

Course Feature



▲ Gordon Irvine MG.

No more sinking feelings

Royal Cinque Ports is back on the right lines after losing its way over the last ten years. Scott MacCallum finds out what went wrong and what was done to make sure progress was made.

Royal Cinque Ports has recovered for the errors of the '90s and are now embarking on the long road to a traditionally maintained links course.

Some golf clubs boast an interesting history but there are few which are part of golfing history. Royal Cinque Ports in Deal, Kent, is certainly one of these.

How else could you possibly describe a club which hosted The Open Championship in 1909, when the great J.H. Taylor won the title, and then again when George Duncan won the title on the first time The Open was held after the First World War?

The course has also hosted a roll of other top events including The Amateur Championship, The Brabazon and the public school Old Boys' Championship, The Halford Hewitt, which has been played at Deal since its inception in 1925.

In short Royal Cinque Ports has a historical CV to die for but, as many have found to their cost, a superb pedigree is no guarantee against inferior or outdated decision making.

Today the club is looking forward with confidence. The course policy and management is on the right lines; the management structure has been revised; long term strategies exist and the books are being filled with more black ink than red. In short, they can look back on the hard times and offer other clubs advice they would do well to heed.

A spokesman for the Board explained that droughts in the mid-90's had put the fairways under stress and that £500,000 had been spent on a complete wall-to-wall irrigation system as an insurance against such problems in the future.

This was not the first drought and experience showed that deep-rooted grasses such as bents and fescues would regenerate in the winter rains but the weed grasses (eg poa annua and rye) might well struggle.

At the time great enthusiasm was generated for the new irrigation system, which resulted in over watering of fairways and greens. The greens were cut too low in search of speed and the fairways and semi-rough were wrongly and excessively fertilised to the point where they resembled meadows.

For a time everything in the garden seemed rosy. Golfers - knowing nothing of the STRI or agronomy and having been educated by television to appreciate stripes and pretty patterns created by mowers joined the 'green is beautiful' cult - were not able to differentiate bents and fescues from poa annua and rye or parkland golf from links golf - and this was no surprise.

Steadily the weed grasses began to take a hold and there is even evidence to suggest that rye grass has been used for divotting. It has also been discovered after analysis by the STRI laboratory that the top dressing being used on the greens was more suited to a cricket wicket than a golf green. Surfaces suited to Ray Lindwall or Glen McGrath do not encourage stop on a golf ball.

At the same time other essential work was being neglected and the winter maintenance programme took second place to construction work. Aeration was largely ignored and as a result growth was impaired on the



fairway and in the semi-rough. An effort to encourage growth led to areas of the rough being fertilised resulting in further invasion of weed grasses.

When the course had to be brought up to standard for top events like the Brabazon or Halford Hewitt the mowers were taken even lower to satisfy the demand for 'speed', but this often led to mechanical scarring. Meanwhile members frequently complained that the course was not the same condition for them in the remaining weeks of the year.

Meanwhile, the Captain of the day was faced with a serious shortfall of revenue in the winter of 2000/1, accentuated by the loss of green-fee income caused by heavy rains.

A problem existed in that the organisation of the club relied on one committee answerable to the Captain, who in turn acted as Chief Executive Officer for his year in Office. A new Captain would then replace him the following year and so on, each with his own plans and ideas for what he wanted to achieve during his term. This committee was responsible for all aspects of the club life and business. There was a lack of continuity and no long-term plan.

After a study of the operations of various clubs perceived to be among those most successfully run it was decided to set up a Board of Management. This Board would run the business side of the club and the Captain's committee would run the 'golf and fun'. The green was to be the responsibility of the Board.

The Captain is seen to be the front man of the club during his year in Office, operating the golf and fun and in the background should be the Secretary, who is Chief Executive Officer reporting to the Board. The Board was first selected by a special sub-group and then voted in by the membership and the new constitution put in place in 2002.

This has resulted in the business being under control, the club being marketed effectively, the revenue altered so that a handsome, sensible profit is being made. There is now a long-term plan in place of which the members are aware of and have commented, and a plan exists to restore the course to its true heritage.

During 2000, and coincidentally with the organisation studies, the Captain, aware that all was not well with the course, asked for a report from Malcolm Peake a member well know for this work at Temple Club. Malcolm has over many years developed a wide knowledge of traditional golf course management and also a wide circle of friends and acquaintances involved in the industry.

Following this, and the decision to return the links to their true heritage, Gordon Irvine MG, who was already know to Malcolm, was taken on as Course Consultant to assist with putting the course back onto the correct path.

Gordon, who can be found on the course dusk to dawn, reported to the Board in April on what he was doing and what he had found. In May he met 100 members in a meeting which lasted about one and half hours. He briefed the membership on his actions and then answered questions. His straightforward and blunt approach was well received and the reception he got was very good indeed.

The changes Gordon has made to the course in the short term have been very noticeable with more traditional links style management in place, closely mown run ups to greens allowing for the use of putters and pitch and run shots and properly defined semi-rough. Construction work has been carried out professionally and in keeping with the rest of the course.

As necessary Gordon is working in conjunction with Donald Steel on design



matters and a leading agronomist is to be appointed. His greenkeeping team is right behind him and he is right behind them, Gordon has stressed the importance of educating and training them correctly.

Gordon has the full support of the Board in the selection and provision of capital machinery and in the approval of the programme for the following winter. It is appreciated that it will take a number of years for the course to return completely to its natural roots, but such is the superb nature of the layout that however long it takes it will be a worthwhile, if painstaking, project.

An awful number of golfers are happy with pretty, green fairways, striped and patterns that are full of weed grasses, over watered and fertilised largely because television leads them that way. To protect and deliver these conditions requires fungicides that may not always be available as we move to a more environmentally friendly society.

