

Scott MacCallum ventured to the outer limits of East Anglia and found a golf club being woken from its slumbers...

# *Sleeping Beauty*



There is nothing more satisfying than to see something restored to its original splendour. It can be a classic car or perhaps a piece of period furniture but in the case of one little corner of East Anglia it's a golf course.

Thanks to the combined efforts of committed new owners, the Course Manager and his team and the club pro, Thorpeness Golf Course is being returned to the quality envisaged by the great James Braid when he designed it 75 years ago.

Although now known as the home of the Sizewell Nuclear Power Station - which offers a unique backdrop to the 10th hole - Thorpeness itself was built in the early part of the century as a holiday village for diplomats who had spent time out of the country but who, on their return, could enjoy some time in retreat taking advantage of the sailing, fishing, walking and golf offered by this little oasis on the eastern edge of East Anglia. It is still an ideal retreat for anyone wishing a quite, relaxing break.

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Above: The 10th hole with Sizewell Power Station in the background

Below: The Thorpeness team with pro, Frank Hill third left, and Ian Willett, third right

Far right: The 18th hole with the unique House in the Clouds



"It's like going back in time" is a comment regularly heard by the locals and when you visit you can appreciate why because the pace of life is certainly a couple of notches down from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the country.

Thorpeness also boasts one of the strangest homes to be found anywhere in the world. "The House in the Clouds" is a perfectly normal looking building but for the fact that it is perched on the top of a water tower overlooking the 18th green.

The golf course is a little treasure. Described as a Maritime Heathland - not near enough the sea to qualify as a links but not far enough inland to qualify as heathland - the course offers up images of the great heathlands of Berkshire and Surrey while providing more than enough bracing sea air to fill lungs for the duration of a round.

"When I arrived in October '96 the Co-Owner and Managing Director, Tim Rowan-Robinson, gave me five years to get the course back to its best and we've made good progress, particularly in the last 18 months," said Course Manager, Ian Willett.

Ian's arrival at Thorpeness followed close on the heels of that of the new owners and heralded an end of a period when the course had suffered from a lack of investment and as a result become a little careworn.

One of Ian's first initiatives was to begin delegating duties to the rest of the staff who had previously been limited in their roles within the club.

"It was like watching flowers bloom and morale increased straight away," said Ian, recalling the time with a satisfied smile.

With none of the staff involved in formal education Ian then spoke with Tim Rowan-Robinson about putting that right.

"We decided that we'd aim to have all our greenkeepers trained to Level 2 while money was made available to further my own education which I extended by undertaking a Training Development Course.

"It was a bit daunting when I started as there was only me and some of Otley's own teaching staff. For the first couple of weeks I wondered whether I was doing the right thing but once I got an understanding of the course it was great.

"I'd previously got D32/D33 at Melton College and the assessor at Otley College asked me to do the D31 as well - writing the assessments for the assessors to use. I'm also just about to start piloting Otley's Level 4," said Ian, who



admits that as he lives away from the family home in Thetford through the week it has allowed him to throw himself into his studies.

"The team regularly come back to my bungalow after work so their diaries can be kept up to date. I take photographs of them carrying out the actual jobs then they write a report on what they do. We put these into their portfolios and Anne Twose, from Otley College, comes out and assesses the work and gives me an update on Ewan Hunter who is the one staff member who is on a Level 3 day release course."

As well as organising the staff training, Ian gave initial priority to writing a course policy document as well as a health and safety policy document which was also taken up by the hotel itself.



Out on the course itself Ian and the team instigated a policy of regular hollow tining, top dressing and overseeding to improve on the 99% Poa infiltration on the greens.

"Root growth was only down to three quarters of an inch so it wasn't going anywhere. Last year we overseeded with 20 bags of seed and this year it's been 16.

"Some mornings, when there's just a tiny breeze, you can see a thin leaf of grass blowing in the hollow tine hole and you know it's taken. It's very satisfying," said Ian.

On the advice of David Stansfield they are aiming for 50-50 Poa/Bent greens as David feels it would suit the course and the amount of play it gets.

"It's an acceptable target but I know I can get better than that. I can get it down to 60-40 possibly 70-30

but it is going to take a long time," said Ian, speaking with a conviction which says that any failure will not be from a lack of effort or know how.

The entire course was awarded SSSI status last year as it is an excellent breeding ground for the Woodlark and the Nightjar. It also recently received a Countryside Stewardship Award and is entered in the BIGGA Golf Environment Competiton, in association with Amazone and Grass Roots having been mentioned in dispatches last year.

Being a "Maritime Heathland" does present Ian and the team with some problems.

"Some holes are only 400 yards from the sea and can be affected by salt spray in storms or if there is a north east wind whipping over the

North Sea. The 10th is the nearest thing we've got to a links green."

Another problem they are currently working to resolve is the infestation of Mountain Ash.

"It has been there a while but lower than the gorse but last year was a really good growing season and up it came. In the winter we didn't notice it but now it has come into leaf you think 'Good Grief' and we've put in place a programme of going round and thinning them out."

Ian's CV includes some of the best known clubs in the country and he's worked under some of the finest Course Managers around.

"I started back at Swinley Forest before going to Wentworth where I spent 14 years, 10 of them as Deputy Head on the East Course," said Ian, who then moved to Thetford as

Head Greenkeeper before beginning his time at Thorpeness.

On the back of this experience he has developed a managerial style out of the relaxed, rather than dictatorial, book of how to do it.

"I'm a qualified trainer and I train my staff so I know that if I send someone out to do a job he is competent enough to do it without me standing over him," said Ian, who is always quick to pick up on any job which needs doing.

"I disagree with the philosophy that I'm Course Manager so I don't get my hands dirty. If there is flymowing to do I'll do it."

One job that he always does himself is the application of fertiliser and the spraying.

"If there was a problem I can turn round and say 'I did it wrong, I'm

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## Equipment Inventory

Ransomes 160D Triple  
John Deere 2653 Triple  
Toro 3000D  
Greensmaster  
Two Ransomes 20 inch Super Certes  
Ransomes 728D Rotary Front Deck  
John Deere 26532 Tees and Banks Mower  
Tri-King  
Cushman Truck  
Cushman Topdresser  
Ryan GA30 Aerator  
Sisis Fairway Slitter  
John Deere 1140 Tractor  
John Deere 855 Compact Tractor  
Kubota B2400 with Front Bucket  
Team Sprayer 250lt  
Trailer



Right: The picturesque par-3, 6th

sorry'. I don't really want to put any of the staff through that at the moment."

He's not the sort to get hung up on something if it isn't 100% right every time and he's happy for people to point out areas of concern on the course.

"I'm not Superman and as far as I'm concerned this job is a team effort. I can't be expected to know everything that's happening on the course all of the time. If someone sees something on the other side of the road and tells me I'll shoot out and have a look.

"I encourage my staff to have input. If we're doing a bunker or redesigning

a tee we'll have tea breaks and sit down and discuss it."

He also has a close relationship with the pro, Frank Hill, with whom any course alteration is discussed fully.

"We bounce ideas off one another. He's been responsible for building a few nine holers and he's got a good eye for landscaping bunkers," explained Ian, who also finds time to be the East Anglia Section Secretary.

"Thorpeness is a great golf course, one of the best in East Anglia," said Frank.

"For that reason I don't think you would ever want to change Braid's

design but what we are looking at is putting in half a dozen new tees to change the angle of some of the holes to take account of the club and ball technology which has improved so much from Braid's day," he explained.

"It will stretch it a little but not too long. For the new millennium we could turn one of the par-4s into a par-5, and that would balance the two nines and bring the par up to 70."

With the effort of Ian, his team and everyone at the club, Thorpeness is well on its way to regaining its place as one of James Braid's best little courses and an East Anglian gem.