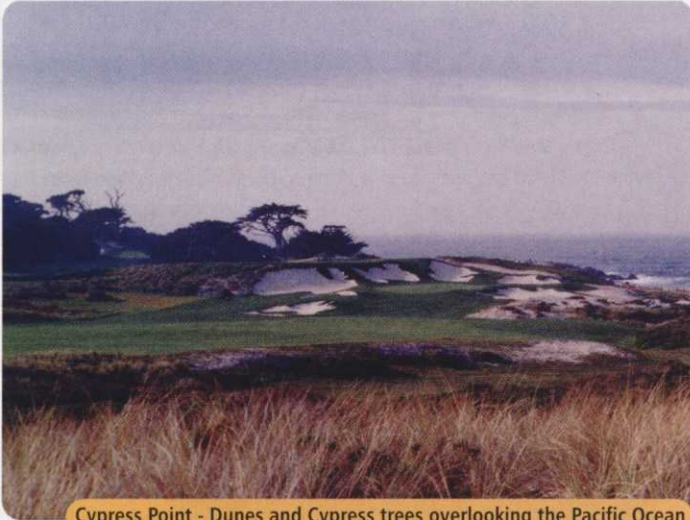


A Golf Course Pilgrimage

Malcolm Peake goes on a golfing pilgrimage and comes back with concerns for the future of the game

It all started with the idea of visiting my sister Val and husband Ken in New Zealand, but it soon developed into a round the world golf course pilgrimage.

A conversation with Walter Woods started the ball rolling then Walter contacted his old friend Ron Read in California. Ron has worked for the USGA for 22 years and through his contacts I received an invitation to play Cypress Point with the current and past Chairmen of Green. They had a combined time in office of 10 years, which ensured great continuity for the Superintendent and the golf course.



Cypress Point - Dunes and Cypress trees overlooking the Pacific Ocean

Cypress Point is one of the most exclusive private members clubs in America. It has an attractive and understated Monterey Colonial style clubhouse with a friendly and hospitable membership. Then there's the golf course, and what a golf course. Cypress Point must be one of the most spectacular golf courses in the world and with 28 green staff, the presentation is immaculate. There is the superb Alistair MacKenzie architecture, epitomised by the bunkering, the wild dunes areas, the magnificent Monterey pines and of course Cypress trees, and finally there is the Pacific Ocean and the rocky coastline. If you are lucky, and I was, you might see seals, sea lions and otters. The one species I did not see was the migrating whales, which apparently are a spectacular sight. The sea comes into play on only three holes, but you are in sight and sound on many others and it dominates the subconscious.

The club is in the final stages of renovating the bunkers returning them

to the original MacKenzie design, and conscious of environmental responsibilities they are reinstating the dunes areas. Only reclaimed water is used in the irrigation system and as a consequence the golf course has a rather green and lush appearance, which applies equally at all courses in the area. Many well-informed golfers are of the opinion that Cypress Point may well be the best golf course in the world, and who am I to disagree with them.

But what of the other courses on the Monterey Peninsula? Of the ones I visited I liked the architecture of The Links at Spanish Bay designed by Robert Trent Jones, Tom Watson and Sandy Tatum. The original concept was to create an old world Scottish links golf course. This depends on a number of issues, and all except one were in place. The seaside location with wind and elements playing an integral role. The design with rolling fairways and large undulating greens, sand dunes, and plenty of bunkers. Sadly the final ingredient was missing- instead of firm playing surfaces to complement the classic chip and run type shots, there were soft lush fairways and greens, 100% Americanised for target golf.

I understand that this changed from the original intention of the design team. Fescue and bent grasses were originally used to ensure a true links playing surface to keep water and fertility low. Unfortunately the influence of THE GOLFER destroyed this concept and the intention was changed. The Links are now more expensive to maintain, mowing is more frequent, and more water, fertiliser and of course herbicides are required. This to me is all very sad, and in my experience is what can spoil well managed golf courses. But I'm getting on my hobbyhorse now, and more of that later!

I visited Pebble Beach, which was being prepared for the AT&T, again a superb site (but very green), it was certainly millionaire golf with green fees up to \$425 about £270. I walked a few holes of Spyglass Hills, which took me back to happy trips in the Algarve. Very reminiscent of one of my favourite courses, Quinto de Lago. But it is not all sunshine and light on the Monterey Peninsula. Superintendents are under great pressure from pests, not just golfers, but also nematodes. They are taken a liking to the

NEW FEATURE COMING SOON...

Whispering Grass

putting surfaces and "it's driving the Superintendents nuts"!

Onto New Zealand and what a contrast. We arrived at Val and Ken's farm after 14 km on unmade roads, 20 minutes drive to our nearest neighbour, 45 minutes to the shops and the DB draught beer tasted like nectar. The next day Ken took me to play at his club Wairoa (pronounced Why Roa). This was a little gem with undulating fairways and greens with subtle borrows. The annual subscription was a bargain at £110 and green fees of about £5.25. The course was managed by four members, little irrigation or fertilisers were used, and I saw more bent and fescue grasses than I had seen in a long time. You could play every shot in the book and some great golf holes made the course a real joy to play.

Later in the week we went to Poverty Bay Golf Club at Gisborne, the first town in the world to see the dawn each day. This is what I would call a semi links golf course with the sea in view on a number of holes.

The greens were as good as you could find anywhere with a high proportion of bent grasses in them. I met Rowan Clarke, the Course Manager, who explained that he worked hard at encouraging the bents to the detriment of *Poa annua*, and had long term plans to take out non-indigenous species of frees and improve the management of the water feature. Because of financial constraints Rowan had only one member of staff, but was hoping to be able to employ an apprentice later in the year. It was quite amazing to see a golf course maintained to this quality by only two people. I hope it is appreciated by the membership, as their subscription was certainly not excessive at about £175. I paid my green fees of about £8.50 and collected my trundler (trolley). The course was another gem and comparatively old being opened in 1894. It held professional tournaments in the 1960's and 70's with players like Bobby Locke and Bob Charles participating. The holes from the 15th at Poverty Bay make it a particularly good finish where level par would be more than satisfactory. In the bar one of the members came up for a chat and enquired where Ken's home club was. When told Wairoa he said, "It's a tricky little course but the biggest hazard is getting out of the 19th!" But I think that's a national problem, hospitality in New Zealand is superb.

On the way back I stopped at Te Pohue Golf Club for a quick look. This was golf as it used to be. Sheep grazed the fairway, "free relief if impeded by sheep dropping, electric fences protected the greens (which you need to turn off before you play or risk the consequences) and an honesty box for the green fees.

In total contrast, the last course I visited in New Zealand was Wairakei. This is in the heart of the lovely countryside surrounding Lake Taupo, an area that bubbles with hot thermal springs, geysers, and burping mud pools. The resort golf course is built on pumice and volcanic cinder, and must have some interesting management challenges. Unfortunately I could not find a greenkeeper to hear about the unique problems. The course had some stunning golf holes, which made use of the natural features of

gullies, woods and creeks. The greens looked superb with a high proportion of bent grasses.

Finally I arrived in Australia and a visit to Royal Sydney Golf Club. This was very interesting as the greens were being rebuilt. I wondered if the new construction would return the links feeling golf course to its heritage. The tees are generally on higher ground with fairways and greens in full view, the marvellous bunkering and the humps and hollows were a real feature of the course. Sea breezes are a big factor at Royal Sydney, as on most seaside courses. The early part of the course has a definite links feel; in the middle of the course the fairways are separated by indigenous stunted trees, making straight driving essential.

Royal Sydney is a traditional golf course, which has hosted the Australian Open on a number of occasions. The layout of the course gives you the opportunity, if you are good enough, of fading or drawing drives, hitting the ball high but more often low below the wind. The visit was an interesting experience and I hope I have the opportunity of playing the course again to see how the new greens have developed.

The old greens were constructed over about a five year period in the early 80's to USGA specifications. However, for reasons unknown there were many greens which were not constructed correctly. They had poor quality material and the different layers of material under the greens were not at consistent depths throughout. The result was that the greens did not drain well and had inferior turf quality. Sadly, not an usual story which happens all too often.

It was decided, after much investigation and scientific evaluation, to rebuild them using local sand as the base without any drainage being placed in them. All green sites were fully excavated, in many cases, right down to the water table. The green bases were filled with local sand and the top 30cm being "amended" with peat. The greens turf is "G2" the fairways are Wintergreen Couch and most tees are Santa Ana Couch."

They were reconstructed and designed by Ross Watson, formerly partner with Graham Marsh. He is a prominent Australian architect with many courses here and in Asia. He has recently done a lot of remodelling work in Sydney.

So what are my impressions of golf in California, New Zealand and Australia? Obviously I saw golf courses of immense contrast in site, climate, architecture, maintenance and, most of all budget. In America I thought the design and architecture of the courses was superb, but was disappointed by the green and lustiness. But that I think is sadly a perception of golfers worldwide. If a golf course is not green, golfers think something is wrong, and nothing could be further from the truth. In some areas I visited there was an acute water shortage yet golfers still expected the golf course to be green. It's irresponsible and unnecessary. At most clubs the Course Managers are doing a good job, but they are juggling too many balls. Maintaining a balance between the demands of the

Are you in possession of a juicy piece of gossip and are just dying to tell someone? Or have you just moved job and want to pass on the good news?

A typical example appeared in a recent Around the Green column:

Who was the person who thought he'd overslept on hearing The Counterfeit Stones playing Honky Tonk Woman in the Majestic Hotel during Harrogate? He jumped up, got himself dressed and down to the ball room only to discover it was the sound check!

Let us at Greenkeeper International know and we'll spread the word. Names could be withheld to protect the innocent... or not so innocent!

The Editor will need to know your name, and in specific cases discrete checks made, but he will protect his sources. Just email your info to: scott@bigga.co.uk titled Whispering Grass.



Temple Golf Course designed by Willie Park Junior in 1910.
Natural Fairways, greens with high proportion of bent and fescue

uneducated members and keeping the course in good health is an almost impossible task.

The Americans I met were in the main the aficionado golfer who appreciates that green is not necessarily great, wants to play our classic British and Irish courses. Not only the great links but also the little gems like my own club Temple. They enjoy courses where you can play bump 'n' run, as my American friends describe it, where you use your imagination to play a shot not just to smash a wedge into a green, but to play a classic, a subtle shot, the sort of shot that has been played for over 200 years. Golfers from all over the world come to our country to play this traditional style of golf, yet sadly in many cases because of GOLFER influence we are trying to produce courses that are green and lush, and American. Why? I don't understand it, we are following instead of leading. Golfers are being influenced by television, by what they see of Tournament golf, by the glossy golf magazines, but do they realise how much it is going to cost, how unrealistic it is, how much water, fertiliser, herbicide, pesticide is going to be required and at a time when environmental issues worldwide need to be considered. Why? This style of target golf is not nearly so much fun, it takes the chance, the luck of the bounce out of the equation, the natural part of golf out of the game - it may be what the pros want but they want everything on a level playing field. You might as well play on all weather astroturf on a billiard table, a tennis court or a bowling green. What fun would golf be then?

Golf on a traditional British golf course is superb, it has so many facets it must be protected from the uneducated golfer. The man on site - The Course Manager is the expert. He is paid to manage, agree a plan and a budget and let him get on and do it!

At Temple, Martin Gunn, Course Manager, and I developed a system which has been used as an example of best management practice, a template if you like. Everything is monitored and recorded so we can put a cost, a value on every part of the golf course and its management. Not only the sports turf, but on the non playing areas - the time and money

that is saved by leaving areas natural and has helped to keep subscriptions down. It adds to that subliminal factor, the pleasure got from playing a traditional golf course. Perhaps not to Philistines, but the people who really know about golf. You can play every shot in the book, the thrill of squeezing a ball off firm turf, playing a chip and run from 40 yards or a putt running the ball over little banks and through shallow hollows. Where is golf going to go? Where are we going to end up - you tell me (answers on a postcard). I feel golf is at a crossroads with the distinct possibility of the traditional game of golf - the game I love, being lost forever.

Malcolm Peake is the author of "Confessions of a Chairman of Green" which is available from the STRI Tel: 01274 565131 priced £10.95.



Reconstruction of the greens and bunkers at the Royal Sydney Golf Club