



The new pond beside the 18th green

DONE TO A TEE

Scott MacCallum visits Teesside Golf Club and meets a man who isn't in danger of letting the grass grow under his feet

Teesside Golf Club has seen, and been through, some remarkable changes over the last quarter of a century and one man has been at the forefront of them all.

Tony Smith arrived as Head Greenkeeper in 1982 and he certainly hasn't been one to sit back and let the mundane greenkeeping chores fill his days – he's pushed himself, his team, and often the club itself, to greater heights.

"No-one would argue that we're the most improved club in the north east," said a proud Tony, as he sat in the club's dining room overlooking the subject of his labours.

Let's just list some of the developments at the club since then – purchasing the club after the racecourse with which it shared land went bust; planting 31,000 trees; opening an official tip and then having the tipping trucks create six metre high, many metre wide, mounding to shelter the course from the nearby roads and industrial trading estate; building ponds and filling in many of the becks which criss crossed the course.

Even given the fact that there has been a significant amount of time in which to fit in the work the grass hasn't been allowed to grow under the collective feet of Teesside Golf Club.

But it was a very difficult time when Tony arrived at the club from Cleveland Golf Club, Yorkshire's only true links, having started his greenkeeping career at Abbeydale Golf Club, in Sheffield.

Teesside shared its land with Stockton Racecourse with eight holes inside the oval track and 10 outside, but within a month of Tony arriving the racecourse had gone bust.

"I only ever saw one race around the track," explained Tony, who added that they used to halt all golf while the race meeting was on.

The implications for the club of the Racecourse going bust were wide-ranging.

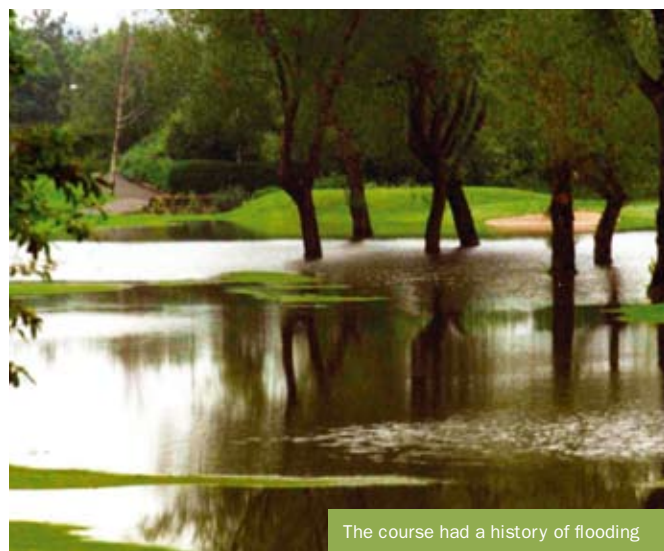
"We paid rent to the Racecourse, before it was taken over by the receivers, and there were sealed bids to buy each plot of land – the cricket club, the football club, the golf club and the surplus land around the racecourse.

"We won the golf course bid but lost out by a small margin on some of the other land which, had we got, would have given us much more room and probably resulted in a re-routing of the course," explained Tony, adding that the developer who bought the other land immediately recouped his investment by selling the grandstand to local Football Club and having car boot sales at weekends.

However, the purchase did have a knock on effect on the maintenance of the course as each member paid a £100 levy to pay for the course, which they got back after 10 years, and fees remained static for five years meaning reduced budgets over that period.

"It meant silly little things like having to borrow a tractor for certain jobs and for the first year I used to carry tools in the back of my Land Rover to repair machines while we were out."

Teesside Golf Club is over 100 years old but we've only been able to make alterations to the course for the last 24 years. The reduced funding didn't, however, mean a halt to course improvements and, working in-house, the team began a programme of installing drainage into what was a wet golf course. So wet indeed that not so many years ago – just under 200 in fact – the River Tees ran along what is now the 18th hole.



The course had a history of flooding

Tony has always planned that the team work the same hours in the winter as they do in the summer to ensure continuity of employment and no winter lay-offs and there are always plenty of projects on the go to keep the entire team busy.

“The route of the Tees was altered three times and our clubhouse was once an old corn mill which was built directly on the bank of the river. It was diverted and is now a couple of miles away but the water table is still extremely high,” said Tony, who recalls seeing photographs of people canoeing down the 18th fairway during his early years at the club. Part of the drainage issue was caused by the fact that Teesside is such a flat golf course, with only an eight inch natural fall from highest point to lowest.

The need to create more definition on the golf course galvanised Tony and an army of club members to plant trees on the course and although, starting in 1985, they were a year later than the “Plant a Tree in ‘83” and “Plant Some More in ‘84”, they attacked the project with genuine gusto.

“On a Saturday and Sunday morning I’d give members a spade and, after a short lesson, they were told where to go and they’d go out and plant them. If I wanted some on a specific place I’d place them on the spot. They weren’t great trees, one foot long whips which we were given by Stockton Council, and they didn’t take too well but it brought the membership together and gave us a common cause. People thought I was a nutter – I’d be out with 1,000 trees under my arm.”

Because of the variety and quality of the trees in the initial phase, most of the planting was to the edge of the golf course adding shelter and cover from the neighbouring area.

Prior to that there had been less than 100 old willow trees on the course and that was that.

“I’d never seen a willow tree in my life before that so I read up on them and discovered that their lifespan, if they didn’t have ready supplies of water, was 30 – 40 years. I also learned that crack willow was its common name because the branches used to break in anything more than a slight breeze. It certainly wasn’t the ideal tree for golf courses and once our water table had dropped they weren’t getting as much to drink.”

The second tree planting phase came about 10 years later and John Nicholson, whom he had met at a conference, was brought in to produce a professional design system the second time.

“With the second phase, which was grant aided, I wanted to split the fairways because we had so many open spaces; we wanted to divide the fairways so golfers didn’t see others playing on the other fairways.”

Over the two phases some 31,000 trees were planted and although many didn’t take, those which did and thrived are now 15 feet tall and are integral parts of Teesside Golf Club.

It was the next project, however, which was to create the biggest change to the golf course.

“We had a little spare land which we didn’t know what to do with but we suddenly thought we could get a tipping licence for subsoil waste and build a mound around the golf course to shield us from the noise of the A66, the A19 and the industrial park which had just replaced the remainder of the racecourse which had been our neighbour, this, together with some landscaping, would create some definition for our perfectly flat golf course,” said Tony,

He spoke with his committee and they agreed that, as an experiment,

they could build a mound down the side of the 13th hole as long as it didn’t interfere with golf.

That heralded the start of lorries tipping on the edge of the golf course, a practice that went on for much longer than originally anticipated.

“It took about six weeks to build that first mound but overall we had around 200 lorries a day for seven years and now we have around three miles of six metre high mounds – they are around 100 metres wide – around three quarters of the course,” said Tony who built a two way roadway outside his maintenance complex to enable the lorries to get in and out.

Lorries used to drive along the top of the mounding and tip at the end so the mound grew lengthwise while the weight of the waste and the inevitable vibrations has seen the mound push into the ground and the golf course rise in places.

“I have three trees which are eight foot above their original level and still growing while we had pipes which we’d discover a few feet above the ground,” said Tony.

With those mounds and others which have been installed at certain points on the course it now boasts definition and privacy it could never have dreamt of and the beauty of it is that it didn’t cost the club a penny and actually brought some revenue into the club.

“In fact we could have made more money than we did but for tax purposes it was not appropriate. In fact we used outside contractors for the landscaping work as it could be claimed back against tax whereas if it had been done in-house we wouldn’t have had any tax benefits.”



The massive mounding, together with the trees, offers great privacy to the course

But having completed the mounding – the tip has now been sealed - still Tony and his team didn't rest with further additions and improvements to the course.

“We've added four new ponds in the last two years. Each one is designed differently so they are not all edged with wood or not all edged with sleepers,” said Tony, of a programme he took initially to his committee.

“They said if we wanted to do a couple of experiments with ponds that would be fine so we built the one at the 1st and the committee said it looked nice and could they have some more. In fact I've just completed my fourth pond.”

The ponds don't fill up via a catchment area but through the water table so the level drops when the water table drops in the summer but each of the ponds has added greatly to the course and become home to a pair of swans among other wildlife.

“The male swan was limping a few months ago and we called in the RSPCA. Gary was able to jump on him and it was discovered that fishing line around his leg had almost severed the foot. But he was able to receive treatment and now they both come to get fed by hand every day. I think he knows we helped him,” said Tony, who added that they also have a robin which lives in the sheds and which hops around the machinery and comes when whistled!

“We get greenkeepers from other clubs coming to see what we've done and when they ask how I'd staked the pond out I told them we did it by hand myself – all 2500 of them.”



Course Manager, Tony Smith



Tony Smith and his team



With 26 years service at the club what does Tony think about those greenkeepers who feel you should move every seven years?

“I think you should. It’s my fault I’m still here,” he said in his blunt Yorkshire way.

“The only advice I have is to look at your course from inside and out and don’t wait for people to come to you with suggestions - be proactive,” said Tony, who along with his wife Lorna throw themselves into their out of office activities as much as they do in.

He has just started his second year on BIGGA’s Board of Management and would encourage everyone to become more involved whether it be at Section, Region or National level.

“I get a lot out of the Association but then people only get out what they put in.”

He and Lorna are also stalwarts of the local amateur dramatic society and Tony has appeared as Buttons in the pantomime among many other parts.

“We were both into scouting for several years and Lorna is Company Secretary of the Saltburn Community & Arts Association. We also make full use of our caravan.”

Tony lives life to the full and anyone who visits Teesside Golf Club can see that it has benefited from the energy that he brings to his day job.



The greenstaff's pet



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