



# In at the DEEP END

**Graham Chambers is not one to shirk a challenge and, faced by a huge one, he has more than measured up.**

There was a television programme, I think it was in the early 80s, called "In at the Deep End" where two guys who had been on "That's Life" were given a set amount of time to become marginally proficient in a particular skill.

It all built up to a climax where the "big boss" had to decide whether or not they were up to putting their new found talents to use at the top level. From one recollection among the skills one or other of them acquired were to become a ball room dancer, an auctioneer and an opera singer, while one of them had to direct a Bananarama pop video. There have been a few recent revivals of the format with different "stooges" but for what it's worth I still prefer the original.

I wouldn't be too surprised if Graham Chambers felt as though he had been selected to appear on the programme when he was appointed Course Manager of Longhirst Hall Golf Course, in Morpeth, just as construction was starting.

It wasn't just that it was the then 26 year-old's first job in charge of his own golf course – it was his first job in greenkeeping, and he arrived at Longhirst Hall direct from his previous job as

Store Manager of Morpeth's Superdrug.

It was more a case of entering the deep end via a triple twisting full pike dive off the high board.

That Longhirst Hall is thriving says much for Graham's ability to acquire new skills quickly and the owner's perception in seeing something in Graham which persuaded him that his new course, which opened for play on June 1 this year, was going to be in safe hands.

That owner is Tom Dawson, the golf loving Chairman and founder of Dawson and Sanderson travel agency, whose approach to the development and running of his own course is less than conventional.

The club encourages women to play off the same tees as the men;

operates a relaxed dress code and slow play is punished by the culprits having to pick up their balls and walk the distance they have dropped behind. Whether that would work in The Open or the Ryder Cup is perhaps debatable but it certainly keeps them on their toes at Longhirst.

"The boss has been a member at a lot of clubs and doesn't like being stuck in the traditional role of a golf club. He wanted a club local people could play not one where you couldn't enter the clubhouse if you were wearing a hat or didn't have a tie," explained Graham.

"It was always intended to be pay and play. They can come here in jeans and trainers and it's just £5 a round. We just want to get local people on so they can play,

or learn how to play, golf."

If people in the North East don't know where Longhirst Hall is exactly, they will certainly know of the famous landmark which previously marked the spot.

"The site was an open cast mine and boasted the biggest crane in Europe – Big Geordie – stuck right in the middle of it. The whole place was a bit of an eyesore to be honest," said Graham.

The site already included an excellent hotel, a tennis club, cricket fields and Tom Dawson's view was that a golf course would fit in well.

If it was an ability to learn quickly coupled with a tenacious desire to get things done which Tom Dawson spotted in Graham he is a remarkable judge of character because it is just those qualities which have shone through.

"When I came into the industry two and a half years ago my perceptions were like those of everyone else coming in. I was going to be cutting grass and that it must be a nice job in the summer," he laughs at his own naivety.

Being faced by a whole new challenge Graham took the only real option open to him. He threw himself into education.

"I started straight away and did my PA1 and PA6 before I even started on the construction. It left me totally drained. I passed but I had to study hard to do it."

Since then the fact that he now has a course to work on and put



Graham Chambers, right, with some of his team

## 'My ambition is to have the course considered one of the better ones in the area'

into practice what he has been learning at Kirkley Hall College.

"I went through Level II last year and I'm half way through Level III at the moment and it's going swimmingly. I'm also going to do a distance learning four year HND course, possibly at Elmwood, from next year.

"I definitely want to improve my knowledge of agronomy. In the past year at college we've been doing quite a lot of work with different cultivars and it's an area I'm very interested in."

Graham began working on July 1 1995 three months after construction work started.

"During the first year and a half there were occasions when I was totally gutted and couldn't face coming to work in the morning. With construction there just seemed that there were times when there was no light at the end of the tunnel. I had this vision in my mind that it would be a nice golf course to work on and it just seemed to be constant digging. It took a lot of getting used to," he confessed.

The course was constructed by Terry Reading Golf Associates and was a design-build.

"An outline drawing had been done but in the main the course was designed as we went along. In the original design plan there were three acres of lakes and by the end this had increased to 35 acres of water."

As the course was being constructed a complete set of temporary greens was included.

"These include the same root-zone, are fully drained and have irrigation," explained Graham.

"These are not only for winter use but will also be handy if working on the main green. The idea was to give our members and guests a quality putting surface throughout the year instead of merely cutting a hole in the fairway."

A grand total of 40,000 trees have been planted which will ultimately give definition to the holes.

"We have larch, Norway spruce, Scots Pine, lime and maple and I keep going out to see if they've grown any or work out how high they'll be in a year's time."

Another statistic to set beside that of the trees is 60 kilometres of drainage. "We've got our own trenching team," he explained.

"Our greens are USGA spec but

the fairways are all on clay so we don't have much soil to work with. We've had to verti drain and top dress to change the structure of the soil and they tend to need a lot of feeding in the summer because they dry up very quickly.

"We are experimenting with fairway irrigation on the 1st and 18th to see how beneficial it will be. If it's worthwhile the boss will probably go ahead with it."

John Hacker has been visiting Longhirst since the project started and is always available should there be any problems while Gary Munro, of The Wynyards, has also been useful in providing advice.

Graham joined BIGGA on the advice of Steve Pope, previously Head Greenkeeper at Tyneside Golf Club but now retired, who worked at Longhirst in the summer.

"He told me all about BIGGA and what I would get out of it and he's been absolutely right. I have been to Harrogate for the last three years, in the last two with the college but I'm going to spend more time there in January.

"The first time I went it just went over my head but the second year I had a little more knowledge but still didn't have a course to work on. Last year I really enjoyed it and met a lot of people in the business. Next year I'll be much more involved."

Graham admits that initially he was driven by a desire to prove the many doubters, who questioned the wisdom of proceeding with such an inexperienced team, wrong.

"As I've gone on that's changed and I'm doing it for myself. I want to have people come up and say how much they've enjoyed the course or that the greens were smashing today.

"My ambition is to have the course considered one of the better ones in the area. Lindon Hall is very, very nice indeed but it was built on existing parkland so had impact straight away. I've heard rumours that people were saying that our place looks very open but we're building from scratch and are targeting different people from Lindon Hall. We're looking at pay-and-play while Lindon Hall is targeting business people."

Graham's experience prior to joining the greenkeeping industry had all been in retail management having become a trainee manager at Finefare (now Gate-



way) before moving to the Coop and then to Superdrug where he was assistant manager of a busy store in centre of Newcastle before being given his own shop in Morpeth shortly before he was lured away to Longhirst Hall.

"What my previous jobs taught me was organisational skills – sorting out daily and weekly priorities and staff training which has been very important here with such an inexperienced staff.

"I like to be the approachable type of manager. If they've got any problems at college it's likely I will have experienced the same as I've been through the same course not long ago so I can help."

The team consists of Graham, his Deputy, Gary Smith who is also the mechanic and four youngsters two of whom have just completed their YTS and completely their NVQ Level II. One of whom, Stuart Wilson, is

currently the Student Greenkeeper of the Year at Kirkley College. Graham also continues to utilise the diverse skills of another five who had worked on the construction.

"There has been a lot of pain and heartache but we've achieved the basics of a golf course. The greens are good, the tees are excellent and we will be working on the fairways for years to come. Otherwise it is just a case of manuring and waiting for the trees to mature," explained Graham.

Then he can perhaps assist Tom Dawson on his next project, and it's a biggy.

"On land just next door to Longhirst he wants to copy the 18 best holes in the world. He saw a course in the States which copied the 18 best holes in America and he wants to go one better," explained Graham adding, "That's not until after the millennium though."