimetre, then hollow cored, overseeded and dressed it all out. It took ages for them to recover and it wasn't until Easter that they started to recover but it paid off.

"The greens are fantastic and we are always complimented on them," said Mark, just as he had to assist one of his staff who had uncovered another minor problem to overcome. Terraspiking the greens it was impossible to know where the root zone finished and the clay began and several of the tines were broken.

"I really do have a good team. I've got a file full of ideas which have come from them about improving the course while one of the team leaders, Gavin Sowden, saved us quite a bit of money the other day just through his irrigation knowledge and was able to pump water from our main lake into a reservoir without us having to dig a trench."

Since taking over as Head Greenkeeper Mark has injected some of his own enthusiasm into his team and it is paying dividends.

"I just love greenkeeping. I could be doing other jobs but I do this for the love of it and I love being connected with BIGGA," said Mark, who is a regular on the Greenkeeping Support Team at The Open.

"The clubhouse here is run like a five star hotel and the course has the potential to be in the same class. When I left Woburn I didn't want to do myself down and move to a lesser club and I feel I have achieved that."

The face looks familiar...

Now there many be some of you out there who look at Mark Ellis and say, "Now that face is familiar."

Any you would be right – particularly if you were a fan of one of the best British-made films of the last 20 years – because Mark was an extra on *Quadrophenia*. Not only that, he appeared in the film on his scooter with Toyah Willcox riding pillion.

"I was on the front cover of *Time Magazine*," recalls Mark from those heady days.

A music fanatic he was also part of *The Jam's* entourage travelling around Europe with them and is a friend of Paul Weller, meeting him again only recently at one of his concerts in the Royal Albert Hall.

"Those were the days. I've even been interviewed by Garry Bushell of *The Sun*," he said.

FACT FILE

Original Fairway and Approaches Seed Mix

- 40% Poa Pratensis (Baron)
- 20% Chewings Fescue (Frida)
- 30% Creeping Fescue (Boreal)
- 10% Agrostis Tenuis (Highland)

Mentmore Greenkeeping Staff

- Mark Ellis, Head Greenkeeper;
- Eamon Slattery, Deputy Head Greenkeeper;
- Mark Whittle, Team Leader;
- Gavin Sowden, Team Leader and Irrigation;
- Sean O'Connell, Bill Lewis; Russell Howson; John Frampton; Mechanic;
- Lee Rance; Lee Stegles, Gardener;
- Michael Dunleavy, YTS; Naomi Janes, YTS; Danny James, YTS; Danny Gilbert

Equipment Inventory

- Two John Deere 2243 greens mowers
- Two Ransomes GT Classic greens mowers
- 2 Ransomes Auto Certes Pedestrian green mowers
- One Ransomes 180D
- Two John Deere 2653A
- One Ransomes 300
- Three John Deere bunker rakes
- One Honda TRX300 ATV
- One Yamaha ATV
- Two Honda 6522 compact tractors
- One Kubota B700 compact tractor
- One John Deere 1070 tractor
- One Ford 334 tractor
- One Zeta 5245 with front loader
- One Jacobsen Turf Truck with attachments
- One Hardi Sprayer
- One Top Dress Unit
- One Tipper Top Box
- Two Ransomes leaf blowers
- One Stihl knapsack leaf blower
- Two Allen Flymos
- Two Flymo GT
- One Victa Rotary Mower
- One Ariens 911 Rotary Mower
- One Kubota KH101 strimmer
- One Komatsu GTHC strimmer
- One Lawnflite brushcutter
- One IBA vacuum cleaner
- One Stihl chain saw
- One Echo lawn edger
- One compact roller
- One Turfco turf cutter
- One Sisis Multi Slit
- One Sisis Rotorake
- One Weidenman Terraspikes
- One Sisis snowplough
- One Charterhouse Moleplough
- One Groundsman 800 Roller mower
- One Wessex leaf sweeper
- One Multi Core TM1000
- One Charterhouse Top Dresser
- One Grader Bar
- One landscaper
- One Charterhouse Dragmat
- One DW Tomlin Rotorake
- One Gravel Cart
- One Farmach back box
- One Warwick trailer
- One Huxley trailer
- Two Logic trailers
- One Sisis overseeder
- One Gandy dropseeder
- One Charterhouse Discseeder
- Two Scotts fertiliser spreaders
- One fertiliser hopper
- One Ransomes golf leader cylinder grinder
- Two copper Pegler knapsack sprayers
- One walkover sprayer