

Course Feature

A Masterly Approach

Scott MacCallum visits Phil Gates MG and views first hand the work he has done at Trentham Golf Club.

It was a proud moment in the professional life of Phil Gates, Course Manager of Trentham Golf Club, near Stoke-on-Trent. The venue was the Harrogate Lecture Theatre, the time, Wednesday morning of Harrogate week, just a few minutes before Alvin Hall was to thrill the packed audience with his remarkable Keynote Speech.

Phil's name was announced and he walked to the stage to be presented with his Master Greenkeeper Plaque by BIGGA National Chairman, George Brown and Walter Woods BEM.

For all Master Greenkeepers, including Phil's fellow inductees, Norbert Lischka and Steve Matuza, it marked the end of a long road during which hours had been spent pouring over books and reports written.

But for Phil there was the added satisfaction of knowing that, back at the club, the work he and his team had spent on the greens was beginning to bear fruit.

"A lot of people had been asking if I was doing the right thing but this winter the greens played like links greens. They were smooth, the bent content was there so they are hard wearing and members have been able to enjoy them throughout the winter," said Phil Gates MG, speaking exactly three weeks after he had officially become a member of the 39 strong Master Greenkeeper Club.

"It has taken us three or four years to get there and there has been a lot of really hard work but the benefits are now there."

That hard work had begun six years ago when Phil moved to Trentham from the K Club in Country Kildare where he had as Assistant Superintendent and learned a tremendous amount on the preparation and set up of the golf course for tournaments. This knowledge was gained from Richard Stillwell, Director of Greenkeepers for the European Tour. Following many successful European Opens the K Club is now due to host the Ryder Cup in 2006.

"When I started here in January '98 the greens drained poorly and were like poa puddings, with three inches of thatch in them. The previous regime had been one of feed and water and the club gave me the brief that they wanted the greens improved," explained Phil, whose first task was the revise the working conditions so that the team began at 7am and

not 8am, which had been the previous official starting time 12 months of the year.

Phil looked at the options which at that stage included everything from rebuilding all 18 greens to a USGA specification, installing new drainage systems in all greens, to introducing a more intensive general aeration programme.

"The club asked me if we could build greens to USGA standard in-house and I told them that the answer was 'yes'. In the October of that year we re-sited and re-built the putting green to USGA standard. The sort of person who has the confidence and ability to do this in-house as well as many other demanding tasks taken on in-house is the sort of person that goes on to gain Master Greenkeeper Status."

Having built the putting green the members took the view that they preferred traditional push-up greens for the course itself.

"The putting green was very much a trial but the club. Thinking then was that because USGA greens play differently they didn't want them. So we were asked to fix the existing greens."

Phil and the team Litag banded the greens and set about changing the grasses from Poa Annua to Avalon, overseeding four times a year to the extent that the percentage of bent in the greens is currently between 50 and 70.

"The banding was tremendous from the point of view of playability but changing the grasses was done to get rid of the dead time between March and May during which the poa-dominated greens suffered and for more sustainability in view of future chemical legislation etc. Putting the bent in benefited that time of year and we didn't have to rely on the weather to

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▲ The Trentham team with Phil Gates, far left

make the course playable."

However the natural progress of the 'new' greens was rudely interrupted by the cold drought of 2000 which killed off six of the greens altogether.

"We'd stopped feeding and stopped watering but the weather at the time meant it was a disaster and everyone was asking what we were doing and what the plan was," said Phil, who was able to count on the support and advice of Alistair Beggs, of the STRI, who was the regular advisor put into the club by the R&A on the strength of Trentham's position as an Open Qualifier venue.

"We held a couple of open days to explain what was happening but really it was a punching session for the members and I had to stand and take it. Fortunately a few of them were positive and we were able to come through it."

Looking back, Phil can also see the good that came about because of the drought.

"In hindsight it was a benefit because so much of the poa was wiped out, so when we overseeded we got a much higher percentage take."

Having climbed the hurdle placed in his way because of Millennium year weather Phil's traditional approach has brought steady improvement.

"We slit every week and haven't used any fertiliser in a year. The thatch was being eaten away naturally and we've had an excellent germination rate from our overseeding. We also have a good IPM programme in place and didn't spray fungicide for four and a half years.

"We do get fusarium but we use it as a biological cleanser, so although it's been frustrating for the members, it's been a benefit to us in helping to get rid of the poa annua. We do try to stop it, but we use calcium, sulphur, liquid iron and potassium nitrate rather than fungicide."

He still feels that the greens are not where they should be, but positive comments from members over the last couple of months have been a positive sign that things are on the up.

"I always try to get the membership away from the theory that green is good and that if the greens are grey or white and putt tremendously that is the most important thing. I tell them to concentrate on their putting and not the visual side of things," said Phil, who also advises at another club, Broughton Heath, near Derby, three times a week.

With the greens under control Phil and his team - it numbers six full time and two who work three days a week - have spent time improving the paths around the course and refurbishing the bunkers.

"Tom McKenzie, of Donald Steel's company, came in and taken things a step further on and the bunkering is very much improved now," said Phil, who added that they still had two holes to do.

Although it would appear that the club has grasped the nettle and spent money on their golf course in recent years, Phil revealed that much had been done with a relatively limited budget. Therefore all the renovation work has been carried out in-house.

"Had we reconstructed all 18 greens it would have cost around £400,000 but the drainage work we did cost us £21,000 instead. We spent £8,000 on the putting green and will be extending it, costing a further £5,000, while we also spent money improving the trees on the course, spending around £4,000 each time on three phases; moving, removing and adding trees. So in effect we have saved the club a great deal of money in the way in which we have done the work."

Phil can't praise the club highly enough as employers.

"It is a very conscious club, spending money wisely and it is full of very professional people whose contribution to my well being since I arrived has been fantastic. They appreciate what I've done and I appreciate being around them."



▲ The new bunkers have improved the definition of the course



▲ A new tee built over the winter

One member comes in for special praise and that's David Beech, who has been Chairman of Green for the past six years and who is about to stand down.

"There is no negative in David at all and he draws people towards positive conclusions. A solicitor he's a very good communicator and a real go-getter who knew nothing about greenkeeping when he started but has now learned so much I think he could go for a Head Greenkeeper's job.

"There have been a few people throughout my career who have had a huge influence on me. David Beech is one of them and Laurence Pithie is another," said Phil.

"I worked with Laurence at Wootton Bassett Golf Club in Swindon for three months and a day, CV in hand, I approached him about improving my career prospects. I went off on holiday and when I got back he told me to go down to Dummer in Hampshire, to be interviewed for a First Assistant's job, at the club which was being grown in."

Phil got the job, and quickly moved on to become Head Greenkeeper and spent two and a half years, in his own words "cutting his teeth", learning a lot and mixing with the likes of Fergie's father Major Ron Ferguson, a member, and Tara Palmer-Tompkinson, a regular in the village shop.



▲ Logs are piled to provide habitat for wildlife



▲ This owl box gives a superb view for any residents

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He moved to the K Club in January '95 as Assistant Superintendent in the then team of 42 for the 18 holes. Numbers subsequently dropped to 35 but there was a great deal of construction and renovation work going on and again it added to his portfolio of experience.

Phil, a keen amateur taxidermist - there was a recently mounted fox head on his desk when I went into his office - is also extremely keen on the environmental side of the job.

"I love nature and we've been pro-active in erecting bat and barn owl boxes, while we ensure when we fell trees we don't burn the wood but stock pile it to provide homes for mice, voles and invertebrates.," said Phil,



▲ The view down the 18th with the clubhouse in the distance

who is also involved in the English Nature/STRI programme which sees Lee Penrose making regular visits.

It was thanks to Laurence Pithie, whom he considers a mentor, that Phil first considered tackling the Master Greenkeeper programme.

"I saw how good Laurence was, and the likes of people like David Whitaker, and thought that I'd like to be as good as them one day. I felt that Master Greenkeeper was something they'd attained and that I could work towards as well."

Phil enrolled in 2000 and worked through the process until he passed the final exam in 2003.

"A lot of people think it is a mysterious process. I was one of them, although it's very well organised once you become involved. The first stage, that of collecting sufficient credits to move to the second stage was easy to complete but the second, the course visit, was very tough."

Phil's course visit was conducted by Andy Campbell and David Leach. They were tremendously supportive both prior to the visit and through it as well.

Trentham's maintenance facility is not the most modern in the country but Phil brought in an architect to draw up plans to demonstrate to Andy and David what is in the pipeline. It is expected that the new facility will be built in the next two or three years.

Once the course inspection had been successfully completed it left the two stage exam and Phil was again indebted to Laurence for supplying him with a series of test questions and answers to build him up for the examination process.

"I am absolutely delighted to have achieved it and would encourage more people to think about taking it on as you benefit individually and indirectly your club benefits from the knowledge you pick up."

The plaque, now mounted in the clubhouse bar, is evidence that the hard work paid off for Phil Gates MG.