

It was all going so well, then it started to go wrong. The story of Ramside Golf Club is a gripping tale, as told to Scott MacCallum by Course Director, Roger Shaw...

Back from the brink



If I were a screen writer I reckon I would be sorely tempted to turn the tale of Ramside Golf Club, near Durham, into a blockbusting movie, something that would knock Caddieshack, Tin Cup, even Follow the Sun, into a cocked hat when it came to golf in the cinema.

It has everything. A story of hope and aspiration, an apparent success, a fall from grace, a mystery, a long torturous climb back, defying all odds, with a few more knocks along the way and, finally, a happy ending. What more could you want? Shakespeare couldn't have wished for a better storyline, and Spielberg? Well, you never know...

Back from the brink

Right: A view of how the course used to look

Below: Roger Shaw, right, with his Head Greenkeeper Harry Lees

Bottom: One of the mighty tee markers for which The Ramside is known



I don't know who you'd get to play Roger Shaw. He would have to be able to play the full gamut of emotions and cope with the north east accent. Gazza could produce the required water works, but he hasn't given up kicking a ball about a field yet, while Roger's a lot better looking than Jimmy Nail.

The story begins in earnest in '93 when Roger, then Course Manager at Brancepeth Castle, decided that after 10 years in the job the time was ripe for a change. He was in his mid 30s and had started to question where he was going with his career.

Taking the bull by the horns he telephoned Michael Adamson, a Brancepeth member, hotel owner and businessman.

"I'd known him from when I was a kid in Sedgefield. He owned a hotel and a couple of pubs and was a big character in the area," recalled Roger.

"I used to see him at Brancepeth and recognised him from my younger days in the pubs in Sedgefield. In the late 80s he had told me that he'd got land around Ramside Hotel - which the Adamson family owns along with

another family - and that he'd bought a neighbouring farm, which gave him about 240 acres, and that he was thinking about building a golf course."

At that time Roger advised him against going down his intended route, that of employing an American architect, on grounds of cost and around the same time the money market took a dive and the project was shelved.

Five years later and in '93, having decided on a change, Roger called Michael and asked if he could come and talk to him.

"He said, 'No problem. What about?' and I said I'd like to come and work for you. Then I asked if he was still interested in building his golf course. He said he was but that he didn't have a clue how to go about it. I said I had a bit of a clue and could we have the talk."

During that initial meeting Michael said that he was prepared to have a go but questioned Roger's decision to give up his job at Brancepeth.

"I told him that I was prepared to do that and he said that if that were the case we'd stand shoulder to



shoulder through thick and thin and that he'd back me if I backed him. Then we shook hands and that was that," recalled Roger.

He started in September of '93 and spent from then until the following February costing the entire project, selecting contractors and examining every single element of building a golf course.

"Michael and I looked at a number of architects and their work before selecting Jonathan Gaunt. Along with Jonathan we then visited The Oxfordshire and I pointed out the things Michael and I liked and wanted at Ramside. Complexes of tees, not aircraft carrier tees; bold undulating greens, but not over the top; fairly large greens and nicely shaped bunkers.

"I also wanted it to be maintenance friendly because, with 27 holes and a staff of eight or nine we didn't want to be fly mowing all day."

"Jonathan and I spent what seemed days and weeks plotting out the golf course ensuring that we had three looks of nine and then he went away and designed it and came back with detailed sketches."

Jonathan was their first major appointment and he was followed by Project Managers, Bob Horngold and Ian Martin; drainage contractors, MJ Abbott, and Par 4 Irrigation of Ripon to install the Toro irrigation system. They were joined by two shapers, a team of local lads for raking and a local firm to dig out lakes.

Roger also appointed Harry Lees, who had been his own boss at Billingham Golf Club, as his Head Greenkeeper.

"I ordered the materials and we had everything tested to meet USGA Guidelines. Just before work commenced we all had a site meeting and I asked everyone if they were happy with the whole situation and they all said that they felt they were getting a fair deal," explained Roger, 41.

Work started in March '94 and they finished the development on September 19 having built and seeded all 27 holes.

"We actually finished seeding in the dark, using car headlights, because the forecast for the following day was heavy rain and I didn't want to run out of time and risk going into the

following year."

They'd seeded in June '94 but they still decided that '95 would be a growing in year. However, as it developed so well it was decided to open for limited play in July '95.

Up until this stage everything had been copybook, and while credit must be given for this, it doesn't add up to a tale that would have got Quentin Tarantino licking his lips. However, what then befell Ramside might have done.

"It was all going so well we felt it was too good to be true, but no sooner had we thought that, then the wheels started falling off.

"We've got 14 lakes on the course but we wanted to keep them cosmetic so we decided to sink a borehole. At great expense we went down 140 metres and found enough water to meet our requirements for tees and greens. This was analysed and approved before we pumped it into a tank to be put through our irrigation system.

"It wasn't too long before we began to notice that greens were becoming a sick yellow colour. We looked at everything from our fertiliser

treatments, our rootzone but these were all quality products. We just couldn't put our finger on it.

"Eventually we thought we'd better check the water again but this time I sent it down to Scotts Fertilisers and asked if they would analyse it.

"I got an urgent fax back saying not to use the water as we'd scorch our greens. It was very high in salt, which hadn't been revealed by the original analysis, and we'd been watering our greens with one third solution sea water from a flooded mine shaft."

The bore hole was shut down immediately and they went on to mains water.

"But the damage was done and it was to take a long time to recover," recalled Roger, as he sat in his office.

"We'd gone from having a fantastic course at growing-in to one which was literally disintegrating in front of us."

Then because the greens were weak they were hit by Take-All which absolutely ravaged them.

"We lost 90% of the grass on them so I called in Neil Baldwin, of Service Chemicals, and he was brilliant. He took one look and put his hands in the air and said that it as the best



Right: From farmland to golf course in just six short months

Below: Take-all patch took advantage of the greens' weakened state

Take-All he'd ever seen - as though it was a great credit to us.

"He explained that we had two options, to use chemicals, which I didn't want to do, or to let it run its course and burn itself out. So that was our approach and we let it go into decline.

"That took two years and we had a hellish time in '95 and '96. We lost 70% of our greens completely, although we stayed on them, tried to present them as well as we could and informed people of the problem."

Just when they thought it couldn't get any worse it did, when they had a problem with a dosing system which had been installed to try and get rid of the water problems.

"It leaked acid through the mains and this was pumped onto about half a dozen greens around the pump

house. I would say that three of the greens were literally burnt to a cinder," said Roger.

"We were then at our lowest ebb, but really the only way was up and we agreed to work like hell to get things back on the rails.

"After two years of Take-All we got poa annua coming in, so the greens looked pretty ragged even then.

"We overseeded with creeping bent because we had seen how fast the poa encroached and the *Agrostis tenuis* bent just couldn't compete."

Ramsdale is always keen to try new ideas and be a little different - the tee markers for example, are huge engraved rocks from a quarry in the Lake District which range in size from four and a half tonnes to a mighty ten and a half tonnes - so when Roger heard about a new carbohydrate food

source he decided to give it a chance.

"We wanted to get the living bacteria in the soil so I spoke with Steve Lucas, of Cargill's, about Fulcrum Blade. He told me he was confident it would do the job. We gave it the full treatment in '97 and we have been pleasantly surprised by the results and from being able to pull the plant out of the rootzone we now have root growth right down the tine holes into the stone carpet."

The course is now back on track, an extension to the hotel and a superb new clubhouse should be completed by Christmas and the course is rebuilding its reputation.

Looking back at last three years Roger is convinced he has come out of the experience a better Course Manager.

"I feel that I can now grow my hair again. It's been one hell of a learning curve. I've been here from day one, I've planned it, I've costed it, worked on it, grown it in then seen it die in front of me," said Roger, before adding, remarkably, that he wouldn't change anything that had happened.

"It brought the staff and me down to earth. We've taken big steps backwards and questioned what we've been doing. The guys, Harry, Deputy Head Greenkeeper, Craig Hardy, who did much of the growing-in and the rest of the team have been absolutely fantastic and supported me 100%.

"Our members have also been absolutely superb. They've been through it all with us and know that we've been working hard to get it back. A lot of them knew Michael Adamson and myself, and were confident that they had the right people running the job."

But seriously would he do it again?
"Yes, I'd certainly do it again but only for the same man."

Just like all the top movies. A possible sequel tantalisingly dangled in front of us before the first film has even been made.

