

Course Feature



▲ Adrian Harris

Water, Water Everywhere...

Scott MacCallum meets Adrian Harris, Course Manager at Hellidon Lakes, where water plays just as big a role as grass in the course management.

If you ever wander into the Pro Shop and see the man whose name adorns the side of the Audi 3 series parked in its own space in the car park indulging in a power nap with a satisfied grin on his face here's what I think he might be dreaming about.

Your man has disappeared off into a world where his pro shop, miles from the nearest golf discount store, is well stocked and well positioned near a 1st tee which is booked solid every day from 6.30am. He is visualising the opening tee shot faced by his members and all he can see is water. Yes, the opening tee shot involves a 300 yard carry over water in every direction! And the reason he's smiling? He's just thinking about how much he's going to make on golf ball sales.

I head off into this flight of fancy after a visit to Hellidon Lakes Hotel and Golf Club, near Daventry, which boasts 17 lakes in total, many of them in play.

And although it isn't the 1st hole the 18th was almost a Professional's dream hole. However, Course Manager Adrian Harris has recently made amendments to ensure fewer Titleists and Dunlop 65s find a watery grave. Until then a 180 yard carry over the largest of these lakes, invariably into the prevailing wind was required before you could two putt and head off to the 19th for a little refreshment.

The alternative was to treat the short par-4 as a par-6 or par-7 and play carefully round three sides of the lake.

"If you could carry the ball 180 to 190 yards into a howling gale then you were ok," said Adrian, employing his droll Midland sense of humour to good effect.

"The only other option was to go around the lake. In golfing terms it wasn't really a hole."

Hellidon Lakes is owned by hotel group Marston who bought the complex five years ago having previously been privately developed.

"A retired businessman bought the land for somewhere to walk the dog and a friend suggested that he should build a golf course on it," explained Adrian.

That was in the mid '80s and the original layout was designed by David Snell, who utilised the land to good effect to produce an excellent undulating test of golf and built the many lakes which provide the club with its name.

"It's a good challenging golf course, not particularly long at around 6100 yards, but if you take on some of the shots you can be rewarded while there is also opportunity for the less able or more conservative to play the course," said the 40 year-old six handicapper.

Unlike Course Managers at proprietary owned or members' golf clubs where the course is the number one priority, a Course Manager at a hotel owned golf course often has to accept that the core business is the hotel and that focus is not always on the golf course.



▲ The Hellidon Lakes team

This can be frustrating but Adrian has turned it to his advantage and his free hand and ability to make strides with minimal investment is much to be admired.

"I've always wanted a golf course where I can work and, within reason, do what I want and here I'm able to put my own little touches to it and people either like them or not. Luckily, people have enjoyed what I've done so far."

That 18th hole with the Kamikaze carry is on such example.

"When I arrived and first saw the old 18th I thought that it was something that we could do a lot better. I discussed it with members and we had committee meetings and walked around the course. I told them what I thought and they told me what they thought and we came to the joint conclusion that something had to be done as it was an unfair golf hole," said Adrian as we sat in the attractive room which acts as the clubhouse in the hotel overlooking the course.

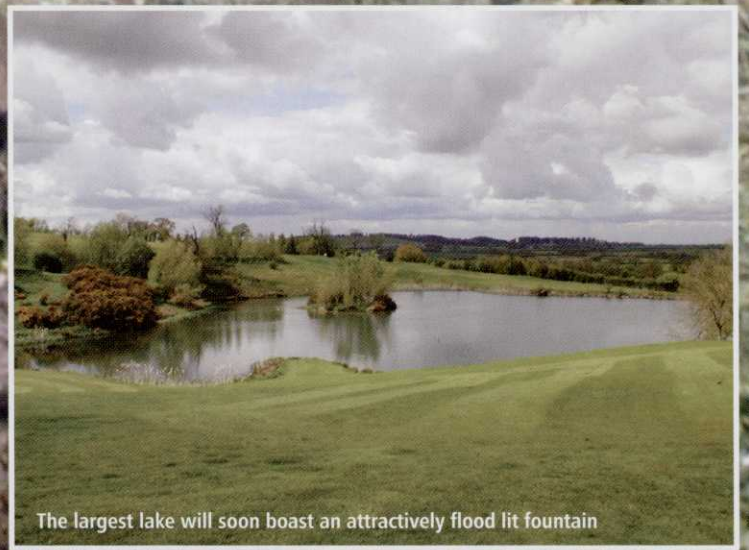
"I produced lots of drawings which I presented to the General Manager of the hotel and he then took them to the Chairman of the Hotel Branch. After I was given outline approval I went out to get some prices and cost the project."

Wherever possible Adrian and his team, he has seven including a mechanic and a gardener for the 27 hole complex, do work in-house as not only is it cost effective but it is an ideal way to motivate the team.

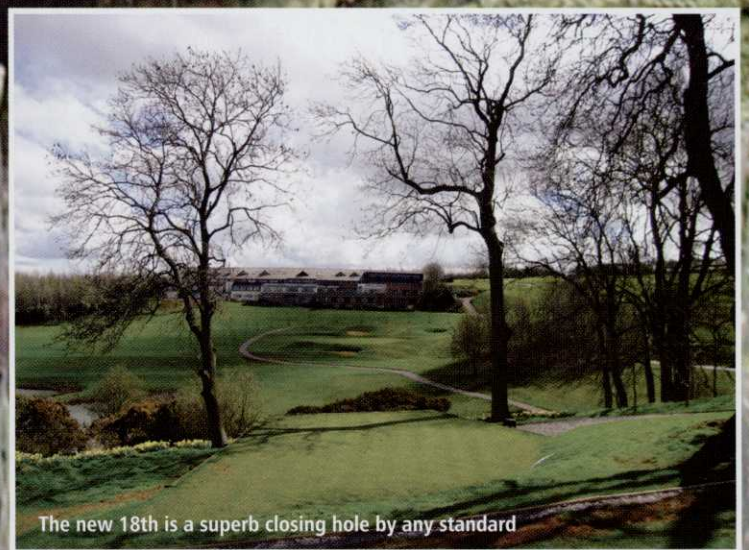
"I always have a winter project and I get the team together to discuss it and share ideas. If the guys put in their own thoughts and they are adopted they feel valued and everyone feels they have ownership of the project."



The 7th is a testing par 4 with a small lake to catch the errant drive



The largest lake will soon boast an attractively flood lit fountain



The new 18th is a superb closing hole by any standard

Course Feature

The new 18th is a much improved hole offering those arriving on the tee with a well put together scorecard an opportunity of finishing with a birdie but also requiring to steel themselves for a 150 to 170 yard par-3 which takes out much of the carry but keeps the fear of a watery end in the back of the mind.

As a result of the excellent work done on the 18th it has quickly become the course's signature hole but like many good courses there are several others which vie for the status not least the 14th, a par-4 played for an elevated tee with one of the ubiquitous lakes guarding the left half of the landing area and a green surrounded by trees.

"It's a great hole. The lake is always in your mind but big hitters can clear it and open up the green if they are feeling brave and get an accurate one away."

The team has been augmented by two recent arrivals from The Belfry and the RAC Club in Epsom, Surrey, who have brought in a lot of knowledge to the team although they are having to get used to the fact that if something is needed you can't just buy it in.

"You have to find a way of ensuring we stay within budget and if that means buying just enough fertiliser to do the job and no more or ensuring that we stage delivery so we don't pay additional cost up front."

The course has been much changed since it first opened, sometimes due to the growth of the four star hotel - which resulted in the 9th hole being totally relocated and rebuilt - and partly through Adrian's constant desire to tweak and improve.

The 17th is another hole which has been totally changed and it is the fairway of this new hole that is causing Adrian and his team some problems.

They built the fairway up with soil from the hotel development but it was totally devoid of nutrients.



▲ The Hellidon Lakes land was originally purchased as a dog walking site by a retired business man

"Try and get grass to grow on that and it's a struggle. We mole drained to get some air into the sub soil every year and spiked it and vertidraind it to get some movement and put in some turf humus to give it a bit of body and we are still going down that path now," he explained.

But as much as he spends time on the turf side of Hellidon Lakes the water requires just as much attention.

"With so many lakes and with around 60% of them in play in one way or another they are an important part of the course and it's great because they do attract quite a bit of wildlife to the course including water voles and barnacle geese which are quite rare for this time of year."

From an aesthetic perspective Adrian does make every effort to ensure that the lakes are as interesting as possible... but always with an eye on the budget.

"I deal with a company called SJS, at Milton Keynes, who start up and shut down my irrigation system each season and carry out any repairs we

can't do ourselves and I often speak with them for advice on water features.

"For example we have a fountain in our main lake which is just the relief valve for our irrigation so as the irrigation is not on during the day we can have a big fountain. I'm going to get a diffuser on it to make it more attractive and perhaps add some lights to it as well," he said, adding that he may have to get another pump installed so that can keep the fountain working in the evenings for the benefit of the hotel guests who take to the balcony overlooking the course.

It's another example of making a lot out of a little.

Another project in the offing is the addition of a waterfall from the small lake which feeds the largest one.

"Currently there is a stream there but I'm going to extend it and use some of the excellent local stone we have on site.

Eventually we're also going to

put another waterfall in on the lake at the 12th hole," said Adrian, who also mentioned that there was a 40 foot waterfall in the grounds of the hotel which is often used as a backdrop for wedding photography.

"The way I look at a project is from the stand point of how I'm going to improve the hole or improve the area. It may be that I won't be able to do it this year or next but I've got it in my mind to do and when the time comes we'll look at it again and assess whether we can do it together as a team or have to bring in contractors."

What the members of Hellidon Lakes do know however is that whatever resources he's got Adrian will make the most of them, even if it does mean getting his feet wet occasionally. He probably collects a few of those damp golf balls at the same time.



▲ Adrian inspects the site for his new waterfall

MACHINERY INVENTORY

Toro 6500D

Toro 3500D

Toro 3100S Sidewinder

Toro 3100 Petrol Mower

Toro 3200D Greens Mower

John Deere 6x4 Gator

2 John Deere 2653A Triple Mowers

Wiedemann 1.2m Vertidrain

Sisis 2m Fairway Slitter

Sisis 1m Greens & Tees Slitter

Sisis 1.5m Universal Spiker Javelin

Sisis 600 Rotorake

Sisis 2m Rear Mounted Brush

Ransomes Jacobsen Cushman with Back Box Top Dresser

Kubota 3060 Rotary Mower with 60" Deck

Kubota 3300 Tractor Midsize 30hp

Goldoni Compact Tractor 22hp

Massey Ferguson 265 Loader 50hp

Ransomes Jacobsen Utility Vehicle plus Huxley Sprayer and Back Box

Dennis RF510 Greens/Tees Mower

Dennis Sport Greens Mower

Allen Flymo

2 Stihl Stimmers

Stihl Chainsaw

Stihl Blower

Hayter Pedestrian Rotary Mower