

# Course Feature

## On the Up

Scott MacCallum visits Burton Golf Club, which through vision and hard work of members and staff, is going places... it's also hosting this year's National Championship.



Burton Golf Club, in Derbyshire, is thriving. There is a waiting list for membership; competitions are oversubscribed, with golfers even scrambling to get their names down for the following year's event, and money is being invested to improve facilities for both member and staff alike. Oh, and they will be welcoming BIGGA members for the National Championship, supported by Ransomes Jacobsen, at the beginning of October.

The root of this success, as is so often the case, can be traced to some committed and far sighted people both from within the membership and on the staff.

John Haley became Chairman of Green three years ago and a few months later Gavin Robson joined the club as Course Manager and since then the giant strides have been made.

"When I took on the Chairman of Green role, unhappy members were button holing me and asking what I was going to do about this and what I was going to do about that. I didn't even know what hollow tining was. To me it sounded like something a musical instrument would do," said John.

"Now I don't get moaning from the membership, only constructive criticism and that's great."

So what magic dust was scattered to improve the club's fortunes? Well, magic didn't come into it. Just good old fashioned greenkeeping and an imaginative use of club resources.

"Before I started the job I played a few rounds and walked the course by myself and the first thing I did when I arrived officially was define the

fairways and put in a bit of shape," explained Gavin, who had previously been at Lingdale Golf Club.

"I sat the staff down and we had a good chat about what I wanted and outlined my ideas for course maintenance and presentation," said Gavin, adding that he has been extremely impress by the qualities and commitment his team has shown over the last two and a half years.

An intensive aeration programme was introduced and the condition of the course turned around. But more than that, the membership noticed the green staff out of the course much more which, in itself, made the next phase of the club's development an easier sell to the members.

"The maintenance facilities were pretty antiquated. They were prone to dampness and flooding, while the mess room was only eight foot by six foot, for five of them. The workshop wasn't too bad but couldn't cope with more than only large piece of machinery," explained John, who added that the main machinery store was damp and in the event of a fire there was no way the kit could have been removed safely.

"This is the 21st century and the days of green staff doffing their caps





and sitting in a wooden hut should be long gone. From my previous life in business I know that it is important that staff are properly looked after - if you have a happy more contented workforce you are more likely to get results," said John, who added that it coincided with the need for a new irrigation system, with its computerisation requiring a secure dry environment.

Having determined that improved facilities were a necessity it was then agreed that repair wasn't a viable option and the prospect loomed of persuading the membership that £250,000 should be spent on greenkeeping facilities.

"With Gavin having got to grips with the course and results starting to show the members' attitude towards the greenkeeping staff was much more positive than it had been. They could see Gavin and the team working out on the course and it was a chance for me to say that we've got to give Gavin and his team what they need to conduct their business properly."

They also showed those who expressed an interest around the existing facilities and to a member they returned convinced of the need for a rebuild.

"We had around a dozen come over and they tended to be among the more influential members - some of whom were of the opinion that the existing units were only 10-20 years old and shouldn't need replacing - and they all came back convinced of the need for change and passed that view on to others," said Gavin.

A small committee was set up to look at the project and some groundwork revealed that they were looking at estimates of around the £180,000 mark. As it turned out the figure turned out to be closer to £250,000.

"We owned a greenkeeper's cottage at the back of the course which the modern day Course Manager tends not to want, so I proposed that we sell it to fund the new maintenance facility. This is what happened," said John.

The club called an Extraordinary General Meeting to approve the project, attended by around 100 members, and during the meeting people with relevant skills were identified as useful for the work that was to follow.

"One member who had been a Site Manager, said that we should have a Site Manager to oversee the work and I approached him after the meeting and he agreed to take on that role. He has been a rottweiler, here every day apart from holidays, and he did it all for nothing," said John.

Having initially produced drawings themselves to give them an idea of cost the committee passed the work on to a professional architect whose plans turned out to be similar to the original plans

Designing and building the new facility was made slightly more complicated by the fact the site was sloping, which meant the main administration, mess room, workshop element was on two levels with the workshop taking the lower tier.

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## Course Feature



"Funnily enough, the fact that it was split level didn't add significant money to the costs, although I had feared that it would," said John, who will be Burton's Captain next year, although he hopes to retain his Chairman of Green role as well - "I'll be up here even more than I am at the moment," he laughed.

Work began on February 4, when one of the old units was knocked down and as we spoke, in early July, there was around four weeks to go until completion.

"We were due to finish around the end of May beginning of June but the difficulty of coordinating time tables of contractor and sub-contractors, and one slight amendment to the plans, slowed the process down," said Gavin, of a delay which is by no means Wembley Stadium standard.

Elsewhere, a new group, the Strategy Committee on planning ahead for the year 2012 on three fronts - course, clubhouse and membership.





"At a lot of clubs developments tend to be ad hoc and this can cause problems when members are surprised, particularly on how much it costs. So what we've done, is look at all areas of the club and examine areas of potential development," explained John.

"For example, next year we are going to employ an architect to review the course and whatever recommendations he makes we'll budget for in the year 2008. We'd like to be able to add length for certain competitions - hopefully an Open qualifier one year - and look at reintroducing the many bunkers which were filled in during the '60s to save on maintenance costs.

"Between the architect's inspection and any work that he recommends we'd like to improve our practice facilities by adding a covered four bay driving range and practice greens, chipping areas and bunkers etc.

"My view is that if you don't keep developing you will fall behind," said John.

And falling behind is something that Burton Golf Club certainly isn't.

"We have become generally regarded as the best club in Derbyshire and our income from societies, competitions and green fees has doubled in a year."

The club hosted BIGGA's scratch match against the Combined Services last year so heroically won against the odds by our boys, and it will again welcome BIGGA members in October for the National Championship.

"Since January every job I've done on the course, I've found myself thinking that greenkeepers are going to be looking at this in a few months' time. Prepping a course for them is going to be fun," said Gavin, while always aware that Burton's members are going to be looking out for any special touches he adds for his own but doesn't for them!

"The club feels it is an honour for him to host his own Association's Championship but if he suddenly produces a course different to what we've seen I know I'll be asked questions by members," added John.

But Gavin does have a few tricks up his sleeve.

"Three or four of the lads from East Midlands Section are going to rake bunkers for me - a mini support team if you like and Burton's members will give me a divotting party. The pressure will be on and it will be a challenge," he smiled.

He will no doubt be more than happy to show any BIGGA members around his new facility during the Championship. It's just another example of the pride the staff and members have for their club.

**Anyone interested in playing in BIGGA's National Championship on October 2 & 3 should contact Sarah Norris at BIGGA HOUSE, Tel: 01347 833800 email: sarah@bigga.co.uk**

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- Ryan Sod Cutter
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- Hedgh Cutters x2
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# 600 Greenkeepers

John Haley pens his own thoughts on Burton Golf Club and his role as Chairman of Green



Just over three years ago I was appointed Chairman of Green at my Club, with a mandate to re-energise the Head Greenkeeper and his staff as the Course - one of the best in the County - was looking tired and below the standards our Members had come to expect. Unlike all my predecessors I made no pretence that I understood the finer art of Greenkeeping, I just thought I could use my motivational skills and the Greens team's expertise would do the rest.

How wrong I was! Within two months, one member of the greens staff had a serious accident on the course; one broke his ankle playing Cricket; his brother tore ligaments playing Soccer; the trainee disappeared; the Health and Safety Executive swarmed all over us; the Irrigation system finally conked out and we had an undetected leak that cost us half our water supply! In addition we had just had the driest winter/spring for many, many years.

There was also the small matter of 600 plus members, all experts in successful maintenance of Golf Courses (As there is little difference between a 20 square foot back lawn and a Golf Course Acreage!) wanting to know what I personally was going to do about it and why, despite all the aforementioned problems, the Course was not yet to the same levels as Augusta!

Well, to cut an ever lengthening story short, the Head Greenkeeper decided the time had come to move on (his Deputy having already left to take up a Head Greenkeeper's position) and the recruitment process started. We had a very good response to our advertisement and out of 35 applicants drew up a shortlist of six. I should say at this point that the recruitment process was left to myself and the Club President and our selection only needed the rubber stamping of the rest of the Club Board.

If I am honest, our eventual appointee was not top of the list before the interviews commenced but was clearly the best candidate at the end of the process. Now this is where I know you will all, particularly those from the Midland Region, be surprised, if not shocked, that this candidate was none other than Gavin Robson!

Moving the clock forward two years and our course is now considered not only a very good test of golf but in magnificent condition and considered the best in Derbyshire and up with the best in the Midlands (other clubs members views who have played the course, not only ours). How has this been achieved? By a lot of hard work; putting together a very professional and skilled team; motivating them; a hands on approach;

proper training of staff and a very professional knowledge and expertise of the art of Golf Course Management.

This is what Gavin has brought to the Club and although he has achieved this in a very short space of time, he and we, are not resting on our laurels but continuing to develop and give Gavin the resources to achieve this.

So what have I brought to the "party"? Well I now know my Hollow tining from my verti draining but not much else. I see my role as the go between the Greens Committee and Gavin but do not allow any interference in how he manages his team or the work they do. Gavin and his team are the Professionals and should not have interference from the other 600 Greenkeepers in the club. As I said to one of our members who used to work in the coal industry, if the Head Greenkeeper at the local course came in and started telling him how to dig coal he would have told him what to do... Why do members of golf clubs think they are different when it comes to Course Management?

Of course I listen to what members say and any ideas they have are always discussed with Gavin and many have been acted on, but I believe the excellent relationship I have with Gavin is I let him get on with the job because that's what he's paid to do. I truly believe that if more clubs had the confidence to let their Head Greenkeepers/Course Managers get on with the job, with a minimum or no interference, most courses and clubs would be all the better for it. So come on all you Chairmen of Green stop interfering and see the results for yourself!

So finally, where is this course that's so good? Its Burton-On-Trent (which is actually just inside Derbyshire ) and many Greenkeepers/Course Managers, will get the chance to play it in October because the BIGGA National Championships are being held here this year. We look forward to seeing you then and with no pressure on Gavin seeing for yourself the quality we now have.