

Course Feature

To the Manor Born

Scott MacCallum met up with Kneale Diamond, whose job at Marriott Hanbury Manor brings all sorts of challenges.



There are some occasions when a nice quiet round of golf, a chance to smell the roses, is just what the doctor ordered. On other occasions it is good to feel the thrill of being at the sharp end, where the action is.

An example of the two bunker types with the older darker sand in the foreground and the modern lighter sand in the background

Kneale Diamond

Marriott Hanbury Manor near Hertford, north of London, can offer a bit of both, but if you are really in the mood for a bit of excitement how about going through your pre-shot routine for your approach shot. You take careful aim, about to undertake a smooth, kink-free back swing only to have to pull away. A helicopter is taking off just a short distance away and the noise of the rotors is barely drowning out the screams of excited young girls.

That could have been the scenario if you were playing the course at the beginning of August when Robbie Williams, watched by a host of young admirers, flew off, having used the hotel as his base during his world record breaking Knebworth concerts.

Course Manager, Kneale Diamond, was on "crowd control" duty that Monday morning, just another example of what he finds himself doing at one of the highest profile hotels and golf course developments in the country.

"We have a lot of celebrity visitors at Hanbury Manor, a lot of footballers are members, but I must say it was good to see Robbie Williams from only 20 yards away," said Kneale, as we spoke the following day.

Kneale has been at Hanbury Manor for three and a half years having previously been Assistant Course Manager at the London Club.

"When I arrived it was as Acting Course Manager under Kenny McKay, who was about to move to Marriott Forest of Arden. I was attracted to the fact that it was a big name, quality venue, with the potential to go further and I liked the idea of working for a hotel chain which included other golf courses," he said, as we sat in the lobby of the five star hotel.

"It was also a tournament venue having hosted three English Opens in the late '90s won by Per Ulrick Johansson, Lee Westwood and Darren Clarke."

The golf course was designed by Jack Nicklaus Jnr and opened in 1991. It breaks down into distinct halves with a completely new nine forming the front nine and the back nine, which has a more parkland feel to it, built on land which had been home to a Harry Vardon-designed course. Two of the original Vardon bunkers are incorporated into the Nicklaus Jnr layout.

When he did take up the post Kneale found that he had quite a bit of work to do if his ambitions for the course were to be realised fully.

"Like every Course Manager who takes over a new job you do find a few shocks in store, and for me it was the irrigation system," said Kneale.

"We were losing four fifths of the water we were putting on through leaks," he revealed.

"That meant if we wanted to irrigate tees, greens, approaches and fairways taking into account the amount of water we were losing, it would take 24 hours to do it, which would mean closing the course for a whole day just to irrigate as opposed to a seven hour job if we didn't have leaks. We used to soak the golf course for two days and get as much water on as we physically could, then shut the system down and two guys would then spend three days a week repairing all the leaks," said Kneale, who added that in addition to the time spent on the job the water wastage could amount to over £300 a night.

"My first job was to convince my bosses that what had been in place wasn't good enough, bearing in mind that it had coped with three English Opens and the



The Hanbury Manor Team

development of Hanbury Manor into one of the top courses in the country," explained Kneale.

"It was a case of building up my bosses confidence in my abilities by showing them what I could do and what I'd like to do in future. I told them just how much water we were losing and the cost and manpower implications of that."

He then sat down with Mark Ganning, of Rainbird, and designed two systems - one all singing and dancing, a triple row system with very efficient full circle on fairway and part circle on edges and another cheaper version with just a single row of pop-ups.

"Obviously I wanted to go for the better one, anyone running a golf course would. I put forward the cost implications of both systems and persuaded them that we would be investing in the future if we went for the better system as it would be more efficient. Happily they agreed."

Not having had any experience of project management, but keen to make sure he kept a hands on approach to the installation of the new system, Kneale spoke with greenkeepers who had been through similar jobs and sought advice as to how best to work.

"I was delighted to work with Rainbird, who had been very good to work with in the past and we specced the system to do exactly what we wanted it to do, with larger pipe sizes so we could run for shorter periods and move water about more efficiently. It was very solid."

MJ Abbott were the installer and Kneale has been delighted with the quality work they produced.

The system is going in in three phases with the first two completed and the other being carried out in October this year.

Phase one was putting in the mains for all 18 holes, tees, surrounds and approaches and this was done between February and May last year. Phase two was the front nine fairways and some of the landscaped areas, while phase three will be the back nine fairways and a weather station.

"The project has been phased as we have a lot of corporate golf and prestigious golf days and members expect the highest levels of presentation so we had to keep disruption to a minimum. Also, financially, it made sense to break it down into three phases."



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A view of the front nine

The decision to go ahead last year has been vindicated by the weather subsequently.

"March was bone dry here with very little rain at all while this July saw average temperatures of 25.4 degrees," said Kneale, as we sweltered on the hottest day of the year so far. August temperatures are likely to break yet more records.

Having tackled the irrigation problems, Kneale and his team, also took on the courses 84 bunkers as another major project.

"In the initial planning approval for the course it was stipulated that the bunker sand be the same dark orange colour as the hotel bricks. It's not always the most appropriate sand for bunkers."

With the course now established and the planners a little more relaxed they have been able to move to a much lighter coloured sand and the change was made as part of a complete overhaul of the bunkering.

"We carried out the work in-house removing the sand, reshaping the bases and replacing the drainage. Basically we rebuilt them from scratch and have completed all greenside bunkers and two thirds of the fairway. The remainder will be completed by October."

Working on the bunkers highlight another problem that hadn't revealed itself in the relatively youthful history of the course.

"We have uncovered cars, engines and brick walls not too far under the surface. Only recently we found a car engine just six inches below the surface of a fairway. In bunker reconstruction we often found brick walls under the surface which caused headaches and had perhaps caused a change in the shape and depth of the bunker," said Kneale, who has also recently added additional cart pathing to areas of the course.

Being part of a large group has given Marriott the flexibility to make changes to cope with the downturn in the general and golfing economy.

To facilitate this Kenny McKay, in addition to his role at Forest of Arden, has recently taken on the role of Senior Courses Manager for the group and is looking at ways of the hotels, which include such illustrious venues as Dalmahoy, St Pierre, Tudor Park and Meon Valley, working together.

"Kenny has visited all 11 venues and done reports on each and we are working much more closely together. For example when the seasonal staff finished last year, I worked below full staffing but took on a couple of guys from Dalmahoy for a period. It worked very well. Another example of co-operation is the fact that we had perhaps 10 hollow corers in the group and whereas in the past another venue might have hired one in, now we would lend one out, as it may well have been sitting in the sheds doing nothing anyway. We now all have trailers to enable us to transport machinery around the country."

Kneale is well supported by his Director of Golf at Hanbury Manor, Iain McNally, who started at the Hertfordshire resort just a short time after his Course Manager.

"The challenge which Kneale has and with which he copes very well is that the golf course is a fixed cost area, in which I mean that whether the course is played or not it has to be maintained. In the case of banqueting and bedrooms, for example, if they are not used there are minimal costs involved so costs can be flexed but not so with the golf course."

Iain is also keen to look at ways of helping Kneale and his team which includes three gardeners to make life easier for him.

"We have 10 acres of formal gardens and when everything is in bloom they look great but we have many weddings each year and the gardens only look their best for a couple of weeks, so looking at ways of using plants which look good for longer and are easier to maintain may be the way ahead."

Kneale, at 29, is the oldest greenkeeper on the staff with his Deputy Jon Clarke, 25 and the majority of the rest of the team coming in at around 20-21.

"As we don't offer tournament golf at the moment we had to look at what we offer staff who work at Hanbury Manor. I want to make it a real learning experience for staff and have looked to set up a scholarship scheme similar to that in place at Gleneagles, and I have spoken to Jimmy Kidd on the subject.

"We have organised exchanges where guys can work around the world and included among these have been trips to work at the Hong Kong Open, and to assist Peter Bradburn in the grand opening of Aphrodite Hills in Cyprus. We also send staff to work at other Marriott properties to help prepare for tournaments such as the Europro Series. These opportunities are all explained to staff at interview. I'm delighted to say we have had zero turnover in the last year and when people do go it tends to be to bigger jobs - the two Head Greenkeepers at Forest of Arden were here previously and we had someone who is now a Contracts Manager in Abu Dhabi."

Among the other projects in the pipeline is a new maintenance facility, practice facilities and continued development of the golf course so crowd control duties for Robbie Williams' visits are going to have to take second place to his greenkeeping work.

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