

Scott MacCallum visits The London Club, which has a big name to live up to but manages the feat with aplomb.

Few would argue that there are no more evocative names throughout the world of golf than The Old Course or Augusta National but another golf club which, despite being relatively new, has a name to be envied is The London Club – the club named after the city which can lay claim to being the world's best known.

To those who don't know differently you might imagine a course which winds its way around the streets of the city never out of sight of Big Ben, with huge carries over the Thames, a halfway house in an annex of St Paul's Cathedral and caddies dressed in pin stripe and bowler hats.

Interesting concept though that is the reality is somewhat different. The London Club is at least half an hour from the city itself and, thankfully, is devoid of the hustle and bustle that proximity to a major city brings. It does, however, have rightful claim to its name and with two Championship courses each with its own formidable reputation forged in a remarkably short time – they were only opened in '93 – it enjoys a celebrity studded membership and has a greenkeeping team which could lay claim to being the most enthusiastic and well motivated in the country.

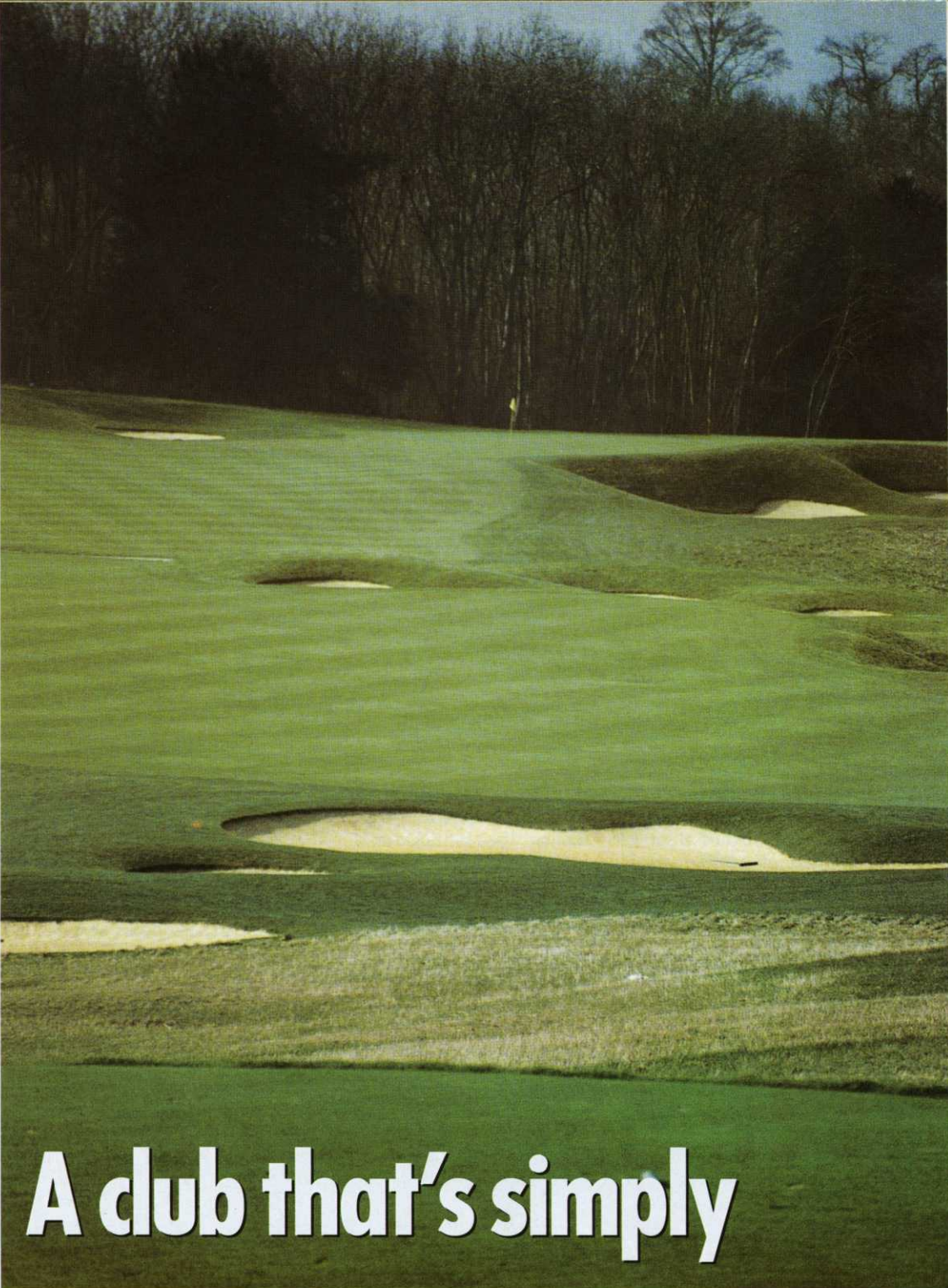
"We run like an army," explained Course Superintendent, Steve Jones, of his 29 full time and 39 strong summer team.

"If you look at our staff you'll see they all walk twice as quickly as most people. They set a cracking pace. They must be clean shaven every day and uniform must be worn at all times. They are always out on the course bang on the dot., no-one ever leaves the yard five minutes late."

On learning this you half expect to overhear US army style marching and chanting going on in the yard.

"Because we strive to be the best. We don't ever take a rest, For London members life is heaven, As all our greens stimp at eleven."

"Other clubs visit us and can't



A club that's simply

CAPITAL

believe the system can work and I think it doubtful any existing club could introduce a system like ours which was set in stone from day one," explained Steve, who was promoted to Superintendent six months ago.

"The staff here are so enthusiastic. I never have any problems

getting them to do overtime," said Steve, who added that the salary scales at The London Club are no more than average. "We're not paid at the top end of the scale by any means.

"They work nine hour days with a 45 minute break in the summer and seven hour days in

the winter and if we've got a tournament on we treat it like The Open and a number stay on site."

While you might imagine such a regime was not for everyone staff turnover is minimal. The fact that a London Club entry on a CV is a feather in the cap of anyone is perhaps the answer to that.



The team at the London Golf Club

The London Club comprises the Jack Nicklaus-designed Heritage Course and the International Course which was designed by Ron Kirby, one of Nicklaus' right hand men.

The courses are completely different. The Heritage is much more Americanised than the International which is links-like in its style.

"The Heritage is the most

frightening golf course I've ever seen with regard to maintenance. It is absolutely massive," said Steve.

"There are 179 bunkers – 38 on the first two holes alone – and

they are generally bigish, clover leaf and in clumps. The manicuring of these is a tremendous task.

A full tournament rake, which we haven't done since last spring, takes 14 guys a full day."

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Greens and tees were designed to be hand cut

There is also a policy of staff placing all the rakes clockwise in the bunkers... although the members are prone to forget to replace them in the right direction!

"The fairways on the Heritage are the biggest in Europe. You are looking at four Jacobsen LFs taking three quarters of a day just to mow them."

Greens and tees are all hand cut as a matter of course – in fact they were designed to be hand cut.

"Some of the greens are within three feet of a lake wall and you couldn't possibly turn a ride-on machine while some of the slopes are too severe. We did try to cut the International tees with a Greens King triplex but it was too big for the tee and even with a very skilled operator it took almost as long as hand cutting."

The Heritage is sown with Providence creeping bent grass while the International is a Colonial bent fescue with 10% Providence – a Nicklaus trait designed



Neat touch: Rakes are left clockwise to the greens

for security reasons.

Dealing with two courses of such different style does cause problems. While at the moment there are two separate sets of staff operating – they are going to be dissolved into one crew later

this year – the same equipment is used on both courses.

"The problem is that they are set differently for each course. For example we might send five Jacobsen LF set at 16 mm to cut fairways on the International but

have to change all the heights to 14 mm before going out to do the Heritage.

This throws up many problems and I've spent a great deal of time trying to work out ways to solve them. We'll probably settle for

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'We spoon feed the greens every seven to ten days'

some mid-height ranges over the two courses to make it practicable but if you want to look after them differently you have to mow at different heights."

Steve has crammed in quite a bit to his 30 years. He worked abroad in Germany and Greece among others, spent some time under Martin Jones at The Oxfordshire before moving to The London Club and also completed a two year turf degree course at Rutgers University in New Jersey during which time he lived in New York.

"I put the idea to Mr Nagahara, the owner of The London Club, and he agreed to send me.

"That was fantastic because the Americans are miles ahead of us when it comes to colleges and education," said Steve who recently visited the GCSAA Conference and Show in Las Vegas with his First Assistant and recalls going into a room packed with 3,000 superintendents for a lecture at seven o'clock in the morning.

He is not overly impressed with the greenkeeper education system in the UK.

"I sent five people to college to do their NVQs and three came back and said 'you're wasting your money sending us on day release because I can't learn as much at college as I can here'. It is generally the fault of the bureaucracy they have to go through. There is no standard to NVQ you pass or fail... and everybody seems to pass. A student who is exceptional and another who is poor or average come out with the same result.

"The standards are low. In fact my guys here sometimes take over the classes. They were putting in a new irrigation system the other week and my staff member had to tell the lecturer how to do it."

The London Club has come up with its own education system to train its employees.

"I'm going to take on two apprentices who start this month. One is an apprentice mechanic/greenkeeper and the other is an apprentice greenkeeper. They are going to work here on a graduated pay scale for four years - our own scheme not part of the modern apprenticeship scheme. .

"The problem is that they may



be inhibited when they go on to another job at another golf course because they won't have qualifications NVQ 2 and 3 but they will have had a four year apprenticeship at this golf course and I'm hoping that will be enough in the industry.

"The other option is that I will pay for them to go to evening classes and study whatever they want, diverting the money I would have spent on NVQs into evening classes. They should get a full background here and we've got a set programme of what they are going to study in the first year, year two, year three, year four."

The club also has a library with over £1000 worth of books, as well as a video and photographic library.

"We also get suppliers to give

Steve Jones, Superintendent



talks, half an hour in club time and half an hour in staff's own time."

The education initiative is matched by my maintenance practices at The London Club which would be an impossibility to the majority of clubs in the country which just don't have the resources.

"We spoon feed greens every seven to ten days while we are introducing a practice whereby we poa pick greens every Monday for four hours before doing any other work."

Not that the greens are in need of it. Steve reckons the greens on the International have less than 2% poa while the Heritage has less than half a percent.

"We core greens and tees on a two by two spacing to a depth of three to four inches twice a year, sometimes three if we can fit it in. That's on both courses and its a huge operation. We verticut more frequently including at depths of 18 mm and we top dress every Monday but so lightly the members don't notice. It's a little and often.

"We are generally more aggressive with turf and that is something I picked up here and at college. It is not something I knew before."

There are two full time mechanics, and an apprentice, who operate in the state-of-the-art maintenance unit.

"Every piece of machinery is washed down, dieselled and greased every night. Our mechanics have 35 year's in dealerships

between them on a range of machinery and their work is extremely important. I can increase their budget by £10,000 and save £150,000 on capital expenditure."

The machinery is predominately Jacobsen a company chosen on the strength of Club Secretary, Joe Paulin's, previous experiences with the kit.

"We're very happy with the equipment. I find that Jacobsen machinery is certainly finer with regard to reels and cutting equipment and that suits our courses," said Steve.

Joe was the original superintendent at the club and his experience has been extremely useful to Steve.

"Joe is very helpful and he lets me try anything. He's certainly a calm person to work with. He's also keen to stress that other greenkeepers are always welcome to come and visit us at The London Club," said Steve.

"I'm very happy working here. We have an excellent bunch of guys and it is a real pleasure to work with such a superb team which is so committed to the industry as a whole.

"We all work hard but it is made easier by the fact that our enthusiasm is encouraged because we have the budgets here to get the job done and a large enough staff to produce the quality we do."

With that sort of commitment The London Club will continue to gain in prestige and live up to its name.