

York Golf Club faced up to the worst weather conditions for 400 years but still completed the most successful project in the club's long history. Scott MacCallum paid the team a visit.

Reigning in the Rain



The abiding memory for many of the latter part of last year and the beginning of this was the horrendous weather - records set for consecutive days of rain, scenes of people perched on roofs as homes were

flooded and all sorts of chaos for people attempting to travel from A to B.

Golf also took a hammering. Courses were closed for weeks, if not months, on end with some more suited to Cowes week than the Royal and Ancient game.

Among the worst areas hit was York.

The ancient city appeared in the national headlines having battled against the worst flooding to hit for 400 years and only sterling work by the army, who built sand bag barricades along the sides of the river Ouse, prevented a much greater disaster.

While all this was going on the green staff at York Golf Club, located in the village of Strensall a few miles north of the city, were embarking upon the largest in-house course reconstruction programme in the club's history. In succeeding they could certainly be said to have "reigned in the rain".

In what is likely to be a two stage two year programme all 51 bunkers on the course are being redesigned and rebuilt to wipe out what has long been regarded as the course's weakest link.

"We have a great golf course but probably the worst feature of it over the years has been the bunkers," explained Howard Stephenson, who made it his mission to improve matters when he became Chairman of Green last April.

"They used to become silted up



Above: (l-r) Michael Rogers, Chris Martin and Howard Stephenson

Right: The team with their John Deere kit



and get very wet and in truth were not particularly good. When I took over as Chairman of Green I felt that it was something with which we could make an impact on the course," he explained, as we, together with Head Greenkeeper, Chris Martin, and Deputy, Michael Rogers, sat in the attractive well appointed clubhouse.

The Greens Committee met out on the course and agreed that the bunkers should be the main priority and that as well as rebuilding and designing them re positioning and draining should take place wherever necessary.

Howard's enthusiasm for the project was matched by that of the team who saw it as something really to get their teeth into.

"We talked about it between ourselves and, although we set ourselves some pretty stiff targets, we all felt that it was doable and that we would just crack on," explained Chris.

The aim for this winter was to do 25 greenside bunkers, which they deemed to be the most important, with 15 of those done by

Christmas...just around the time that the heaven's opened!

"The flooding affected us quite a lot because we'd planned to do certain areas which we couldn't get to and had to change our programme to suit. We bought sheets of board and laid these down to prevent wear and tear and have been very careful around the areas of the green," said Chris.

In the six weeks before Christmas the course was only open for around a week but, while this was unfortunate for the members, the upside was that the team could work with very little disruption. In fact the entire 4th fairway was under two feet of water which is unheard of for the course.

"It stayed for days then just began to recede when we'd have another downpour and it would all come back again," said Chris.

"We bought a pump to pump some of the water away and it's proved a very useful tool," added Michael, who joined the club from Royal St George's last year.

"It can pump 60-70,000 gallons an

hour and there are certainly jobs we wouldn't have been able to do without the pump."

Michael's role was that of project co-ordinator with responsibility for selecting the sand and he ensured a large number were examined before the decision on the final one was taken.

"The sand was the starting point. It was the thing we had to get right so took advice from Stuart Ormondroyd, at Bingley, and sent samples across for analysis. The recommendation was Nottingham - Number 6 which is a sort of tan colour with black specs which we think will fit in well," revealed Michael, who added that previously the sand was of an orange hue.

"As luck would have it Sandmoor in Leeds had started to use the same sand so we went across one morning to take a look. The greenkeeper there was extremely happy with it," explained Michael.

With the sand decided upon the next task for Chris and the team was to plan the practicalities of the job -

the hiring of the plant; the cost of the gravel; blinding layers and drainage pipes and to ensure that timings were all agreed.

"It was difficult to work out volumes required exactly until we started the job but we knew a certain amount of materials that we'd need so we got them in before we started and they as soon as materials became low we ordered more," said Chris.

"We are very fortunate in so much as we have some excellent suppliers, who we can ring up in the morning and the material is there in the afternoon. It means that the work never stops and the worst scenario is overnight for virtually anything," explained Chris, who said that they used Greenpride for rootzone, JH Walker & Co for gravel and blinding layer sand and Lindum for turf. The club also struck up a good relationship with the plant hire company who allowed them to take machinery on a long term loan basis.

The first bunkers to be tackled were those surrounding the 9th green, a

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Equipment Inventory

- 2 John Deere 2243
- John Deere 2653
- John Deere 955 with front loader
- John Deere 365 Trailed hydraulic
- John Deere 455 Bunker rake
- John Deere Aerocore
- 6x4 Gator
- Iseki 4270 tractor
- Richard Long versatile
- Richard Long top dresser
- SISIS Technicore
- SISIS Slitter
- Thatchaway Units
- Hardi Spray Unit
- Tornado Blower
- Cushman



Far page: One of the new bunkers complete with steps

Above: Bunker drainage going in

Above right: Another fine example

venue located a mere 100 yards from the team's base. However, while that may have been the plus of the chosen debut site, the inherent problems involved in the 9th hole made it anything but the ideal starting point.

"We picked the 9th because it was close and we could waste very little time toing and froing and because there was a decent temporary green and we could take the whole thing out of play," explained Chris. However....

"Drainage was the main problem. We were not sure where the outlet pipes would be but luckily we found a concrete chamber which gave us a good depth for an outlet pipe. We traced this through the trees releas-

ing blockages as we went before we could even start the bunkers," added Chris.

Once they had overcome the initial problems the team set about planning the location and shape on the new bunkers.

"Looking back, knowing then what we know now, Chris probably wouldn't have started on the 9th but on the other hand we learned so much so quickly and the team developed so many skills it was probably a good move," said Howard.

"I see it for a slightly different perspective as they probably don't see how their performance has improved as much as I do. In the early work they may have been a little tentative about doing certain things whereas now everyone is tuned into what we are trying to do and everyone is

much more confident in taking things on himself."

It is a point which Michael elaborates upon.

"Initially we'd get everyone's opinion before me moved on and we'd perhaps have too many people on the job at the one time but we've learned from that now," he said.

While always working to a plan a little bit of license because they were aware that things could change depending upon the conditions they met when they started work.

It took them three to four weeks to complete the work on the 9th hole as they took their time to ensure they got it right but now, having this experience under their belts they have speeded up and the shaping is achieved which much more ease.

If a nagging doubt about having



bitten off more than they could chew entered Chris' mind it didn't show.

"If it had come to the point where we felt we were pushing ourselves too much we'd have eased off and slowed down a bit...but it never came to that," he said.

Members were kept informed via regular newsletters and the feedback has been very positive.

"We hope the members will be pleased with all the work we've done this winter," said Chris.

For construction work that has been carried out by the greenkeeping team, being maintenance friendly has not been at the forefront of their mind, although after the first year it should be more easy to maintain.

"There will be more fly mowing while the turf is given a chance to knit but there is a lot more character

to the bunkers now than before when they could be said to have been too symmetrical," said Chris.

The team has also taken the opportunity to improve other hump and hollow areas surrounding the greens and bit in additional drainage where required.

Having achieved their pre Christmas target of 15 the team are well on their way to hitting the winter programme target of another 10 and with each member of the team becoming a specialist in a particular area the skills they have acquired will stand them in good stead for years to come.

The second phase will begin in September of this year while some of the fairway bunkers, because of their size, might well stretch into a third winter.

By the end something will have been done to every one of the club's bunkers whether it be the installation of drainage or a bit of reshaping.

"Alan Coates is our main man on the digger; Robert Pilgrim is the drainage king, only happy if he's up to his waist in water; Philip Bradley is our turfing and shaping man while apprentice Alastair Bolch can turn his hand to most things. It's a team effort and it can't be done without the work of the individuals," said Howard, who oozes pride in the work of his team.

"It is one of the most successful projects the club has ever undertaken...it is certainly the biggest," he added.

York Golf Club is extremely proud of its status as one of the best courses in Yorkshire and to maintain that

position huge investment is made on giving the greenkeeping team the tools to do the job. This is illustrated by the modern John Deere kit which fills the maintenance facility.

"We are always looking for ways to improve and that includes our machinery fleet," explained Howard.

"We are all about best practice and if we find someone doing something better than us we'll take it on board. We're happy to nick ideas and hopefully people will do the same with our ideas," he explained.

While it has been the York weather that has hit the headlines over the last few months it perhaps more fittingly should be the work of the hard working and dedicated York Golf Club team who have triumphed in those difficult times.