

Course Feature



Niall McKibbon

Racing Ahead

Scott MacCallum may have arrived at Ramsey on the Isle of Man on four wheels rather than two but he found the golf course just as interesting as the TT course.

Hear the name "Ramsay" and what do you think of? Is it the guy who managed England to the Jules Remes Trophy in the dim and distant past? Perhaps it's that famous street in Australia with all those neighbours? It could also be the bloke who invented the ladder or the chef with the colourful language.

See it written down as "Ramsey", though, and unless you are acquainted with the names Ducati, Kawasaki, Yamaha, Suzuki and Honda, it may not mean much to you. Ramsey is the town on the north of the Isle of Man where the famous TT course passes through but it is also home to a very fine golf course which, although it may never usurp motor bike racing as Ramsey's claim to fame, is a good reason to pack your golf clubs as well as your leathers if you're ever in the area.

"They average 200 miles an hour for the 39 mile course," revealed Course Manager, Niall McKibbon, who has a library of gory tales of what has happened to some of the racers when things go just slightly wrong. Indeed just a couple of weeks after my visit a sidecar passenger died in Ramsey itself during one of the races.

"They close the road for practice in the morning and then again for racing in the late afternoon and the noise can be deafening when they pass just beside the golf course, having started at ten second intervals," said the young Ulsterman, who has been Course Manager since May '99.

In that time he has done much to polish what is undoubtedly a fine James Braid layout through the introduction of new working practices, new course presentation and a bunker reconstruction programme which has moulded the greenkeeping team together and provided the course with a set of bunkers even Gary Player would enjoy pitching his skills against.

The project which really relaunched the club came in 1999 when architect, Steve Marnoch, and construction company, Delta 2000, were appointed to look at the first six holes and last two of the course. Four and a half miles of drainage pipe was installed, new ditches were built, tees were reconstructed and all the bunkers in that phase, the clubhouse side of a course which is split by a road, were rebuilt.



The success of that project gave the club a taste of what the course could be like and Niall was asked to redo the remaining bunkers.

"We started the bunker programme in October 2002 when we did 15 bunkers on holes 7 to 11 and the response from the members to those was good. They were astonished by the visual enhancement of the holes and the change from having a bunker which went up to their knee caps to having to be on their tip toes to see out."



Niall and his staff

Over the following two years, having got the bit between their teeth the team did a further 23 bunkers and 10 holes and the entire project was completed last winter.

"It was a buzz. The boys were coming in when the weather was terrible keen to get stuck in and they were often turfing bunkers in the pouring rain."

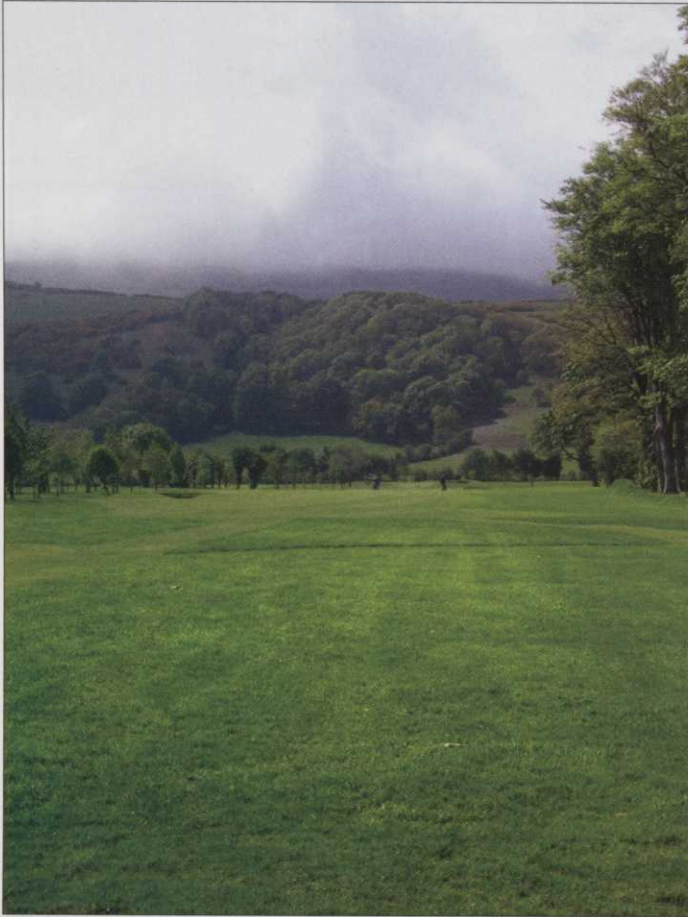
Niall took the lead on that first phase using the experienced he'd picked up through working on golf course constructions in South Carolina and Virginia as a young greenkeeper in the mid 90s.

"The club asked me to take on the construction - basically to design and build the bunkers from scratch - and one thing I would say is that you won't know how good you are until you are put in a situation where you have to think about the knowledge and skills you have picked up and then put them to good use. Being naïve and 23 in the States I thought everything was going in one ear and out the other but eight years later I found myself putting into practice what I'd picked up.

"I found the best way was to return the old bunker to flat ground and then assessing the situation, imagining the bunker before I put anything into the ground. When I got the shape I'd visualise the shot and take some more out if I thought it was too shallow," explained Niall.

All the staff were involved throughout the process, preparing the ground and removing the turf, putting in the membrane, adding the sand and returning.

"The following year I taught two of the guys how to do it because I could have been off sick and they might have needed to step in and they picked up the skills."



One of them did get a little carried away though on a bunker on the 13th fairway.

"I was driving back across the course and I couldn't see the digger. I got a little closer and I could just see the bucket coming up. He'd gone so deep the digger was below the level of the surface. We pulled it back to about six feet deep although he had been about 10."

Despite the severity of the new Ramsey bunkers the course record has gone four times in recent years and Niall is still smarting that his own record 64 was beaten last season by a 63.

When he took over as Course Manager he started to bring in presentation styles more sympathetic to a Braid designed course.

"I introduced the shaping of fairways and started to off set the tees which was a feature of Braid courses. I'd also noticed that every green was cut differently so I now get the guy cutting the greens to put a stroke on the calendar in the Mess room so that the guy who is cutting next knows which way to make the cut," said Niall, as he pointed out the calendar covered in a series of pen marks.

"We change that every day through the season so I can see how many times we've cut them and which direction they've been cut in. It's second nature to the guys now," he explained, adding that he now also had policies in place for the cutting of fairways.

He has also left more areas uncut, which is more environmentally friendly and cuts down on the workload for the team.

His communications skills verbally and in written form are well honed and he also has knack of finding a way to get a job done.

When the ladies were concerned about rough being left in front of one of their tees and their ability to make the carry he gave them all survey flags to take out with them on a competition to indicate where their drives had finished so he could amend his strategy appropriately.

The other significant change he introduced involved the working hours of the team and he did so initially on a trial basis after having floated the idea past them first.

"They used to work 8am-5pm and take three breaks a day. I felt you'd only

got started on something when it was time for another break so I proposed 6am - 2.30pm which we operated for four and a half years. We changed it last year in response to the lady members, who felt that the machines were too noisy on Ladies' Day, so now we work 6am - 3.30pm four days a week and 6am - 10am on Tuesdays. The boys now enjoy those hours."

He has recently introduced a three flag system so the colour of the flag signifies if the pin is front, middle or back.

"It is helpful to the members but also means that the guys cutting the holes have to make sure they think more about what they are doing and have six front, six middle and six back. Prior to that the holes were sometimes moved without too much thought to pin position."

Niall started his career at his home club of Royal County Down where he worked under Walter Beattie. Whenever he's home he visits Alan Strachan, a man for whom he has the utmost respect, but while his upbringing was on a links, he has no desire to return to that style of course.

"I've gone away from links and been on inland golf for sometime so I think I'd find myself getting confused if I returned to links. The only way forward for me is to stay with the type of golf course I know best and that's parkland," explained Niall, who has now settled down well into island life and married a local girl.

Island life does have its complications however and compromises have to be made.

"I went to four different quarries on the island to ask for a sample of bunker sand as bringing it in from the mainland is just too prohibitive - it would work out at nearly £8,000 for 100 tones and I spent £3,000 on 210 tonnes. I eventually stumbled across what I thought was an excellent sand and sent it to my agronomist, Dave Bates, and he was blown away by it. Unfortunately the quarry has since moved and I'm back to square one but it is something we have to deal with."

Another problem is coping with the pace of life on the island, remarkable for somewhere where the record for getting around 39 miles of it is under 20 minutes.

"I recently ordered some speed rollers from Greentech and they were delivered to the island but then didn't arrive. I finally got the name of the company who had them and was told that they'd get them up to me in two



The team have been busy with a bunker reconstruction programme



The course boasts some superb views

days as it wasn't a big enough order to do it straight away. I ended up driving the 16 miles from Ramsey to Douglas and picking them up myself.

"It is a lot slower and you have to be patient. The Manx have a saying, 'Tres De Loure' which roughly translated is, 'What can't be done today can be done tomorrow'. It just means you have to plan ahead. If you want something in June order it in March."

It is also important to have a good mechanic to keep the machines operational and Niall appointed just such a character in 2003 and Dave Birchenough has since proved his worth.

RAMSEY GOLF CLUB INVENTORY

- Toro 3250 Greens Mower
- Toro 3000 Tee Mower
- Toro 216 Green Bankings
- Toro 3300 Utility Vehicle
- Toro 4500 Rough Mower
- Jacobson Lf3810 Fairway Mower
- Renault Pales 210 Tractor
- Ford 1920 Tractor
- Bobcat 328 Mini Digger
- Toro 1800lt Topdresser
- Charterhouse Slitter Attachment
- 3 x Kawasaki Strimmers
- M1tsubisha Strimmer
- 2 x Suzuki Flymos M12ox Gt500
- Charterhouse 105 145 Verti Drain
- Graden Greens Scarifer and Slitter
- Mountfield Xte50 Hand Mower
- Canon C8 Rotavator
- Ryan Sod Cutter
- Paladin Hand Mower
- Gambettibarre 450 Sprayer Attachment
- Toro Green Aerator Not Working For Last 3 Years
- Clarke Mig Welder 220te Turbo
- Karcher Hd 525s Pressure Washer
- Oleo Mae Bv 162 Blower
- Oleo Mae 951 Chainsaw
- Oleo Mae 962 Chainsaw
- Bernhard + Co Rota Minor Relief Grinder
- Bernhard + Co Rapid Relief 1000 Bed Knife Sharpener
- Toro Blow Vac

"He'd been in the automotive industry for 36 years and decided on a career change and there isn't a machine he doesn't know inside out. He can tell if there's a problem just from the sound a machine might make," said Niall, who has since promoted him to become his Deputy.

He is very keen that his team are properly trained and he encouraged Paul McGreal, of Myerscough College, to visit once a month to work with his team.



"Initially he just came here but now Paul visits virtually every club on the island. In fact when our guys all became qualified we had our picture on the front page of the island newspaper," said Niall, who is also D32 and D33 qualified and proud of his tough assessments.

"I was assessing one of the guys on irrigation and was going to fail him but Paul told me that it was the toughest assessment he'd ever seen, and advised me to pass him."

The work is paying off however and one of his team has recently left to take up a position at a golf club in Austria, proof if it were needed that if you work at it greenkeeping can be a passport to seeing the world.

Ramsey may be synonymous to bikers but thanks to the work of Niall and his team it is now on the golfing map as well.