

An excellent piece of farmland, a superb location and a supreme attention to detail have combined to produce a new course destined to be a winner. As Scott MacCallum discovered.

When the *Demand for Golf* was first published by the R&A in the mid '80s it was as if the starting pistol had gone in a great race for land owners and developers to produce the "biggest", the "best ever", the "most expensive" golf courses yet seen in the country.

With the benefit of hindsight the sight of white elephants and smell of burnt fingers were almost inevitable but it was easy to sympathise with those who tried and failed at the time.

To compete with the Turnberys, Wentworths, Sunningdales and St Andrews of this world with their rich history and world renown new courses used different tactics to attract members – most expensive memberships, big name designers, signature holes, five star clubhouses. All to grab publicity and entice golfers to part with their money and join.

The problem was that the investment required was colossal and the competition among new clubs huge and, ironically, no matter the quality of the final product many golfers would still rather become members of a traditional members' club given the opportunity.

Robert Knut is one of the new breed of golf developer who watched the banks and third parties move in to rescue magnificent, but failing, courses and paying a fraction of the initial cost to do so. He watched and he learned and he constructed proper business plans before beginning his own course.

Like many of its impoverished older colleagues The Oaks is an outstanding golf course and no expense has been spared. Unlike the others steps were taken to minimise the possibility of financial collapse.

For one thing The Oaks is sited just north of Selby, in Aughton, close to York, close also to the A1 and the M62.

"We counted the chimney pots," explained Robert. It's a nice way of saying that the demand was gauged before any other move was made.

"Primarily we thought we had a block of land which was suitable for a golf course with woods and some water and being situated where we are we felt that there was demand for another course around York.

"We knew we had to go to the top end of the market to compete

From little acorns...

THE OAKS

has grown



The well maintained entrance

with the clubs which had big waiting lists like Fulford, Strensall, Ganton, Selby and Brough," he said.

"We were convinced that there is always a demand if the job is done right. You just have to avoid getting cold feet."

The feasibility study was so wide ranging it also took into account the fact that the Central Science Laboratories and the Ministry of Agriculture had relocated to York from London.

"We worked out how many of the staff were likely to be golfers and that they would require somewhere to play golf. It was one of the main reasons we decided to go ahead."

As it turned out the "new golfers to the area" would not have been required as around 85% of the membership has come from neighbouring golf clubs and the The Oaks opened with a full membership of over 640. They even have a waiting list. How

many new clubs could claim that within four months of opening the gates?

The course was built by Fox Plant, of Lincoln, a company which had built its own course near Birmingham about two years before.

"They were absolutely invaluable when it came to credibility for the course and when they began building they came in with a lot of equipment and it was built quickly," explained Robert.

"The grass seed was one of the biggest decisions we had to make and we looked at a number of golf clubs, visited the STRI and most of the major seed breeders at their own trial sites before making up our minds," said Robert whose family are also seed merchants.

"My brother, father and I went to Bingley twice and we each identified what we thought were the best grasses and we were unanimous each time. So in the end it was easy."

They went with Barenbrug in the end and have been impressed with the "hands-on" attention of Michel Mulder who frequently popped in on the course to check on progress of his grass.

"Being a specialist grass seed company as well as farmers ourselves made us look harder than some people would have done when it came to seed. We had contacts in the trade ourselves but the odd thing was that we had never dealt with Barenbrug," explained Robert.

The greens and greens surrounds were both sown with the same mix – 20% Lance, browntop bent; 40% Barcrown, slender creeping red fescue and 40% Baragreen, chewings fescue – to reduce the chances of invasion by poa and as an added insurance we had three men for three weeks



The team: Assistant Richard Webster, First Assistant Nigel Tate and Head Greenkeeper Philip Young

who spent all day on their hands and knees roguing poa by hand.

"We took the attitude that if we start as near perfect as we can we will try and keep on top of it. It's an on-going problem so we had a rule that every time the green was cut a dozen meadow grasses had to be rogued out.

"We decided not to go with dedicated rough mix – they went with fairway mix is 25% Bar-crown; 20% Barumba/Bargreen,

chewings fescue; 25% Barnica, chewings fescue; 20% Limousine, smooth stalked meadow grass and 10% Highland, browntop bent – because it allowed us more flexibility as to where to put the rough and meant less compaction at the sowing stage.

"We said from day one that we would reduce compaction and use light vehicles and special tyres."

"Trees have rough round them

so there is no strimming while wherever possible jobs can be mechanised.

The course was designed and constructed to be maintenance friendly and manageable by the full time green staff of three – Head Greenkeeper Philip Young, First Assistant Nigel Tate and Assistant Richard Webster.

"Philip and the team work on tees, greens, fairways and bunkers while we have someone in the summer months who does nothing but cut rough and semi rough. There is no strimming to be done. Trees all have rough up to the bottom of them while slopes are all shallow enough to allow them to be cut by ride-ons and all greens and tees can also be cut by ride-ons. We don't have steps up to tees because that creates wear areas and again the areas around them would have to hand cut."

Farm staff can also be brought in to assist in non-greenkeeping work like dyke building if the need arises.

Robert has brought some agricultural practices to the job of maintaining golf courses.

"On the measuring side greenkeepers have traditionally walked

up and down with a hand pushed fertiliser spreader and there is no proper speed monitor. The speed could vary depending up how tired he was that day. With proper speed recording equipment and doing it in a vehicle 100% accuracy can be achieved and the job done much quicker.

"My tractor man who does the spraying on the golf course can take the sprayer to within half an inch of a green and you can do a job in four hours what it would take three days to do by hand."

They use liquids on The Oaks because of the accuracy it affords and because they can tailor a liquid by adding iron, sulphur or any of the trace elements and applying them in one application.

"I am absolutely delighted with the way the golf course and the club has established itself so quickly – we already have 39 single figure handicappers in the club one of the highest number in the area," explained Robert, whose bid to become one of them, admittedly from a standing start, is hampered by an inability to find time to play on his own golf course.

You can be sure that like the famous trees which share the club's name The Oaks will be become ever more impressive with time and become an established part of the golfing community of the area.



Rough is allowed to grow around trees to ease maintenance

EQUIPMENT INVENTORY

- Two 6x4 John Deere Gators
- One John Deere 2243 Diesel Greens Mower
- One John Deere 2243 Petrol Greens Mower (Tees and Approaches)
- One Toro Reelmaster 6500-D Fairway Mower
- One Sabo Roberine Continent 400-3D Triple Mower
- Three Ransomes Greenspro 22 Hand mowers
- One Lastec F Deck Articulator
- One Huxley TR 84 Three gang Hydraulic Reel Mower
- One Wessex Trailed Rotary Mower
- One Kubota L4200 4WD Tractor
- One Massey Ferguson 1210 4WD Tractor
- One Blec Top Dresser
- One Techneat six metre sprayer
- One Kubota LA680 Loader