



Gavin Robson: "I was devastated when I first saw the damage that was being done"

BOAY OF THE MOLLE



June the 21st last year is a date engraved on the memory of Gavin Robson. He relives the nightmare with Scott MacCallum

It is the sort of thing which would have normally calm, rational men waking in the middle of the night, drowned in chilly perspiration and voluntarily climbing into the straitjacket every greenkeeper keeps under his bed for such eventualities.

For Gavin Robson, however, this was not a recurring nightmare of an irrational greenkeeping fear – like reversing a triplex into the Captain's new car – but a living, painful reality and it was happening before his eyes on a bright summer's day at Lingdale Golf Club, near Leicester.

Like most horror stories the terror arrived unexpectedly but, unlike most horror stories, this one had a happy ending... thanks to one of the main characters – not a Freddie Kruger but a Barry Cooper.

Since it was built Lingdale, a beautifully located members' club, had hidden an awful secret. It held water, lots of it. So much that



MOLEPLOUGH

during each of the winters of '94 and '95 the course had been closed for 57 days because it was so wet. The members were restless. They wanted to play golf but the course just wouldn't drain and nothing could be done...until the arrival of the VAT money that is.

"We got £84,000 and the club held a special AGM to discuss where the money should go. It was decided the club should keep it and use it for a drainage system and an irrigation system," recalls Gavin, of the time leading up to his private hell.

"We decided on Barry Cooper and he came in and took a bore hole to test how wet the ground was. Within half an hour of digging a hole it was full of water. We left it open for weeks and the water level did not drop at all. The drainage work was to cost £44,000.

A total of 15,000 yards of drainage had to be put into the course but because of the specific nature of the problems at Lingdale a technique never before employed on a playing golf course was required.

"We have clay silt and it causes compaction and is also built on a quarry so the amount of

stone we have means a normal trenching machine couldn't go through the ground and the Moleplough was the quickest and easiest way of doing it. When the original plans were discussed we didn't know we were going to face this problem," said Gavin, who has been at Lingdale for eight years.

'I thought we would never get the ground back down to level again'

The disc on the Moleplough was eight feet long and went eight feet down and they had to pull the pipes into the ground and normally when the job is done on a new course it is done in sequence so the drainage goes in then the top soil is put down.

Which brings us to that fateful day – Wednesday June 21 – last year when Gavin watched the work begin.

"They arrived about 10 o'clock and after they set up all the machines I watched them pull the first drain in around 1.

What happened then will live with Gavin for the rest of his life as he saw his entire green-keeping career flash before his eyes.

"I was devastated when I first saw the damage that was being done," explained Gavin as he thinks back.

"The heave was six feet across and two and a half feet high. I walked down the fairway and I thought we had two ditches at one stage it was so bad. My worst estimate was a heave of around seven to eight inches, perhaps a foot at most.

"It was heartbreaking to see the course being taken apart and knowing that there was 15,000 yards of drainage piping to go in," said Gavin (29).

"I thought we would never get the ground back down to level again," he explained. As situations for a Head Greenkeeper at a members' club to be in it was pretty bleak and Gavin would have been forgiven for barricading himself into his office until it was safe to come out and face the members again.

DAY OF THE MOLEPLOUGH



Now you can hardly see the join: After the work the heave has gone and the fairway is returning to normal

It says much for the way in which the job was tackled and the acceptance of the Lingdale membership that you can't make an omelette without cracking eggs that the story does have a happy ending.

One of the major advantages Gavin had was that the club decided to appoint one of the members, Eric Taylor, as Project Manager and that he rather than Gavin and the then Chairman of Green, would liaise with the contractors and be the link between the members and the work.

"First thing in the morning we would have a site meeting and it would be agreed which holes were going to be worked on. Then we would put that information on a blackboard for the members and put down the necessary temporary tee mats and greens.

"The course was never closed during the work and it was all completed within four weeks and not the six weeks which was originally estimated. When the men were working we just let the members continue playing and no-one interfered with the golfers although there was a lot of disturbance," recalls Gavin.

"Barry Cooper had four men here constantly and they were very quick and Barry came up every Monday for a site meeting and to see the progress and again on the Friday to go over the work which had been done."

As soon as the drains went in the ground was rotavated and two weeks later it was rolled.

"The problem then was that all the stones began coming up to the surface from the heave and we had to get a stone picker in

from Sisis. It picked all the fairways in a week and we seeded straight after," said Gavin.

To compound the problems the drought was causing major problems to the course.

"Barry lent me a bouser and we were pumping water on to the course but we were stopped by the National Rivers Authority in August – the hottest time of the year and we had no water for two weeks. There was nothing left of the tees and greens were burnt up and there were only a few green places to put the hole. We lost nine greens altogether but they have come back."

The week Barry Cooper finished, ILS Irrigation came in to install the Watermation irrigation system on the tees and greens on the clubhouse side of the course – a road splits the course into two and the other side is due to have the same work done when the money becomes available.

"I would do nothing differently the next time – the same system will be used but it won't be so much of a shock next time. Barry Cooper is a superb contractor, neat, tidy and his work was excellent.

"The members have put up with a hell of a lot but they should have 57 more days in the winter to play golf but it has been said to me that I can never shut the course again now that they've spent all this money!"

The good news is that the heave shrank and the fairways returned to their correct state, drainage is now working at 100% and the fairways are the driest they have ever been and the members can see they've got their money's worth.

"It's definitely not a summer I would wish to repeat and I wouldn't wish what happened to me on any greenkeeper but the club was very supportive and I've now got a new Chairman of Green – Eric Taylor who was the Project Manager and we have the full backing of the management."

EQUIPMENT INVENTORY

- 3 Ransomes Handmowers
- 1 Ransomes Fairway Mower
- 1 Kubota L3300 Tractor
- 1 Massey Ferguson Tractor with Loader
- 1 GT2 Flymo
- 1 Huxley Deep Slitter
- 1 Allen National Triple Mower
- 1 Jacobsen Tri-King
- 1 Jacobsen Greenking
- 1 Easy Go Truck
- 1 Pro-Strimmer
- 1 Huxley Hollow Tiner and Solid
- 1 Sisis Fairway Slitter
- 1 Lawn Genie
- 1 Hardi Mounted Sprayer
- 1 Ryan Sod Cutter
- 1 171 Hann
- 1 Verti Cut Unit (Set)
- 1 Jacobsen Hydraulic Top Dresser