

Wellingborough GC decided to have all 18 greens rebuilt in one go and work started in mid-July. As Scott MacCallum discovered, they will soon be reaping the benefits...

Taking the Bull by the horns?



Many established golf clubs find themselves in a quandary. Saddled with ageing greens, built to cope with the playing levels of the day, which now struggle to cope with the increased year round play they are presented with the following options.

Do they?

a) Do nothing and accept that they will be forced to play temporary greens on an increasingly regular basis each winter. Or ...

b) Decide to rebuild the greens to a modern specification and face the cost and undoubted upheaval that ensues.

It is fair to say that eventually the second option is likely to prevail but that merely creates more options. How to go about it.

Do they?

a) Carry out the job in stages using the existing greenkeeping staff over the course of a few winter programmes? Or ...

b) Bring in an outside contractor and split the job into three phases of six holes or two phases of nine completing the work over two or three years.

The pressures on a modern day greenkeeping team and the workload involved in rebuilding 18 greens may edge a club towards the second option where the amount of upheaval would have to be assessed before deciding which way to go.

Or ...

There is a third option and the one chosen by the members of Wellingborough Golf Club.

They brought in an outside con-

tractor, S&G Ltd of Welwyn, who rebuilt all 18 greens in one hit. And what's more, to ensure they had the best conditions in which to do the work they started on the Monday after the finish of the Open Championship in July.

The benefit to the club was that the entire work was completed in just 15 weeks and the members of Wellingborough can look forward to enjoying their golf on brand new greens from next season.

"For many years Wellingborough had greens to be proud of, but only for a few months each year. Visiting societies during the summer could not believe that we were to be digging up our greens. But they didn't see them during the late autumn. We suffered from Black Thatch which meant that later in the year there was

Taking the Bull by the horns?

Below: Steve Clement and Chris Gilroy of S&G Ltd



very little opportunity for the greens to dry out and consequently they were soft and spongy. Putting became a lottery," explained Roy Tomlin, the Club's Secretary/Manager.

STRI Golf Course Architect, Jonathan Tucker, and, agronomist, Andy Cole, were involved in the project from the early stages and assisted the club in deciding what needed to be done and how best to go about doing it.

"Initially it was a slow process of the club agreeing that something needed to be done and then getting everyone on board to agree to it ... the committee and then the wider golfing membership," explained Jonathan.

"Once that was agreed that the work needed to be done the next step was to decide whether to do it in one hit or over two or possibly three years. The final decision was taken because of the difficulties in juggling the maintenance of old established greens with the new ones ... and the fact that the disruption would be kept effectively to one year. Although I do believe that finance was also very cogent argument," he said.

On the face of it it seems a reasonable and considered decision but remarkably Wellingborough may be one of the first to have taken this option.

"It is very unusual that a club should bite the bullet in this way. It is the first time I have been involved in a project like this. Usually a club likes to see the fruits of its labour and see how it does in the first year before moving on to year two," said Jonathan.

In fact it was not until a couple of months before the work was due to start that the decision was finally taken and S&G put in two tender quotes, one for nine plus nine and the other for doing it all in one go.

The club held a very successful meeting of members - around 200 attended at which the club officials, together with Jonathan and Andy, made presentations.

"We were able to get over the reasoning behind why we wanted to do it in one phase."

Bob Savine - the "S" in S&G - who explained just how what could be construed as the more drastic route for the club is also the most cost effective.

"There are savings for doing it all together on materials, not having to remobilise for the second or third years and on company overheads and these amounted to about 10%, which in monetary terms is quite significant."

The 15 week time period to complete the contract held no fears for S&G who ensured that everything was in place before they started work.

"We anticipated having it all done in 12 weeks and if it wasn't for a bit of bad weather we would have achieved it. As it is we will have to go into week 15."

Bob, and Chris Gilroy - the "G" in S&G - worked closely with Head

Greenkeeper, Ian Marshall, who has more than 20 years experience on the course.

"What he doesn't know about the course isn't worth knowing and any problems we encountered, for example with electricity or gas mains, he knew exactly where they were which saved us valuable time. He also had to prepare the 18 temporary greens."

Ironically when the time came to dig up the existing greens they looked in superb condition.

"We played them and were hard pushed to find anything wrong with them. Ian had done a great job papering over the cracks, but in the winter you couldn't play on them," said Bob, reiterating what Roy Tomlin had said.

Having said that the work was being done in one hit the job was actually planned in phases before the work started.

A total of 10 men, including Bob and Chris, undertook the work while S&G has recently employed Steve Clements, formerly of Whitbread, as a Project Manager. He visited the site once or twice a week.

"The plan was to reconstruct three greens a week but because the weather was so good in the first few weeks we were almost getting to a point of doing four a week, and that was everything from re-root zoning and resurfacing," said Steve.

The original turf was scrapped and Rolawn washed turf was brought in, the decision being that turf, as opposed to seed, would give the greens a head start.

"As well as the greens reconstruction the irrigation system around each green was also renewed," said Steve.

Credit must also go to the golf club for sacrificing a large proportion of their summer season to allow the work to take place in advantageous conditions.

"The Open had only finished on the



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Sunday and work here started on the Saturday and they were on temps from then on. Not many clubs would contemplate the disruption to their club competitions and bigger societies," said Jonathan.

The upside is that it allowed the work to be done much quicker than if it had been limited to the autumn and winter.

"Just to give an example, when I was at Whitbread the policy was not to do any construction work in the summer. We would take greens out of play in November and not be finishing the work until the first week in May. On another occasion we took a green out of play on April 1 and it was finished by May 1 so what took six months in one case took just one in another merely by choosing a different time of year to do it," said Steve.

"You are better off leaving your

greens in play over winter, no matter how bad they are, rather than try to rebuild them in the winter," he added.

Steve explained that he had come across situations recently whereby architects had attempted to impose damages on a contractor starting work in October should he not finish the work in the agreed time.

"That either shows a lack of awareness of what can happen to ground in the winter or an acceptance that the contractor will be working in wet conditions. To any good contractor that is not acceptable."

It is that sort of knowledge and experience that encouraged S&G to bring Steve on board.

"S&G has gained from Steve's experience and as a team - S&G, Jonathan Tucker and the golf club, we've worked well. That's what has made this project so successful," said Bob.



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