





Scott MacCallum meets Master Greenkeeper John Wells who has shown that with hard work and application, the limit of a greenkeeper's horizons might not be where he thinks they are...

Reach for the stars

When John Wells began his career as an apprentice greenkeeper at the age of 16 he might have been forgiven for letting his mind race on a few years to what the future might hold in store for him.

As a teenager with no qualifications, having enjoyed school's sporting opportunities more than the academic ones, the possibility of reaching the position of Head Greenkeeper was a long way off, but by transferring the dedication and application he had shown on the sporting field to his greenkeeping career, he was confident that he might just pull it off.

Well, within five years John was a Head Greenkeeper and as we sat in the majestic surroundings of the Brocket Hall Clubhouse I was facing John Wells, Master Greenkeeper, Estates Manager of Brocket Hall, International Ltd, a man in charge of two teams of eight greenkeepers, three gardeners, a forester and all the security of the 543 acre site which boasts two superb 18-hole courses - the second of which he project managed, a six hole par-3 course and three hole short game facility.

"My career should be a perfect message for everyone who thinks he is just an average greenkeeper. Unless you work hard and push yourself you have no idea how far you can get," said John, speaking as a man who has very definitely practised what he preached.

"I left school with no qualifications because I wanted to play a lot of sport at school at the expense of my education so I've done most of my learning since leaving school," he explained.

"I went to night school one night a

week to study Business Management Level 4 Greenkeeping and General Horticulture, with a lot of additional reading in between time but I did it as I felt that I had the ability to run a team out on the golf course but I didn't understand budgets or have a lot of the management skills. When I worked for my Master Greenkeeper certificate there was also an awful lot of work outside my normal working hours.

"It is one step at a time. You have to go to look at what you want to become and then look at what you need to become that person," added John, who moved to Brocket Hall in 1992 having previously been Head Greenkeeper at nearby Welwyn Golf Club.

"A career is all about gradual progression and I can assure you it is not handed to you on a plate. It is something you have to work hard towards. It can start, as it did with me at the age of 16, just by proving your worth to the Head Greenkeeper and working hard, being conscientious and reliable. As you move on opportunities will arise to advance within the team," explained John, who added that reading magazine articles and bothering older greenkeepers for information will show a keenness and assist up the first rungs of the ladder.

"From there on get involved in BIG-GA, go to conferences and seminars and take what you learn back to your golf club. It is a form of progression. I didn't say at the age of 16 that I wanted to be an Estates Manager on a prestigious estate by the time I'd got to 40, but I took one step at a time and my career developed.

"As soon as you reach one level in your career you should be looking to get more information to develop on to the next level. I'm learning all the time and, with this new job I'm on a steep learning curve."

Having moved from a members' club to a larger proprietary operation where he has flourished John is well placed to comment on the differences between the two styles of club.

"I think one of the saddest things about greenkeeping is that there are a lot of talented greenkeepers running members' golf clubs who are not being allowed to develop fully as professionals.

"A lot of clubs don't hold their greenkeeper in high enough esteem for him to be respected by the people around him. If the greenkeeper was portrayed as a skilled professional the members would listen more and understand that a lot of the problems the greenkeeper is dealing with are inherited, the result of poor choice of materials or poor construction from many years before. The greenkeeper is therefore trying to put right problems many of which may have begun before his arrival at the club," said John.

He compared the role of the greenkeeper to that of the club professional, who is invariably held in high esteem at the golf club and judged on what competitions he has won or that he once qualified for The Open.

"The pro is often judged on how good he is at golf but that doesn't mean he will make a good teacher or run a good shop. A greenkeeper is always judged and often put down but ultimately he is more important than

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Machinery Inventory

- 5 Allen Hovers
- 2 Allen National 68
- 1 Allen National 84
- 5 Allen Pro26 Strimmers
- 1 Billy Goat Truckloader
- 1 Bomford Bandit
- 1 Coremaster 12
- 2 Cushman Truckster 4 wheel
- 1 Cushman Topdresser
- 1 Cushman Turf Truck (Diesel)
- 1 Dowdesell Roller Mower
- 2 Ez-go Workhorses
- 1 Hardi Sprayer
- 1 Hayter Harrier
- 2 Hayter Jubilee No 1
- 1 Iseki TA45
- 1 Iseki TA 160
- 3 Jacobsen Greensking V
- 1 Jacobsen Smithco Sand Rake
- 1 John Deere 1200A Bunker Rake
- 1 John Deere 1500 Aercore Aerator
- 7 John Deere 220A
- 3 John Deere 2653A
- 2 John Deere 3235A
- 1 John Deere 4400
- 1 C/W 72 cutter deck
- 1 John Deere 5300
- 2 John Deere F1145
- 4 John Deere Gator Diesel
- 3 John Deere Gator
- 1 Kubota 3250 4-wheel drive
- 1 Front Loader
- 1 Back Hoe
- 1 Kuhn Rotovator E L 35
- 1 Little Wonder
- 1 Massey Ferguson 20
- 1 Massey Ferguson 240
- 1 Ransomes 350D (2WD)
- 1 Ransomes Hydraulic 5s
- 7 Ransomes Marquis 51
- 4 Ransomes Super Certes 151
- 1 Roberine 500
- 1 Royer Soil Shredder
- 1 Ryan Ren-o-Thin
- 1 Sisis Twin Play
- 1 Sisis Ultra Tiner
- 1 Stihl Chainsaw
- 3 Stihl BR 400 Blower
- 2 Stihl BG75 Blower
- 4 Stihl Br 400 Blower
- 2 Tornado Blower
- 1 Victor 403 Spreader
- 1 Wiedenman Terra Spike
- 2 Yamaha YFU ITW
- 1 Zetor 5245 (4WD)



the golf professional to the success of the business."

John did accept, however, that the situation has improved over the last 10 years and that now, at least, the majority of Head Greenkeepers at 18-hole members clubs have use of a company vehicle whereas a decade ago the figure was more like 10%.

"The portrayal of the greenkeeper's job has risen but still it nowhere near reflects the importance of the job he does."

Having spent 25 years in greenkeeping, and now having responsibility for 45 holes plus all the additional Brocket Hall Estate John has developed planning skills to ease the way towards a smooth running operation.

"From a practical point of view being a good forward planner is a huge advantage. The Course Development Plan is something which often catches out Master Greenkeeper candidates, I know it did me. We have five year machinery plans so why not have a five year course development plan?"

"Courses are judged by existing Master Greenkeepers so, when Gordon Irvine came and failed me on the golf course, my first reaction was to resent him, my second was to sit down and work on the areas on which I'd failed and my third was to realise just how much better a greenkeeper it was going to make me by doing these things."

To highlight the point he explained how his plan for the two courses worked.

"I have a plan for the whole year from week one to week 52 and I plan in each job that has to be done, with some spare columns to give flexibility. For example I might plan to put some fertiliser on in week 11, but it might end up going on in week 13 because of a cold wet spell, or it might be week 10 because we've hit a nice mild week and you know in greenkeeping that it's the right thing to do.

"Formulating the plan helps me to know when we have to bring our products on site so we don't have a shed full of materials sitting waiting to be used."

Also included in this plan are the heights and frequency of cut.

"I do my soil tests in November and do the plans for both the Melbourne and Palmerston courses in December.

Once I've organised the fertiliser programme I work out when all the other jobs are going on - the scarifying, the brushing, the hollow tining, top dressing etc. Bunker renovation work is also planned in for the last week in February, beginning of March where we edge the bunkers, check sand levels and getting everything in good shape for the start of the season.

With such a big combined team, operating under Head Greenkeepers John Moorhouse, who is also John's Deputy, and Mark Jennings communication is vital to ensure smooth running.

"Every morning we have a briefing where the day's jobs are handed out while every month we have a meeting where I talk about what is going on within the company as a whole. John will then report on the Melbourne Course; Mark, on the Palmerston; the Head Gardener, on the gardens; there will be a report on all the projects going on on the estate and one of the team will talk about what he has planned for the social side.

"Every two or three months we all go and do something while twice a year the company run something for the 150 employees. This tends to be an annual party which we have in early January and then in late summer when we have an activity day on the Estate," said John.

In addition the staff play 16 aside golf matches against both the men and lady members which is a great way to build





relationships with the members.

Brocket Hall has a history as illustrious as any stately home in the country. The first record of the house goes back to the 13th century and it was named Brocket Hall in 1440. It was the home of two serving Prime Ministers, Lord Melbourne and Lord Palmerston in the 19th century.

Golf became a part of the Hall when Lord Brocket decided that it was an ideal way for the estate to earn its keep and the first course, the Melbourne, designed by Peter Alliss and Clive Clark was opened in '91. Plans for the second course were put to one side while the future of the Estate was decided and moved forward when the current owners CCA International bought the lease for the Estate in '96.

The Palmerston Course was designed by Donald Steele and opened by Dame Kiri Te Kanawa in June last year.

The mid '90s uncertainty was obviously unsettling for anyone connected with Brocket Hall and Lord MacLaurin, currently Chairman of the England and Wales Cricket Board, was appointed Chairman of Brocket Hall Ltd to look after the interests of the members and staff.

"When any course goes through troubled times and take over is talked about the greenkeeper always feels very vulnerable but in most cases it is the greenkeeping team which is safest. When new management take over they often see that it is the greenkeeping team which is very well organised and very

adaptable and it is the greenkeeping team which is required to lift the golf course. It is more likely to be the finance and marketing departments which are vulnerable."

He added however that hopes that, after working on a shoe string for an extended period, that money would be lavished on the golf course were rarely fulfilled.

"The new company will take a look at the place and you've got to prove to them that you are the right guy to develop the site and you have to put in place the reasons why you feel investment is required, often providing leasing options for consideration," said John, who often looks to purchase second hand machin-

ery to make the budget go further.

It was since the new owners arrival that John has really flourished, being Project Manager for the new course and working closely with Donald Steele, who was chosen from a short list of five architects because he was considered most suitable to work with chosen tract of land, to produce a course that has received acclaim from all quarters.

"The whole project went very smoothly and we came in just under the original budget cost," said John, who has fond memories of watching Donald plot the route through dense forest.

As we concluded the interview and John prepared for another meeting he added.

"I'd like to finish off by saying to every greenkeeper out there. Don't get comfortable with your lot, try to push yourselves because although a lot of hard work is needed, there is an awful lot of enjoyment. Never rest on your laurels, keep driving and see how far you can take it because the rewards are out there.

"I now get trips abroad, assessing other courses the company is involved with, and that is a great fun as well as a great education for me.

"One of the professions biggest mistakes is to think that once we've reached a certain level we've gone as far as we are going to get."