

# Course Feature



Colin Robinson

## Sweet Harmony

Gareth Jones visits John O'Gaunt Golf Club, which contains two vastly contrasting courses that are kept in harmony by a dedicated Course Manager.

For the keen historians among the readership of Greenkeeper International the name John of Gaunt will be familiar. John of Gaunt, so named after being born in Ghent in 1340, was the third son of King Edward III and took the title of Duke of Lancaster in 1362. The Duke is a powerful figure in history, shaping much of the 14th century. A former adviser to young King Richard II, it was Gaunt who returned from Spain, where he was an Ambassador, to deter the threat of civil war in England.

Unwise decisions on taxation had led to a clash between King Richard II and the Lords Appellant and, with the peasants' revolt just four years earlier, hostilities were high and war was near. It was Gaunt who brought compromise between the two parties, which halted the English going into battle and ensured a period of stability and harmony within the country.

Much the same can be said of Colin Robinson, Course Manager at John O'Gaunt Golf Club, a course so named as the Duke formerly owned the land the course is located on. Colin may not enjoy such a prominence in British history as Gaunt, however if alive today the Duke would surely appreciate the harmony and stability that the greenkeeper has brought between two very differing and demanding golf courses. The John O'Gaunt course, which contains the remains of a moat dug during those uprisings on the 17th, and the Carthagena course maybe split by a single B road, but at times they are worlds apart.

The John O'Gaunt is the club's original course and was opened as a nine hole track in 1948, with the competition of 18 holes occurring in 1950. The par 72, 6513 yard course boasts a superb view when coming up the 18th of the magnificent clubhouse, a converted house that was property of the Burgoyne family, who were gifted the land by Gaunt. Similar to the Gaunt course, Carthagena was opened as nine holes in 1972, before being extended to 18 in 1980. While shorter at 5869 yards, the Carthagena contains larger greens and longer tees than its older sister.



Colin does not divide his team between the two courses

It's not just visually where these two Hawtree & Son designed courses differ, it's also what is underneath the grass that keeps Colin and his 13 man team on its toes. The Carthagena is built on a deep sandy loam that plays a huge role in the course's exceptional drainage. The second course can handle hours of rain, only to be playable hours later, a feat that continues to amaze Colin.

"I have to confess that it bamboozled me when I first started here. One night it really came down heavily, once I got to the course in the morning I went out and as expected puddles were all over both courses, they were soaked though. My previous experiences told me that the course was not playable and I went and told the Secretary that I had to close both courses for the day. He looked surprised that I was shutting the Carthagena but respected my decision. I then went out a few hours later and the water logging had disappeared from the Carthagena and it was ready for action. I couldn't believe how quickly the water had been drained, it's incredible," said a smiling Colin as he recalled that day.

The course was built, purely by coincident, using materials so close to the 2004 USGA Guidelines, that you could be forgiven for thinking that the club transported a USGA Agronomist from the future to oversee the original developments. The sandy base is almost as good as the material that the majority of clubs would have to bring in during the construction process. These elements play the major role in keeping this par 69 open for the majority of the winter months.

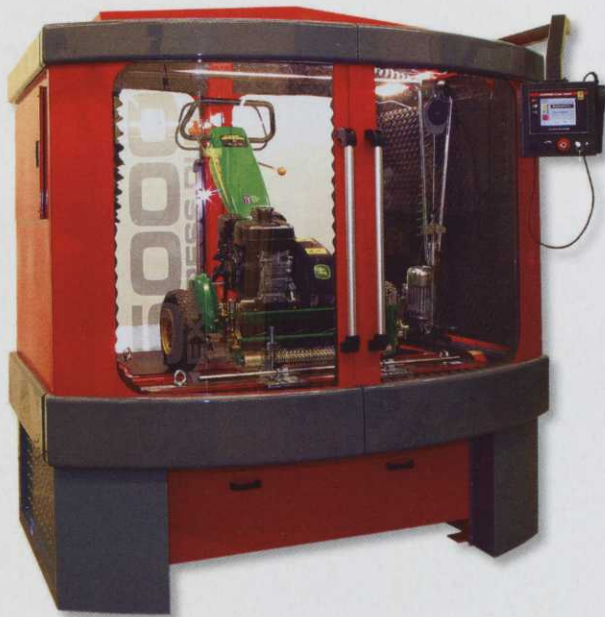
However, while the thought of Colin having a course with natural drainage so good that it copes easily with Britain's typically terrible winter weather and thus helps him avoid an ear bashing from the membership may leave many a Course Manager green with envy, this does have its problematic draw backs come a dry period.



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"The drainage is so good that it means if we get one dry week the course dries out completely and then you have trouble. As well as the obvious problems, we really struggle with our bunker edges. We rely on a nice grass cover around the bunker edges to keep it maintained and in a healthy state, but if it stays dry the moisture is sucked out of the ground, the grass dies and the edges start to crumble," stated the Headman, who with his team dedicated a large part of the winter programme to rebuilding these edges.

This leads to Colin's biggest headache at John O'Gaunt - irrigation. Both courses only have irrigation boxes located on their tees and greens and, while the greenkeeper has widened the irrigation arcs in recent years in an attempt to encompass fairways, it's a problem that doesn't have a straight forward answer.



Colin has widened his irrigation arcs to encompass more of the area around the greens

"The irrigation issue at the club has dominated the agenda for a long while now and I think that will continue to be the case as the summers become hotter and drier, especially in this area of the country. 20 years ago scientists started to talk about global warming and its effects, we probably all thought that it wouldn't happen, but in just two decades you can see that it has happened very quickly. 20 years is not a long time period and no doubt this will lead to more questions regarding the use of water on golf courses."

Those questions are already being asked close to home. Cranfield University, which is situated just 20 minutes down the road from John O'Gaunt, is currently undertaking Government research into water management. Colin gained a MSC in Sports Surface Technology from the same university in 2004 and was asked to take part in the study.

"I completed a survey which was basically asking about mains and irrigation water and how and if I could use a lesser percent on the courses. You can see the view that water needs to be saved and that throwing it on grass is a massive waste. In the near future I think it will become an issue of us losing what we have now. There is pressure on the Environment Agency and the water companies, so restrictions will come into place, certainly on mains water."

It's a factor that Colin is looking to tackle head on. He has been looking for alternatives from using mains water for the majority of his 11 years at the club for both the health of the environment and his course and he believes he has one solution. An exhausted quarry a stone's throw away from the club would make an ideal site for a reservoir, with winter extraction from the stream that dissects the John O'Gaunt course providing enough water to cope in the dry summer months. However this has led to an age old obstacle - the word golf has bumped up the price of the unused land.



The splendid view walking up the 18th on the John O'Gaunt course

"It is just too expensive for us at the moment. It is frustrating because the land is just sitting there and would be great for us. With the ground being pure sand all we would need to do is install a liner and there you have it. Getting a winter extraction would safe guard our water supplies and we would be able to look after the courses all year round. The club know how important it is, they are very good like that, and they will eventually go down this route one way or another, we'll find alternatives if the price on this piece of land doesn't come down to a reasonable level.

"It just kills me. The whole team works so hard during the year to get the course playing well and looking nice and then to see it drying up and cracking really hurts. It is a real shame and I know a lot of other clubs will probably share our pain," admitted Colin, who knows the course provides a good service when there is enough moisture in the ground.

Here is where Colin shows the traits familiar to that of John O'Gaunt himself. While coping with the Carthagena's dehydrating problems he is tackling the John O'Gaunt course's wet dilemmas. The top of the original course boasts the same type of quality, quick draining sand as its sister, but the bottom half of the track has different characteristics. The lower end contains a heavier, solid, peatier base, which leads to more quandaries for the Head man.

"When you get wet and warm conditions down there it becomes a real grass factory. The ground is fertile so you don't get good quality playing conditions out of it. I've knocked fertilising on the head and the quality is better now, although it still grows very fast and very green indeed. It is controlled at least now.

"The golfers think it is great as it is really green but as a purist I know it isn't. It isn't all fescue and bent, there is lots of meadow grass. Lots of water loving plants are down that end, so when it is dry they turn their toes up pretty quickly," commented the greenkeeper.

The water table does have a tendency to creep up in that area. The 13th runs along side the club's beautiful stream and has flooded in the past, which caused a surprising problem in the long term.





Colin is looking at irrigation systems, including a reservoir, that can keep the course in a healthy condition when the dry periods hit

"When the 13th flooded I think the club panicked. They want to see the course in a healthy state and will spend time and money to do it, but in this case when I look back we probably would have been best not doing what we did. We installed drainpipes and the water went - great, but now it drains too well, goes brown easily and gets dry lines. I've learnt that when you get one extreme like that you shouldn't over react, just grin and bare it and take a longer term view," stated Colin wisely.

Colin has helped the two Bedfordshire courses come together by keeping his staff united. While numerous 36 plus hole courses split their greens team and keep them on one particular course, Colin has chosen to stick to a different tactic, which he feels has benefited both his staff and the courses.

"Keeping my team together has always worked for me. I can tell any one of my staff to get on a machine and go to any part of either course and they know exactly where they are going and what to do, that's a great help. It also means that we can get big jobs done a lot quicker."

A good example of why this works well is with the club's hosting of the English Schools Tournament in August, a year after hosting the English Seniors. Colin had 11 of his staff working on the John O'Gaunt the day before the competition. They had everything prepared within the day, which would have been impossible with a lower number of staff, and then hit the Carthage the following day in preparation for the second day of the event. It is a system that benefits the staff as well as the two courses.

"I think this method is important for my team. In practice they are working



on two different courses with differing needs and characteristics, so they are getting that great experience and it is aiding their development. It helps their moral too, as they aren't getting bored working on just the one course, a change of scenery can do them good," said Colin, who also writes a piece in the club's monthly newsletter to keep the membership up to date with course developments, an approach that works wonders.

Colin started in greenkeeping in January 1975 thanks to his mother spotting an advert in the local newspaper for an Assistant at Wheatley Golf Club. Now after 30 years within the profession and five golf clubs under his belt he has become very shrewd about the industry and learnt some important lessons. The height of cut in

particular has become a topic close to his heart.

"If you had a room full of greenkeepers and asked them who cut low and then in the dry periods if their greens were stressed out I reckon most would raise their hand. The golfers' perceptions have changed now. What used to be considered fast is dead slow in today's world. A quick green is considered to be a good one by the golfer, which is wrong. So the pressure is on to cut low to get the speed. The major problem is that while golfers' perceptions have changed dramatically, the type of grass that we use has not. Greens would be better for lifting the height of cut, but it is just not feasible and it puts a lot of pressure on us greenkeepers," concluded Colin.

That's one subject matter that equally affects both of Colin's contrasting parkland courses. While the courses may remain poles apart in behaviour you can be sure that Colin will keep them in perfect harmony and that John O'Gaunt will be looking on proudly at the Headman's work on his former land.