

Scott MacCallum visited The Manor House at Castle Combe and found a golf course basking in the magnificent setting...



The spectacular drop which faces players on the 17th hole

Lord of the Manor

There are some places in this world which obviously managed to be further up the pecking order when good looks and scenery were handed out.

One such area is undoubtedly the Cotswolds, and more specifically, Castle Combe, a village that could have single handedly inspired the American tourist mantra "Ain't it quaint".

While the village is a star in its own right, acting as it did as backdrop to the film *Dr Doolittle*, the Manor House Hotel and Golf Club at Castle Combe more than adds to the area.

The golf course was designed by Peter Alliss and Clive Clark in the early 90s and is now the responsibility of Course Manager Paul Bishop, who is well aware of how lucky he is to earn his living in such an idyllic part of the world.

"It is a wonderful place to work," he explained, as he sat in the clubhouse following a BIGGA day during which the course had impressed everyone... despite a day-long down-pour which would have been of more use to the Director of Singing in the Rain than *Dr Doolittle*.

Lord of the Manor

Paul has been at The Manor House for five years having moved from Hever Castle in Kent, and before that East Sussex National.

"When I was at Hever I wrote to a couple of courses to ask if they had any job vacancies and one of those was Mannings Heath in the Sussex Downs. They wrote back to say that they didn't have anything but that their company, Exclusive Hotels and Country Clubs, had just bought a course in the West Country - The Manor House at Castle Combe," explained Paul.

Since then, and despite the obvious distractions that the stunning scenery provides, Paul and his team, have been hard at work both on the general maintenance of the course but also on some elements of course reconstruction to iron out some of the wrinkles implicit in the original design and build.

With the added complication of the course being built on Cotswold Brash, Paul's first task was to try to improve the make up of the greens which had been constructed on pure fine sand

"It packed down causing compaction and drainage problems so they required lots of aeration," explained Paul.

"We did what we could for the first couple of years with soil exchange - taking pure sand out and putting in top dressing - and although we had moderate success we realised that reconstruction was the only way forward."

Having come to that conclusion, a programme was put in place after having identified where the work would be targeted.

"There were certain holes on the course which had small greens compounded by the fact that they were also in the



Above right: The 11th green has been enlarged

Below: Course Manager, Paul Bishop



shade - in particular the 2nd, 3rd and 4th - and these caused us real problems.

"Other greens, like the 18th, are quite small and offer up limited pin positions which doesn't help to spread the wear."

The first phase involved the three aforementioned holes and in particular the 4th - a par-3 completely encased by trees.

"Light was always a problem with old established trees which had been there for a long time so we decided that the best option was to move the green turning it into a par-4.

"The tee stayed where it was but the green, which had been at the bottom of a hill was moved to the top."

The work was done pretty much in-house with a team consisting of Paul plus six greenkeepers and a mechanic

but for the addition of Shaper and Constructor, Will Geddes, who had previously worked for Transcontinental Golf.

"I could not have done all this without the hard work and dedication of my deputy, Chris Jack, along with the rest of the greenkeeping team.

I ordered the materials and all the machinery required" explained Paul, who added that the beauty of the plan was that the original par-3 could still be played by the members while the work on the new green was going on.

Having completed the first phase last year the second was undertaken earlier this year, featuring two of the most picturesque holes on the course.

Both par-3s, the 11th and 17th, have greens at the bottom of a valley and you would be just as likely to reach for a camera as a short iron when



standing on the tee. Indeed the 17th, regarded as the the signature hole on the course, drops over 100 feet in the space of 100 yards.

"They were both small greens - the 11th was about 400 square metres - and were in frost pockets," explained Paul.

Both greens were totally rebuilt to full USGA spec. with all materials sent away to the European Turfgrass Laboratories, Stirling, Scotland to ascertain full compatibility. Greens were sown down to providence creeping Bentgrass at 4g/m² x 2 directions.

"Providence I believe provides an excellent dense, true putting surface and if managed correctly, does not require excessive maintenance."

The 11th is now around 600 square metres and has been lowered so that people did not have to scramble up

the side to get on it while the 17th now has two greens to utilise.

"We built another green for the 17th so we can spread the wear. As you can imagine tee shots were landing from quite a considerable height and the pitch marks were a problem.

The main green has been pushed back so that we can now have a medal position right by the brook which runs behind the hole," said Paul, while the other green has the brook running in front of it bears loose comparison to Augusta National's 12th on Amen Corner.

In addition to the greens several tees were altered and enlarged including the 9th which is now significantly bigger and offering many more tee positions. This hole has been changed from a par-4 blind tee shot to a par-3, which compensates for the change on

the 4th to keep the course pretty much the same length.

With the first two reconstruction phases now complete Paul and his team can now return to the regular tasks of maintaining the course and enjoying one of the more pleasant work places in the country.

Indeed, fact could quite easily emulate fiction as "talking to the animals" is a distinct possibility with the amount of wildlife on show and the club were the Western winners of the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition in association with Amazone and Rhone Poulenc, two years ago.

"It is a wonderful course for wildlife, we have two pairs of buzzards nesting and regularly see kestrels, woodpeckers, monk jacks and roe deer while there is also evidence of badgers," said Paul, although unlike the good doctor

he didn't admit to having any experience of the rare Pushmepullyou.

"We have got some areas of limestone grassland which is designated SSSI and we manage this in conjunction with the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust.

"We have a complete management strategy and one of the things we do is never spread grass clippings in the rough - we've got specific grass dumping piles to ensure that it does not go into the woods etc. We also have a list of weed killers and pesticides which have been approved by the Trust"

The course is extremely hilly and the majority of golfers use buggies - in fact during the South West and South Wales BIGGA Day when I visited only one team ventured out on on foot - congratulations to Jeff Mills and his colleagues from Taunton and Pickeridge.

"I know cart paths are much criti-

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The undulating course makes a buggy a very good idea

cised but they are a great help to us, particularly in the winter when we can get round the course on machinery when otherwise we would be stuck. We can get jobs like changing holes done without marking the course at all."

"I would like to take this opportunity to say that if you manage predominately established POA greens that you should actively encourage it!

In my near 20 years in the business I do not know anyone who has com-

pletely succeeded in transforming POA greens to Fescue/Bent but I know many that have nearly lost their jobs trying to achieve it. With many young and upcoming greenkeepers this does concern me because above all whatever grass plant you have on your greens it should be strong and healthy not starved of essential nutrients. I also expect to see in the not too distant future new greens being sown down to a variety/mixture of POA

reptens. I know this is a very controversial subject, but at least there will be plenty of letters next month!

As well as looking after the golf course Paul and his team look after the Hotel grounds including the croquet lawn.

"The future for the whole place is extremely rosy. The hotel is superb, unusual and incredibly tranquil and the golf course will go from strength to strength" said Paul.

Machinery Inventory

6 John Deere 220 Hand Mowers
2 John Deere 2243 Greens Triples with vertidrain units
1 Jacobsen Greens King IV Tees Mower
1 Set of True Surface Rollers
1 John Deere 3235 Fairways Mower with lightweight heads
1 Toro 5100-D Fairway Mower
1 Jacobsen Tri-King 1672D
1 Jacobsen Tri-King 11900D

1 Ransomes T51D Backwing
1 Kubota F2400 Outfront
1 John Deere Gator 6x4 Utility Vehicle
1 Kawasaki Mule 1000 Utility Vehicle
1 Toro Workman 3300-D with topdresser
1 Cushman Turf Truckster
1 Toro Sand Pro 2000
1 Kubota ST30 Compact Tractor
1 Izeki 537 Tractor
1 Massey Ferguson 362 with Front Loader

1 Hardi 300L Sprayer
1 Hardi 600L Sprayer
1 Amazone Groundkeeper 150
1 HO532 Sisis Fairway Slitter
1 Sisis Multislit (Greens)
1 Sarrell Roller
1 Vicon Spreader
1 Multi-Core TM1500 Hollowtiner
1 Tornado TM360 Blower
1 Wessex Rotovator

1 Verti-drain 205-150
1 SW15 Scarifier
1 Charterhouse Verti-Seed
1 Ransomes Ryan Sod Cutter
1 Sutton Roadbrush
7 Flymos
4 Strimmers
2 Ashresty Bunker Rakes
1 Express Dual 20000X Cylinder Grinder
1 Anglemaster 2000DX Bottom Blade Grinder