

A REAL TRANSFORMATION



Scott MacCallum visits a nine hole golf club in Cambridgeshire which will soon be completely unrecognisable

Comedians have a joke. “What’s the secret of good comedy?” Then, without giving any time to think, the answer is blurted out, “Timing”.

It’s a good joke, but, what’s more, it’s true, and not just for comedy. There are many situations where timing is everything and getting it right can make an enormous difference.

Such is the case at St Ives Golf Club, in Cambridgeshire. A lovely nine hole parkland course, with a clubhouse tucked behind the local secondary school. The membership had always dreamt about the possibility of extending to 18 holes, and over the last 20 or so years there had been much talk about possible options. Indeed, a plan to buy the adjoining Poultry Research Station and build an additional nine holes was put to the membership but ultimately failed to materialise.

But here comes the timing bit. A group of senior, highly motivated, members with exactly the correct skill sets, came together with the view that if St Ives Golf Club really was serious about moving forward some serious work would need to be done, and a working party was set up.

Those people, a building developer, Keith Fleming; an architect, David Cook and David Christopher, Past President of the Club, who possessed a range of core skills, came together and identified that the club was sitting on a land bank that could potentially be the key to the future.

And here is the other bit of immaculate timing. The working party spoke with planning authorities, went out and contacted potential developers and eventually sold 10 acres of land – covering two of the existing two nine holes - to a medium sized

property developer for a substantial sum, right at the top of the property boom.

That money has enabled the club to purchase land from a farmer a couple of miles away on the other side of St Ives, and they are in the process of building a superb 18 hole inland-links course, complete with stunning clubhouse and driving range facilities which are also currently under construction.

It looks like a no-lose situation for the golf club and indeed it is, but if it is so easy why aren’t more clubs, with courses restricted by housing, going down the same route?

“It sounds easy, but there is a lot of very hard work and the negotiations are extremely complicated and requires the support and approval of the membership to take it forward,” explained Club Manager, Mike Kjenstad, who joined St Ives



18 months ago, a short time after the project had started.

Once the initial working party had set up the basic project structure they handed their valuable work over to another talented member, current Club President, Philip Casey, who has since managed the project. A retired, high ranking administration officer in the Fire Service, Philip possessed the skill and talent to run a major project of this nature through steering committees.

“Once the project is complete, I am sure that the membership will come to appreciate how much devotion and work that Philip Casey has lent to the project and reward his efforts accordingly” said Mike.

The new course is designed by Cameron Sinclair and built by Ely Golf Construction Ltd, while, Phil Gates MG, pictured left, came on board as Course Manager a year ago.

From its beginnings as a fairly bland piece of farmland which rose up at the end, the new course,

shaped and seeded, already looks as though it was always destined to be a golf course.

“Cameron was given a free reign to produce the type of golf course he thought best and the club was extremely impressed with what he came up with,” explained Phil.

With heavy clay soil to contend with the course was designed and shaped so water would run off the roughs and into man made wetlands. The water gathered in the wetlands is then pumped into the 5,000,000 gallon irrigation reservoir at the top of the course, making the club self sufficient in recycled water.

The heavy clay also dictated that the fairways would require significant investment in primary and secondary drainage and this has certainly been the case which has been complemented with a 75mm of sand capping.

Phil who, along with his current on-site team of Robert Duff and Gareth Morgan, have been developing the new course and setting up the

fantastic purpose built maintenance facility that the Club has invested in.

Phil spent much of his initial time on site involved in meetings, setting up budgets, liaising with Ely's and working with Mark Campbell, Head Greenkeeper on the original nine hole course.

"I've been very impressed with the high quality of work that Ely's have done," said Phil, who brought grow-in experience with him from working on what is now The Wiltshire and Dummer Golf Clubs in the early '90s.

Every Friday morning a site meeting involving Phil, Cameron, Adrian Cook from the club and either Nigel or Mark Ely is held to assess progress and make whatever tweaks are deemed necessary.

"Course Development Officer Adrian, is excellent in liaising with Cameron and Elys making sure that what work set out the week prior is done and any small things are picked up. Ely's are very good at fixing those small things and making sure everything is carried out to standard," said Phil.

The grasses selected are a mono culture of Velvet Bent for the greens; green and tee surrounds are pure fescue, while there is 15% rye grass in the tees and approaches to take the wear and tear. There is 30% rye in the fairways. The rough is 95% fescue with 5% bent. The seed was supplied by British Seed Houses with Barenbrug supplying the cultivars for over-seeding.

"When finished the course will look like it has been cut out of two foot long grass, with the holes sculpted through the wispy fescue. The wetlands will be planted with wild flowers and there are 2,000 gorse plants to go in along with a small number of Scots Pines to give a little definition and character on some holes. There is one established tree on the course – an oak on the 4th."

The Clubhouse has a splendid courtyard design while the outfield of the state-of-the-art 8 bay driving range with 4 allocated to Achnusnet Europe for the company's custom fit business. The range will also have a unique floodlighting system using a combination of uplighters and special low level lighting.

"Undoubtedly the exceptional rainfall over the past two summers has delayed the project and given those circumstances may lead to a revised opening date. The Steering Committee realises the investment involved and the responsibility they have been charged with to ensure that the project meets the member expectations" said Mike.

The members have been kept fully informed of developments at every stage with every reported issued by Cameron or Ely's posted on the club noticeboard and website.

"Having already carried out all the background work to get us to the stage the skyline of the course and buildings showing maturity each day is generating more interest and enthusiasm among our members.

"We had a foundation ceremony last September and invited all members to come and there is genuine excitement about moving over," explained Mike, who is well aware of the quantum leap St Ives Golf Club is taking.

"It is going to be a big step for the club but I think we are starting to put a good team together



The new clubhouse takes shape

to support that," said Mike.

The 525 members of St Ives will enjoy their membership fees being kept at the same level as for the old nine hole course when we re locate. The new facilities will enable St Ives to increase its membership but maintain a sensible ceiling to ensure the course is not flooded with play and maintain the enjoyment for its members.

The Club will still hold 30 acres of land in reserve at the old site which could potentially also be sold off for housing and secure the long term future of St Ives.

"Eventually we may have the luxury of not having to take societies and will not be financial forced down the route relying on external income to make the books balance" said Mike.

Back at the course Phil and the guys are working hard to ensure the grow-in work goes well and they are enjoying the demands that building a new course brings.

"I am learning management of USGA greens, bent grasses, fescues, construction inputs, water management and will be drawing up a wildlife

policy to be implemented. Having worked on the parkland course with poa greens this is an enjoyable learning curve" said Rob.

Ultimately there will be a team of seven, including the guys who move over from the existing course.

What St Ives has achieved is quite mind blowing – leaving a lovely but geographically restricted nine hole course steeped in history and moving to what will undoubtedly will be the finest golf course in Cambridgeshire – so what advice would Mike give to any other clubs in similar circumstances?

"You have to have skilful people in place with the ability to progress the project, control it and manage it. They need to be dedicated professional people with the time on their hands to commit such a project," explained Mike.

As I said timing is everything. You need the ideal people in the ideal place at the ideal time willing to dedicate bucket loads of effort, and, of course, selling land at the top of the market.

A recipe for real success!



Left to Right Head Greenkeeper Mark Campbell; Gareth "Trigger" Morgan, Rob Duff, Craig Marshall and Course Manager Phil Gates MC.