



CREEPING SOUTH

Scott MacCallum meets up with Robert Hogarth who travelled from Scotland to meet the challenge of managing creeping bent greens at one of the finest new courses in the UK

Remedy Oak Golf Club, on the edge of the New Forest, didn't exist five years ago. It was then a mixed forest and the seed of an idea in the mind of Bill Riddle, a successful businessman and owner of the nearby pay and play 45 hole Canford Magna golf and conference centre.

If you visit Remedy Oak now you'll see fantastic golf holes cut through majestic woodland and you would happily wager a handsome amount that the course had been there for at least as long as the neighbouring clubs which help make the Dorset area such a fine golfing destination - Ferndown, Broadstone and Parkstone.

Remarkably, the project was carried out very much in-house with respected architect and former professional, John Jacobs, advising on the design alongside a local team which worked closely with Bill Riddle. Between them they designed the course and create a very valuable golfing treasure.

"The people who worked on the construction of the course ought to be applauded for their sensitivity. It would have been very easy to have become carried away and cut down far too many trees," said Robert Hogarth, who has been Course Manager since February 2006, having travelled south from Cardrona H&GC, in Peebles.

No matter how well established the Remedy Oak course appears, having just being open for 18 months, just one step onto the putting surfaces immediately identifies it as a very modern golf development, with its immaculate set of creeping bent grass greens which immediately give us all the misguided belief that we'll start to putt like Ben Crenshaw.

Indeed, it was the opportunity of working with creeping bent which attracted Robert to the south coast.

"I'd been fascinated by creeping bent for some time having talked to people about it and read up about it on websites and it has long been an ambition of mine to work with the grass at some stage in my career," he said.

"I even remember Payne Stewart at The Open at Royal Birkdale in '91, when Tom O'Brien had such a terrible time with his greens, talking about how they should use Penn. It would have been completely unsuitable, and proves just how little pros know, but it does show that it was about then."

The decision to use creeping bent came after watching the success of the grass at Queenwood under the stewardship of first Ian, and then Cameron McMillan.

"It was Ian who got me really excited about creeping bent. It is something completely different to what we've been used to working with."

But it's all very well having a dream, making it reality is the tough bit, but Robert is not a man who allows obstacles to stand in his way.

"I remember reading Greenkeeper International back in 1994 when I was at my nine hole course in the Scottish borders, Innerleithen, and the job adverts all said, 'Must have USGA greens experience'; 'Must have automatic irrigation experience' and thinking how the hell am I going to get that experience.

"By early 2000 I'd installed two irrigation systems, worked with John Soutar on redesigning new USGA greens and build an 18 hole championship course to USGA spec with a full irrigation system. That didn't happen by accident. I'm a positive person and I made it happen."

When the opportunity arose at Remedy Oak, and Robert was called to interview, he was immediately impressed by what he found.

"The moment I drove up to the gates there was a sense of anticipation and a feeling that there was something very special behind those gates. When I drove home, after the interview, I had a very good feeling about it."

And his experiences of working with creeping bent have lived up to all his expectations, both negative and positive.



Robert has a staff of 12 and he estimates that between four and five of his team are there purely because of the demands of creeping bent. “That’s partly because of the size of the greens – we have 1.9 hectares of putting surface, which is the equivalent of two regularly sized 18 hole courses, With the high standards demanded we move between hand and triple cutting.”

The team top dress fortnightly to counter the fibrous nature of creeping bent while they have had issues with Nematodes and Take-All Patch.

“I’m waiting for the greens to catch an STD as it’s about the only thing they haven’t caught!” he joked.

“We foliar feed because of the Nematodes and I do all I can, not to stress the plates.

“It’s extremely challenging and you can never relax with these greens. If you think you’ve got it cracked something will come up and kick you. But there is an awful lot of good advice out there, more all the time, because more and more people are using them in Britain and Ireland,” said Robert, who added that the club policy is to be cautious regarding the greens during the winter, moving to temporaries if there is any doubt, and he keeps the membership updated via website and email.

With so much work and worry associated with creeping bent, why do it?

“The upside is absolutely fantastic putting surfaces. We run average green speeds of 11.5 to 12 with no effort at all and we cut all year round at 3 mil – creeping bent doesn’t like its height of cut to be altered. You really do get a very tight surface 12 months of the year,” said Robert, who revealed that as part of test and after consultation with the membership they ran them at 14 for the Club Championship.

“We wanted to push them and we did it with no stress to the grass plant.”

“Obviously creeping bent does suit everybody but being on the south coast with limited rounds – somewhere between 15 and 20000 a year – and at a high end membership who are prepared to pay for the privilege we can do it.”

As you would expect, poa infiltration is an issue and Robert uses both chemical and cultural controls to hold back the tide.

“This is poa country as it thrives in the shaded warm conditions so we use Primo Maxx which restricts the seed heads, while, culturally, we hand pick using our own staff, students and the clubhouse staff on quiet days.

“We won’t win, we’re just fire fighting, but we’ll do what we can. Like Cameron at Queenwood we’ll replace the collar turf to reduce the poa infiltration from it being walked onto the green but that will merely extend our period of not having poa.”

The lifespan of creeping bent greens at a high standard is reckoned to be around six or seven years before poa takes over and replacing them is then the option.

“I know of people who are having creeping bent turf grown for them a year in advance but it will be very much for the members to decide if they want the high end surfaces. If they do they will have to pay for them via a levy.”

One thing that Robert does point out with his, and any new development, is that while his tees, greens and surrounds are top quality the fairways are just a little behind.

“In an ideal world it would be fantastic to have the resources to maintain fairways to the same level as the rest but in terms of sheer area it’s just not possible. We do still top dress fairways and are working on upping the nutrient level but they do take much longer on grow-ins and are always the last thing to come.

“In many ways we’re the victims of our own success as everything is to such a high standard it shows up the fairways a little bit, but we’re conscious of it and are working towards improving them.”

Robert is absolutely delighted with the team he has assembled at Remedy Oak and is full of admiration for the quality and volume of work the guys get through.



Robert Hogarth, Course Manager



The greenkeeping team



“The standards they have produced over the last two years has been incredible and they should be applauded for that. The job couldn’t have been done without them, especially Alan Magee my Deputy. I couldn’t do without him.

“The club does recognised the skills of the greenkeeping staff but a lot of the members would be shocked at the amount of work they get through in a week to prepare the playing surfaces for them. But they do really appreciate what they are given.”

The course itself could not be more tranquil and you don’t come across any houses or car noise during a round. It is a real haven for wildlife with badger sets, otters, kingfishers woodpeckers, herons and deer. While I was looking out the clubhouse window a fox wandered across the 18th fairway.

For a red haired Scotsman how has Robert coped with his move south on a personal note.

“Well I miss the Rangers big time and I’ve had to come to terms with the fact that a pint was £1.60 in my local back home and here it’s £3. But I’ve been made very welcome by the other Course Managers and made good friends already.”

He’s had to throw away his thermal vest with temperatures on average 10 degrees hotter than in the Borders.

“I struggled in the heat the first summer, we ‘gingas’ are not known for our ability in the heat and exhaustion is an issue as the woodland holds the heat in.

“Our staff are supplied with PP kit – suncream, insect repellent, sunglasses



etc - and they are encouraged to take water out with them.

“Our brothers in Spain have a siesta but we don’t. We batter on and forget that we are reaching temperatures which are the equivalent of the Mediterranean and don’t rest up.”

Indeed, but you can be pretty sure that Robert and Remedy Oak will not rest until it is as good as it possibly can be.

“Remedy Oak is very much Bill Riddle’s legacy to golf,” added Robert.



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