

Just over three years ago, with the end of the millennium approaching fast, the members of Ross-on-Wye Golf Club, in Herefordshire, decided they needed to be prepared for the challenges that lay ahead and that they should approach the running of the club in a more business-like manner. It was decided to employ a new Course Manager to work alongside the existing Head Greenkeeper and the team. Scott MacCallum found out more...

Another level



Above: The mature trees belie the relatively youthful nature of the course

As then Chairman of Green, and now Club President, Tom Haskett, confessed that it did lead to a delicate situation, but the way the matter was handled has subsequently proved beneficial to everyone, with the club reaping the rewards.

"We came to the decision that we needed a Course Manager to take the club forward," said Tom, adding that they had been helped towards the decision by Jim Arthur, who was the club's agronomist at the time.

"Peter Kings, the Head Greenkeeper,

had been at the club for over 20 years and had worked closely with the Greens Committee on course matters but it was felt that a qualified Course Manager with new ideas could take the course to the next level in its development. We wanted someone to take it by the scruff of the neck and move it forward," recalled Tom.

This sensitive situation was handled impeccably by the club and Peter Kings himself, who appreciated the thinking behind the move.

"Before we advertised the post I

went to Peter and explained everything to him and how changes were going to be made at the club. I told him that his job was safe, as was his Club bungalow.

The man who was appointed was Jonathan Wood, 32, who until that point had been First Assistant at Enville GC.

"The first thing I did was to get to know the team and get them on my side and then started putting down policies," said Jonathan, in his quiet Midlands accent.



Above: The Ross on Wye Team: Course Manager, Jonathan Wood, Head Greenkeeper, Peter Kings, Robert Wilband, Alan Kings, Michael Dobson and Harvey Ryder

"I believe some people look at the position of the Course Manager and think he's a guy who sits behind a desk all day. I made it plain that I wanted to be a hands-on Course Manager and also get out on the course. They are a very established and committed staff and it would have been hard for them to see me come in, go straight into an office and control it all there but, on the other hand, there is going to be a certain amount of time needed to be given to office work."

What Jonathan could bring to the party, as well as greenkeeping knowledge to complement that of Peter and the team, was an ability to look at the wider picture and to plan for the medium and longer term.

"I investigate finance deals, such as the one which we have recently struck

with John Deere; changed the regime of the course to start an organics programme and have got the staff more involved in education and training," said Jonathan, who had been, and still is, a regular at BIGGA headquarters management training courses and he admits he was champing at the bit to put into practice the knowledge he had acquired.

He also put in place a proper health and safety policy, which made the staff more aware of good health and safety, adding a wash off area where the waste water drains into a septic tank which is then taken away.

Talking about his relationship with Peter Kings, Jonathan is delighted with the way it has worked out.

"Peter has been invaluable to me as his knowledge of the golf course is a great asset. Every time we've done

something new I've tried to involve the staff as much as possible. It shows the benefit of the path the club chose because they retained experience and I didn't have to start here from scratch.

The golf course, one of only a handful in Herefordshire, was built in two stages by C. K. Cotton, Henry's cousin. The first nine was constructed in 1964, the clubhouse a year later with the remaining nine holes being added in 1967.

"It was all done for a total cost of £42,000, including the clubhouse and car park," said Jonathan. "It's laughable when you think of the cost of a new course nowadays."

"People think the course is a lot older than it is because it was cut out of woodland and there are a lot of mature trees," he said.

While that is great for the golfer it does cause problems to the greenkeeping staff with submerged roots and air circulation problems.

"We still have roots coming to the surface which makes aeration difficult while we are currently solving a problem that was created when the course was constructed. A number of huge pits were dug when the course was built to bury all the stones, brash and cuttings and now as this has rotted down the pits are starting to sink so we've got pot holes in about four fairways.

"The 8th is the first one we've done and we shortened it to a par-3 for the duration. We dug it all out, put in new soil and turfing it. We will be doing this to the other fairways over the next few winters," explained Jonathan.

The damp winter Herefordshire





weather, coupled with the clay soil means that most construction work has to be started in September or wait until spring.

In his first season the club undertook a total bunker refurbishment, a project that had been in the offing prior to his arrival but it was an ideal opportunity for the new man to make a bit of a splash.

"The club uses Donald Steel as a course architect and he advised us on the new design for the new bunkers and Nigel Ealy, a golf course constructor, helped to build them," he explained.

"We took the old face off all the bunkers and redid them further away from the green because over the years they'd gradually got closer and closer to the greens because of the sand splash - we've only got 29 but we re-did them all in one hit."

In April 1999 we did our first drainage programme with M. J. Abbotts and this coming spring we are adding to that system with some more drainage work.

"The woodland programme has been continued and this will improve and maintain our existing woodland. This needs to be coppiced every 25 years so we cut them down just above root height and let the new growth come from the stump. We also planted something like 200 new trees and encouraged depth to the woodland by planting shrubs like spindle, holly and gilder rose," said Jonathan, who has hosted an Open days for members to look round the facility and gives talks to the lady members.

"It is my belief that the minute you stop improving a course is the first signs that you should start to move

on because the danger is that you stagnate. There has to be an enthusiasm to improve and move forward."

The organics programme that had been introduced has also shown good results.

"The year before I came they'd sprayed for Fusarium between 12 and 14 times. Since then we've done it once or twice a year.

"We tried it at my last club in my final year there and we saw significant improvements in disease resistance, a better root growth and a better top cover of grass.

"It's not just the organics programme, we've got to do more aeration and slit throughout the year. You've got to get the humus layer into the soil," he explained, adding that the organics programme is something he'd like to extend to the entire course.

"Although people will say organic fertiliser is a lot more expensive than chemical, mass produced fertiliser I find that it lasts a lot longer and you know what you are putting in. The benefits far outweigh the disadvantages and what we're spending on fertilisers we're saving on chemical applications," said Jonathan, who uses Amenity Land Services.

"Disease has been reduced, particularly with our air circulation problems. There is now perhaps only one green particularly susceptible to disease whereas before it was seven or eight."

The Ross-on-Wye maintenance facility is now awash with green and yellow kit, the result of the finance deal struck with John Deere dealer, Frank Sutton, of Raglan, in Monmouthshire.

"On our five year rolling replace-



Above: Some of the new John Deere kit at Ross-on-Wye

Right: Mike Keeling shakes hands with Jonathon Wood, as Tom Haskett looks on



Machinery Inventory

- 3 John Deere 220A Pedestrian Greens Mowers
- 1 John Deere 2500 Ride-on Greens Mower
- 2 John Deere 2653 Utility Mowers, 8 bladed
- 1 John Deere 3235 Fairway Mower 8 bladed
- 1 John Deere F1145 Rotary Mower with collector
- 1 John Deere Gator Turf
- 1 John Deere Pro Gator
- 2 John Deere 4500 Tractors one with 460 loader
- 1 Sonma High Tip Flail Collector 1.5 metre
- 1 Huxley Soil Retriever SR60
- 1 Risborough Sorrell Roller
- 1 Gambetti 350L Sprayer
- 1 Sisis Slitter

ment programme, which I introduced when I arrived, we were in line to replace some large pieces of machinery over the next couple of years which was going to be a fairly hefty outlay for the club. As a result I started to look down other avenues which included a finance deal.

"We'd already had a demo of a John Deere tractor and a fairway mower, along with other makes, and we liked the kit so I talked to our Frank Sutton local rep, Mike Keeling, about a package. Mike has been very helpful and informative since our first meeting.

"He came back with the basis of one based on replacing all our main mowing equipment, along with tractors

and utility vehicles and we presented this to the finance committee.

"They were favourable because they could see that we would replace the majority of our machinery for less than the capital outlay for the existing five year replacement programme. It worked out at around £30,000 a year all in for five years whereas our existing programme saw us spending £35,000 a year over the same period."

In total the club has about 10 new pieces of kit to go along with the John Deere hand mowers purchased the previous year.

"What I am impressed with more than anything is the training policy

and back-up of John Deere. The whole team has already had a day at the training facility in Langar learning about the equipment and every time a new piece gets delivered to us we get on-site training.

And training has become a watchword at the golf club for all six of the greenkeeping staff.

"Two others and myself will again be at BIGGA HOUSE for management courses later in the year while we also have a Modern Apprentice working towards his Level 2. I try to get training for everything whether it be health and safety or first aid," said Jonathan who did a three year block release course at Elmwood and who is looking to start a HND Distance learning course.

It all augers well for continuing improvements at Ross-on-Wye Golf Club who are certainly reaping the rewards of decisions taken three years ago and can now look forward to the new millennium with increasing confidence.