

Course Feature



More to Henley than Rowing

Scott MacCallum visits Henley Golf Club and discovers there is more to the town than Boris and its world famous Regatta.

Think of the Oxfordshire town of Henley and most people will immediately conjure up images of Redgrave and Pinsent; glasses of chilled Pimms and conservative hemlines.

The more politically in tune would perhaps think of the never-out-of-the-headlines, Boris Johnson, who is the local MP. I would certainly offer long odds on golf finding its way onto your Henley radar.

But Henley Golf Club has made significant strides over the last five years and anyone who does venture into the famous town with a bag of clubs rather than an oar should no longer feel out of place.

A James Braid design constructed in 1907, the course was initially conceived as an alternative summer pursuit for the town of Henley and Braid built it for the man arriving on a bike with a half set of clubs slung over his shoulder. It would of course be wrong to criticise one of golf's finest golfer/architects but that market has changed and the pressures on some of the country's senior golf courses became too much.

To meet the demands of all year round golf and the vast increase in membership – there were 400 members in the '70s with around half active



A view down the 18th.



The new look 3rd hole.

playing members while now there are over 700 with 80-90% of them regular golfers – a plan was put in place to bring the club and course up to modern day spec and standards without compromising the original Braid design.

Much has been achieved since then thanks to a trimmed down committee and a young vibrant greenkeeping team for whom no task is too big. Head Greenkeeper, Steve Shaw, and Deputy, Mitch Stewart, operate a very workable system whereby Steve, while still spending more than his fair share of the time out on the golf course, handles all the administration – planning, record keeping, policy writing and implementation - and Mitch takes charge of the day to day greenkeeping and construction work and assigning daily and weekly tasks to the seven strong team.

A decision was taken early on that construction work in the plan would be done in house and the team has worked hard to determine how long each job should take to complete, weather permitting, so much more accurate work programmes can be established and they have found that their productivity has increased markedly as a result.

Another benefit has been to highlight just how much work is involved in apparently minor jobs. For example an arrangement with the local cricket club to maintain their pitch in exchange for the use of their car park has been shown to absorb over 300 man hours per annum not to mention the cost of seed, feed and other materials.

“The beauty of it is that the greenkeeping team has taken ownership of the golf course which wasn’t the case five years ago. Now every time I tell them how good I think the course is looking they tell me that it’s not as good as they are going to get it. It is fantastic,” said Club President Michael Herriot.

His rueful comment that previously some of the greens could be described as being like carpets - not attached to the earth.

A quote from this year’s STRI report reinforces his belief that the club is now very much on the right lines.

“It is very pleasing to note that the general playing conditions at Henley are improving year on year. That is now well ameliorated and under control, root depth on virtually every green examined was greater than previous years and the bentgrass percentage is starting to increase.”

Michael was elected President five years ago and he has overseen the modernisation of Henley as a golf club. Drawing on experience as a top executive with a blue chip company, coupled with times spent on Henley’s committee he recommended that the club scrap the old 16 strong committee and introduce a slimmed down version of eight – four committee members plus the four officers of the club.

“It is run much more like a Board than a committee and through careful nomination we ensure that you get the right people with the right skills to look after the various sub committees. Then the Chairman can co-opt into his sub committee people who have specific skills. For example we have people who are involved with interior design on the House Committee,” explained Michael.

Henley Golf Club is a traditional out and back layout laid out over a relatively tight acreage with several roads close by and crossing the course and it was a “near miss” which proved to be the catalyst for change.

“That resulted in the Green Committee having to do a Health and Safety plan and we involved a member, Simon Barrington, who had worked for the PGA at one time.



The team with Mitch Stewart, extreme right, and Head Greenkeeper Steve Shaw, insert.



Before and after on the 6th taken two days apart.



“Simon had a great interest in golf course design and had done a lot of research into health and safety issues,” said Michael, who revealed that James Braid himself had struck a steam roller which had been trundling along a road at the side of the course not long after the course had opened.

Simon produced what was to become known as the Centenary Plan, designed to ensure that when the club reached its 100th birthday in 2007 the club had a course of which to be extremely proud.

“We presented the plan at the AGM four years ago and this was passed with the proviso that as far as the members were concerned they would approve anything that was done on the golf course and that we would get professional advice for everything that we chose to do,” explained Michael, among whose more ingenious plans for the course was the introduction of plastic birds of prey to some of the trees to scare off the noisier birds.

“What we put in place was exactly the same as how my business life had been. If I don’t know how to do it myself I’m going to get someone else to tell me how we should and then we are going to do it that way without deviation. If it then doesn’t work we have some come back to the



Hard work is common place at Henley.

professional to whom we'd paid money."

Another of the key figures in the development of the club has been Dennis Oliver, the current Chairman of Green and another retired executive with a lot of business expertise.

"The budget has increased. We've invested over £400,000 on a new irrigation system for a start and the subs have gone up quite significantly as a result. But our subs were below the average by quite a bit and we'd been getting our golf on the cheap. If we wanted to make Henley one of the best clubs in the area within its class we were going to have to invest," said Dennis.

"Running in parallel with the health and safety issue which drove the centenary plan was a clear recognition that the market was changing. The number of golf clubs in this area has probably doubled in recent years but I doubt whether the number of people wanting to pay golf has doubled so it has turned from being a suppliers' market 10 years ago to a buyers' market today.

"Waiting lists are shrinking or disappearing so we have got to supply a product to our customers/members/guests/visitors that they will come and enjoy. The investment in the course and the investment in the clubhouse is all designed to try to make Henley Golf Club your club of choice if you like," said Dennis.

"I come from a business background and I have to be a little careful as this is a members' club and not strictly a business but I have to see it through a business person's eyes. All we are doing is responding to the market place and the market place is demanding more. Henley was never built to be played in winter so it didn't matter if the greens flooded or it became boggy. Now we have to be open 365 days a year and the course has to look immaculate. People's knowledge and expectations have increased and we have to respond to that. An example of this is the fact that greens are now hand cut."

The main health and safety issues involved the roads surrounding and crossing the course and principally the 3rd, 10th and 18th holes and the goal was to turn the fairways away from the road and have play directed into the golf course rather than down the side of the road.

The club is particularly proud of the 3rd, a par-5, which had involved a tee shot directly over a road and which often offered a tempting second shot to the green which invariably ended in anguished shouts of "Fore" and a prayer that no vehicle would be in the direct line of fire.

The tee has been brought to the other side of the road, although the club hopes to retain the back tee for Medals with a strict procedure for play involving player look-outs, with a new bunkering system which ensures the hole becomes a genuine three shotter with no value to taking on the green in two. So pleased are the club with the finished result, which was all accomplished through the endeavours of the in-house team, that they have put the project forward for a "Golf World Greenkeeping Achievement Award".

The work on other holes have included the re-shaping of fairways and the introducing of humps and trees to try to prevent balls flying from one

fairway to another, thus protecting people on the golf course.

The major construction work will be completed this year with tidying up work being carried out the following year so everything is as it should be by 2007 and the centenary celebrations.

The next phase is a tee audit as they are seen as a weakness, being too small and not offering sufficient rotation.

One of the recent highlights at the club was a Goldsmith Charity Day just after The Open Championship at Royal Troon which attracted among others Paul Lawrie, Barry Lane and the man who could quite easily have won that Open, Thomas Levett.

"I spoke to Thomas at The Open and arranged to caddy for him at Henley," said Mitch as he showed photographs of the day.

"He was a great guy and made time for everyone. He also had a putt for a course record on the final green which he didn't thank me for making him aware of," he laughed.

On the course, Mitch is responsible for ensuring the construction work is carried out and is keen wherever possible to use local labour and local materials. That way he ensures a good deal by missing out the middle man and that work remains in the local area.

He is also a little jealous of the younger members of the team who find themselves involved in high level work at an early stage in their careers.

"When we started for the first three years we raked bunkers, flymowed, trimmed and made tea," said Mitch, with another of the more experienced members of the team, Justin Robinson, in full agreement.

"The great thing about this place is the fact that they trust us to do what we are paid for. At the last Greens Committee a new member asked what the policy was on closing the course. He was told that it was in the policy document which states that it is down to the green staff to decide. That is just as it should be," said Mitch, who, as well as Steve, has been a regular on Frank Newberry's Management training courses.

That has seen a big board introduced to the Mess Room upon which every job for the forthcoming week is listed alongside the person responsible for carrying it out.

"We have General Maintenance; Non Weekly Maintenance; Special Projects and Outstanding Tasks, with the latter two being fitted around the first two when time permits," said Mitch.

Golf may never rival rowing when it comes to thinking about Henley but such is the work being done at the golf club Henley does have a golf club to be proud of. Indeed Sir Steve Redgrave is an Honorary and Matthew Pinsent a full member of the club.

Machinery Inventory

Amazone Multi Purpose Sweeper
Charterhouse Vertidrain
Coremaster 12 Multi Purpose Aerator
Cushman Truckster
Ford Ranger
Hardi Tractor Mounted Sprayer
Huxley Multi Depth Aerator
Kubota 38HP Mini Tractor
Kubota Front Loader
Kubota Backhoe
Marston Tipping Trailer
Massey Ferguson 62HP Tractor
Ransomes AR250
Ransomes TM80
Ransomes Fairway Slitter
Toro GM3000D
2 Toro RM3100S/w
Toro RM6500
Toro GM3250
4 Toro GM100s
Turfco Topdresser
Turfmech Leaf Blower
Woods Tractor Back Blade
3 Allen 218SI Flymos
Bosch Electric Drill
Bosch Angle Grinder
Bosch Electric Sander
Draper Air Compressor
Clarke Arc Welder
Cooper Pegler Knapsack Sprayer
Edge Pressure Washer
Echo Hedge Cutter
Hunter Relief Grinder
Farmura Walk Along Sprayer
Ryobi Electric Drill
Scotts Had Fertiliser Spreader
Sealey Lifting Bench
4 Sthil Stimmers
Sthil Hedge Cutter
3 Sthil Blowers
2 Sthil Chainsaws
Truecraft Battery Charger
Zenoah Bunker Edger



Construction work on the 6th green.