

Course Feature

Rejuvenated Felixstowe

Scott MacCallum travelled to East Anglia to visit an old club with some new and fresh thinking.



An area of gorse which has taken well in from of the SSSI site

Felixstowe Ferry is the fifth oldest golf club in England and boasts a history befitting a club of that longevity. However, if you were to ask members today they would probably be more proud of their achievements over the last three and a half years than much of what has gone on before.

In that short period in the club's history the improvement in the presentation and grass quality has been marked, while three new holes, designed by Martin Hawtree, have added something more to the course.

"I was employed in the April and we started work on the new holes in the November so it was a case of being straight in at the deep end," said Course Manager, John Houston.

"At the interview it was mentioned that there was a possibility of it happening and I said it would be great to be involved."

With the hole construction work on the horizon – coastal erosion and health and safety issues were the reasons the new holes were

required – John and his team got to grips with the condition and presentation of the course.

"When I arrived the greens left a lot to be desired – they were soft, compacted and had the wrong species of grass in them, including rye, and the ball just didn't run very well – while the fairways were just straight up and down," said John, who by coincidence also has England's oldest club, Royal Blackheath, on his CV.

A programme of intense aeration, slit tining, micro tining, hollow tining and vertidrainage was introduced in a bid to reduce the compaction and thatch, while wetting agents were applied.

"I see aeration as the key to success. We micro tined every three weeks and vertidrainage up to five to six times a year and this went on for two and a half years at this level of intensity. We applied 200 tonnes of Fen Dressing 80-20 mix to the greens before spring and autumn on the greens. Members put up with it because they could see the greens improving month on month," said John, who took over from a

“ ...he dug up what looked suspiciously like a landmine...

It was a genuine “Don’t panic!” moment ”

The boulders brought in from Norway to act as coastal defences



fine old greenkeeper, George Newson, who along with greenkeeper Paul Bolton, who retired recently, each had over 40 years service at the club.

The smooth hand over from George to John was complete when John had a hole-in-one at George’s retiral golf day.

“With salt tolerance a real requirement in the East Anglian area, I felt we needed something other than the fescue with which they had been overseeding before I arrived. I thought this was just throwing money away as the soil structure was poor and there was no root development in the greens,” explained John, who replaced the Fescue overseeding programme with that of bent and brought in Headland to provide soil analysis and produce a programme to help improve matters.

“I am now using Rigby Taylor R1 and R1 01 with all seed treated for salt tolerance,” said John, who will be 50 this month.

At the same time John has added his own touches to the fairways and rough, using the golfing knowledge which has carried him to playing success at several of his previous courses – Junior Champion at Ratho Park twice, the village where he was born; Club Champion at Dorking twice, once breaking the course record twice in the same day with rounds of 66 and 65; Club Champion at Dale Hill twice and winner of the Artisan’s Scratch Medal at Royal Blackheath two years running.

“I put some shape into the fairways and in doing so brought in the rough with one and a half inch and three inch cuts. The members loved having shaped fairways instead of straight ones. It started to look like a golf course,” said John, who works closely with Tim Lodge, who advises on agronomic issues.

John used his previous experience of working with Martin Hawtree at Royal Blackheath to persuade him to take on the re-design work. The plans were drawn up but with consultation required with, among others, the Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the Major of Felixstowe, it was a drawn out process. However with everyone’s concern satisfied work began on the holes – moving and directing holes away from the sea wall – with the construction work being carried out jointly by John Greasley, and the Felixstowe green staff to keep costs down.

“The Greasley’s team did the mounding on the right of the 15th hole and we did the ones between 14 and 15. We all did the turfing while we built the 16th tee ourselves. All the staff enjoyed the experience.”

The importance of moving the holes away from the sea wall and the still ever present danger that coastal erosion presents showed itself late last year when the wall almost breached – the new holes only being saved when the night tide turned with only a few inches to spare.

“I was getting worried about the new holes and thinking about the potential salt damage but the very next day the authorities pushed the shingle up the beach and then, over a period of around five months some huge boulders imported



Some of the Felixstowe team with Captain Mick Dabbs second from the right and John Houston extreme right

from Norway, were put in place,” said John, who added that in 1953 over 100 people drowned in Felixstowe when the area was flooded.

With the new holes proving a great success, John felt there was one small area which still needed a little refinement and Martin was brought back in to take a look.

“Looking down the course I thought a new mound might just help define the 14th hole a little better but I would never have gone ahead without consulting with the professional architect first. Martin came in, agreed, and the mound was added a few weeks ago.”

Another more recent refinement was to deepen the three fairway bunkers on the 15th so that they could be seen from the tee. The work on these brought a little excitement to the club earlier last month for John and Deputy Course Manager, Glenn Rayfield.

“Glenn was using the digger on the second bunker up on the right when he dug up what looked suspiciously like a landmine. It came up in the bucket and placed in the trailer having come from about three metres down.”

It was a genuine “Don’t panic!” moment but Glenn was more impressed than worried as his ambition always had been to find one, while John, having convinced himself that it was indeed a mine, phoned Club Manager, Richard Tibbs, who called in the police.

“They arrived within five minutes and one of them, who

knew about such things, told us not to go too close to it. A bomb disposal team then arrived and after we had cleared the course of golfers the team moved the mine onto the beach and there they blew it up. It made one hell of a bang,” recalled John.

An interesting recent innovation is a monthly 7.30am informal greens committee meeting, in addition to the regular meetings, which enables a much more hands-on approach to the role and, being a morning, allows the committee to meet on the course itself if necessary.

The whole course is a nature lover’s idea of heaven and bird watchers can often be seen spying on the rare species which drop in on the course on their migratory paths.

“It has been recorded that we have 11 different species of butterfly and 147 species of bird, including the skylark which are generally declining in numbers, while we also have otters, water voles, slow worms and lizards. We have a SSSI site at the bottom of the course, wild orchids at the back of the 9th hole the Kingsfeet course as well as Giant Hogweed and we work extremely closely with Peter Ling, of the Suffolk Wildlife Trust to ensure this is maintained and protected.

Among the projects, the Trust and the Club - which won best Newcomer in the 2004 BIGGA Golf Environment Competition - have worked on cutting back some of the long lank grass which bordered the road which cuts through the course, back to three inches to reduced its fertility.

"We collected the clippings and scarify and once we'd done that two or three times it came back looking nice and wispy just as the Trust would want it and exactly what we would want for a links course. It shows that golf is compatible with wildlife and wildlife is compatible with golf," said John, who added that it was an expensive process but that they received funding from the Trust.

John was a member of the 2006 BIGGA Delegation, sponsored by Bernhard's, which attended the GCSAA Show, in Atlanta, and the trip left a lasting impression on him having visited some of the finest courses America has to offer.

"I'd like to thank BIGGA and Bernhards for the trip. We visited East Lakes and the Atlanta Athletic Club and since I've become friendly with Ken Magnum, the Atlanta Athletic Club Superintendent. Ken played Felixstowe Ferry in a Ransomes tournament many years ago and is keen to play next time he visits the UK. He was also kind enough recently to send me a flag signed by David Toms, from when he won the USPGA Championship at Atlanta Athletic Club a few years ago."

If East Lakes and Atlanta Athletic Club both have impeccable golfing pedigrees, through their connection with Bobby Jones, Felixstowe Ferry has its own claim to fame. Willie Fernie was the Club Professional when he won the 1883 Open Championship, while another Club Professional, Bob Martin was also an Open Champion. The Rt Honourable A.J. Balfour was Captain of the Club in 1889 before taking on the job of Prime Minister in 1902, while that doyen of Golf Writers, Bernard Darwin, was made an Honorary Member in 1957.

Over 10 years ago the greenkeeping staff built a new nine holes which now operates as a successful and lucrative pay-and-play course.

"It was funded for by the VAT money and was the club's way of giving something to the community," said Glenn, who'd joined the club just before the work began.

"It took us two and a half years to build but was great experience for the team and we all learned a lot."

It is all the more commendable for a club with such a history that in the 21st century it is so go-ahead.

Mick Dabbs became Club Captain at the end of March and he is keen to ensure the club moves forward and takes advantage of the quality course John and his team have produced.

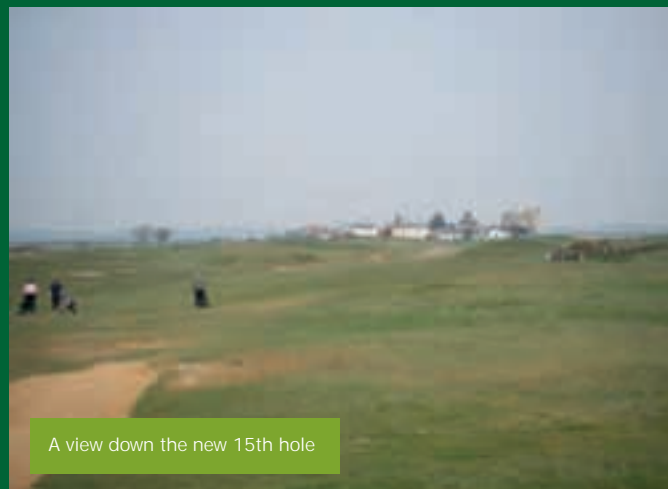
"We employed John four years ago and he asked for five years to get it right but within three and a half we have got one of the best courses in East Anglia. It is in fantastic condition," said Mick, who got some excellent publicity for the club by turning up at his "Driving in" ceremony with a 10 foot long driver, securing publicity in all the local papers.

"We have accommodation at the Club and it is important that we use the quality of the course to bring more people to Felixstowe Ferry and maximise our revenue. We're also working to attract people living further than 45 miles away to join us as a second club."

Mick explained that he was the third businessman in a row to become Club Captain and that the knowledge of health and safety, personnel, marketing and finance had been a huge benefit to the club.

"It's like running a £1 million company for a year. Courses need money to survive and there is a lot of competition."

There is a desire at Felixstowe to keep on improving and developing, and you can be sure that despite its age the best years are still ahead of it.



A view down the new 15th hole



Work on a new tee



The famous tower which provides the club with its logo



The bunker which held the landmine