

Course Feature

A Guardian Angel

Just like Robbie Williams Ravensworth Golf Club has an Angel watching over it and, as Scott MacCallum found out, she has seen great things happening at the club

We'd all like to think we've got an angel watching over us but very few of us can actually point to our very own Angel and not have the men in white coats lining up to take us away.

Ravensworth Golf Club, in Gateshead, does have an angel watching over the members and staff - the famous Angel of the North, which at its nearest point is no more than a few hundred yards from the course. While many may be sceptical that such a heavenly influence can have a genuine impact on the fortunes of a golf club, a look at Ravensworth over the last six years will show genuine progress as both a golf course and a golf club.

Of course you should add that the Angel has had quite a bit of support, not least from Ravensworth's Head Greenkeeper, John Talbot, his team, and a number of committed club members. It is very much a team effort.

So what has the Angel presided over during the last six years?

Well, in that time the club has moved to a wonderful new clubhouse on the other side of the course from the original; the course has been reconfigured to fit

the new arrangement; an extensive drainage and aeration policy has ensured the course stays open in even the worst of the wet weather; new tees, bunkers and lakes have been added while the club now boasts a superb junior section thanks to an innovative policy involving the local schools. Add to that a new irrigation system, which itself is soon to be upgraded, and new maintenance facilities and you have a golf club that can't be accused of standing still.

"It is amazing just how far we've come in six years," said Club Chairman, Colin Reay, whose personal efforts towards the wellbeing of the golf club since he took over as Chairman 10 years ago have been mammoth.

The major change in the six years has been the new clubhouse, the need for which came about when the lease with Lord Ravensworth Estates was due to run out and the existing clubhouse, maintenance facility and car park were earmarked for luxury apartments.

The new site, which on casual observation looks nothing less than a number one choice, had been identified as potential land for a hole extension about 20 years ago and



John Talbot (right), Head Greenkeeper, with his Club Chairman, Colin Reay.



John with his dedicated team.

The Angel of the North can be seen throughout the course.



What the Angel would look like if Colin had his way.

it was only when a member pointed out just how much land the club actually owned in that vicinity.

"There was enough for 110 car park spaces and a new clubhouse and when you look at some of the views we have – including the Angel – it became the place," said Colin.

Indeed the local Council requested that the club change the name of the 16th hole to Angel View, which is the closest hole to the course.

Colin, always thinking of the club, did want to put a sign to the golf club on the left hand wing of Gateshead's most famous resident. His fellow members are fairly sure he was only half joking.

The two storey clubhouse was opened on December 19 last year and brought into play the newly configured golf course.

The old 7th became the 1st and the 6th became the 18th and a short uphill par-4 instead of a par-3. The course is laid out over three fields, each with its own characteristics and the only real downside is the fact that the poor members are still coming to terms with the fact that they start their round with the toughest hole on the course.

"The 1st is an extraordinarily difficult par-4, currently playing to an average of 6.4. John is currently building a lake on the left hand side to add more difficulty to the tariff while there is out-of-bounds all down the right and a blind approach shot. Of course it is very much frowned upon to have your stroke index 1 as the 1st hole so we'll have to see how it works when the course settles down," explained Colin, as a group of us including John and Mike Potter, the Club Secretary, sat in the new bar area.

Having survived that 1st there are only a few holes to wait until you hit the 7th an uphill 244 yard par-3 over a

valley, with the green guarded on one side by trees and the other by a big bunker. They breed them tough in the North East!

John took over as Head Greenkeeper when the previous Head Man, Mark Bowman, was head hunted by Seaton Carew Golf Club. Mark, in fact was the first professional greenkeeper the club had ever had and was brought to Ravensworth by Colin.

"Before that it was a very old fashioned system, run on purse strings with £25 the limit any committee man could spend before having to go back to the committee itself," recalled Colin.

John had previously been a one man band in charge of a small 18 hole course, a nine hole academy, a 10 bay driving range and a putting green in Wensleydale.

"Before John was appointed a colleague and I went down to have a look at it and were amazed at what one man had done. He'd even put in an irrigation system," said Colin.

"I looked after it for a couple of years and it was tough putting in 80-90 hours a week and not having a holiday," said John, before Colin jumped in to say that he works more hours now.

Ravensworth was renowned for having the fastest greens in the area but John was concerned that they perhaps weren't the healthiest.

"Every time it rained we were closed so when I started I advocated an intensive aeration programme and hollow tined in May and August," said John.

"I was terrified, but John was always confident it would come together. You've got to remember our members had never seen anything like this and had been happy with their golf course. Then this young lad turns up and tells them that it won't work if we



John's ditch digging protected the course from flooding.

carried on like it. He said he would stand or fall by his actions as long as we backed him initially which we did," said Colin.

Three years in and the course was transformed and John and Colin were receiving pats on the back from those who'd been critical of the policy prior to that.

Being carried out alongside the aeration was the drainage, necessary because the course, in the old home field, could be like a swamp in very little rain.

"There was a problem with a quarry which had been filled in close to the course which caused water to gravitate to the course so I dug an open ditch across the old 2nd and 18th fairways and since then there hasn't been a problem," explained John, who was a runner-up in the Toro Student Greenkeeper of the Year Award last year, and who is hoping to add to his education by tackling an MSc at Cranfield University soon.

"As well as being Chairman of the Club I'm also Chairman of the Newcastle and District League so I can go to every club in the area during the season and, while there are better lay-outs than Ravensworth, there is no course in the area which has had as much work done as ours or which comes close to the condition we have," said Colin, with a degree of pride.

Being in an urban location vandalism is a constant problem – 18 flags a week were being lost at one stage and police are currently investigating a fire which saw the old clubhouse and sheds razed to the ground in June - but it has reduced since the club sent out a letter to all the neighbouring schools offering free golf lessons on a Friday evening and free use of the course on Sunday afternoons for the juniors.

"We now have a Junior Section to be proud of and a lot of low handicappers among them," said Colin, who also tackled the vandalism problem by approaching the local Police Commander and offering reduced membership to the boys in blue.

"Over 20 of them have taken the club up on the offer and the

new members are very quick at responding to problems on their golf course.

It has all lead to Ravensworth gaining an excellent reputation not just as a golf club but as a potential employer and the club is often approached by fathers and mothers hoping to place their children in work at the club.

"It is the club's policy that as soon as someone is employed they are enrolled at college and they must be prepared to attend college before they will even be considered," explained Mike.

That training extends to driving lessons.

"When I started 10 years ago we only had one member of staff with a driving licence and with a road running through the course that was a problem. We were liable so I said the club would pay them to take their driving test and we still do that," said Colin.

For all the huge strides that the club has made over the last six years Colin is in no doubt where much of credit should go.

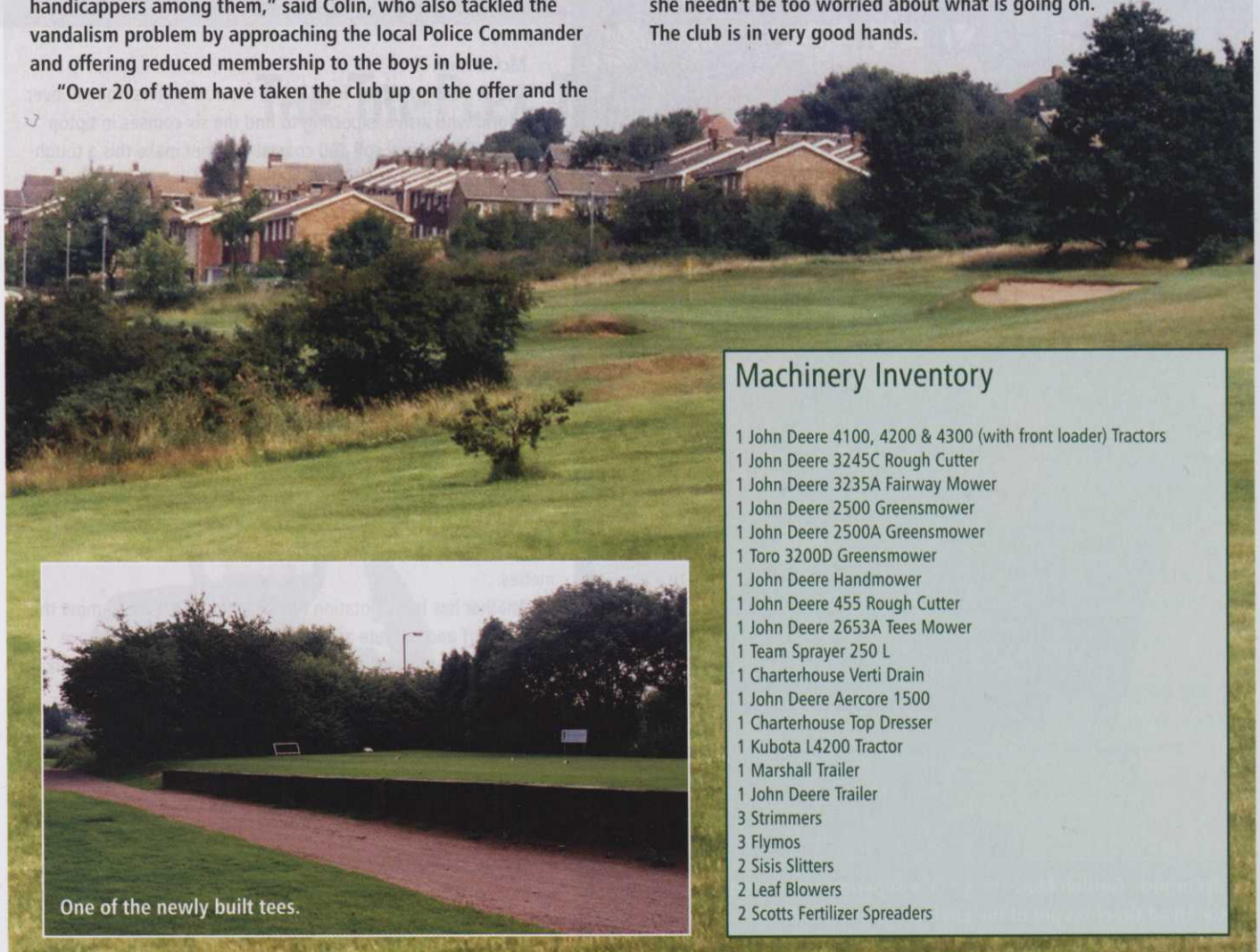
"The best thing to happen to this club has been John. He is first class and what he has done to the golf course has been superb and made a huge difference to the course."

To illustrate the point Colin and Mike point out that in the past the club would take in around £8,000-£10,000 per annum in green fees and that now it was around £3,000 a week while societies always rebook when they've made a visit to the course.

If clubs think that employing a qualified Course Manager or Head Greenkeeper is an expensive option the experiences of Ravensworth blow that out of the water.

"You get what you pay for and John and his team have proved that," said Colin.

So while the Angel of the North is watching over Ravensworth she needn't be too worried about what is going on. The club is in very good hands.



One of the newly built tees.

Machinery Inventory

- 1 John Deere 4100, 4200 & 4300 (with front loader) Tractors
- 1 John Deere 3245C Rough Cutter
- 1 John Deere 3235A Fairway Mower
- 1 John Deere 2500 Greensmower
- 1 John Deere 2500A Greensmower
- 1 Toro 3200D Greensmower
- 1 John Deere Handmower
- 1 John Deere 455 Rough Cutter
- 1 John Deere 2653A Tees Mower
- 1 Team Sprayer 250 L
- 1 Charterhouse Verti Drain
- 1 John Deere Aercore 1500
- 1 Charterhouse Top Dresser
- 1 Kubota L4200 Tractor
- 1 Marshall Trailer
- 1 John Deere Trailer
- 3 Strimmers
- 3 Flymos
- 2 Sisis Slitters
- 2 Leaf Blowers
- 2 Scotts Fertilizer Spreaders