

Course Feature



▲ Andrew Ross, Kevin Hill, Mark Campbell and Robert McTurk

From Small Acorns...

Gareth Jones visits Thornhill Golf Club where a three man greenkeeping team are battling with limited budgets and time to produce a top course.

We have all heard and, most probably, used the phrase “from small acorns large oaks grow” at least once in our lifetime. This particularly poignant saying can be applied to many instances but it is no more apt than at Thornhill Golf Club, an 18 hole course nestled away in the Dumfriesshire countryside, where a three man green staff has been battling with restricted budgets, time and man power to produce a superb parkland/heathland golf course.

The club was established in April 1893 as a nine hole track and had to wait 86 years until it was extended to 18 holes in 1979, the club waiting until 1996 to enlarge its Clubhouse. In the years between the two extensions, particularly in the early to mid 1990’s, Thornhill enjoyed a membership of over 700 and a green staff of five full time and two seasonal workers.

However, as with many smaller clubs, as the 90’s progressed they were rocked by the changing times within the golf world, namely competition from other courses. The club was hit hard when two local, but higher profile and wealthier clubs, the Dumfries and Galloway Golf Club and Dumfries and Country Golf Club, opened up their membership. Thornhill’s membership plummeted to below 500, with the resulting decrease of income meaning an obvious cut back in resources and the greenkeeping team was reduced from five to three, with the seasonal workers being targeted also.

The tightening of the Thornhill purse strings came at the same time as Kevin Hill was promoted to the position of Head Greenkeeper, in 1996. Despite landing his dream job, Kevin, who has now been at the club for 16 years, faced the ominous task of improving the course in order to attract back wandering members, while working with impedingly small budgets and just two other men.

If the Headman’s job wasn’t already tough enough Kevin and his trusty men had to rewrite the wrongs of the past and put the course back to its rightful state before they could actually move on and improve the course, a case off taking two steps back to take just one forward.

“When I first got the job we focused all our energy on getting the course back up to scratch. We needed to improve the course and move it forward, but before any of that we had to mend what I considered some of the errors of the past. From a greenkeeping point of view a lot had been done to the course which just shouldn’t have happened,” said Kevin, as we chatted in a corner of the cosy clubhouse with Thornhill’s Green Convenor, Robert McTurk.

Inherited problems included poor drainage, tees, greens and disease; in Kevin’s first season he was spraying for fusarium every week.

“Previous to 1996 we fed the course all the time and we had so many problems with disease all over the course, we just never got rid of it. I believe in minimal feeding and I don’t use fungicides, mainly due to these early experiences, and when I took over I installed this policy straight away. Now we are at the stage when we don’t get too much disease at all, particularly on the greens. Obviously we still get a bit, which course doesn’t, but it is only the odd isolated spot and that is it. The greens are better than ever now,” stated Kevin proudly.

Drainage was the next headache for the three man team, the 4th fairway especially needed attention. Drainage pipes had been placed incorrectly, so that they actually ran up hill as they came to the ditch, which wasn’t deep enough in the first place, and to add to the predicament the pipes only ran to the edge of the fairway instead of all the way to the end of the rough. Visually, the 4th was the most dramatic portrait of this trouble but other parts of the course were suffering from the inadequate drainage. The materials used in the construction of tees and greens had left a lot to be desired and in the long run had cost the club both valuable time and money, both commodities it just cannot afford.

“The drainage that was put in just wasn’t up to the job and because it wasn’t done right it is still causing us problems 10 years down the line. Back in 1996 we rebuilt three tees straight away, as they were in such a bad way. The tees and greens had not been built correctly originally and the wrong materials were used, so they looked and played well for the first season, but after that we had so many problems with them.”

Kevin and his team of Mark Campbell, Senior Greenkeeper, and Andrew Ross, Assistant Greenkeeper, knew that, with constricted time, money and manpower, they could no longer afford continually to come back to elements of the course that needed repairing time and again. In order to eradicate this and achieve healthy, stable greens and tees they liaised closely with Richard Windows, Turfgrass Agronomist with the STRI, and developed a set method and standard of materials that all Thornhill tees and greens would be constructed from if required.

“We have a certain specification, based on USGA guidelines, in place now and we use this for everything. It doesn’t matter what the job, whether we are placing pipes in greens or fairways, we use the same sand, the same grit, and the same gravel all the time. We know this method works for us and it has benefited the course massively. Having a standardised set of methods also means that if I left the club and somebody else came in they could look at this system, see that it works well and carry it on,” said Kevin, who is a Dumfries lad and, despite his last comment, gives the impression that he will not be leaving his beloved Scottish course for a long time to come.

Rebuilding tees and greens, using a USGA based specific for this process and purchasing the correct materials doesn’t come cheap and it is here that the relationship between Kevin and Robert has become a crucial part of the club’s success.

“We have known each other for a long time, I used to play golf with Robert when I was a kid. I wouldn’t say we have always seen eye to eye, but

as both a Greens Convenor and before that as a Captain he has always been strong and has done a lot for me. He gets done what I want, rather than what he wants."

"We had a fundamental problem here that each Captain, rightly or wrongly, wanted to make his mark, this meant there was no continuity to what was happening on the course. We needed to put the course in the hands of people that really knew what was needed and we are very lucky that we have this with our greens staff, ably led by Kevin," said Robert, who has been in his current position since 2002.

"I see my role as the link between the staff and the Committee. As a four we discuss as much as we can in order to develop a better working relationship, as communication in a club this size is very important. Then we will go to the council and put our case forward."

It took six years for the team to get the course back up to a standard that they were happy with, now they could finally move forward and it was this new enlightened thinking from the club which would dramatically aid Kevin, Mark and Andrew's job. 1994 saw the greenkeeping team enjoying a budget of £36,000 plus, since then this has been radically reduced, in the past Kevin has had no more than around a £20,000 budget to play with and typically he is limited to £18,000, which is now on the increase.

Despite this, the club, which is essentially run by a six man panel consisting Captain, Vice Captain, Greens Convenor, Secretary, Treasurer and Bar Convenor, has done everything in its power to provide Kevin with the equipment and materials he requires to complete his and the club's aim of making Thornhill one of the top courses in the south of Scotland.

"The club has come a long way in recent years. I now feel that I can go to the Committee and tell them what I would like to do and what I need to do it and they will support me fully. I remember when I first started here I was sent out to cut the rough with a scythe and used hand shears to cut around the base of trees. It is changed days now, we have a replacement programme in place and we get most of the equipment we want," stated a delighted Kevin, who was promoted to the position of Course Manager in February, another sign that Thornhill is moving on.

"The club now realise that we have to try and take some pressure off the greenkeeping team. We just can't afford to employ another member of staff, so we have to find ways of easing the workload and freeing up their time as best we can so they can focus on improving the course rather than spending all their time just keeping it ticking over. If that means spending money on a certain bit of kit or rebuilding a tee so we don't have to come back to it time and again then so be it. In many cases we are spending money to save money in the long run," added Robert, a man clearly focused on bringing Thornhill into the 21st century and building up the club's reputation once again.

Kevin has learnt to be patient at Thornhill, special projects that he wishes to undertake to improve the course have to wait until time and finances allow and for the majority it is a case of prioritising tasks and being flexible.

"You have to be sensible and understand the club's position. You have to give and take, for instance, do you spend £10,000 a year on rebuilding one green or do you spend £15,000 on a verti-drainer which can improve all the greens year in year out? We chose to do the later. This is when you have to balance things out and wait to do those special projects when time allows. If we have a machine breakdown and need money to repair it the first thing to cut from the budget is a special project, that is just how we have to work. It is hard to run an 18 hole course on a £18,000 budget," concluded the Headman.

During his time in charge at Thornhill Kevin has overseen the rebuilding of 15 tees in total, including the medal tees at the 1st, 4th, 6th, 11th and 12th. Again Kevin has had to watch the accounts carefully. When rebuilding the 17th tee the club could not afford to fit real sleepers, so Kevin used scrap wood instead, the skill of the installation by the team ensuring that the golfer could not tell between the two.



▲ The old 16th tee



▲ Construction of the new 16th tee



▲ The 16th tee as it looks today

Course Feature

This winter's developments have been concentrated on the 16th hole, the main project of rebuilding the tee taking 14 days to do. Originally it was decided to build a new tee for yellow boxes. As the season wound down, the winter golfers came out and, as the three men prepared to start the work, Kevin placed a mat further back from the original tee in place of a winter tee. The result was that the members liked the new tee position of the mat so much that it was decided to add in a 180 square yard medal tee 20 yards further back. The outcome was a 450sq yd yellow tee, a medal tee sitting comfortably behind this, and a handsome red stone path running through the middle of them both.

"It looks great and we are very, very pleased with it. The thing with projects like new tees is that when the golfer comes back from their winter break they can actually see what work has been done and where the money has been spent, so this helps them appreciate it all. The problems come and more questions are asked when you spend the winter dealing with massive work that isn't as clear to see, like digging up and replacing drainage pipes," said Kevin.

Undertaking work of this magnitude, while still successfully managing and maintaining the rest of the 6102 yards, par 71, course, requires a strong staff dynamic between the three greenkeepers. Kevin is a self confessed perfectionist, a man who refuses to cut corners and makes sure all work that is done to the Thornhill course is completed to the highest of standards, using the best materials possible. Luckily for both Kevin and Thornhill, Mark, who has been at the club for four years, and Andrew, who has had two stints at Thornhill cumulating in nine years, are equally as obsessive about the course's health and presentation.

"Like in any other job, when I got promoted I found it hard to go from one of the boys to being the boss. It took me a while to find my feet and initially I had some problems," confessed Kevin, who has also found time to reinstate lost heather and gorse throughout the course during his time in charge.

"Changes were made, I developed into the role and we have a great team now. I like to think that we have a good respect for each other and it helps that we have a lot in common, that makes a big difference. We are all perfectionists and we all aim to produce a high level of workmanship.

"With just two guys under you it is difficult, you do have to manage time so well. It is hard but I am very lucky that Mark and Andrew are so good. I have full confidence to send them out on the course and I know that they will do what I have asked them to do to an excellent standard. They know what I want and I know what they can do, it makes things a hell of a lot easier."

The end result of all this hard work is a golf course described by the locals as a 'hidden jewel', the course is fully booked for May by visiting parties, something that is a first for Thornhill. The club also warmly welcomes any visitors to come and play the course and see for themselves just how far it has developed.

The course is the home to Ryder Cup golfer Andrew Coltart, who commented recently: "Every year when I return to Thornhill there is a marked improvement in the course, its condition, the presentation and the setup. I'm really proud of the work that Kevin has done, I can talk about my club with pride now and know that anyone who plays the course will enjoy the challenge and the ride."

Thanks to the efforts of Kevin and his team Thornhill has a course that is moving up to the next step. Kevin has planned to have all the greens and tees standardised within the next five years, with the 10th being the next on his list.

If Kevin and his team's future developments match the level of their previous nine years' work, forget the tiny budgets, overlook the undersized staff and ignore the limited equipment, because Thornhill Golf Club will grow into a great oak, it is already well on its way.



▲ The new 15th tee

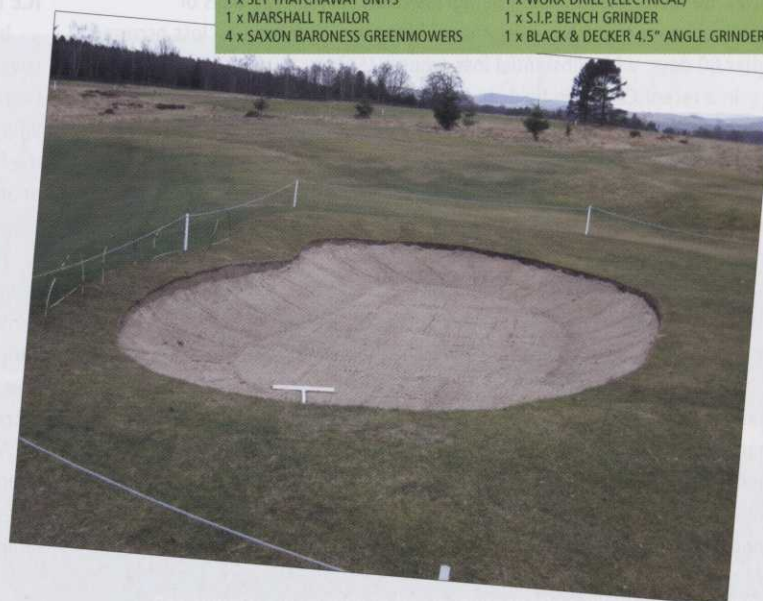


▲ The 9th

THORNHILL GOLF CLUB INVENTORY

1 x RANSOMES FAIRWAY 250
 1 x JOHN DEERE 2653A
 1 x TORO 3000D GREENSMOWER
 1 x TORO 3000D TEESMOWER
 1 x JOHN DEERE 4600 TRACTOR
 1 x JOHN DEERE GATOR
 2 x CUSHMAN
 1 x ZETOR TRACTOR
 1 x TRAILED 5 GANGS
 1 x FRONT LOADER
 1 x CHARTERHOUSE 7316 VERTI-DRAIN
 1 x TURFCO WIDESPIN 1530 TOP DRESSER
 1 x WESSEX ROTARY MOWER
 1 x SET THATCHAWAY UNITS
 1 x MARSHALL TRAILOR
 4 x SAXON BARONESS GREENMOWERS

1 x SAXON BARONESS TEESMOWER
 5 x ALLEN HOVER MOWERS
 3 x FLYMO
 4 x DANARM STRIMMERS
 2 x ZENOA BACKPACK BLOWERS
 1 x HARDI SPRAYER
 1 x RYAN TURFCUTTER
 1 x ROYER SCREENER
 1 x SISIS DEEP SLITTER
 1 x SISIS BRUSH
 1 x SISIS LITAMISER
 1 x EARTHWAY FERTILISER SPREADER
 1 x EHRLE PRESSURE WASHER
 1 x HURRICANE AIR COMPRESSOR
 1 x WORX PLANNER (ELECTRICAL)
 1 x WORX DRILL (ELECTRICAL)
 1 x S.I.P. BENCH GRINDER
 1 x BLACK & DECKER 4.5" ANGLE GRINDER



▲ A new bunker thanks to the handy work of Mark Campbell