



Picture by Charles Briscoe-Knight

Back in the Green

Historic Royal Mid Surrey suffered badly in the recent drought but some extensive work has brought about a transformation as Scott MacCallum found out.

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There is an old folk song which must make all publicans wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, before realising that it is no more than a horrible nightmare. I am convinced that the sad ballad, "The Pub with no Beer", must have that effect on the men who pull the pints.

Looking at other areas where equally horrific songs could bring about the heebiebies you might get "The Hospital with no Nurses", "The Cinema with no Films" or "The Football Team with no Players" - although, in the last case, there are supporters up and down the country who believe they live through such a case every Saturday.

In golf, the haunting refrain of "The Course with no Grass" would induce shivers up the spine of many greenkeepers and, until recently, one of these would certainly have been Allan McDougall, Course Manager at Royal Mid Surrey, who came close to facing up to the reality of just such a situation.

When Allan took over at the Richmond club a combination of drought and no fairway watering system had conspired to leave the two renowned courses extremely bare.

"When I arrived in July '95 we were in the middle of a drought, as it turned out, one this country had never seen before and maybe will never see again. Basically it lasted two years and that summer we had

temperatures in the 100s, the lowest it was getting was still in the 90s, and tees, greens and fairways were all suffering," said Allan.

"I must say now that the membership was very understanding because it was not the first time that Royal Mid Surrey had faced that type of problem," he explained, "My predecessor, Bill Lyon, had gone a long way to solving the fusarium and thatch problems on the greens but, while we still had patches of grass on the greens, there were large dead areas, the same as Royal Porthcawl experienced during the Walker Cup in '95."

If the greens were bad the rest of the course was causing just as much concern.

"At the time we didn't have a green blade of grass left on the fairways, semi rough or rough and the problem we had was, 'how do we bring it back?'"

"My view was that if we didn't have grass on the fairways there wouldn't be any point in having a greenkeeper. If you don't have grass no-one comes and plays, and there are 13 greens staff, and all the clubhouse staff, relying on the club for their wages. It would all go down the Swanney," said Allan.

A native of the Isle of Bute on the West coast of Scotland, and the son of a greenkeeper, Allan's arrival in the affluent stockbroker belt came at the end of a journey during which he had picked up a wealth of experience. It start when he helped his father, Robert, at Clydebank and District GC as a youngster a time when he also picked up the golf balls of a young Bernard Gallacher who practiced there.

He started properly at Killermont, in Glasgow, under Jimmy Kidd, before working at Hilton Park - with his father who had move there - and then Cawder, before getting his first Head job at Eastwood in Glasgow at the age of 21.

From there he went to Stirling before venturing south to Sandwell Park, then to Roe Park, in Ulster, his last job before arriving at Royal Mid Surrey, a club steeped in history.

Among the five club professionals have been five time Open Champion, JH Taylor, three time Open Champion, Henry Cotton, one time Open

Champion, Max Faulkner, while the only other two pros the club has had were Ryder Cup player, Jimmy Adams, and current incumbent, David Talbot, a former PGA Champion.

HRH The Prince of Wales (later to be the Abdicating King) was Club Captain in 1926 and the club history is littered with famous names.

Faced with the problem of managing such a historic venue back to tip top condition Allan went to the committee and said that he wanted to do some things to retrieve the situation which wouldn't be popular. He introduced the Sub-Air, something he had first used at Sandwell Park in the late 80s and early 90s.

"The ground was so hard there was nothing else we could do. The course had been vertidrain every year but it had just bounced on the top so really was pointless. The Sub-Air broke it up and all of a sudden the verti drain went in eight inches and we could slit."

In the spring of '96 Allan decided to oversee the fairways and, through Jamie Bennett and Grass Roots Trading Company, used Barenbrug mixes.

"We overseeded but got no water behind it - just two showers between the end of March and July. We had moor drilled three inches apart and the lines kept opening. It was paper dry and I had dead divots coming out.

"People were saying that I'd wasted their money but I assured them that the grass was in there and that it would come. Once I'd taken the decision I was up there to be shot at... and I was being shot at. I just had to wait.

"I knew the soil temperature was high and that the seed would take right up to the end of October, so it was a case of sitting there, believing in myself and knowing that the job had been done the proper way."

If Allan had been praying his pleas were finally answered at the end of September when they got a week of rain.

"In the first week in October we had lines of grass as thick as your finger. We had pinstriped fairways. I had proved that the system worked and that if we had the right conditions we could improve the quality of the fairways. I felt justified."

That same month the club sat down and signed the contract for a new wall-to-wall irrigation system to cover both the Inner and Outer Courses.



Before and after:
Allan McDougall highlights the difference in his fairways

The original system greens only system had been installed in 1974 and extended to cover the tees.

"It was never upgraded and as a result we found ourselves in an ever decreasing circle. We had a 17,500 storage tank and while originally we could water the greens every night and the tees every second night latterly we couldn't afford to water the tees and they died. It was a case of overseeding them more or less every autumn," explained Allan, who in his golfing prime played off 1.

The new half a million pound TIL system covers greens, tees fairways and surrounds, there are two new bore holes and the club has a 100,000 gallon capacity storage tank.

The system was up and running in April last year and Allan has already enjoyed the fruits of the control he can now exert.

"We are able to control our own ecosystem. Last summer we were putting on anywhere between 70,000 and 160,000 gallons a night."



He seeded using a 25% Barcrown (Slender Sleeping Red Fescue); 25% Baroxi (Chewings Fescue); 15% Limousine (Smooth Stalked Meadowgrass) 15% Baron (Smooth Stalked Meadowgrass) and 20% Highland (Brown Topped Bent) mix in September last year to make use of the heat and is recommissioning the irrigation system in March so he is ready to reseed again in April. We also Sub-Aired, hollow cored and vertidrain every fairway and when I can get a tractor on them without marking I'm going to slit them four or five times.

"For the next three years this will be an on-going programme and I have warned the committee that this is not a one-off cost.

"Once we've completed and got a density of sward we'll back off and verti drain every year, Sub-Air every second year and hollow core every third year," said Allan, whose own son has joined him on the staff to become the third generation McDougall in greenkeeping.

The effort that Allan and Royal

Mid Surrey has put into its fairways is something which is being replicated throughout the country while a number of nearby clubs are in the process of installing new irrigation systems.

"More attention is now being paid to fairways and it is great in this instance to see that work being combined with a new irrigation system which brings about more reliable results," said John Bradley, UK Sales Manager for Barenbrug.

In conjunction with the fairway work Allan has devoted a great of time to improving the greens which had suffered in '95 - and been identified by David Stansfield - as suffering from Thatch Fungus.

"The greens had tended to be wet and very susceptible to disease and Bill (Lyon) had a problem with a film of white lead under four or five of the greens," revealed Allan, who added that Bill had been good for the club as he had improved the machinery provision and encouraged the committee to think along the right lines.

"When I took over I upped the

regime and hollow cored, vertidrain and verticut a lot more often.

"When I came in, the verticut reels were non-existent. I bought new ones and went out to the 10th green and emptied the boxes 32 times - that's 96 boxes of grass I took out of the 10th green," said Allan, who is a great believer in the hands-on approach, spending the vast majority of his time out on the course and keeping his paper work to the end of the day.

"Every green got the same treatment. Now we verticut every Monday it is possible to do so and we've bought another set of reels so we can work with two machines. It is that important to get the thatch under control.

"They are not the best draining greens in the world and this spring I'm going to have to hollow core again, and really attack them with the verticut reels, because they haven't drained well again this winter."

Allan is acutely aware of the problems which will arise should legisla-

tion rule out the use of pesticides in the not to distant future.

"There is no point in saying we'll go back to the old methods because they are not going to be available either. There won't be Lead Arsenic or Mercury. We're all going to have to learn the job again...on the hoof."

Troubled with worms and with an ever decreasing armoury a company told him recently that they were looking at curry powder because worms didn't like it.

"The biggest problem is how to get rid of the smell and if by doing that it has to go through a process which makes it also chemical it will fall in the same category as the others."

He is working, and having success, with organics through Symbio and Soil Life.

"This autumn while everyone has been spraying we've only had to do it once. So we are hopefully getting fusarium under control."

It all means Allan can sleep relatively soundly knowing that now-days the grass is greener on his own side of the fence.

Royal Mid Surrey trivia

A word which could lay claim to being the most widely used worldwide came into being at the King's Observatory which is a recognised feature in the park as you play Royal Mid Surrey.

The universally used word which came out of the King's Observatory was OK. The building was used to determine true north with two posts one on what is now the golf course and the other at nearby Twickenham.

Among the jobs performed there was checking the accuracy of time pieces. Those which passed muster were stamped "OK" for Observatory Kew.

The history of Royal Mid Surrey by Peter Ryde is a magnificent book featuring all manner of anecdotes. Also listed is a piece written by the daughter of JH Taylor, Phyllis Taylor, on Peter Lees the first greenkeeper. There follows an extract.



The Royal Mid Surrey team under the famous century old Cedar Tree which attracts regular attention from Kew Garden's

"There was a time when Mid Surrey golf course was internationally famous for the excellence of its greens. No royal lawns were ever more cosseted than these, being cut daily (twice in summer), rolled, swept, dressed and nourished with fanatical zeal by a dour Scot named Peter Lees. He affirmed that he could turn it into a first class course in five years provided he was given a completely free hand. Wisely, the committee recognised a maestro in the art of green-keeping, and gave him the go-ahead. Acting on his advice the club arranged for a flock of sheep to graze the course every

summer. Their droppings contributed to the rich texture of fairway and green...

"Being a Scot, Lees was no mean golfer; he and JH played regularly together, and during the round they would decide on certain policies for the greens, then inform the secretary who saw to it that the committee endorsed them. In 1915 after a disagreement with the committee Lees resigned and went to America to a similar post with a much higher salary. He was responsible for laying out and maintaining five courses round New York. Sadly, in 1923 he died from pneumonia."

Royal Mid Surrey Equipment Inventory

- 2 Buggies
- 4 Toro GM3Ds
- 2 Toro Verticut Unit Sets
- 1 Jacobsen Greensking MKV
- 3 Ransomes Motor 180s
- 1 Toro 450D
- 1 Set Jacobsen Hydraulic Gangs
- 1 Jacobsen F10
- 1 Iseki 318 Tractor
- 2 Honda 22Hp Tractor
- 2 Iseki 537 Tractors
- 1 Iseki 530 Tractor
- 1 Kubota L2550 Tractor with Front Loader
- 1 Ford 3000 Tractor
- 2 Metal Trailers
- 1 Sisis Vari-Core
- 1 Ransomes 24" Mower
- 4 Ransomes 20" Mowers Auto Certes
- 1 Harrow
- 1 Dragmat
- 1 Sisis Roller
- 1 Air Compressor
- 1 Allen Turf Cutter
- 1 Sisis Fairway Spiker
- 1 John Deere 3225 Mower and Verti-cut Units
- 1 Sisis Litamisa
- 2 Toro Reelmasters 216
- 1 Verti-drain Captain Model
- 1 Wessex Sweeper
- 1 Huxley TV36 Scarifier
- 1 Hardi 400 LT Sprayer
- 1 Rotary Mower
- 1 Trailer
- 1 Rytec Leaf Collector
- 2 Billy Goat Blower
- 1 Charterhouse Verti-seeder
- 6 Lloyds Palladin 20" Mower
- 1 Toro Hydro-Ject Aerator
- 1 Back Hoe
- 1 John Deere Aerocore
- 1 John Deere 76hp Tractor
- 1 Major Verti-Drain



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