

Course Feature

Plenty Bang for its Buck

Scott MacCallum visits Laleham, a club where the greenstaff makes sure it gets a lot of bang for its buck.

Some golf clubs can boast a genuinely blue blooded golfing history having hosted famous events and with legends of the game attached to the club in one way or another. Other clubs have a more general, but no less intriguing, history and one of those is Laleham GC, near Chertsey, in Surrey. A glance through the superb centenary book, produced in 2003, reveals a selection of star names connected with Laleham that other clubs could only dream about.

Take Bing Crosby and Bob Hope for starters. Both played regularly when filming at nearby Shepperton Studios. All right here's two more, Joan Collins and Julie Andrews. Ok, now for a couple out of left field - Aviator, Amy Johnson, and singer, Englebert Humperdink. All have visited, and enjoyed their time at, Laleham Golf Club. Oh, and did I mention that the course is built on land once owned by Lord Lucan, and that his infamous disappearance delayed its sale to the members as they couldn't get the paperwork signed? In the game of Celebrity Trumps Laleham Golf Club certainly wouldn't be found wanting.

Should the surviving members of that starry group - Joan, Julie and Englebert, and, you never know, the elusive Lord - pay a return visit to the club in 2005 they would certainly be impressed by recent changes to the course since their day.

At the forefront of those course improvements has been Course Manager, John Ross, his Deputy, Bob Rogers, and some enlightened members who drove through a five year plan designed to sharpen up the challenge offered by Laleham.

"The front nine at Laleham has always been a decent test of golf, but the back nine wasn't quite as challenging - you could be forgiven for thinking that every hole was pretty much the same," explained John.

But there was a potential solution. The club owned three and a half acres of land on the edge of the course which had been left to its own devices and become a jungle - the only signs of civilisation being the old mowers, horse shoes, not to mention a fridge, from when the land was used as a handy dumping ground.

The club had never been able to utilise it properly as the course is laid out on a flood plain, built on gravel with the ground water level just ten feet below the surface. Flooding occurs from the bottom up and the unused area was always the first to flood as it was the lowest point of the course.

"I walked up there with the then Chairman of Green in 1994 and pointed out how we could use the land by building a green here, a tee there and another green over there. He was very keen on the idea and encouraged me to make it happen. On frosty days we started clearing the site of many years' worth of rubbish and dead wood.

"We both believed it would happen one day," said John, who has been at the course since 1993.

In the meantime the team was making an impact on other areas of the golf course in smaller ways - building tees, installing drainage to greens and changing the bunkering from predominately flat bunkers to pot bunkers dug into the gravel, "These were well received by the members so it meant we had a history of undertaking successful projects at the club."

Around this time a Past Captain of the Club, Martin Johnson, produced a dissertation for a qualification he was seeking entitled "The Golfing Challenge at Laleham GC". The conclusion was that the course had not kept up with changes in technology and no longer presented a balanced and varied challenge to all categories of golfer.



The Laleham Team with Bob Rogers, centre left, and John Ross, centre right

"He presented this to the General Committee who accepted it in principle and a sub-committee was formed aimed at improving certain elements on the golf course.

"The Club Pro, Hogan Stott, myself and a number of other members made up the committee and we looked at a five year, costed plan identifying how we could improve every hole on the course, covering the environmental impact; benefits to golf, maintenance and to traffic flow. This was accepted by the General Committee in May 2000 and we started work in the winter of that year," explained John.

The plan added 136 yards to the course, balanced out the nines, and generally had the aim of ensuring players used every club in the bag. For example the five par-3s were altered so that they ranged from between 127 and 214 yards instead of between 156 yards and 178.

The first phase was to dig a pond on the front nine which, in turn, generated the subsoil to lengthen one of the par-3s.

"The culmination of the five year project was the construction of our two new holes, the design of which was left entirely to me as I had this concept in my head as to how they would play," said John.

Undaunted he got hold of an Auto CAD programme which came free with a computer magazine. Using the tutorial John taught himself how to use it.

"I'm sure CAD is very difficult and technical if you are trying to build a house but for landscaping I found it fairly simple. I drew the holes and the Committee accepted the drawings," said John, who was also able to refer to an aerial picture of the course.

Having convinced the Committee the next step was to win over the membership and an open evening was organised where John and the sub committee gave a Powerpoint presentation outlining what was being proposed.

"About 90 members attended and they tended to be the anti-lobby," said John, who noted that some Sub Committee members, who had originally voted in favour of the project changed their minds when it went to the General Committee.

"I had to convince them that the soil was suitable, if we worked it properly, that there was enough of it, explain what hydroseeding was, justify the cost, even explain how we were going to get rid of the rubbish. It went on and on. But fortunately the evening was just a presentation and not a vote, so it was a fait accompli really. We were just trying to deal with members' fears."

One of the main concerns of the members was how John and his team could build two complete holes for what was then £18,000, the final figure was actually £15,000 - when they had been quoted £88,000 by a contractor?

"It was difficult to get them to understand that the major cost in a project of this nature is the importing of rootzones and we weren't doing that. We were importing a minimal of materials, we were completely reshaping the site, constructing the greens and tee using primarily those material. I guess you would call them pushover greens"

"Politics never goes away at golf clubs. I had two Chairmen of Green while the project was on-going and one



Preparation work for the new 13th green



The new 13th is a very attractive dog leg par 4



The fairway was seeded and took extremely well

of them is no longer even a member of the club due to club politics; three Captains from beginning to opening of the project, and they were all brilliant, but I know that on another day at another golf club it could have been different."

Once the go-ahead was given work began in April of 2003 by spraying the entire site with a mixture of contact, selective and residual weedkillers to obtain a blanket total kill and be left with just the mature trees and some remaining rubbish.

"I took the sprayer out and was bouncing all over the place. It was ridiculous but I was able to spray the whole site," recalled Bob.

Then began a task which, had he being doing it at the aforementioned Shepperton Studios, might have seen him successfully audition for cameos in the "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and "George of the Jungle". For five long weeks he and his chainsaw were as one as he battled to clear the three and a half acre site as comprehensively as possible.

"It began in May 2003, it was hot and I was wearing safety gear," he recalled.

"The guys were bringing buckets of ice with cold drinks down but it was hard, hard work. I was cutting and another guy was pulling out the wood and making piles. We couldn't



The team now look back at their work with genuine pride



The jungle that faced Bob and his chainsaw

see an end to it. I get so much pride in looking what we've achieved now but at one point I was totally sick of it and admit that I wanted to go off and just sit on a mower and forget all about it," he said.

The next job was to hire a seven tonne digger and create two huge bonfires to get rid of as much of the debris as possible.

Having cleared the site ready for action John commissioned John Gardener, from Barrefields, as a shaper - the only outside contractor used on the project.

"We struck a very good deal which hinged on us being able to find somewhere for John's caravan and we supplied the diesel. We then worked hard to ensure we made the most of his time," said John.

"After he scraped the topsoil Bob was running a dumper for him and we had a digger making sure there was always subsoil available for him to shape. We generally avoided him having to do the silly things which took up time. I told John how I wanted the holes to look, gave him two drawings of the greens and left him to it. He did a superb job."



The 14th was to become a nice looking short par 3



The rootzone all came from Laleham's existing resources



They hydroseeded the new greens

John and Bob had staked out the entire site highlighting the maximum height of the flooding and ensuring that the level of the rootzone was well above it.

"We couldn't take this project on, and then allow the holes to be flooded if the rest of the course was open, because the old holes would only close in the winter if the entire course was under water. The minimum criterion was that they would be able to be played in the winter," said John.

Having done all the preparatory work everything went like clockwork on the 14 week project.

"There were no hidden surprises and we were hydroseeding the greens and the new tee on the day we'd scheduled to be, we used Lance and Heriot on the green and sauvignon fine leaf dwarf Rye on the tee" said John, who added that that particular day in October 2003 was marked by a few beers on site.

The fairways had also been seeded and but for a problem with moles, unhappy that their old stomping ground was now a golf course, everything came on well.

The golf club which is a stone's throw from Thorpe Park theme park is in a strange ecoclimate all of its own. For a 10 month spell from January to November 1, 2003, it did not

receive one drop of rain while there are severe restriction on water usage on the golf course due to the proximity of the River Thames.

John had argued from the beginning that essential to a successful outcome was the fact that the new holes would have to be built in the summer to prevent damage to the soil structure, as it happened the drought of 2003 from the point of view of the new holes could not have been better timed. The severity of the drought was unfortunate though and did impact on the actual golf course to a huge degree. The committee had to handle this issue delicately as all some members could see was a golf course that looked like a moonscape, and the greenstaff working away on two new holes.

"If you were to ask me what the best thing is about Laleham Golf Club I'd say it's that we are on alluvial silt over gravel. If you were to ask me what the worst thing is about Laleham Golf Club I'd say it's that we are on alluvial silt over gravel. The reason we recovered from 2003 was that we were on alluvial silt and it's very fertile, but because we are



Irrigation helped the greens to establish



The new area was prone to flooding so the fairways were raised



Laleham have changed the style of their bunkering

on gravel we burn up every summer although stay nice and firm in the winter. There are positive and negatives."

The reaction to the new holes which enjoyed an official opening in June has been universally positive.

"A huge majority of the membership appreciate what we've done but I don't think they quite realise the magnitude of what we've achieved for £15,000," said John, who said another benefit of the new holes was that four of his team were able to complete all the turf grass elements of NVQ Level 2, through the evidence we accumulated on the site.

One of those guys has since left, but the Laleham team of just five, John and Bob joined by Andy Dennis, Adam Watts and Greg Smith, who was on holiday when Greenkeeper International visited, have done a super job.

"What we have fundamentally proven is that a golf club like us with limited budgets doesn't have to walk away from the fact that redesign is necessary. We have produced two fine new holes which have improved the course for £15,000."

Such is the improved test of golf, any modern day Bing Crosby and Bob Hope might just consider taking The Road to Laleham with their clubs in tow.



Success!