

Abbeydale Golf Club came perilously close to being closed down because of the state of its maintenance facilities but thanks to the club making some tough decisions and some exceptional work by its Course Manager it survived.

We would all admit to having "bad days at the office". Occasions when just nothing goes right. It may be that the photocopier goes on the blink, or that someone says "no" when you desperately needed him to say "yes", or that the boss has a go at you.

In the case of BIGGA members it might be getting into work on the morning of Captain's Day and discovering disease on the 18th green, or finding out that the course's loudest critic has just been appointed Chairman of Green.

Any of these scenarios would pale into insignificance, however, if lined up against the experience of John Coleman, Course Manager of Abbeydale Golf Club in Sheffield.

John's "bad day" involved a lady from the Health and Safety Inspectorate taking one look at his maintenance facilities and threatening to shut the whole club down... immediately!

As it was, one of the buildings had a prohibition order slapped on from immediate effect and the club was given six months to put it right.

Fortunately for Abbeydale the team it had in place to cope with such a horrific "Challenge Anneka" like task was up to the job. In addition to John and his team, the club's Chairman of Green, Jack Copland, is a model for all holders of the position, while the rest of the Board boasts some experienced business men.

The catalyst for what could have been the end of a very fine golf club was an accident which saw a young assistant break his wrist.

"We had previously studied the COSHH regulations and were beginning to become health and safety aware so when I looked at the legislation I realised that it was a notifiable injury. I rang the Health and Safety Inspectorate a couple of days later and they admonished me for not contacting them or sending in the completed relevant forms straight away," explained Jack.

The club had had a health and safety problem over the years and it had been neglected. In mitigation, however, for many years the club had been operating on a comparatively short term lease from the council which inhibited any major investment. The club

Surviving the ultimate sanction

from
THIS



to
THIS



had only obtained a longer lease as recently as '93.

"General amenities were lacking for the greenkeeping staff. There were inadequate washing facilities - no showers or toilets, a mess room which was just part of a shed. The facilities from a machinery point of view were also poor. We were housing what was becoming extremely expen-

sive equipment in barns which were not water proof nor vandal proof. It was a bit like a farm yard."

John took up the description of the facilities.

"There was no hard standing and no drainage. We would wash a machine off but we'd only go 15 yards, particularly if it was raining, and it would be dirty again,"

he explained.

It was these conditions which had led to the accident.

"The young lad was assisting in the hitching up of a trailer on to the back of a tractor and because there was no adequate hard standing it was parked on a couple of cut down old sleepers. As the tractor was backing up it dislodged the support which caused



the front of the trailer to fall on his hand," recalled Jack.

A short time later the Health and Safety Inspector visited and met with John in the clubhouse.

"The clubhouse is magnificent and the offices are the same - computerised, with low level lighting etc and the Inspector agreed that the place was lovely," said John, as he began to describe the fateful day.

"She asked where my office was and I told her it was on the other side of the course. It was a sunny day and as we walked across the course she commented that the place was obviously going places.

"But when she reached the sheds, within seconds she had threatened to close us down. She was horrified. Annoyed beyond belief at the conditions in which we were expected to work and the difference between the excellent clubhouse and our area.

"I'd spoken to Jack before she came and thought that something good might come from her visit

but it had gone way beyond that and the implications of what was happening made it a little worrying," explained John, in his understated way.

"There and then she placed a prohibition order on one of the buildings and basically locked it up. It contained equipment but was deemed unsafe and liable to fall down at any time. She also put prohibition orders on some of the old equipment including the trailer that had caused the accident," said John.

The normal procedure from that stage is that a letter is sent to the golf club giving a time scale in which to get things done.

"In our case they went a stage

further and said that in six months if work hadn't actually started they would close the golf course. It wasn't going to be enough just to have the planning in place," explained John.

"They said it had obviously been like this for the last 10 or 20 years so we have had more than enough time to put it right."

The financial implications of what was involved soon began to hit home and to make it even more of a bitter pill to swallow it came on the back of some fairly hefty investments by the club and its membership.

"We had persuaded the membership to spend the recovered VAT money on a new irrigation system costing around £120,000, while we were also down the road in implementing a major revamp to the course itself with remodelled greens and rebuilt bunkers," said Jack.

"We weren't sure what it was going to cost so in effect we were asking for an open cheque," added John.

"The entire future of the golf club was at risk," said Jack, reliving the moment.

Part of the problem was that so many different bodies had to be consulted before anything could be done.

"There were the planning department, the National River Authorities, the water board, the environment agency, the electricity board, not to mention the conservation groups. None of whom made any concession to the fact that there was a strict time limit imposed on the job," said Jack.

"There were so many knock on effects. We found that to do one thing was going to involve another 10," said John.

As well as having a Board capable of dealing with the level of trauma and a membership with deep enough pockets to cope with the excessive financial demands, Jack was quick to credit another huge advantage on Abbeydale's side.

"We were fortunate that four

years ago the club took on a young, vibrant greenkeeper and without that there is no doubt that we would have been in difficulties. The remarkable progress this club has made in the last four years has to be seen to be believed.

"In the space of a season we remodelled some greens, completely rebuilt 50 bunkers in-house, produced a quite professional video to show members the benefits of an irrigation system - which has been looked at by other clubs, planned and authorised a system - John has a Diploma in irrigation - as well as coped with redesigning our entire maintenance facility," he explained.

Initially the club put the building of the new facility out to tender but the cost of doing it that way was quite prohibitive - over £300,000. So John and Jack, with the help of an architect, took on the planning and implementation of the work themselves.

"We'd saved a minimum of 50% by the time we finished," explained Jack.

The finance was raised by increasing the subs and borrowing money from the bank.

"That way people who join in the future will pay as well as those who are around now."

Building work began in October of '95 and coincided with the work on both the bunkers and the irrigation installation with John acting as Clerk of Works on all three.

"We'd decided we were too far down the road on the other two jobs to stop them and that we would just bite the bullet and get them done," said the 26 year-old Scot.

"It was no mean feat to be perfectly honest with, at times, 25 people all wanting me at once but I quite enjoyed it and it was certainly good experience for me.

We took the viewpoint that we would keep the Health and Safety Inspectorate informed so I talked to them on a weekly basis about what we were planning and

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whether it would meet with their requirements," said John.

He then went on to describe how one part of the job was undertaken – that of the wash-down area.

"I told the architect about the washdown area and he asked what I had in mind. I then explained that I wanted a grid system with a false bottom and he told me that from his point of view it was feasible. Then, I went to the Inspector to ask what was needed to meet the requirements and she said I needed a petrol and diesel interceptor and that it would need to be weight rated and have a silt trap'.

"I then had to find a petrol and diesel interceptor. I contacted the council and they put me on to a company who told me the size I'd need for the amount of equipment we'd got. They then drew up a spec which I took to the builders and told them that it was a 600 litre interceptor and that it would need the appropriate room. That was how it worked."

Other problems were that the facility was the furthestmost point from the clubhouse, the highest point of the club and also the wettest.

"We had tremendous problems with drainage and by necessity we couldn't just race on because

we had to keep involving people like the NRA," said Jack.

With no services to the area and all other avenues explored – soakaways etc a sewage treatment plant had to be installed which again involved the NRA, who then did tests and a huge questionnaire then had to be completed before it could proceed.

"We fitted the sewage plant ourselves and it has worked very well but it shows some of the problems we were hitting. Everything we did seem to produce problems," said John, ruefully.

By January '96 – the deadline imposed – the Health and Safety Inspectorate was satisfied and the threat of closure was removed and by April the first phase was completed and by October the temporary accommodation block has been installed. With the financial demands on the membership becoming increasing excessive it was decided to put a hold on the permanent accommodation for three or four years.

"In many respects we are fortunate because we're over it now and, while we are still paying, we won't have to consider the problem again.

"It is a difficult one for most clubs because it is an area you can forget and the average mem-



ber is accustomed to cheap golf.

"One asked me recently what the health and safety has got to do with the golf club as we weren't a factory.

"Golf clubs and their memberships are out of touch, one or two generations behind the times when it comes to their golf club," said Jack.

"As club members we are all landlords on an estate and we have a duty of care as landlords whether we go on that piece of land during our round or not. We are responsible for the woodland, the wildlife, boundaries and hedgerows. It is a concept we have to get over to the membership that when they become members of a private club they accept responsibility for the

whole structure and are not just there to play golf," Jack continued.

Back on the subject of Health and Safety Jack is convinced that had the unfortunate accident not taken place the club would still be where it was two years ago.

"We did ask why other clubs had not been examined and the Inspector said it was just that they hadn't got round to them yet," said Jack.

Abbeydale is by no means unique.

The original facilities, although bad, are those still seen at many other golf clubs up and down the country and before long you can be sure that those clubs are going to be hit with the same demands as Abbeydale.

Finding our own way of tackling aeration

When taking over the running of any new golf course there will inevitably be concepts in greens management which differ from those of previous persons in charge and as such new methodologies will have to be implemented to achieve these goals.

The problems I faced at Abbeydale were generally those being faced by many courses built of that era (early 1900s). Greens built with indigenous soil, no drainage system or drains which were dysfunctional and predominantly annual meadow grass dominant.

Although numerous management practices were used to alleviate this problem, the main source of success in the transformation of the greens has

been aeration.

In order to gain the most benefit from aeration it is important to aerate during the summer months ie when the grass plant is active. However, as this is also the height of the golfing season the primary objective of producing a smooth putting surface may be compromised. The old adage of sometimes having to go back to go forward bears little weight with golf club committees who are none too enamoured at the prospect of bombarding greens with holes throughout the golfing season. I, then, had to find a method of achieving this with little or no disruption to the putting surface. This simply boiled down to the working width of the tine, the thicker the tine the larger the entry hole,

the greater the surrounding displacement of compaction will be and the longer the recovery time of the green surface.

All this sounds fairly straight forward, and it is, but when broaching the subject with equipment manufacturers their response was hesitant to say the least. We have all at some stage thought that our ideas were good but have not been able to take them further. Fortunately being in Sheffield the expertise in steel manufacturing was close at hand and I was able to put forward my ideas, I basically invited a metallurgist from a local firm to look at the problems I was faced with, explained to him my requirements and asked if it were possible to meet them.

Over a period of nearly three

years with much trial and error we have now perfected a tine of only 4 mm in diameter capable of punching to a depth of over five and a half inches. Used with two leading manufacturers machines, each producing about 400,000 holes per green the results have been no less than excellent. Sward density has improved enormously and unless they witness the machine on the green, golfers are totally oblivious to the fact the greens have been tined at all.

It is rewarding to know that the two leading manufacturers of aeration equipment are now producing this tine for use on their machines – hope at least that sometimes large companies do listen to our requirements!

John Coleman