

Scott MacCallum travels to England's easterly most point to meet a man who eats, drinks and breathes his golf

# Through and through



Slice John Beamish through the middle and the drinkers among you may be a little disappointed. Instead of finding copious quantities of the black liquid with which he shares a name you are more likely to discover the words Rookery Park Golf Club. Because John Beamish is Rookery Park through and through.

He has worked for the Lowestoft club since 1964, been Head Greenkeeper since 1984 and when the the course

relocated to its present site to make way for a housing development John bought one of the houses.

"I live on the 4th tee. I know that because the tree that overlooked the tee is still there," laughed John, who is very open about the place the golf club holds in his life.

"I'm married to the golf course," he says and it is not said a boast, just as a matter of fact statement.

And it is obviously a happy union

because John is held in such high regard that the Club Manager, David Kelly, nominated him for last year's Toro Award for Excellence in Greenkeeping and a Highly Recommended plaque now hangs in the clubhouse lounge.

"Mr Kelly kept it quite that he was nominating me and I only found out about it when he presented me with the forms. To tell you the truth I was apprehensive about the thought of being judged but I was really delight-

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ed, particularly that I was also backed by the committee."

Eric James conducted the course visit and once he'd completed the form filling revealed to John just how impressed he had been with the set-up at Rookery Park.

"It is a real feather in my cap and I certainly didn't expect it," said John, as he sat in the clubhouse overlooking the course.

John started work as an 18 year-old in 1964 having attended horticultural college in Leatherhead, Surrey and it fulfilled his desire to work outside.

"Basically I heard about the job, went to see the Captain and was lucky enough to get it. In those days it wasn't much more than a grass cutting job. If we saw 40 people on the course a day, 20 even through the week we were doing well. Now we've got 1000 members and most days the course is full."



John worked under four or five Head Greenkeepers before landing the top job himself.

"I'd applied a couple of times but, you know how it is, you're told that you already work here so we've got the value of you anyway. But in 1984 I got the chance and I've never looked back."

John, and his team of five soon to be six, have their work cut out because as well as the 6,700 plus yard course spread out over 360 acres there is also a nine hole par-3 course.

"We have a very stable team. The last man in arrived three years ago and some have been with me for ten years. The team is good because of everybody in it, not because of any one person," said John who possesses a nice line in self deprecating humour.

"We try and keep the par-3 to the same standard as the main course but obviously the main course will always come first.

"We really are a grass factory because in the summer every part of the course has to be cut every week - and that's without throwing fertiliser about."

John has a voracious thirst for knowledge and he is a regular attender of Harrogate - BTME 2000 was his eighth - and he will travel far to attend seminars he thinks will help him improve.

"I love Harrogate. I love the idea of it and it has helped me through my career through what I've learned.

"Sometimes, over breakfast, you learn more than you do in any seminar but I do sign up for all the seminars, especially the ones about health and safety. I also do a lot of reading. That's the only way to pick up knowledge. You can't stick your head in the sand as when the Health and Safety man

comes around you might have a problem," said John.

"I'll do anything to cover up weaknesses or better still to turn weaknesses into strengths. I often phone up the health and safety executive and ask advice. If you have a problem you are as well going to the people who make the decisions as anyone else. They can help you to develop what you've got rather than walk in afterwards and change everything. That's the theory and I believe it works," said John, who speaks as a man who has two Health and Safety Officers who regularly play the course.

The golf course is a tough test, perhaps suited to the longer hitters while a decision was taken recently to reduce the height of the rough to help speed up play.

"We are also heavily involved in a bunker and fairway drainage programme. The course is built on clay and we lie wet for about three months of the year."

The on-going work has been laid down in a five year policy document to ensure that a continuity of development is maintained.

"We can add to it but it is very much a framework which can't be changed. A copy of this is given to new committee members so they don't come in blind and know exactly where we are heading.

"This is a professional business now, it's one of the main changes I've seen since I started. Everything we do has got to be done properly and to the ultimate standard."

The examination of that standard was thorough when Rookery Park played host to an East Anglia Section event last year and 60 greenkeepers converged on the course.



"I was a bit apprehensive but it was a good day for greenkeepers and a good day for our course. In fact they want to come back again this year. I do believe if you are pleased with your course in the season you should be pleased to show it off."

John is currently trying to get away from the use of fungicides and he is looking at the biological methods.

"At the moment I don't know whether it is a bit like the King's clothes and we're being sold something we can't see... although I'm sure eventually it will be the way we've got to go.

"As it stands you've got to commit a certain amount of money to a programme which you must stick to, whereas with fungicide you only use what you feel you need. Having said that, I do think it's the way to go and I will keep track of it."

It is a pragmatic approach borne out of experience.

"Years ago I'd look at the latest machine, think it's wonderful, go for it and sometimes catch a cold so my philosophy is now to be a year to 16 months behind. I'll let others be the trail blazers."

On the construction front the team is currently working on a tee replacement programme - three per year.

"With so much play we need wider tees so that is what we are doing. All work is done in-house unless we need specialist skills or equipment," he explained.

Speaking with John Beamish it is easy to forget that he has 35 years in the industry as his enthusiasm and genuine love for what he is doing, and where he is going, shines through.