

**The Course Manager at Naunton Downs Golf Club is a rare breed – a “Hook” that is welcome on the golf course.**

**Scott MacCallum met Robert Hook to discuss the problems he’s overcome**

**N**aunton Downs is a fine golf club. It has a location to die for, high on the Cotswold hills, with views which would have had Constable drooling. It is a testing course which satisfies its 800 plus membership as well as hosts of visitors and a clubhouse with comforts which make the worst 18 hole nightmare bearable.

But it was not always so.

When Course Manager Robert Hook arrived at Naunton Downs three months after it opened three and a half years ago, he found a course which had fallen into many of the traps and pitfalls which lie in wait for new golf developments.

“There was no definition to the fairways. The rough was cut once every three weeks with a rotary mower. They’d started cutting the greens low immediately and didn’t know about groomers so they were always on and they’d hollow cored just after the turf was laid. Everything generally was very ‘sick,’” recalled Robert.

But one of the biggest problems was the actual design of the golf course itself.

“Part of the golf course, which is laid out over old agricultural land, included a huge ravine and four consecutive holes were played straight across it. On one of the holes you might have to take a 9-iron off the tee and follow it up with a full five-wood to get across the ravine. It was difficult to play and the course’s reputation suffered as a result,” explained Robert. As we looked at where the four consecutive ravine holes had been and the huge gully into which golfers had to submerge themselves, not knowing whether they would have the strength to come out the other side, it brought to mind images of Peter Pan – the “Lost Boys” being replaced by those “Lost Golfers” who had failed to make the ascent and were living in the bottom. Robert’s seafaring ancestor, the black sheep of the family, Captain Hook, could have been completed the picture. Indeed an ability to retain one’s youth and vigour would have been useful to the golfers at the Naunton Downs of a couple of a couple years ago.

Due the fact that the course had 650 newly-signed up members champing at the bit there was also great pressure to open before a significant growing-in period.

Robert knew within a very short time of arriving that drastic, remedial action would be required to put Naunton Downs on the right path. He girded his loins and approached the owners.

“I told them that things needed to change. It took a bit of persuasion but I made them realise that they had to scrap holes, redesign and construct new ones,” explained Robert. In fact the land containing the ravine holes was sold off to finance the new work.

What followed might have acted as the perfect story line for Mission Impossible, or Challenge Anneka!

“I got back from a holiday around midnight and opened a letter that was waiting for me from the golf club. It said that the directors had decided to go ahead with changes to the golf club but that I had to get the whole project completed from start to finish – that was



# MISSION

build three greens, five tees, ten bunkers, reshape the fairways and install the irrigation – in seven weeks! Oh yes, and the course had to stay open during the construction work.”

It was a project Robert tackled with relish and no little skill, much of it learned under Jim Russell at Lingfield GC and Ray Day at Saunton.

“The first thing I did was sit down and work out how much I thought it would cost and put that figure to the directors. I estimated £10,000 per green and with the tees, bunkers and the casual labour said the project would cost in the region of £75,000.

“I told them I could build a green in a week. It was September but fortunately it stayed dry, otherwise we would have been in big trouble.”

Another complication was that we didn’t have any maps for the irrigation because the company which had originally been used was no longer in business and the work was com-

pleted by a local contractor. That meant we had great difficulty finding the mains when we plumbed in the new, Write Rain, irrigation.

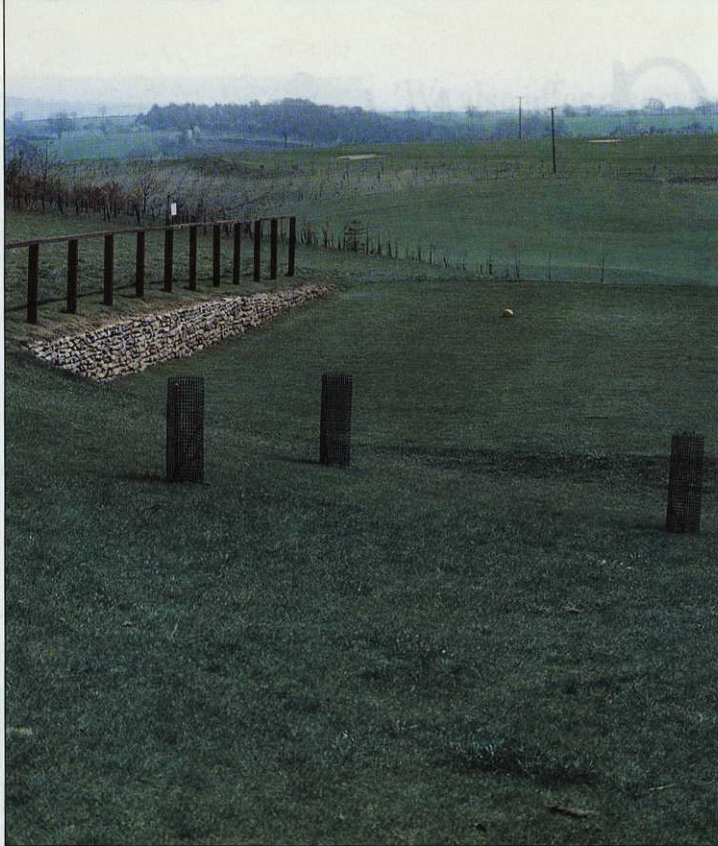
The notorious Cotswold Brash left a lot of debris to use and some of it went to build up one of the greens which was on the side of the valley. It’s built on a huge stone carpet.”

The team was Robert, plus three other greenkeepers who had 18 months greenkeeping experience and no construction experience, between them.

“I took on four more from the Job Centre but we lost quite a lot of the casual labour because they couldn’t cope with the long hours – 12 hours a day seven days a week. One guy disappeared within half an hour. We gave him a pair of boots and didn’t see him again,” laughed Robert, as he recalled the incident.

“We were lucky that we had an excellent JCB driver who knew exactly what to do. I put

**Left: the ravine which caused original problems.**  
**Right: a new tee**



all the levels out and got the specification right and the gang would follow behind the JCB putting in all the root zone from our five tonne dump truck, and 40 horse power tractor and three tonne trailer.

"After seven weeks of this we had all the turf down, we'd used big turf rolls laid by contractors on the greens and smaller turfs on the tees."

By the end we'd done 1400 square metres of green and 2000 square metres of tees and banks.

Having met the seven week deadline the course was given a rest to allow it to grow in until the spring. We were taking the grass down a millimetre at a time, dressing well back into early March and we had very good root development when we opened.

"The owners had given us a definitive deadline because, they didn't want to miss any potential new members joining at the beginning of the following season. They'd actually said they wanted it to be open on April 1 but I told them it was unlikely because we're 800 metres up here and our growing season is about five or six weeks behind so we finally opened the new holes on May 1."

Even that took a bit on planning as right up until the day of opening the course was still

"I just went for it. I also did accounts and secretarial classes in the evenings as well as I wanted to be ready for office work.

"BIGGA has really helped me because every angle is covered by my education with BIGGA or articles in the magazine," said Robert, who is fulsome in his praise of his team of Roger Myatt, Deputy Head Greenkeeper, Leon Piercy and Colin Martin.

Looking back at the work which was completed two years ago Robert is extremely proud of what he and his team achieved.

"Although we were working to a tight deadline everything was done to specification and there were no corners cut and I do believe the

finished product is good. The one thing we might have done differently is make the tees bigger but we are currently extending them as part of on-going construction work" said 35 year-old Robert.

"We've also rebuilt a lot of the bunkers and had to drill into them with Kangol hammers because the original design was such that where you would expect the top of the sand to be was the base soil. We've done about ten bunkers that way," explained Robert.

"The greens are fine. I'd actually say they are better than the originals. We hardly have any annual meadow grass because we dry them out aggressively. We keep a lot of water in the profile but let the top inch or two get very dry to encourage the roots to go down."

Naunton Downs is now moving in the right direction. The course is well received – the layout has shed most of the required climbing and members can spend their time on the practice range instead of the gym.

"The main shareholder, Ian Wilson, is very forward thinking and we are currently building astro turf tennis courts as it provides added value to members and their families."

It shows that with expertise and hard work even the most unpromising of situations can be turned round and that though skills learned through BIGGA's education programmes demanding projects can be tackled and completed successfully.

# IMPOSSIBLE

being played in the conventional manner.

"On opening day I shifted the new tees to play to the new greens and, as I knew where the rough was going to be, I'd fed the areas three weeks earlier so up it came and we had definition straight away."

Bearing in mind the element of haste involved in the remoulding of Naunton Downs Robert can now look at the finished product and feel proud at the achievement.

Robert has a real thirst for knowledge and his CV can tell of three years on a Grassland Management Course from Bicton College in South Devon; a National Certificate and National Certificate Advanced and Levels 1-3 – 3 being Business Management and Accounting; a correspondence course for a National Practical Certificate Technical; Phase 3 Management in Greenkeeping; Phase 4 Business Management as well as spraying and tractor driving courses.



**The greenkeeping team at Naunton Downs**