

Course Feature

Playing your Cards Right

When Robert Hogarth took over at a new development in Peebleshire he had a great deal to content with but with the right attitude he is reaping the rewards



When I arrived at MacDonald Cardrona Golf and Country Club the Course Manager was in the quaint railway station building, acting as the temporary clubhouse until the official opening of the new one, counting money.

This wasn't anything directly concerning his staff wages or the maintenance of the golf course but money which had been taken in for the buggy or cart hire and green fees and Robert Hogarth, calculator in hand, was splitting it into the relevant accounts.

That's the way life has been for Robert since he arrived at the superb resort, just south of Peebles, in October '99. He has turned his hand to just about everything in that time and when Prince Charles opens Cardrona officially next month there will be few people more proud of what has been achieved than him.

Among the tasks Robert has tackled are drawing up the fixture lists; determining the Standard Scratch; naming the holes; sourcing a second hand bridge over the River Tweed... oh and selling space in the pro shop to top clothing and equipment manufacturers. All in a day's work for Robert, who also manages to fit being Scottish Region Education Convenor and GTC Liaison Officer for Lothian and Borders.

On top of that, of course, he had the growing-in of the Dave Thomas designed course from the moment the constructors left the site in November '99.

"Construction had started in May '98, which coincided with an extremely wet time and work was held up dramatically. The first sowing was done in July '99 and I arrived in the October. But, with it too wet to work, the constructors left the site in the November but didn't return the following spring to finish the job. It was the last I saw of them," recalled Robert.

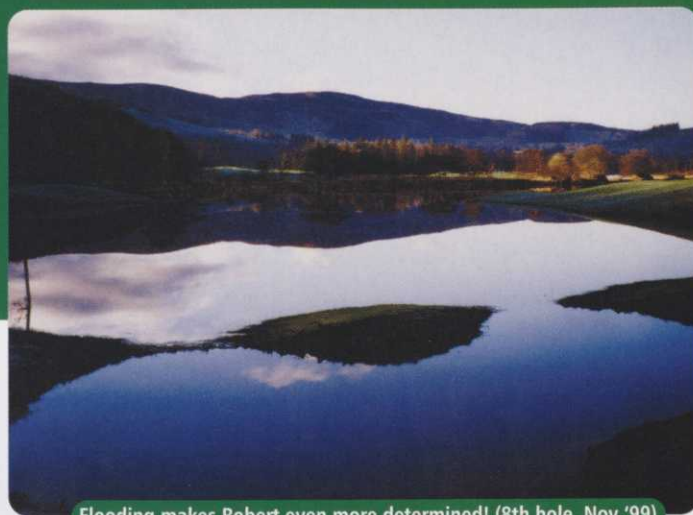
"At that stage it became apparent that I could take one of two attitudes. I could take the view that it wasn't my job, nor my responsibility, and just wait for something to happen. Alternatively I could say 'Right, this is what we've got to work with. It's not the greatest, but let's see what we can do'. Thankfully I chose the latter approach."

And he hasn't regretted the decision. It wasn't the easiest, as he had little or no equipment to work with at the start and no staff, but he set to work about finishing the job that had been started and moving the course forward.

"The whole episode taught me that you can achieve a lot more than you believe you can by having the right attitude and the necessary people skills. There were, and still are, a lot of contractors on the site, building houses and the hotel, using large machinery and by talking to them I was able to get favours done in exchange for games of golf when the course opened. It's what makes the world go round" he explained.

This pragmatic approach was also seen with the designing of the course as well.

"The course was designed and built for £1.5 million out of an overall project cost of £12 million and to meet budget Dave Thomas felt it best not to include every feature he intended for the course right at the beginning.



Flooding makes Robert even more determined! (8th hole, Nov '99)

"What we have achieved for £1.5 million is of a high standard, but what we have actually done is complete the foundations for a superb course with other elements to be added when the budget becomes available.

"For example there are still 40 bunkers to go in and in many cases we have the materials on site and seeded over them for the time being but they will be brought into play in the next couple of years."

The golf course has been designed to fit into the rolling hills and countryside of the local surroundings and uses its main feature, the River Tweed, to great effect.

The river, which is regarded as the best salmon fishing river in the country, also causes some major headaches and, as will be revealed later, to Robert, some leg aches.

"Because we have built a golf course on a flood plain it meant we had to raise all the greens and tees, which are built to USGA guidelines, and create a series of swails and ponds to move the flood water as quickly as possible.

"I was very sceptical at first that it would work but it is superb. There is no point attempting to stop the flooding so we put all the resources into trying to get rid of the water as quickly as possible."

And it needed to be as, three weeks after Robert started, they experienced what was a one in five year flood which drowned the still to be completed fairways under four feet of water.

"I wondered what I was getting myself into but the Tweed is a very fast flowing, clean river, not very silty and leaving very little debris, and we can get the course back into play very quickly. For example last November, the



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View of 16th hole

most common month for a flood, we had a bad one but had nine holes playable in 12 hours and the whole course in 24. Last year we were only closed for a total of 48 hours."

While the river is a superb feature of the area it does mean that the area is designated a SSSI from the river bank to the golf course and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and Scottish Natural Heritage are very protective of what goes on.

As with the other areas of his responsibility Robert built up relationships with the people involved, earned their trust, and moved things forward.

"They were under the misconception that we were big fungicide junkies and that we'd spill out thousands of tonnes of chemicals, so I arranged, through Jonathan Smith of the Scottish Golf Course Wildlife Group, to bring a group from Scottish Natural Heritage here to explain what goes on.

"The argument I put over was that if the area was still agricultural farm animals would go to the edge of the river and the banks would slide away. I told them that it was absolutely essential that I maintain the river banks because that is what protects me from the river. I'm going to look after that river bank like no-one has ever looked after it in the past," said Robert, who was also responsible for sourcing a second hand bridge over the Tweed capable of taking all their machinery and a strong gallery, if and when the course is chosen for a professional tournament.

"CEPA then allowed me to take water out through the bank into the river as long as it was monitored by them, the work carried out by a company recommended by CEPA and that the river bank be maintained to its original standard.

"I got a lovely letter back from them afterwards saying that I'd changed their opinions on how it would be," he said.

Cardrona is a unique project and with the 280 houses, built by five different builders to fit varying budgets up to £1 million - a King's ransom in this particular location - and is actually the first new village to be built in the Scottish Borders since the 1700s.

"The whole project was the brainchild of local farmer, Tom Renwick, who had the vision to see that agriculture was about to take a dip in the 80s, and had the idea to build a village together with the golf course. The idea took off when he contacted MacDonald Hotels in the 90s," explained Robert, who takes additional pride in the project as he was born in Peebles and has built a greenkeeping team of predominately local people.

Every visitor to the golf club will have valet parking, their own locker for the day, their clubs taken to the 1st tee and shoes cleaned for them by the butler.

"MacDonald's have 127 hotels but no five stars and although Cardrona will open with four they are going for five very quickly. Cardrona is going to be the flagship of the company."

"It will be an all year round resort with golf between March and October; salmon fishing October and November; December will be Christmas parties; January and February is the Conference season with March the start of golf and the wedding season. We have an events division so we can organise anything including falconry, archery, 4x4 quads biking, tank driving and ballooning," said Robert, who was Head Greenkeeper at Peebles at 19 and who arrived at Cardrona from Cathcart Castle.

"This has been the biggest development in Peebleshire in the last 200 years and so the local team, and it includes many of the others in the hotel as well, have a vested interest in making it a success."



The first sowing was done in July '99



Construction of USGA practice putting green (800m²)

Course Feature

And "making it a success" saw Robert turn himself into a super salesman and selling shop space to blue chip companies.

"Until recently MacDonald Hotels wasn't really a golf orientated company and as I had experience of working in the industry my General Manager asked me to find 17 nominated suppliers and sell shop space to them for a three year period to pay for the high class pro shop fitting we'd had done.

"When someone throws something like this at you you panic but that's what I did. I went through the golf magazines and got the names of companies, then a contact name and called them up. Some turned me down but by the end I'd persuaded companies like Ashworth, Greg Norman, Pringle Burbury Golf, Ping, Maxfli and Taylor Made to come on board and by the end I actually had a waiting list!"

When the club's new Director of Golf arrived from his previous job at Gleneagles he couldn't quite believe what had been done as selling shop space to companies is not even done at Gleneagles!

"It gave me a fantastic amount of satisfaction."

It was that same ability and golfing knowledge which led him to be the man who named the homes, organised the fixture lists and the temporary standard scratch for the course and he dismissed the tasks with the view that they needed to be done.

Robert's approach to maintenance is one of low feeding but he admits to being a realist and that his regime will be dictated by the levels of play.

"On the greens I put on very little feeding and a lot of top dressing and overseeding especially in the early stages which a lot of people might mind strange on USGA greens. I get away with it but I'm a new resort and the hotel hasn't opened yet - although the course has been open since August 2001 - and I haven't had the weight of play yet.

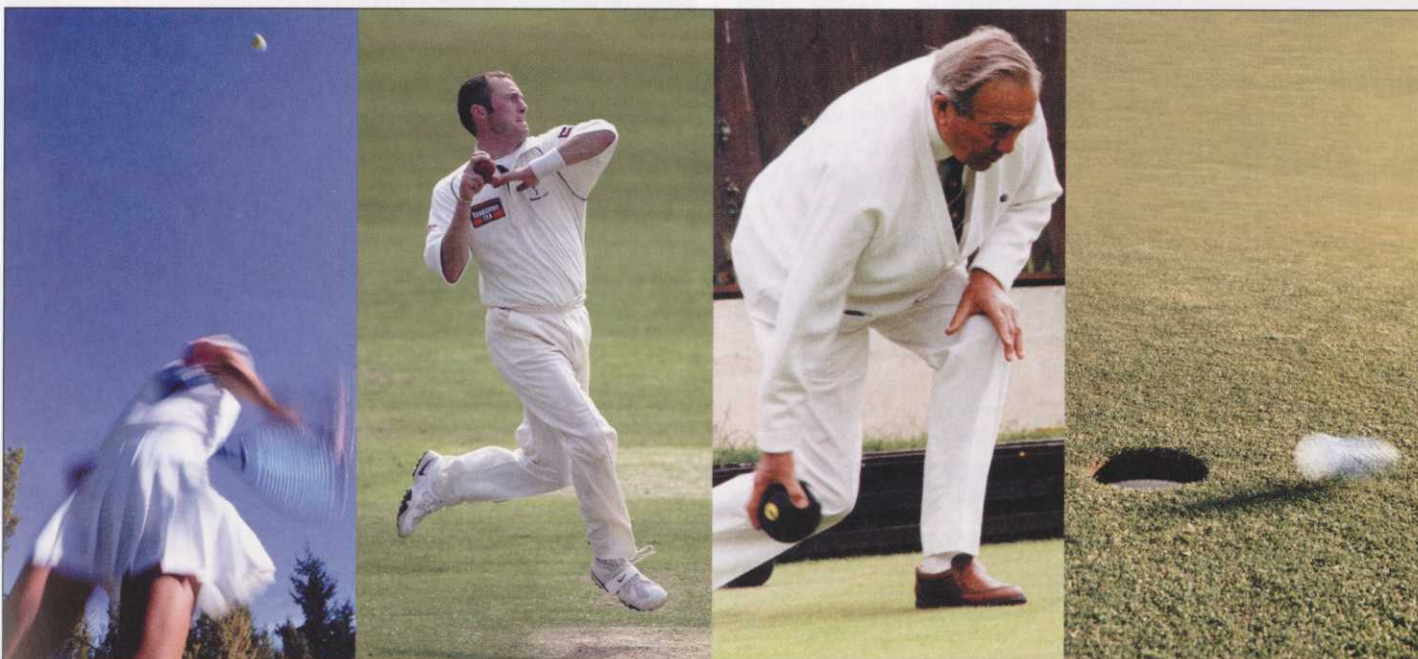
"I have good tight bent fescue swards and I'll do everything in my power to keep them that way but if I have to change the programme to suit customer needs so be it.

"The bottom line is that I'm a realist and I know that if I've got 100 golfers out on a soaking wet course in November my bents and fescues probably won't survive and I'll have to build a programme to suit that need. But that's modern golf. You must meet the requirements of the customer," he said.

"I'm very conscious of the company's role more than my own and it would take a stronger person than me to tell a Chief Executive that we can't take £50,000 worth of business at a weekend because it was going to damage the course.

"I used to see the golf course as my own but since coming here I've found that there are other ways, and there are better ways. I'm not saying that everything I did in the past was wrong, but you can always open up your eyes to something better.

Robert is delighted with the attitude and commitment of his seven man team which he will grow by one more in the summer.



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Bringing quality to play



View of 11th hole from the back of the green

"I've put together a really strong and willing team although there have been casualties along the way, people who have come in and worked very hard but been unable to maintain it. I'm very proud of the guys I have," he said, while revealing that at the beginning of March the team, along with the fire brigade had been out fighting a fire which accounted for 150 tubed trees.

"A grow-in is hard graft and on this site we've got stones eight inches below the surface and when you dig stones they never seem to go away,' while in addition they had carried out an extensive wood clearance programme.

"This is my first grow-in and I swore 18 months in that I'd never do another one but as time goes on the pain dulls and I think I would do it again," said Robert, who is indebted to the support he's received from local dealer, George Henderson, and, in particular, Graham Miller and William Smith.

One pain that has taken some time to dull is the one from his right leg after he broke his ankle falling into the river last year.

"I hopped over the dyke to check the outlet of the no-return valve but got my legs tangled up in the long grass and took a four foot drop into the river onto my right leg shattering my ankle in three places. I've had a metal pin inserted in it and I'm afraid my five-a-side days are over. I was indebted during this time to all my staff for a fantastic job, especially Deputy Course Manager, Colin Noble and First Assistant Donald Campbell."

However when Prince Charles arrives to open MacDonalD Cardrona Golf and Country Club officially next month Robert will hopefully be able to forget even that pain and feel nothing but pride in what has been achieved.



Robert's second hand bridge proves to be very useful



Par 3: 13th hole

Course Feature



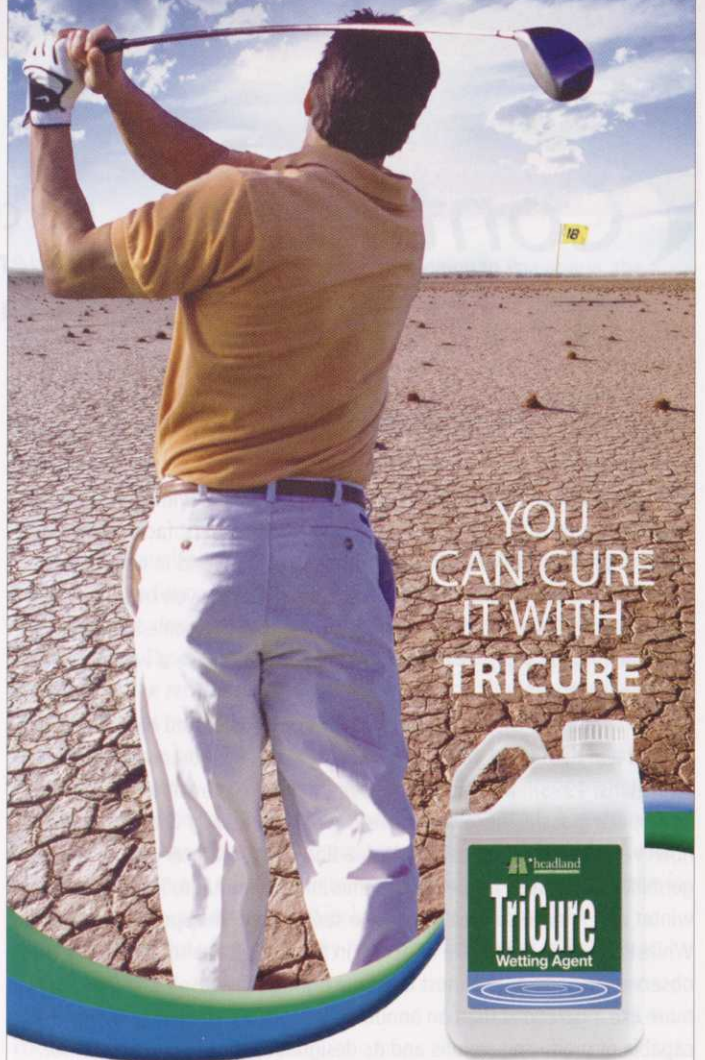
Par 4: 2nd hole with Hosburgh Castle in the background

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