

Jeremy Pilcher, Course Manager at Copt Heath Golf Club in Solihull, describes the background and work that went into producing their superb new greenkeeping facility...

Top of the Copts



Copt Heath Golf Club was formed in 1907, with the great Harry Vardon invited to contribute towards the laying out of the 18-hole course. In 1912 Harry Colt, the prominent golf course architect, made an inspection of the course and advised on what could be done to develop the existing layout. Over the next 20 years he would return to Copt Heath on several occasions to upgrade and improve on the layout.

Following the war, during which land was used for farming purposes, the firm of F G Hawtree and Son was given the job of reconstructing the course.

In 1934 an opportunity to purchase Longdon Hall and its farm with 91 acres arose, this land adjoined the golf course and a decision was made to pro-

ceed with the purchase. Sometime in the mid 60s a milking parlour that had served the farm was converted to be used for greenkeeping use.

Over the next 35 years or so this building remained little changed, and during that time housed the greenkeepers and their machinery in increasing discomfort.

During 1998 two things happened, one was the club decided that new greenkeeping facilities were overdue and the second was a new Course Manager was appointed.

The latter half of 1998 an architect was appointed to design with the help and input of the greenstaff a completely new greenkeeping building that would meet our requirements for many years to come.

The siting of new buildings can often be a difficult decision, in our case we were already well situated with our present building as it sits almost in the middle of the course.

As things turned out our new building was actually erected just two metres from the end of the existing building.

The initial drawings produced by the architect were based upon what we thought would be the most practical use of space and movement in and out of the building.

This resulted in a building approximately 30m x 30m in total with a block

constructed of brick attached to one end which would house such things as an office, mess room and shower/drying room.

The main building would be constructed of brick and cladding over a steel frame. From our point of view this would be a very practical building and would easily house our machinery plus allow some expansion room for additional machinery. It would allow space for a fully equipped workshop and stores room.

Looking back we may have been a bit naive to think that the local planning office would allow such a building on what is greenbelt land and within the vicinity of Longdon Hall which by this time had acquired a Grade 2 listing.

However, the plan was submitted in December 1998, the planning office advised the architect that if the plans were to come before the planning meeting in January they would be turned down.

The club withdrew this application thereby saving the application fee which exceeded £2,000. Following extensive talks between the architect the club and planning officials guidelines were drawn up as to what the council would allow in terms of size of the building, the materials and the design of the building.

What planning officers had in mind was very far removed from our original ideas, they wanted to see something that when finished would resemble a group of farm buildings or stables, that in many ways would resemble the nearby barns and out-buildings attached to Longdon Hall. The materials specified were to include such things as a mixture of slate and tiles for the roofing and the bulk of the building to be constructed of brick that would closely match the brick of Longdon Hall.

As all this was going on we were still working out of the old milking parlour and preparing the course for such

Below: The new maintenance facilities were designed to blend sympathetically to the surrounding buildings of Longdon Hall, and were fashioned on old stable blocks



Right: Spacious storage areas mean all the equipment can be housed in a tidy fashion

Below: Building from scratch enables the inclusion of 'wish-list' items like this machinery lift



things as The Peter McEvoy Trophy and holding the Regional Qualifying Round for The Open Championship.

In the summer of 1999 Jim Tomkins, the architect, came back to us with his interpretation of the planners guidelines. The transformation was stunning! We now had before us a design showing a group of buildings around a courtyard, just as you might find on a farm or at a stables. Because of the design, some space had been lost, but after careful consideration we came to the conclusion that the overall design and the much improved prospects of obtaining planning permission made it a worthwhile sacrifice.

At this stage I would like to point out that at no time did the golf club put restrictions on our relationship with the architect, he always approached the greenstaff with any designs and drawing which were then left with us to consider, and if needed we then added our suggestions which would then be incorporated into the design.

After lengthy consideration and consultations with the planning officer the golf club agreed to submit the much revised design and apply for full planning permission.

The planning sub committee met on August 9, 1999, our concerns were misplaced, the design went through without comment, we now had our much prized planning permission. The next stage was to prepare detailed drawings and submit these to the contractors that had been chosen to tender.

In the meantime a builder's estimate was obtained to give a general idea of costings. This appeared to be within our budget.

Structural Engineers appeared on site along with landscape designers things seemed to be going along at a good pace, building work was expected to be started in October of 1999 with a completion around March 2000 in readiness for the new season.

October came and went then the wet weather started, other delays included such things as detail design and approval of drainage both foul and rainwater, the regulations and laws concerning the installation of fuel tanks in the ground.

Eventually tenders were sent out to four contractors including the one who had submitted the builders estimate, they were received back after a period of four weeks and duly examined by the architect. Winter was giving way to Spring and a start in the summer now seemed favourable. Out of the four tenders only one was within the anticipated cost range, strangely the contractor who has submitted the original builder's estimate now submitted the second highest price.

As there was a considerable difference between the lowest tender and the other three some time had to be spent examining the reasons behind this.

Finally in April 2000 the general committee of the golf club took the decision to recommend that the club proceed with the contract and agree with the main contractor a price and possible dates for starting the work.

To ensure that the members of Copt Heath were kept informed of developments we arranged to hold two open evenings in the committee room where, we made available full colour drawings of the buildings and in attendance was members of the committee and myself as well as the architect.

Contracts were signed on May 18, 2000 a start was made on June 19, 2000.

The summer of 2000 will be remembered as a wet and dull summer, although it did not cause many problems to the contractor some unforeseen difficulties did arise early on in construction with unstable ground conditions being encountered during the excavation of the foundations. This involved the importation of around

440 tonnes of stone in one day alone.

Site meetings were held every month so that any problems or queries could be aired, progress was checked at these meetings, which were attended by the chairman of the buildings and developments committee for the golf club, along with the architect and myself, the contractor was represented by his site manager and project director.

Thankfully the golf club readily accepted the need to change various things as the project was developing, for an example it soon became apparent that the three tonne capacity lift due to be installed in the workshop was not going to accept our fairway mower, a Toro 6700 due to the width of the units.

Consequently we upgraded this to four tonnes, giving not only a greater lift capacity, but also the required width to drive the machine onto the lift.

Another change that became apparent was the need to upgrade the heating system in the staff block, originally the specification called for a number of wall mounted electric heaters placed in the office, mess-room/kitchen and drying room.

I had always opposed these, favouring instead a oil fired central heating system, gas was never an option as we are some distance from the nearest gas supply.

The contractor supplied cost comparisons between the two heating systems, obviously the oil fired boiler system was more expensive to install but over a longer term would result in lower fuel bills.

Also it had the advantage of supplying hot water in unlimited quantities.

Security of the site was always going to be a problem, apart from London Hall the site is fairly remote, during the construction phase several attempts to break in to site cabins and storage areas took place, unfortunately this also bought unwanted attention to our existing greenkeeping building.

One incident that could have been far more serious occurred one weekend, two youths obtained the key to a rough terrain fork lift truck. After breaking their way out of the compound, they decided on a quick tour of the golf course via several greens.

After being spotted by a member who then gave chase, they abandoned ship, only to be apprehended by another member whose house overlooks the course.

The club after due consideration decided not to press charges, a decision also taken by the contractor.

These incidents did in no way hamper construction and as the end of October approached the building was nearing completion.

With the arrival of Autumn most of you will remember that signalled the start of the wettest autumn on record, this affected the final stages of construction to the extent that the underground petrol and diesel tanks due to be installed have had to be temporarily postponed.

Also a new access road that has been partially constructed has had to be postponed. As I write this in February, these and the landscaping of the grounds still await completion.

Putting those aside, we have now a superb building which houses all the equipment and staff in very comfortable and secure premises.

The time taken in the planning and development stage along with the input of all the green staff has paid off, we have ended up with a building to be proud of

Looking back the planning officials actually did us a favour in respect of rejecting the first design, as we now have a building that looks far better than we could ever have imagined, and with the use of materials probably far more in keeping with our surrounds and probably far more durable in the long term.