



The new look 2nd green allows the player to see the entire green from the tee.



Same Name, Different Course

It's the largest and most demanding project ever to have been undertaken by a British golf club. Scott MacCallum met up with Wentworth's, Chris Kennedy, to see a remarkable transformation of a famous old course.

The decision to dig up, redesign and rebuild, to USGA spec, all 18 greens on Wentworth's iconic West Course has had the greenkeeping industry buzzing since the plan was made public.

Much of the talk was of how Courses Manager, Chris Kennedy, would be able to achieve such a formidable task within the tight time-frame dictated by the end of one BMW PGA Championship, this May, and the start of the next BMW PGA Championship next May, as well as cope with the fierce examination and high expectations that come with hosting top Tour players.

The opportunity to make the changes only came about because the World Match-Play, which had traditionally been held over the same course in the autumn, was moved to Spain.

Well, Chris is currently deep into the project and they are on track to complete in time for next year's Championship, but this isn't the original plan. Oh no, the whole project has grown massively in recent months and it would be fair to say that had what is being done been contemplated earlier it would probably have been dismissed as over-ambitious folly.

The West Course that will confront defending Champion, Paul Casey, and the other 155 players next year at the BMW PGA Championship, will be completely different to the one to which they waved goodbye this May – changes so dramatic they could be compared to a regenerated Time Lord – “He says he's Dr Who, but he looks completely different!” To tweak another sci fi reference – “It's Wentworth, Jim, but not as we know it.”

In fact, only the par-3 5th has remained basically unchanged other than its new green.

Nowhere is that change more apparent than at the 18th hole.

In previous years a potential winner, needing a birdie four to win, would need a drive just inside the bunkers on the left of the fairway then hit a solid approach, either flying all the way to the green or bouncing in, avoiding the two bunkers, leaving two putts on the tricky sloping green.

Faced with the same situation next May, and having congratulated himself on a fine tee shot, the winner-in-waiting will look up and be faced with an eight metre wide creek running down the right side of the fairway with a nine feet high sleeper wall before cutting across

the fairway, in front of a green which has been lifted another half metre above that.

“Originally there were three bunkers on the 18th, and after it was redesigned there were 13, but even then our owner, Richard Caring, said he was disappointed,” explained Chris as we drove around the new look course.

“He said there wasn't enough drama and that he wanted a totally different hole. He then came up with the idea of the creek – we're calling it Richard's Creek – and the elevated green.”

Raised greens is something that Richard Caring – a 2-handicapper who has played on some of the finest courses in the world – is keen on and the new look course boasts several greens significantly higher than their predecessors.

“He has got a fantastic eye and a lot of quality players and European Tour officials have said how much they like the input he has had on the course,” explained Chris. Richard Caring is the owner of Caprice Holdings, whose portfolio includes many top nightclubs and restaurants including Annabel's; The Ivy, Soho House, and Le Caprice, and he has contributed a lot to how they look as well.

The original concept of rebuilding the greens had been under discussion between Wentworth and the Tour, which is based at Wentworth, for some time, in response to certain players who had voiced dissatisfaction with the course's poa greens and subsequently not entered the PGA Championship.

“It was driven by people like Padraig Harrington and Ian Poulter who were unhappy that we couldn't get the greens at the PGA to the standard we had them for the Matchplay, which was played in the autumn. The explanation was that the Matchplay had enjoyed five months of growth whereas the PGA is in May, when we don't have double figure temperatures until three weeks before the event and obviously the first thing that kicks off is the poa seed.

“The greens were still running at 11 and a half and we'd only lose two inches on the stimpmeter between 7am and 7pm, thanks to verticutting and products like Primo Maxx, but unfortunately there are players who have decided that they can't putt on poa greens and won't take time to learn. It's not just us, Pebble Beach, Pine Valley and many big tournament venues are nearly all poa,” said Chris.

However, the decision was taken to change the greens and Chris



Co-project Manager, Jack McMillan with Chris Kennedy

explained to the owner that the turf was not the most important issue – “That's just the carpet on top,” Chris had told him – and that they needed to rebuild the greens to USGA spec so they would all “perc” at the same rate and react the same to the golf ball, which had been a major concern.

Together with the STRI, Jeff Perris and George Shiels, as well as Jack McMillan, who acted as Co-Project Manager with Chris, they agreed to use Colonial Bent, which they'd already used to overseed, on the new greens.

“People have been using Creeping Bent but that creates so much thatch and poa comes in quickly. Apart from that you can't play Creeping Bent greens in winter



ABOVE: Work is well underway on the amazing new 18th hole with the creek crossing in front of the still-to-be-constructed green

time and our business plan works round playing 12 months of the year and we look at 35,000 rounds per annum.

“We all agreed that the grass that would suit us best was Colonial Bent although, to my knowledge no-one has tried it before.”

The contract to supply the turf was put out to tender and after a series of site visits and discussions Tillers Turf were appointed.

“Tim Fell had an area set aside for us in Lincolnshire and the seed was put to ground in the same 15 cm nutrient-filled rootzone as we were using on the new greens. Straight after the PGA we did a core out,”

Wentworth resident, Ernie Els and his company Ernie Els Design, who had been responsible for the

previous re-design three years before, won the contract for the design of the new greens while MJ Abbott won the construction contract. Arden Lea Irrigation completed the team.

“We started on June 1, the drawings for all 18 greens were approved by the Board and a re-opening date of November 6 was set.

“However, as time went by Richard Caring saw the opportunity to create a totally different golf course. Although he loved Wentworth, having played golf all over the world, he felt that the challenge had been reduced over time and that modern players had overtaken the golf course.

“He felt that this was his opportunity to create a tough golf course

that has great impact and be his legacy to the game. It would be something he’d do just once.”

Richard Caring began to get involved - hole by hole, green by green - with Ernie Els toughening up the course and adding difficulty to the greens, and what had initially started as a project covering greens and 10 yards beyond, began to escalate, sometimes stretching to two acres around the green, occasionally amending fairways as well as doing all fairway bunkers.

“The owner always walks the course on the Saturday and Sunday of the PGA and he watched Paul Casey play from a fairway bunker on the 3rd to three feet and make birdie. You need to be good to be able to do it, but he didn’t think that



it should be possible to play that sort of shot so fairway bunkers have all been toughened up. He feels that sort of shot should cost at least half a shot and a player shouldn't be able to play straight to the hole."

Chris is aware that there will be golfing traditionalists who will be unhappy that the original Harry Colt-design has been so radically changed, but having been involved in the project and having spoken with various people including Greg Letsche, Ernie's Head of Design, he has begun to appreciate the counter argument.

"Wentworth is regarded as a Harry Colt masterpiece but the feeling is that if Harry had come along today he'd be thinking along the same lines as the new design. When he was building golf courses they were done with a horse and cart and he didn't have the opportunity to move earth and use the sophisticated machinery that is around today," said Chris.

An example of this comes on the 2nd hole, a par-3 made famous when Isao Aoki holed in one during the World Match-play in 1979 and won himself a house at Gleneagles.

"I'd always thought the hole was amazing the way it was, but Greg felt that on a short par-3, where players were only hitting an 8 or 9-iron, you should always see the ball finish. However, because the front of the green was higher than the back that didn't happen and if there was a hole-in-one you'd have to rely on the crowd telling you or wait until you'd got to the green to find out. You've got to agree with the guy," said Chris, as we surveyed the entire new green from the tee.

Chris is quick to confirm that it is still the Harry Colt routing plan, but he does admit that the new course takes the ground game out of play.

"Modern equipment, the ball and clubs, are designed for a through the air game and the new course takes account of this but that means that the opportunity to run the ball in, rather than fly it in has been removed."

The quality of the work from all concerned has been of the highest quality and Chris has nothing but praise for them. Abbotts used their own turf layers, or brought in professionals, rather than calling in unskilled labour, while they have

ABOVE: The new 17th green now features a fiendish drop off to the right

ABOVE RIGHT: Spectating has been improved at the rear of the 9th by thinning out some trees to show the raised green.

RIGHT: The 12th has become a difficult par-4 instead of an easy par-5

operated an 11 days on three days off schedule with Arden Lea going in on the three days to carry out the irrigation work which has required virtually a new system because fairways have been amended and the bunker has changed.

"The eight inch main which feeds the whole system has been rerouted and we've got double heads on all surrounds which is totally new," he said.

The new course will require more intense maintenance but Chris has been assured that he will be given the staff to make sure that the usual high standards are achieved.

With so many changes to the original spec it inevitably placed increasing demands on everyone involved, but despite this an opening date of early April is envisaged giving Wentworth members an opportunity to play the course in for a couple of weeks before it closes in preparation for the PGA.

It would be fair to say that not many, if any, established courses have ever taken on such a dramatic project between major tournaments but as things stood in late



**Courses Manager,
Chris Kennedy,**



September they were on track to pull it off.

“Wentworth tends to be at the forefront of most things and I think, with this project, we are there again.

“I have had some sleepless nights, not to mention some fairly fraught meetings but the greatest pressure came waiting for my daughter, Suzanne, to make me a granddad,” said Chris.

“Callum arrived at seven pounds six ounces. I had to give my apologies for a planning meeting to be there, but I wouldn’t have been anywhere else and Mr Caring was extremely supportive.”

Chris has been at Wentworth since 1989 and done 20 PGA Championships, 20 World Matchplays and 10 Wentworth Senior Masters, but next May the relief he always feels will be all the greater as it will signal the end of the most intense period in his professional life.

“When that final putt goes down on that Sunday afternoon the feeling of satisfaction will be greater than ever and I’ll know by the look on Mr Caring’s face if it has all been worthwhile.”

