

Is this the man with the country's biggest budget? Steve Clements ensures that Whitbread's Marriot stable of courses are up to scratch.

Hey, big spender



How would you like to be managing a budget of £7 million? Great! You'd be able to fulfil every dream, acquire every conceivable piece of new kit and get enough staff to ensure that all the regular jobs were carried out by 7am. Or would you be a tiny wincy bit intimidated by that sum of money and all the expectation of perfection that went along with it?

Well, Steve Clements, Golf Course Development Manager for Whitbread Plc, has just that sort of budget to ensure that the the company's four 36 hole developments, one 27, three 18 together with two new 18 courses, at Hollins Hall and Worsley, are each of the best possible quality.

With a background in golf course construction Steve is well placed to ensure that the new courses currently being built by Marriott, Whitbread's golf hotel arm, and the many other projects which are being carried out are done satisfactorily... and to budget.

Among the courses he's worked on are Hanbury Manor, where he was Construction Manager, Collingtree Park, The Warwickshire, Girona, in Spain, for the PGA European Tour, and Quietwaters, now known as Five Lakes.

"I do believe that you should know more about an operation than the contractor. Not having that knowledge puts you in a very dangerous position and leaves you open to paying for extras you don't need.

"We don't have extras it is that simple... We don't have extras. We work out the budget beforehand and we do not go over budget.

Marriott owns the equivalent of 13 18 hole courses, each with a Course Manager or Golf Estates Manager, a Head Greenkeeper, First Assistant and full staff.

"We have a minimum of 100 greenstaff overall and I'm keen to look after them because I want them to stay with us and not go off because someone offers them more money. We would also like to encourage more good people to join us," explained Steve, during a stop off at Marriott Forest of Arden Golf and Country Club.

Steve's role involves him driving 1000 miles a week - he did 46,000 miles last year - leaving at 6am each morning and rarely being home before 7pm.



"I live in Solihull and our Head Office is in Luton but I spend a great deal of time travelling to our various properties. I just plan my day around avoiding the worst of the traffic black spots - north of Birmingham on the M6 at 4pm on a Friday or any time on the M25."

Once at one of the Marriott venues Steve meets up with the Course Manager and discuss the issues of the day and any problems he might be encountering.

"I like to meet on the hoof. The best way to see a golf course is to be on it so I like to walk and talk and look," explained Steve.

Ray Hunt, Golf Estates Manager at Forest of Arden, and the man responsible for preparing the course for this month's One 2 One British Masters, is delighted to have Steve in his camp.

"Having a guy like Steve in his position is a real change for us as Course Managers. He has great experience and knows his side of the business inside out. He can see things that we probably wouldn't," he explained.

"In the past we were always the Project Manager on site now we have an ally who knows all the nuts and bolts of the job," he added.

The money that Whitbread as a whole has spent in the last two years is simply staggering. Including its new projects at Heathrow; the new Travel Inn at County Hall in Central London and the two new courses, it is estimated at around £100 million.

"Last year my budget for the golf, including the two new courses, was £7 million," revealed Steve.

Each Course Manager is responsible for his own operational budget and sets these with the General Manager of the individual hotels.

"Around the same time I'll be working on the Capital expenditure budget. To do these I go around the courses with the Course Managers deciding where we need to inject money and make improvements. By the end of this year there will be a five year plan for each property in place and we'll know what has to be done," said Steve.

A tangible example of the benefits this can produce came at Forest of Arden when one of Steve's pet hates emerged from the wet winter.

"I particularly hate to see water in bunkers

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and there was no bunker drainage put in when the course was built. It is a clay site and the bunkers acted as swimming pools when the irrigation system was on let alone heavy rain. So we drained them all and we've had heavy rain this year and not one inch as stayed in the bunkers.

"Previously we would have had two or three guys in buggies with two inch pumps constantly working throughout a tournament pumping out water just for want of a properly draining bunker. Now that we've done it it's proved to be a great labour saving job."

One of the biggest frustrations at busy commercial operations like Marriott courses is the need to do the majority of construction work in the winter months.

"It is the quietest time for the hotel and the golf courses but when you get wet weather has we have done it can cost you a lot of money to spin wheels and burn diesel."

He is also well aware of the problems of trying to create an overall corporate identity for Marriott courses while at the same time retaining the individuality for the golf courses.

"I try to have continuity with the course furniture standardised tee markers etc but we allow for the fact that the courses are individual and we don't want to transport materials from Maidstone to Dalmaohy for example so pathways are locally derived. Similarly with top dressings. You are almost duty bound to top dress with the same material that the greens were built with in the first place."

One situation Steve has taken a corporate decision on is the use of fen soil.

"It is a smeary wet material and doesn't take heavy play when wet, and we have heavy play on our golf courses so we've moved away from fen soil."

"I identify the problem one year so I can budget for it the next," he explained.

He also highlights situations which may cause problems in the longer term.

"Greens which are too small

for the amount of play they are getting, greens in shaded areas, tees which are not big enough etc."

Steve meets with all the Course Managers, who include some of the most experienced men in the country, collectively three times a year.

"We usually meet at one of their golf courses. We usually have a facilitator who is used to dealing with meetings and getting people to brainstorm. We end up with short, medium and long term improvements down on paper.


"What I'm trying to do is avoid the need for fire fighting and allow the Course Manager to focus on presentation. I want to take away the frustrating things from a Course Manager and enable him to deliver a quality golf course.

"There is a degree of expectation that we know a golfer has when he arrives at a Marriott golf course. That includes tees to be cut at 10-12 mm, moved every day and cut every three days and greens to be cut to a maximum of five mm and cut every day with the pins being moved every day as well," explained Steve.

Listening to Steve you hear a man who is relishing his job and the budgets he wields obviously doesn't weigh to heavily.

"Whitbread want to know why we want to spend the money so I have to do a lot of work explaining why things have to be done and whether they will get a return from every pound invested. But they do understand the need for it."



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