

# Course Feature

## Traditional Values

Scott MacCallum travels to Temple Golf Club to meet two men with outstanding records in the crusade to preserve traditional golf.



**In recent months the Temple Golf Club doormat has become the resting place for a growing number of letters of commendation on the excellent condition of the course.**

Not surprising you might think for one of the country's increasingly better known and best run clubs but all the more pleasing for Course Manager, Martin Gunn, as the letters are focussing on the quality of the greens and fine grasses, and not merely praising the club's renowned ecological work.

"I'm particularly delighted because when articles are written on Temple there is rarely any recognition for the work we've done on the course, as the emphasis is virtually always on our environment work," said Martin.

And he's right. Thanks to the sterling work carried out by the management team, Temple has been known primarily as an example of what good environmental practice can achieve - the club won the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition in 1999 - and the fact that the golf course has come on by leaps and bounds over the last 13 years is sometimes overlooked.

But by using traditional British greenkeeping methods Martin and his team are in the process of returning Temple to a haven for people looking to play traditional British golf. However, while you would think that this would have been a vision shared by the vast majority, in fact it has not been easy to 1. get to, and 2. maintain the standards achieved.

While Malcolm is no longer an official of the golf club he still takes more than an active interest in the golf course and his work and support over the majority of the last 13 years has certainly helped Martin.

"I was Chairman of Green for six years and then the club appointed me Course Consultant for another five, to ensure that the policy document we had put in place wasn't changed. Above all, I was there to police it," explained Malcolm.

Martin, who became Course Manager around the time the work began, is quick to credit his colleague for ensuring the continuity required to achieve while both are also keen to credit the four Chairmen of Green who have followed on from Malcolm.

"The Club is soundly managed and carefully selects those members nominated to hold important positions within the club.

"Without continuity the chances of achieving anything are virtually nil, because change management is so painful in terms of policy and resources."

Malcolm also added his praise to his successors in the post of Chairman of Green.

"Each of them has been excellent and none of them has tried to rock



Martin Gunn and Malcolm Peake

the boat, supporting and carrying on the work of the policy document," he added.

So what was the catalyst for moving the club forward from where it was in 1990 to where it is now?

"In 1990 this was like a pseudo American course, lush, soft and ideal for what a friend of mine calls golf by numbers," recalled Malcolm, adding that it was his firmly held belief that it was the introduction of an irrigation system, and its subsequent overuse, in the 70s which led to the change in the course's playing characteristics.

A student of the game and keen to return the course, previously known as Temple Links, to what architect Willie Park Jnr had intended it to be, Malcolm and Martin worked on how to achieve this aim.

"We wanted to give people what we wanted based on what we'd learned from talking with people within the industry; from going back through the history of the club and from studying pictures of how the course once looked. The Temple Board and the President, Nicky Oppenheimer, whose family owned the course supported this strategy."

At Martin's suggestion an agronomist was brought in and the club was fortunate to forge a long standing friendship with Jeff Perris, who has been agronomist to the club ever since. In addition they sought advice from BIGGA, English Nature, the Forestry Commission and highly regarded architect Donald Steel, some of which came free and some they gladly paid for.

"One of the best pieces of advice Jeff gave us, and he also gave at an Open Forum, was that the medicine we were taking wasn't going to be pleasant and that things could deteriorate before they got better.

"That was a very, very strong message and it was soundbites like that which helped us win the battles... although we know we will never win the war," said Martin.

Malcolm added that he had inadvertently contributed to some of the difficulties by thinking there would be a time limit to the work.

"I said to everyone that we'd turn the course around in five years. It sounds like a hell of a long time to the average golfer but in fact it took a lot longer than that."

A more realistic time span was ten years and there were many headaches and heartaches along the way, often

caused by droughts and frost ridden springs.

"This isn't a club, although well resourced, that can throw money at projects and it has very sensible views on how much money to put into projects and what the cost benefits will be. However, there are variables like weather, pests and diseases which slow you up," said Martin.

After about five years the silent majority in the club were becoming a little more vocal in their support of what was being done. There followed an article four years ago written in The Daily Telegraph by Colin Callander praising the course and the work that has been done to earn it a place on the "A" List of British golf clubs, highly regarded by the golfing establishment. Since then it has become a port of call for nearly 200 golf clubs, colleges, scientists and universities keen to see what it is like and learn how it has been achieved.

So what has happened since turning the course around from a lush "American-lite" affair to a traditional British course?

Well, surprisingly there are still people who try, however well meaning, to knock Temple off course.

"This year is a classic example. Like everyone we had a very cold dry spell early in the year, but we are also a north facing course so are very slow to warm up. Pretty much every course in the area was away before us and there was a group of members who were very unhappy and made their views known," said Martin.



The 11th Fairway

# Course Feature

"We are using some alternative methods and the members felt that these obviously hadn't been paying dividends and that we should be using more conventional chemicals, fertilisers and water. But it wouldn't have made any difference because the temperature was too low.

"It is all about perception and people perceive an awful lot about greenkeeping and particularly the greenkeeping at Temple. In fact we held a Forum called Myths and Legends at the club and tried to dispel the incorrect perceptions that some members hold.

"For example I bumped into one guy recently who asked me where I played my golf. I told him and he said 'I know all about Temple. That's the first all organic golf course since the war, isn't it?'"

Martin is realistic enough to know that these things don't go away and that the job involves constant fire fighting, while Malcolm added that he knew why these particular issues arose.

"It was a mistake talking quite so much about ecological and holistic management because people were thinking we were going down a very green route. In fact we were going down a traditional greenkeeping - Jim Arthur - route," he said.

"There was once a note in the Suggestion Box that this is a golf course not a wildlife park. We'd never said that, but the way we were managing the golf course was taking it back to pre 1970s with meadow, managed woodland, reinstating hedgerows etc. This to me framed the golf course and made it much more stimulating to play but perhaps we over emphasised it and gave the wrong impression," admitted Malcolm, who joked that there were occasions when he and Martin had to walk back to back so they could see the knives flying.

But Martin, a man of strong views, is of the opinion that he doesn't feel that problems begin and end with the golfer and feels that greenkeepers are often not strong enough to deliver the job they've been employed to do.

"It is pointless to bury our heads in the sand and say it is the management of the golf club or the media which is at fault. It is a lot of things and we are part of it. We must recognise that, as in most businesses, there are a number of ways of doing a job but only one way which is suitable."

But does he have any sympathy for the greenkeeper who retains the status quo because he has a mortgage to pay and needs continuity of employment?

"Very few of us don't have those needs but out of the 250 people who have come to see Temple some greenkeepers will have been given the opportunity to initiate change management strategies but won't take it.

"But do I have any sympathy? If there is someone who finds himself in a Course Manager's position when he is really a Head Greenkeeper, then no.



Composting clippings

Do I have sympathy for someone who is doing a Course Manager's job but who has been employed as a Head Greenkeeper, then yes, absolutely."

Malcolm agrees with these sentiments.

"I would say that if members just allowed greenkeepers to get on with it, and not bog them down with politics and monthly meetings they would generally have a golf course in better health. He could then be judged by his own results."

At this point Martin chips in.

"That's fine if the evaluation is made by someone other than the employer and is independent."

In that Martin meant the agronomists report which he feels could be made much more of.

"People have an annual agronomy check and not a lot else. What we do with Jeff is treat him as our independent auditor and he checks what we have achieved and whether it is cost effective. He also assesses whether we have sufficient resources to do the job. In many ways it's a little like the OFSTED inspection which schools go through."

Malcolm agrees that this is the way to go.

"When I started as Chairman of Green I would never miss the agronomist's visit. For a start I'd be learning a lot, but as the club's representative I'm paying for it and should be involved. What you are paying for is an audit," said Malcolm, who has started work on a follow up book to his very successful Confessions of a Chairman of Green, under the working title of The Best Course for Golf, which is R&A supported and will be published by the STRI.

"It is obviously going to be slanted towards traditional British greenkeeping and no-one whom I've contacted has mentioned money and are all keen to do their bit for the good of the game.

"If courses don't follow best management practices we could be in danger of losing the character of all our priceless national heritage courses - heathland, links and downland and this would change forever the way we play traditional British golf."

It's a salutary thought.



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