



# MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Scott MacCallum met up with Mike Smith, who accepted an assignment which would have scared off many, but what he and the Donnington Valley team have since done shows just what can be achieved with hard work and ingenuity.

Imagine a situation where your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to design and build a golf course on the site of an existing course; where you undertake the job in-house; oh yes, and the existing golf course remains open while the new course is being built. Sound a tall order? Well that's exactly what Mike Smith and his team at Donnington Valley, in Newbury, have recently accomplished.





Previous Page. One of the huge reservoirs under construction

Right: Andy Burnham installs a new sprinkler head

Above right. The magnificent double 9th and 18th green

Below: Mike Smith and Andy Burnham

Bottom. The Donnington Valley Clubhouse



Mike, who had already designed several golf courses, took on the assignment in 1997 when it was decided that the original 18 hole course did not match the standard of the four star Donnington Valley Hotel and sister five star Vineyard at Stockcross Hotel, which also boasts a Michelin Star Restaurant. The two hotels and course are owned by Sir Peter Michael, a successful entrepreneur, who is the Chairman of Classic FM and who owns a renowned vineyard in California which produces some of the finest wine in the world.

"He is not a golfer and was more interested in buying the hotels than the fact that they also came with a golf course but was keen that the

course should be up to the standard of everything else he is involved with," explained Mike.

The original lay-out was basic. Aimed at, and popular with, the new golfer. It had greens cut out of the hill, straight fairway and few bunkers.

Acting Head Greenkeeper at this time was Andy Burnham, who had worked at the course since the day after his 16th birthday, and who had been promoted to the acting role when he was 19. When Mike arrived one of his first decisions was to confirm Andy, then 21, as Head Greenkeeper.

"Andy had the responsibility for the day to day running of the golf course while I spent from April to July designing the new course over the existing ground and some adjoining parcels of land which had been purchased with the new improved course in mind," explained Mike, although both were heavily involved in the actual construction of the course.

Throughout the construction stage Mike and Andy tried to keep as many holes open as they possibly could to give the members something to play while at the same time constructing the course.

"We managed to give them 18 holes for the vast majority of the time, although we did drop to 15 for a while, and 11 for about a week, when we put in the last three holes - the new 12th, 13th and 14th."

This plan, while placating members during a difficult time, caused innumerable complications while building the new course.



Although it was not how he would have done the job in the ideal world Mike had actually been instrumental in the decision to keep the course open.

"I was asked what the best way of doing it was and I said that if we kept it open we could still generate half a million in revenue each year by giving members a course to play as well as keeping up their interest. Had we shut for two years they might have found somewhere else to play and not come back," he explained.

What it meant was that while the course was under construction they still had to access established greens so they could be cut.

"We would have to put boards over for members so they could walk over the mud," recalled Andy.

They had hosted a members' meeting at which they explained what was going to be happening and how it would effect their golf.

"About 120 members turned up and Andy was thrown in at the deep end as I gave him grasses to talk about. I wanted the members to realise how big a part he was playing in the project. It was an excellent meeting, we cut cores and put them behind glass to show how the greens were to be





constructed and told them that the expected time frame for the job would be two years," said Mike.

"For the first 18 months I attended every committee meeting, gave them a progress report and told them what course they would have for the next few months. As we brought new holes into play and removed the old the par was steadily going up from 61 to 63 to 65 etc"

However, after the first 18 months it became obvious that the two year deadline would not be met and patience, among the membership, began to wear a little thin. Mike explained to Sir Peter that you couldn't be three months or six months behind when you build a golf course, you were either a season behind or you weren't.

"We accepted the fact that the job would take three years to complete and not two. We were facing many problems for the first time and trying to keep one course going as we built another on the same site caused more problems than we perhaps envisaged," said Mike, who added that the weather was not helping either.

Andy chipped in.

"We took on three or four extra guys but occasionally we'd have to take

everyone off construction because the grass on the course was getting so high while we'd have to put extra people on course preparation when there was a competition coming up."

Oh yes. Another little complication. Right behind the course is Snelesmore Common, home of the infamous Newbury By-Pass protesters, Swampy et al, who did their bit to slow down proceedings.

"They took tarpaulins and rope, dug up the 4th green and put top dressing in our fuel tanks," said Andy, who also recalls an amusing scene when a water cannon was used to try to remove a naked man from a tree.

"He was hanging on for dear life," he said, smiling at the memory.

Carrying out construction work while golfers plied their trade just a few yards away also had another downside.

"It meant we couldn't hide our mistakes. When we did everyone could see it, and we were not in a position to close the door and say that they wouldn't see anything until it was finished."

Mike and Andy freely admit that they made mistakes but are equally free in admitting that they learned from each and every one.





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Right. The final green laid which burnt up under a strong sun initially was to come back strong later



## Mike Smith

Mike Smith has a unique set of talents. He is a former draftsman, who worked in the North Sea Gas fields producing cartography and seismic maps but was also a talented golfer playing off 1 and representing Perthshire Boys.

Bored with life in London, and seeing his golfing ability diminishing he returned home and a job at Dunblane Golf Club.

"The Captain sent me to Elmwood where I was in the same class as Laurence Pitthie."

When the previous Head Greenkeeper/Pro left, Mike became Head Greenkeeper at Dunblane and he remained there until Lord Morton asked him to take over at the 36 hole country club at Dalmahoy.

"We'd already agreed to take the European Matchplay Championship the following year but the thatch of the greens would have sucked your golf shoes off. In 1977 I believe I bought the first Cushman in the country for £5,500, put a Greensaver on the back of it and piled sand into the greens until the greens were firm, fast and good to putt on and I got some lovely comments from Tommy Horton and Bernard Gallacher among others." He left Dalmahoy shortly afterwards and moved to Littlestone GC and then Bush Hill Park when he got the chance to design three golf courses in Southend which, due to a downturn in the climate, ultimately didn't get built. The first course he designed to be actually built was Lydd on Romney Marshes and his name is listed as architect in the R&A Golfers Handbook on the same page as the likes of James Braid, Henry Cotton, Donald Steel, Alistair Mackenzie and Jack Nicklaus.

Since then he has designed courses on Wincanton Racecourse, Newbury Racecourse, the Strand Leisure Centre, in Gillingham, as well as Donnington Valley while he has another six hole academy currently under construction.

"To have had one 18 hole course actually built is a wonderful feeling but to have done six courses is great."

"When the first load of root zone arrived for the double 9th and 18th green, one of two double greens on the course, we thought there was something wrong with it and we should have stopped but we carried on and when it was all in and levelled off it looked great," explained Mike.

"But after a while it started to back off as the root zone had gone like concrete. It was totally the wrong spec. We tried to punch holes in it but to no avail so we ended up ripping up the green and doing it again having sought advice from Tim Banks, of Banks Amenity.

Another problem emerged when Mike and on site digger operator, Malcolm Cox, laid some irrigation piping.

"It was a lovely sunny day, Malcolm had trenched it all and we had laid out the four inch piping and put in the cables. We then left it open to fill the following day but the heat had expanded the piping and when we returned it had contracted leaving a four inch gap. We took it out and made sure the second time."

Andy also found himself "fire fighting" after they had turfed their final green, right in the middle of summer '99.

"We hadn't got the irrigation connected up to the green and when I came in on the Sunday morning the turfs were all curling up at the edges. I spent four hours hand hosing the green but it was just baking it," he explained.

"We decided to leave that green for a while and concentrate on areas which we wanted in play quicker but all the members could see the tram lines. They were telling us that we'd have to relay the green but Andy told them he would seed and irrigate, and together with picking the meadow grass out by hand on the bare patches, the green has come back well just as he said," said Mike.

The construction work involved everyone at the hotel as well as the golf club.



"We were digging our two reservoirs at the same time as building the course and used the earth from the holes to shape the course. We had one contractor digging and we had hotel kitchen porters, chefs and chamber maids driving diggers to move the earth around the site when Malcolm would do the shaping. It would never happen nowadays but they all loved it. They were out in the sun getting a sun tan," recalled Mike.

The reservoirs - one with a surface area of 2000 square metres of surface area four and a half metres deep and the other 1200 square metres also to a depth of four and a half metres.

One is two metres above the other with a waterfall connecting the two.

Slowly the course came together and the completed lay-out was played for the first time in May 2000 with the official opening - with the PGA South Region Donnington Valley Classic with ex Ryder Cup star Paul Way in the field - played last June.

Having safely emerged at the other side of a huge project both men can reflect on things they would do differently next time round.

"We turfed some of the greens before we did the aprons because we had to get the greens in play but then we had to marry the greens to the aprons which was difficult," said Andy.

"Another thing we would have done is built a concrete turning bay for lorries as access was extremely difficult. I remember having six lorries lined up a 6pm one day all desperate to unload so they could get home but they couldn't get onto the site."

Mike can reflect on how a more conventional design/build/grow-in would have made their lives so much easier.

"It would have been nice to have had unrestricted access to the entire site and to have done the job in one go. We could have ploughed the field, stone buried, harrowed, prepared for seeding, installed the irrigation, seeded, fertilised and waited to see it all come through," he said wistfully, while he is also well aware of the





inherent problems of turfing, rather than seeding, greens.

Asked if he was now bored having returned to pure greenkeeping rather than the exciting life of greenkeeper/constructor Andy is refreshingly honest.

"I was glad to get my golf course back. The old course wasn't the best in the world but I looked after it and it was my little baby. Then Mike came along and ripped it up. I was 19 and wondered what on earth he was doing. Then I realised what we were trying to achieve and it has turned out better than I'd hoped," said Andy.

I've learned so much during the last four years it's unbelievable."

Mike has now taken on the role of Director of Golf and is involved in all aspects of the golf related business but he is immensely proud of what he and his team of seven greenkeepers have achieved.

"It is a tough little lay-out - 6,354 yards off the back tees - with a tight back nine and the toughest closing four holes in the county," said Mike.

Donnington Valley is also unusual in that it has some magnificent sculpture displayed around the course.

"Sir Peter loves sculptures and pieces are often shipped from California

for display here. It adds a nice unique touch to the course," said Mike.

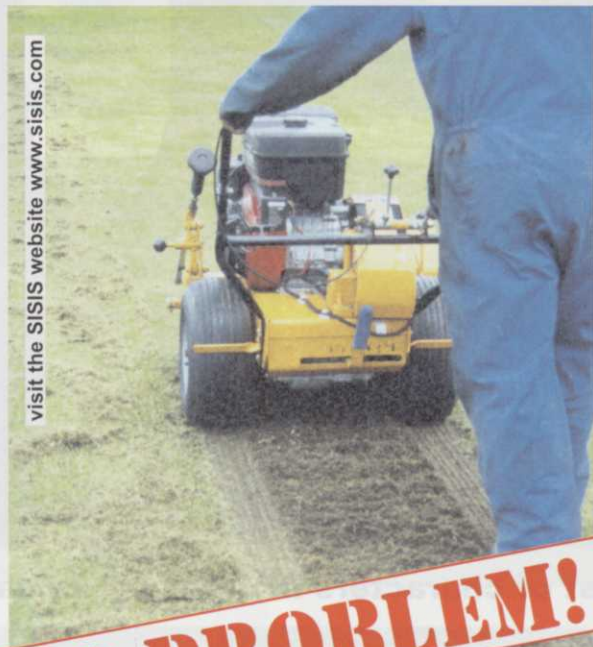
It has come a long way since he first set eyes on a site with genuine potential "It was a field with a bit of formal garden and I got such a buzz from doing it. Once I'd drawn the layout we painted out the course on the land and then went to the hill across the road to see how it looked. We still go there occasionally and we get a real buzz seeing what it has become.

"From a distance it looks quite good," he added, with a self deprecating laugh.



# THATCH PROBLEM?

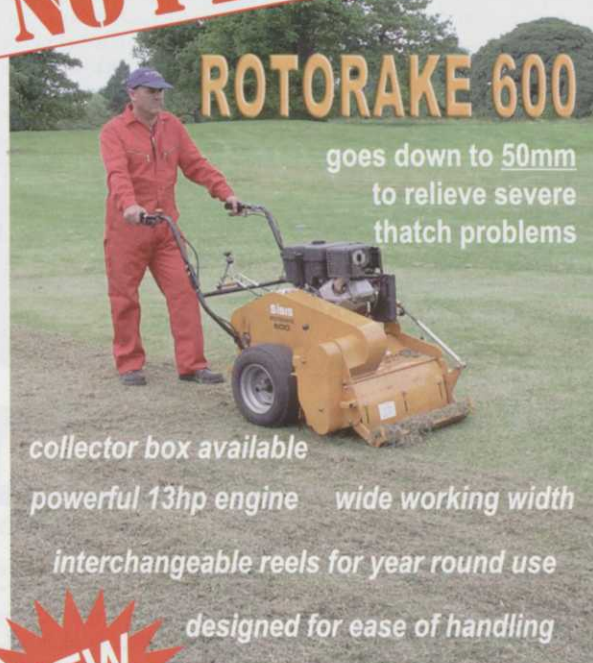
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