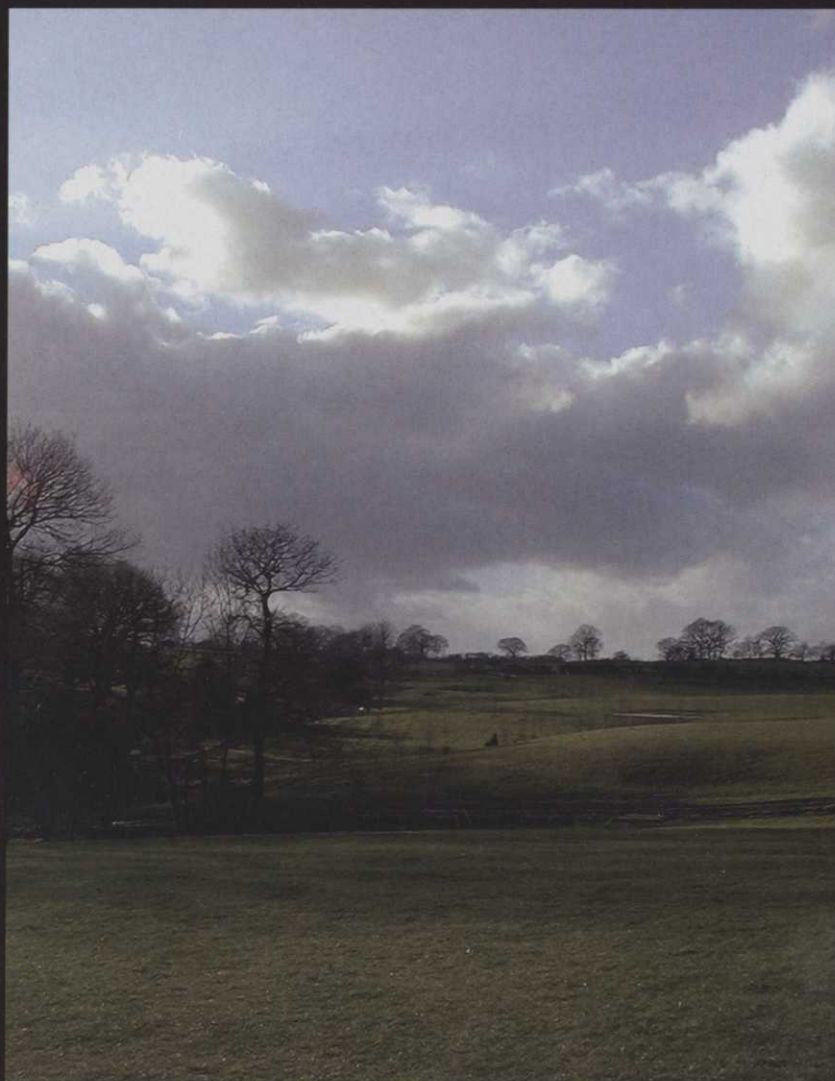


Scott MacCallum meets up with two brothers whose move into the golf market certainly hasn't gone sour

Pastures new



Cleobury Mortimer Golf Club is a fine complex. Ten miles out of Kidderminster it boasts 27 interesting holes which are not too intimidating for the novice but with interest enough for the proficient; some magnificent oaks; an attractive clubhouse and some excellent practice facilities, all set in beautiful Shropshire countryside. It looks like it has been there for years.

But just seven years ago this was farmland and the staged developed is the work of two brothers, farmers born and bred, who have masterminded the transformation from dairy farm into a

golf club boasting over 700 members.

Graham Pain now handles the administration of the club while brother, Robert, is in charge of everything outside, although they are interchangeable and don't believe in job titles - for themselves nor for their 15 staff.

"We were farming 400 acres on three separate sites with a village in the middle so it was never very easy," explained Graham, who admitted that, for those in agriculture, the writing for the industry had been on the wall for 15 years - going back to when milk quotas were first introduced.

"As relatively young men, in our 30s with wives and families, we looked at the situation and asked ourselves whether we wanted to continue doing what we were doing, with not much light at the end of the tunnel, until retirement. Or did we want to change our lot."

Having decided on the latter it was a case of whether they dipped their toes in the water of an alternative life or dived right on in.

"It was a case of whether we might open a bed and breakfast, hosting the odd clay pigeon shoot, or really grasp-

Pastures new

ing the nettle and taking a make or break move... something very radical," said Graham.

The fact that the three of us are sitting in the well appointed first floor function room in the clubhouse is evidence enough of the path they chose.

Golf was always one of their main options as they owned a substantial amount of land and golf would be a good use of that resource.

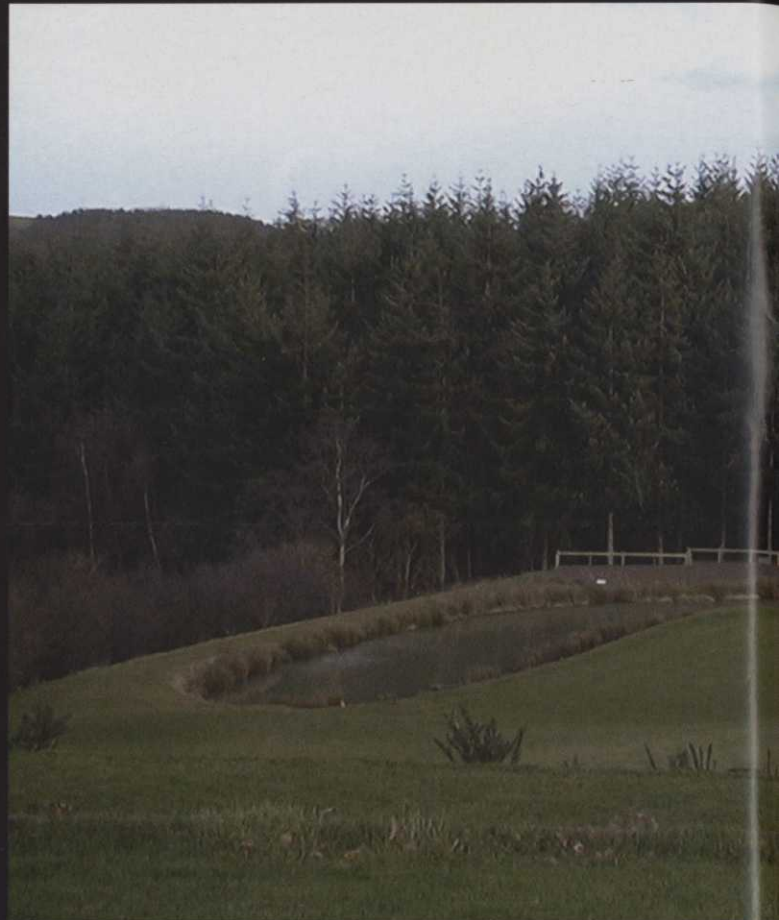
"We looked at the Demand for Golf report and, although it had its limitations, it made a point that was relatively valid," said Graham, referring to the report's call for more golf courses throughout the country.

The brothers identified a gap in the market between the multi-million pound projects that were being built around the time and the traditional members clubs where membership was given only after a, sometimes intimidating, interview with the committee.

"We suspected that the long term future of golf is in the mid market level - a guy, with a wife, a couple of kids, a mortgage and a reasonably good job and who is looking to take up golf after having played rugby, cricket or football. He's looking for a sensibly priced product but a good quality golf course."

Having made this decision the Pains approached the local planner and asked about the feasibility of building a golf course at Cleobury Mortimer.

"The head planning officer advised us to contact the English Golf Union



Clockwise from above: The 6th on the Badger's Sett nine

Cleobury's tribute to Payne Stewart crafted by a local blacksmith and mounted on an old tree stump

The attractive course markers hewn from local timber

Below: Brothers, Graham and Robert Pain



and we got in contact with their local man, Ray Baldwin. That advice saved us spending a fortune on a planning application which could have been thrown out," revealed Robert.

Ray steered the project through its various phases, designing the first, and subsequent two other nines himself, introducing the brothers to the STRI, who, through Andy Cole, assisted with the construction criteria, and English Nature to guide them through the environmental issues.

The brothers also took a decision to use local contractors wherever possible on the construction of the course and this bore fruit particularly when it came to the drainage of the courses.

"They were a father and son company with huge experience going back to the 50s and 60s when there was a lot of grant available for drainage work. Their knowledge was stunning," said Robert.

"When we built the irrigation lake, for example, we asked them to dig us the biggest hole they could for the money available. The son started at 5am on the Saturday morning and worked for a whole week then called me to check his levels. I went round the face of the dam - it covered three acres to hold five million gallons and he'd done it by eye - and he was half an inch out. He was furious because he thought he'd got it spot on," said Graham.

That irrigation lake was an example of how looking into the future and making provision in the present has served them well.

"Water is the most precious asset any of us will have in the next ten or 20 years and it is going to be very difficult to manage. So we bit the bullet right at the very beginning when we decid-

ed to put in the lake as well as a bore hole, for which we obtained a licence to pump all through the summer. That will cover all our water needs come what may. Having said that it really was something we'd rather not have spent our money on at that stage, but we felt it was a long term investment," said Graham.

They also insisted on putting in two main drains 15 metres apart and 18 inches down along the entire length of each fairway on all three of the loops.

"That was our infrastructure and although you could say it was wasteful it meant that we knew what we'd got," explained Graham.

"Since then we've put in open ditches around the boundaries of the course to get the water away," added Robert.

Perryfields provided the seed that was used for the course with the greens on the first nine turfed and the other two seeded.

"We went for turf because we needed to get the first nine open to bring in some revenue but every loop was in play within 12 months of construction starting," said Robert.

"In any case, the best thing for a green is to get some size 10s on it," he added.

The first nine opened in July '93 with 202 members with the second nine opening in '95 by which time the membership had risen to 500.

The opportunity to build the third nine came with the chance to buy another 50 acres of land in 1997.

"Deciding to go to 27 holes was purely down to commercial reality. We didn't want to get away from our philosophy of affordable golf for the ordinary guy on a quality facility but in order to satisfy those demands we had to have a lot of pay and play, societies and



corporate days," explained Graham. "You can only do so much on 18 holes, particularly on your prime days of Saturday and Sunday when you can charge more, and we were becoming victims of our own success - people wanted to play but couldn't get a tee time," he admitted.

The extra nine holes solved that problem as demonstrated by a recent Mixed Open when over 200 players competed while at the same time the weekend regulars were enjoying their own round - all playing 18 different holes and filtering round each other.

The transition from farmer to greenkeeper has been accomplished with great aplomb by Robert who now freely admits there is nothing better than being out working on the course in the summer dressed in shorts.

"A lot of it is not that different from agriculture and involves knowing the soil, but attention to detail is important and not being frightened to ask. We have always sought out unbiased advice," he explained.

The pointed is followed up by Graham.

"Also not being afraid to learn from your mistakes. We've all dropped tremendous clangers but we have always, and also told our staff, owned up to it and be open about it. That way we all learn."

The working patterns of Graham and Robert have worked well when it comes to building relations with the membership.

The brothers place great store in their availability to the membership and believe it has earned them respect.

"They see Robert, who owns half the business, cutting rough or me pulling pints behind the bar and know we are



prepared to roll up our sleeves and get on with it," said Graham.

"I'm in the clubhouse in the morning for my breakfast and Graham at the other end of the day and people ask us questions and make suggestions.

We can also defuse things. They know that we listen and that we can sanctions things to be done rather than wait and have a committee decide on them," said Robert.

It is a point that Graham is eager to take on.

"The great thing about running a golf course in our situation is that we have the power to make a difference and this

is brought home when we meet golf club secretaries. We don't have many levels of management as our staff are empowered to make decisions as well."

Having seen many golf courses built in the 90s in the hands of receivers and have multiple changes of ownership Graham and Robert have received much acclaim for having undertaken the project the correct way - staging the development and not over stretching themselves.

"It makes us laugh because we did it the way we did because we didn't have the finance to do it any other

way. We had security because we owned land and the banks knew us but we always tried to be modest with what we were trying to achieve.

"It is a long term investment. I'm 40, Robert's 42 and we've got a lovely asset out there, on a stunning piece of real estate, which can give us a return in the long term and a reasonable standard of living in the mean time. There isn't a lot more you could want out of life," said Graham.

To use a dairy analogy from their previous lives, and without ever appearing smug, Robert and Graham are the cats who have got the cream.