



From cows to birdies

Tom King has made the leap from dairy farmer to Course Manager with remarkable ease, while his course is set to become a superb addition to the Edinburgh golfing scene.

When six years ago dairy farmer Tom King and his father, John, decided the time was ripe to diversify, golf was identified as the ideal opportunity. The move also opened up an entirely new career for Tom, one which he is now following with great enthusiasm and success.

The piece of land earmarked for an 18 hole golf course – King's Acre – could have been intended for the Royal and Ancient game in the first place. Just south of Edinburgh, close to the City By-pass, the land is undulating, tree lined and designated as an area of great landscape value.

"We were looking to diversify out of pure dairy farming as we felt we had expanded the dairy as far as we could," explained Tom, whose family had farmed the site since 1939.

"I'm not a golfer myself but some people visited us who were interested in developing the site as a golf course and that is what started the ball rolling," he explained

A feasibility study was then carried out



Tom King: We knew there would be a demand

which involved speaking with local golfers and learning more about the waiting lists at other local courses.

"We knew there would be a demand but we felt we had better get something on paper."

The Greens of Scotland Division of the Aberdeen's Scottish Agriculture College carried out the research and submitted the plans to the local authorities which were ultimately approved.

The course was designed and constructed by Graeme Webster, of the Aberdeen-based design and construction company Glen Andrews Ltd, but much of the early hands-on work was done by Tom and his father

"The ground work started in January '95 and my father and I started stripping the top soil for the greens, tees, fairways and bunkers," said Tom, from the farmhouse which sits in the middle of the site.

Most of that work was completed by April at which time the construction equipment was brought in – a D7 Bulldozer and scraper box and a D4 Bulldozer which was used for the big earth shifts and general shaping up. A tractor shovel was also used for much of the shaping and the adding of the green contours and the tees.

"We have quite a lot of contours here anyway and I'm extremely pleased with the design because Graeme has used a lot of the natural contours in the layout. However, we did do quite a bit of earth moving to remove possible blind shots into holes."

That work was completed by July last year and all the top soils and root zones were in place by October.

"We've tried to design the course so that we could use as much machinery as possible

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reducing maintenance time and I'll be looking as to how best the job can be mechanised."

Not reliant on outside investors keen to see a return on their money Tom is happy not to rush jobs through in order to open the gates to the golfers

"We had hoped to have everything sown out last autumn but the wet weather came and we weren't able to get it done. It got too cold and we didn't want to risk sowing too late. I would think we would be open for business by next June (1997) but wouldn't want to rush the opening if it is not ready – it all depends how it grows in," explained Tom (30), whose wife Lizzie and the rest of the family, also got involved, picking stones when the drainage was going in.

"My father and I also did all the drainage on site. We installed the main circuit for irrigation putting in Toro twin speed sprinklers on the greens and tees. The surrounds also get done. Knowing the land we knew where the wet spots were. We maybe don't know how to run a golf course yet but we know our own land."

Knowing how to run a golf course is something which Tom is learning quickly how to do.

"I'm going to be the Course Manager and I went to Oatridge College and did an HNC in Golf Course Management," explained Tom, who also has a BSC in Agriculture from Edinburgh University.

"A lot of people in my position would employ a Head Greenkeeper and just look after the business side but I like practical work and I enjoy working on the course side of the job.

"Greenkeeping is totally different to farming and people who try to jump from one to the other immediately see the difference. Farmers are trying to grow grass as quickly as possible and as much as they can while in golf there are totally different cultivars and you are trying to grow it slowly and get colour."

Tom has much praise for his fellow greenkeepers at Oatridge.

"They were very helpful as I was coming in not very knowledgeable and they were great at putting me in the right direction."

So successful were they that he won a prize for being the best HNC student over the two years of the course.

"It was tough because it was one or two days a week in the winter from 1pm to 8pm and it was while we were still farming cattle so it was a busy time for me."

It was that personal commitment, coupled with a willingness to learn greenkeeping from the bottom up, that has enabled Tom to forge ahead with the project.

"As long as you don't enter greenkeeping thinking that you know it all agriculture knowledge definitely helps because you have an understanding of the soil and drainage."

On the golf side green construction was something which really took him, until he got



more involved, aback.

"The amount of work involved really did surprise me with the different drainage layers, the root zones, the lot."

The course is going to be around 6000 yards, par 69 and will definitely be open to the public while a decision on what form of membership will be available will be taken shortly.

"We have a cottage which we are going to extend to include changing facilities and a bar but we are not meaning to invest heavily on the clubhouse but it is something which we can expand in the future."

Even on a rainy day in April and with the course still a long way from what will be its

picturesque best it was still easy to see what an excellent new course King's Acre is going to be and as a new golfing development just a stones through from the capital of the home of golf it seems set for long and prosperous future.

■ Since visiting King's Acre Tom has completed the sowing in of the course and is currently involved in what he describes as "hectic cutting".

"We are cutting the whole site to the same length at the moment to allow the grass to thicken up while we are also top dressing the greens.

"We are extremely pleased with the way the course is coming along," he said.