

GRASPING THE NETTLE



Below: Ian Farrall and Tom Dickinson



Scott MacCallum visits Caldy Golf Club which has benefited from a decision to solve their course problems in a decisive manner

Faced with a chronic drainage problem, which had seen nine months lost to golf in the last two years, Caldy Golf Club grasped the nettle in a manner which could well provide a template for other clubs in the same position.

Under the stewardship of Chairman of Green, Tom Dickinson, and Head Greenkeeper, Ian Farrall, the Wirral-based club has rebuilt six greens to USGA specification, five tees and installed a completely new drainage system covering the entire course over the winter period and, weather permitting, the course should be ready to welcome in the new playing season in June.

It was the incredibly wet winters over the last two years, which had seen the course closed, and under as much as eight or nine feet of water, for five months last year and four

months the year before, which convinced Tom, Ian and the Green Committee that it was time for drastic action.

"The course is split by the Wirral Way, a nature trail developed from a former railway line, and one half is clay sitting on sand and the other is sand sitting on clay and try as we might we just couldn't find a way of getting rid of standing water," explained Ian.

As Tom explained, they discovered that the unfortunate soil profile was only part of the problem on the course which hosted The Caldy Classic on the European Ladies' Tour in the mid 80s.

"We had tried rodding out the drains but finally found that the old drainage, installed when the land was still agricultural, was broken in places and had totally silted up. In effect it

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Facing page: The R&A had early assisted with the funding for coastal defences and you can see how they have protected the golf course while the unprotected area further down has eroded considerably

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Caldy GC Chairman of Green, Tom Dickinson

Below: The newly designed 17 green makes it a real feature hole

Bottom: This duck will soon have to find a new home other than the 16th fairway!

Far right: How the course was for much of the year



had collapsed. We realised then that any attempted 'patch-up' just wasn't going to work," he said.

Having made that decision it became apparent that the financial implications were enormous.

"When we started to get quotes together I must admit that I thought we might be able to do it for about £150,000, but I was way off because to do the job properly to the proper spec was going to cost almost double that," revealed Tom.

Having already received substantial funding from the R&A for cliff protection work 10 years ago they realised that any other central funding would be limited so it was to its members that the club turned for the finance to complete the job.

Caldy's Past Captains then came up with a superb idea which benefited both the members, who wished to make a contribution to the project, and the club itself.

"We created a Members' Loan Note Scheme whereby members who loaned money to the club were able to benefit from a substantial reduction in their annual subscriptions

depending upon the amount of money they loaned. It was a win-win situation from the club's point of view and the members put their hands in their pockets and came up with the entire sum of money required to fund the project over one year," explained Tom.

Prior to that, Ian and Tom had hoped to do the job as quickly as possible to keep disruption to a minimum but it hadn't looked possible.

"Originally we had been told that we could do it over two years but when we decided that we wanted to rebuild six of the greens as well it looked as though it would be over four years which I didn't like one little bit," revealed Tom, explaining that he felt it would be unfair to Ian and his team to manage the disruption over such a period.

And it was not just on the issue of disruption that Ian felt a phased introduction of the work could cause problems.

"Doing six greens over four years would have meant that each green built would have had a different maturity but now, having done them all over the same period it means that they will be much easier to look after.

Having listened to both Ian and to Alistair Beggs, of the STRI, about the best approach Tom went back to the Board and talked about doing the work over two years as a possible compromise.

However, the key to the decision to bite the bullet and do the work over the course of one winter and spring was an EGM attended by the Course Architect, Cameron Sinclair, who designed the new greens, and Barry Cooper, of the Leicester Drainage Company, who was contracted to undertake the drainage work.

"I think once the programme had been explained to them the members were very much on our side," said Tom, whose own professional experience in Sales and Marketing did much to ensure that the project was "sold" in the most effective manner.

"Not only did we get the support to spend all the money, the body of opinion was that they'd rather not do it over two years but that they wanted to do it over one. This was music to our ears because it was where we'd started."

It was at this stage that the Members' Loan Note scheme was launched and the entire funding for the project was put in place.



While relishing the challenge it did mean a swift amending of the plans that had already been put tentatively in place.

Cameron Sinclair designed the six new greens and J&E Ely were contracted to construct them to USGA spec before Barry Cooper came in to lay the drainage having first come up with a plan which looked like a cross between a map of the London Underground and the face of a weather beaten octogenarian.

"By the time we are finished over 18 miles of drainage will have been installed - that's the distance from Hoylake to Chester," revealed Ian

"The greens were done first and we finished them, and five tees, by Christmas. Cameron, who also acted as supervising architect, said it was nice to leave a contractor knowing that when you came back everything had been done exactly to spec," said Ian, who added that one of the reasons Ely's had been chosen was the wonderful work they had done at nearby Hoylake.

Some of the tees were actually rebuilt in-house with Ian and Tom encouraging the team to study Ely's work on the greens before using the same techniques on the tees.

"It as a great training and development exercise and I learned a lot as well," said Ian.

They have managed to keep nine holes of the course playable at a time while the work has been done but as Ian points out the members had no golf during much of the two previous winters anyway.

"There has been quite a bit of disruption but the vast majority of the membership are right behind us



because they voted for it with their pockets and want the job done as per the plan," admitted Tom.

He has been Chairman of Green for three years having previously held a similar post at Burghley Park, in Stamford, Lincolnshire.

When he moved back home to the north west to settle he joined Caldys and before long he found himself doing the same job.

"When I took over I told Ian that I wanted to work together and saw myself and the green staff as part of the same team.

"I see my job as giving the guys support, encouragement and the investment necessary to get Caldys

Golf Club to the standard we aspire to and then to communicate with, and manage, the membership, rather than the other way round," explained Tom.

"If we can keep the membership informed and up to date with what we are trying to do, they respond, and the whole thing goes forward. That's what we have found with this massive project," said Tom, who could be used as an identikit Chairman of Green.

Tom is a huge fan of Alistair McKenzie and particularly his recently-discovered book *The Spirit of St Andrews*.

"Reading his thoughts on golf and



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This page: Barry Cooper had a considerable job on his hands and more than 18 miles of pipe have been used

its development going back to the 30s they are as relevant today as they were then and are the same guiding principles we have here at Cald.

"We want to do what's best for Cald, its members and visitors, but also for golf and the game. We've got a lot out of the game and we want to put something back for the future. That means doing the best quality job we can with the long term in mind and managing the

course ecologically and environmentally as well," said Tom, who has hopes that the course may be used as a final qualifying venue when The Open returns to Hoylake in the near future.

He has also ensured that the greens staff have the tools they require to do the job and a five year rolling programme with Toro dealer Cheshire Turf Machinery ensures that the club gets the best equipment at the most competitive price because the length of the agreement also allows the company to plan ahead. New maintenance and storage facilities have also been built to house staff and machinery.



Nearing the end of the drainage contract Ian and Tom are delighted with what has been achieved particularly given the constraints of working through a wet winter.

"With a free rein it would have been great to have done the work in the summer when the ground conditions were at their optimum rather than the winter as the disruption would have been much less but we know that members wouldn't have wanted to lose any more of their playing season, particularly when they'd been off the course so much in the last two years," said Ian.

"We currently have eight weeks to completion but, talking with the drainage team, we would have been

finished by now using the time spans summer would have involved," he added.

"We have told the members that the new system will start to work immediately but that it will take a couple of years for the ground to settle so it might not be perfect straight away."

As for the greens, which reused the existing turf, they are settling in very well and will be hand cut probably for the rest of this year.

Having bitten the bullet and taken advantage of the innovative fund raising scheme instigated by the club, Cald Golf Club members can now look forward to year round golf from now on.

