

Course Feature

The Three Musketeers

Gareth Jones took a trip to the highest part of Oxfordshire and found three men implementing critical change at Chipping Norton Golf Club.

At the highest point in Oxfordshire you will find three men united. A trio battling the old golf ethos to ensure a future for their beloved golf club. These three individuals are the Head Greenkeeper, Chairman of Green and the General Manager at Chipping Norton Golf Club and they have formed a formidable alliance to rival that of the Three Musketeers.

Head Greenkeeper David Sturgeon, Committee man John Taylor and management expert Neil Clayton have all brought their vast skills and considerable knowledge together as they strive to steer Chipping Norton along the path to a healthy, secure, successful future. Crucially, the trio have concentrated their efforts on the club's most valuable asset - the par 71, 6316 yard, 18 hole golf course.

To allow them to do just that, change and modernisation had to be implemented at the club by the two founding fathers of this alliance, David and John. The Chairman of the Green Committee has been the power behind the winds of transformation at Chipping Norton, ensuring the correct procedures are installed within the club to allow David and his four man greenkeeping team to do their job to the best of their high ability.

The major issue tackled has been one of greenkeeping's ancient problems. A difficulty so old that it no doubt stretches back to the time of Old Tom Morris himself - the lack of continuity caused by the conveyor belt system of Green Chairmen.

"Most greenkeepers will have experienced it at one time or another. The problem with having a new Chairman of Green in each year is that there is no structure to the developments on the course. Each one, rightly or wrongly, wants to make their own mark on the course, but with everyone having different ideas you have dramatic swings in direction year on year. That's not good for anyone, but the course is especially affected, negatively. We needed a long term, sustainable plan, but it wasn't possible under the old system," confessed David, who has been at Chipping Norton for over six years.

This is where the benefit of a strong ally within the membership came into play for David. John, who had already been the driving influence behind the construction of a new clubhouse in 1995, set about instilling a new management style within the club. The hard work of David and John ensured that their vision was realised. Instead of a yearly cycle, the Chairman of Green now serves for three years, heading a committee that shares the same long term views for the golf course.

John, a Chipping Norton member for over 28 years, currently heads the Green Committee. Unlike some Chairman of Green, he has spent his time learning the science of greenkeeping rather than dictating his desires to David and his team.



David, front right, John, far right, and the four members of the greens staff

"John is a problem solver and he has been very useful for me, he's got really stuck in. When he became Chairman he went about improving his knowledge, reading Greenkeeper International and building up the club's library. He didn't come in and tell us what to do, he came to shadow and learn from us. It's that respect he shows for us that is important, as he has earned the backing of my greens staff," said David.

The final piece of the Chipping Norton jigsaw was put in place just nine months ago, with the employment of Neil as General Manager. The former RAF man, who had previously worked at The London Club, has come in to oversee all aspects of the club and to provide that vital communication link between the committees and employees.

"The whole change in system was the result of a steering committee, some three years ago, which was then accepted and adopted by the membership. Now that has been implemented we realised that we needed a middleman. Three years for a Chairman of Green is certainly not forever, when I step down we don't want to lose momentum. We needed a General Manager in place who could guide the next person into the job and keep the overall objectives on route. Neil can make sure everything is in place for the next Chairman of Green. That should make it easier and will benefit the club as a whole," explained John, who, now retired, devotes a large amount of time and support to both the club and David, lending his background in Industrial Management to the cause.

Importantly, Neil's role has opened up the communication channels within the picturesque club. He sits on all committees and will liaise closely with David to ensure the Course Manager is fully in the loop. The General Manager position has also meant that certain jobs, such as material

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costing and sourcing, can be taken off David's shoulders, to allow him to concentrate his attention on the course.

"My responsibility is the future of the club. I can step back and look at the long term issues affecting us, such as the environment and irrigation. It's seeing the bigger picture and realising how it all fits together with the concepts at Chipping. We have a template in place so everyone can see clearly the direction we are going in. It is my job to make sure we don't divert off this too severely, whatever positional changes may occur," stated Neil.

An example of the trio's foresight is the reservoir that has appeared behind the neatly hidden greenkeeping facilities. While a concept created by the previous Chairman of Green, it is a project being taken to the next level now. Affectionately known as the lagoon by the team, it highlights that the future is never far from the mind of the present. Currently taking rain water from the clubhouse roof, it will also be delivered off the car park, the waste water system and from the wash down area, which is in the process of being built.

"It's using common sense and doing the bits and pieces that might not be a major concern now, but will be soon. A lot of investigation has gone in to it all. We are installing a reed bed at the entry into the lagoon and taking water from these extra sources will be a great advantage.

"We've needed more water on the course for a number of reasons. We've modified, and in some cases enlarged, the older greens, which are on limestone brash, so have very strong drainage. Also, being up high means we are drier for longer periods. The conservation of water means, hopefully, we wouldn't have to rely on the limited mains supply," said David, who works closely with his Deputy, Adrian, who has been at the club for 30 years, man and boy.



Look closely and you can see the course suggestion box that David placed on the island for the members

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The 3rd hole at Chipping Norton



Artificial winter mats have been inserted within the actual tee

"When David came here he brought in more expertise and a new level of refined professionalism. New ideas and practices have come in from David, which have moved the greens staff and course on. We would be foolish to interfere and try and tell him how to do his job. It is about asking and listening to his reasoning. I've learnt a lot from him, so I can answer some of the questions asked in the clubhouse, instead of having to go and bother David about every little aspect," said past Captain John.

It is all adding up to the completion of the three men's aims of a secure, prosperous future for Chipping Norton. This winter will see the finishing touches to their existing improvement plans, the removal of 160 trees from the back 9, after 250 have already been taken out. Schemes like this don't always go down well within a golf club, but a clear sign of the Musketeers' success has been the reaction from the 800 strong Membership and visiting players.

"We have the confidence and trust of the members here, which I feel is 90% of the battle. When I joined, it was a 'them and us' mentality, especially with the committees. Now everyone is united and working towards the common good. Little things help that, like bringing in the rest of the team to try out new equipment and allowing them to influence the decision on it. On the other side, it is talking with the members and answering their questions with real reasoning. It makes everyone feel part of something, which is very important," commented the experienced Headman, who has been in the profession since 1976.

"We are not the Sunningdales or Wentworths of this world, but what we can offer is a 'Gem in the Cotswolds'. We aimed to get to a standard where visitors could take something good away with them every time they played the course and we have done that now. It's not just financial investment, it is commitment to the enduring quality and presentation of the course - something I like to call 'invisionment'. Enthusiasm is our biggest asset here," stated the hard working, determined Chairman of Green.

"Both the club itself and the course have gone up in standard. It is about taking it all forward now and making sure we have the correct equipment and knowledge to improve the longevity and quality and then maintaining that. In terms of health, presentation and challenge the course is currently the best it has ever been," concluded Neil.

This last statement is accompanied by agreeing nods from all three men. You get the impression that the rest of the Chipping Norton membership would do the same when hearing that quote, proving change is not always a bad thing, but an essential necessity in many cases.



John sourced the materials and David did the installation of these stairs



The 'lagoon' will provide a crucial water supply in the summer