

# Course Feature

## WHEN IAN MET SALLY

When Ian Needham and his dog, Sally, were issued with the challenge of building a golf course they could not have imagined just how well they would succeed. Scott MacCallum travelled to Beedles Lake to meeting the human half of the partnership.



Together we'll jump aboard a time machine and transport ourselves back 13 years to a land fill site in Leicestershire where we can listen into a conversation between JCB operator, Ian Needham, and his boss.

Boss: Ian, we've had plans drawn up and we want you to build a golf course on this site for us.

Ian (in shock): You're the boss, but I've never even been on a golf course before, never mind know anything about the game.

Boss: We're sure you can do it.

Ian: Well, perhaps the first thing I should do is go to college and learn a little bit about golf and golf course maintenance.

This should be interesting. Let's get back into the time machine and see how it all worked out.

It's now the present day and Ian is sitting in the extensive Beedles Lake Golf Club clubhouse. He's Course Manager of the successful pay and play course which hosts around 35,000 rounds a year and a membership of around 400. On the wall behind the 9 handicap golfer is the board listing the Club Captains which carries the name "Ian Needham 2000", while a few yards away in the Lady Captain Board which lists "Janet Needham 2000".

If you think this is all a little far fetched and more like a Kevin Costner screenplay than an article you normally find in your

monthly greenkeeping magazine hold on to your hats as it gets even more amazing.

To say that Ian built the course single handedly, on behalf of Leicester building company Jelson, wouldn't be strictly correct. No, he built it with the assistance of his Springer Spaniel, Sally, who was with him every step of the way. To complicate matters further the rootzone Ian used was ash, which was imported from another company in the Jelson group and was against all the advice being given at the time.

"A lot of people threw there hands up in horror and told us it wouldn't work. It wouldn't hold the nutrients and it would be very stale. It was pure black ash" recalled Ian.

Ian's boss, Robert Jelley, who must now feel like the man who discovered Wayne Rooney, could not have envisaged that his decision to turn his JCB operator into a Golf Course Constructor, then Grow-in Superintendent then Course Manager could have borne fruit in quite the way it has.

"I've always been a believer that if you are going to do



The Beedles Lake team with new canine recruit, Rizzler

something you do it wholeheartedly and properly and that's why, at the same time as I was building the golf course, I was on a three year Brooksby College course."

The plans for the golf course had been drawn up by David Tucker, the father-in-law of Robert Jelley, who had already designed the back nine at nearby Lingdale Golf Club before tackling an 18 at Beedles Lake.

"We started by building the 9th and 18th greens and we tried two different types of turf to see which was best suited to the ash. Sally and I dug out all the drainage - between 250 and 500 metres of it - and then put eight to ten inches of clean two inch ash on top of the draining layer, then two to three inches of five eighths down to fines to act as the intermediate layer then 12 to 18 inches on top of that."

He also shaped the greenside bunkering at the same time.

"It was a real work of art to shape them. It was fairly fine so the only way I could find to work it was to get on my hands and knees with a six foot piece of board and drag it into the shape I wanted and then we had a light whacker."

Remember all this was being done by someone who until a few months previously had no knowledge of golf whatsoever.

"I knew where the fairways were coming in from but I should imagine when I started there was a large element of luck as to how it turned out," said Ian, with disarming honesty.

Of the two turfs that were selected for the greens, one on either green, it was that supplied by Greenkeeper Turf, Sheford, Notts, which prevailed.

"It had been grown on polythene and so had no soil on it when it came to us and we found that it grew a lot quicker and was more easier to maintain so, having built the 9th and 18th in October and November of 1991, we went full steam ahead in '92," said Ian.

He found as he progressed that his skills developed to the extent that he even tackled a McKenzie, two tier green. This was also aided by regular visits to other golf clubs to see established golf courses and Hoover up information visually and from the Course Managers.

"From digging out a green, installing the land drain and putting in the binding layers and the rootzone would probably take me a week all told while, as I developed, I was putting in more shape to the greens," he explained.

In the main Sally and Ian tended to follow the route of the course doing the tees and greens in order unless adverse weather made that difficult.


The 16 additional greens were all built and turfed in 1992 while the fairways were seeded and then Ian saw his job change from Constructor to Grow-in Superintendent.

"By now I was hooked on the job. I'd built something from scratch and wanted to get to the next stage and produce something for golfers to play on."

At this stage he and Sally were joined by Tim Needham (no relation), who was to become Deputy Course Manager and between them they planted quite a lot of trees on the course and started to shape the fairways.

"Initially it was wide straight fairways cut by gang mowers but

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# Course Feature

as our knowledge has increased and we have got better quality machinery they have got a lot better."

The course opened on the first of July 1993, just under a year from when the last green was built and with Ian as head man, Tim as his deputy and a part timer in the summer, he had completed the transition from JCB operator to greenkeeper.

"I started to play golf around this time and became a little more knowledgeable about the game and began to look at creating doglegs and putting more shaping into the course."

"We do get quite a few problems from that, occasionally dips appear because of subsoil settlement and, being on a flood plain, it can be very difficult to drain.

And those ash based greens?

Nine years on they are as good as they were when I laid them. They drain beautifully and we stay on them all year round even through frost. I used to top dress with Probase but eventually I thought that somewhere along the line I had to get a little bit of soil into them as none of the organic material was staying in them and nothing was keeping the thatch done. So we started top dressing with a traditional 70-30 mix which has improved them. The ph having gone down from between 8.2 and 8.5 to 5.7 and 6.4.

"They want a lot of water in the summer and we have a Toro system on tees and greens but not much meadow grass has got into them which is surprising for greens which have been down for 10 years."

He admits to some Take-All Patch early on but is confident that it has now run its course while the growth of the trees planted in the early days has seen a little more fusarium creep in.

"We do get quite a bit of trouble in the winter months from crows damaging the greens as they hunt chaffer grubs and leatherjackets but not much other than that," explained Ian, who comes from a farming family.

Looking back on his construction work with the benefit of 10

years greenkeeping experience behind him Ian does feel that mistakes were made.

"If I had my time again I wouldn't have as many greenside bunkers. We put in too many and they were too close to the edge of the greens which has caused maintenance problems with sand on the greens but we have already started on improving this and have filled in some of the bunkers," said Ian, who has also worked on enlarging some of the tees.

The excellent clubhouse was built shortly after the course opened and four years ago it was joined by a driving range which is maintained by the greenkeeping team which now numbers four, and which this year has been augmented on a part-time basis by BIGGA National Chairman, Richard Barker, who has put in the odd shift between Association commitments.

"It has been an honour having Richard here and it's been quite useful to be able to pick his brains occasionally," said Ian.

The club name comes from the 38 acre lake, excavated by barges in the 1950s, which the clubhouse looks over and which boasts some fairly sizeable carp and pike.

"One of Tim's jobs is to look after the anglers and he is here on Saturdays and Sundays collecting money from them, so he works seven days a week."

If there was a defining moment of just how far Ian has come since the day he first drove his JCB out onto the landfill site 13 years ago it would be when he and his wife, Janet, who only started playing four years ago and who already boasts a fine handicap of 19, were elected Captain and Lady Captain respectively for the year 2000.

"We had a fabulous year. It was a real honour to be elected and we thoroughly enjoyed it," said the man whose first handicap was 15 and who touched 8 last year before rising to a steady 9.

He joined BIGGA in '95 and has since become a regular attendee

Ian's digger with Sally posing in front

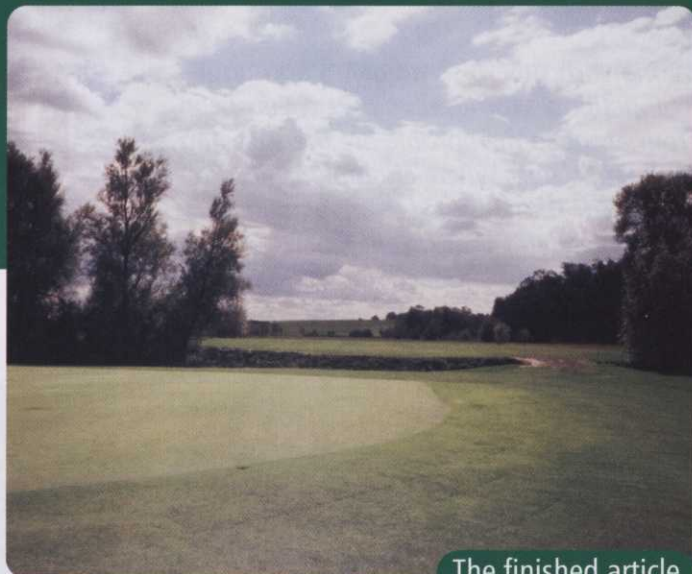


Laying a green





Ash was used as the rootzone



The finished article

of seminars and events at Section - he is Vice Chairman of the East Midland Section -, Region and Nationally where his thirst for knowledge takes him to Harrogate every year while the golf bug has seen him play in every National Championship since '95.

"It is indescribable what you get out of BIGGA. I wouldn't be where I am now without meeting the people I've met and helped me over the last few years."

Life has certainly changed for the unassuming 45 year-old, since he was issued with that job assignment 13 years ago.

"I certainly couldn't have envisaged my life turning out this way. There is something out there that I've built and can't be taken away from me. There is a huge element of pride and satisfaction and it

was quite an honour to have the trust of the Jolly family placed in me as they had invested a lot of money in this project."

He still has ambitions for the golf course with the possibility of a nine hole pitch and putt course whetting his appetite for construction work again.

But sadly, when he does climb back onto his JCB, he will do so without Sally who died last October and who is buried on the 18th fairway.

"Sally supervised me during the original construction. She was the boss," signed Ian.

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