



Phoenix from the Ashes

Muswell Hill Golf Club suffered a horrendous arson attack just before Matt Plested took over as Course Manager. Since then, as Scott MacCallum found out, things have got a lot better...

There can be few more stressful experiences in life than changing job or getting married so spare a thought for Matt Plested who combined those two activities in the space of a couple of weeks two and a half years ago.

While I soldier on the certain knowledge that a wave of “So what’s!” will be the response of many who have been in a similar position, let me give you more information which might just make you a little more sympathetic to Matt.

While he was serving his notice at Old Fold Manor Golf Club, in north London, and about to march down the aisle with his beautiful bride, Matt got a phone call from the Chairman of Green at Muswell Hill Golf Club to say that the Maintenance Facility had burnt down.

“It was a real shock. When I asked him what had survived he told me, ‘a shovel,’” said Matt, as we sat in his fantastic new facility, a clue to the fact that the harrowing start to his career at Muswell Hill was not to last too long into his married life.

“As well as every machine, all the paperwork – drainage and irrigation records – went, and we did indeed have nothing but a shovel.”

The fire, in June of 2007, was truly horrific. A total of 55 fire fighters from all over London attended and with a 5,000 litre delivery of diesel that day, and a school just a few yards from the scene frantic efforts were made to ensure that it didn’t spread beyond the boundaries of the golf club.

The culprit, of this deliberate act of arson, was found to be a 14 year



MAIN PHOTO: The 11th hole at Muswell Hill looking splendid.

INSET ABOVE AND LEFT PAGE: Damage caused by the fire



old boy who was caught after he boasted of his “achievement” to a friend on the bus home from school the next day and was overheard by the Course Manager of another local golf club. He contacted the police who apprehended the boy when he got off the bus.

“He got a caution, and a year later burnt down the cricket club,” said Matt, ruefully.

So, with his wedding imminent, Matt took stock of the situation. No maintenance facility; no machinery; no staff – the two green staff who Matt was due to inherit when he started work left a short time after

the fire, and, perhaps the biggest worry of all, no water.

“The fire melted the irrigation tank, even though it was full of water at the time, and the pumps had burnt inside out and melted to the floor.”

Having hit rock bottom there was only one way to go for Muswell Hill Golf Club and thanks to a sound policy by the club itself; a welcome turn around in fortune and Matt’s success in recruiting a team, that’s exactly where the club headed.

“The club was very well insured, with a new for old policy on the machinery, while we prayed for,

and were rewarded with, one of the wettest summers in years. That meant that, without any means of irrigating the course for that first few months, we survived!

“We couldn’t even hand water as we had absolutely nothing and that was the biggest stress for me because had I lost the greens it would have been disastrous. That winter we put in a temporary irrigation tank and a temporary pump house while the new facility was being built.

The stunning new compound is the result of numerous meetings between Matt, who had a real vision



INSET ABOVE: Damage caused by the fire to a triple



LEFT: Beautiful, diamond cut fairway on the 15th at Muswell Hill



ABOVE: The new facility with its new fleet of Toro machinery



of what he wanted, and architects who attempted to incorporate those ideas but also add some of their own.

“The first quote was for £750,000 and including things like Dyson Hand dryers and sun tubes but we didn’t need that. I’ve never been in as many meetings in my life while I also took the architects to see facilities at other golf clubs including Walton Heath, Old Fold Manor, Finchley and Hendon.”

The end result demonstrates that those meetings were hours well spent. There is a drive-in storage area which removes the need for

any manual handling – an idea taken from Walton Heath; a Mezzanine floor for additional storage and a superb workshop area.

Having taken advice from a security advisor, as well as the demands of the insurance companies, the site is now surrounded by 10 foot high fencing with iron gates, cameras, a security system linked to the local police station and bollards. Machinery and equipment is kept in separate locked rooms with high security doors.

“I requested that we put grills on the windows which we close at the end of each day. The facility is

large but I said that we’d only have one chance to get it right as we had no more land and that we would certainly grow into it.”

It all came in at a fraction of that initial quote but still much more than the existing building had been insured for, a shortfall which was covered by the club’s contingency fund and a levy which the members are currently paying.

To compound matters further the building was delayed, however, the consequence of another complication, which would go on to have repercussions for the club and course as a whole.



INSET AND ABOVE: Matt Plested, Course Manager.

ABOVE: The greenkeeping team during the recent snow.

“There were extended talks with the local authority about where the new facility would be sited.

“This caused a delay of a year before work could get underway and all this time we were living out of 18 containers which sat in the club car park, much to the consternation of the membership.”

The final decision placed the maintenance facility on the existing putting green which, in turn, meant that it had to be moved to a new location which impacted on the 17th hole, which then meant that the 17th tee had to be moved which meant that the entire hole had to be realigned.

As you can see, Muswell Hill Golf Club had a mountain to climb.

But back to the near beginnings of this saga, when Matt was still young, free and single, he started his recruitment drive with nothing but promises to offer prospective staff.

He struck gold straight away however, in the shape of Kevin O'Neill.

“Kevin originally came as an Assistant, but I met him before my wedding and we walked around the course.

“He'd worked at Gleneagles and was clearly very clued up.

“I spoke with people he'd been with who told me what a good worker he was and it turned into the easiest Deputy interview in history.”

Kevin, as it turned out, started three weeks before Matt went on honeymoon and, using just a greens mower and a fairway mower lent to the club by other clubs, he started the long process of recovery before being joined by his newly-married boss.

“I must admit I did have a few sneaky phone calls to Kev while I was away. I'd go for a walk and ring him to see how he was getting on,” revealed Matt, who had completed the new £350,000 machinery deal with Toro two days before he left.

On his return Matt became a key part of an Extraordinary General Meeting called by the members unhappy with the state of the golf course with around 100 threatening to resign.

Muswell Hill Golf Club has a rich history. Bobby Locke and Ted Ray regularly played challenge matches over the course and Frank Sinatra

often played there while staying at the Savoy. Among the current members is John Paramor, The European Tour's Chief Referee.

“I didn't know I would be so heavily involved until I got there, but I stood up at the meeting and asked them to give me a year and that I would guarantee that those who did decide to leave would kick themselves. I told them it was not going to take rocket science to get the course back on track but just a bit of hard work.”

Two and a half years on Matt, Kev, First Assistant, Lee Brady, and the rest of the hand picked team, have been as good as their word.

“Just by cutting the course well - diamond cutting the fairways and adding definition -and setting it up properly the members thought we were heroes,” recalled Kevin.

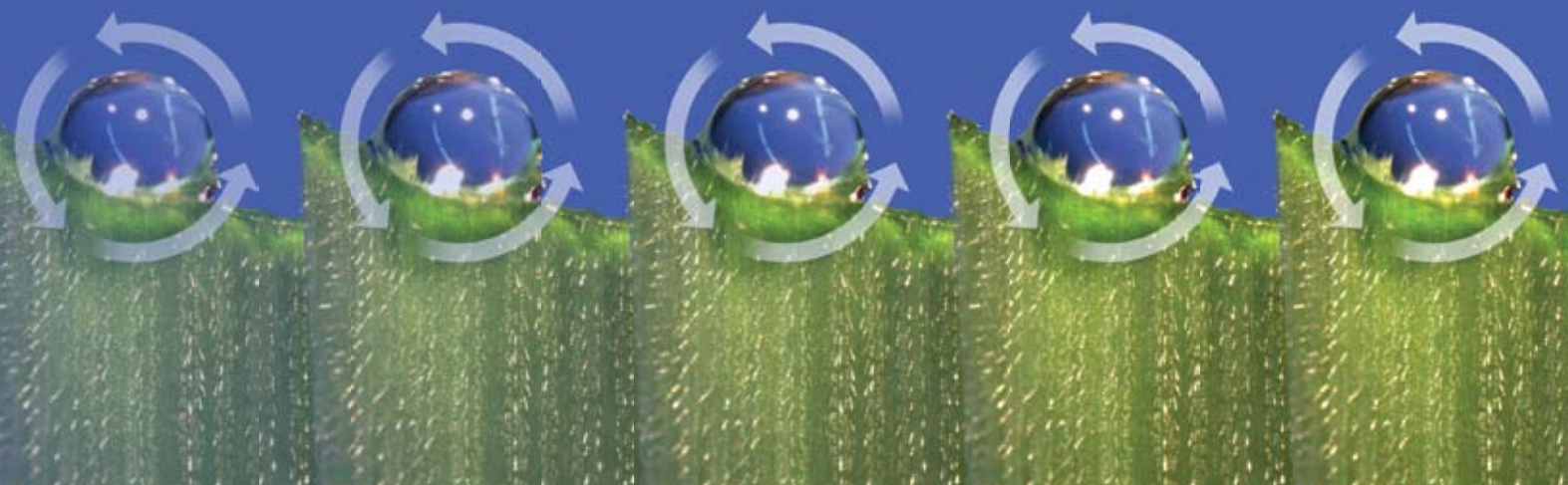
“Our first priority was to improve grass coverage and work on increasing the amount of light so we removed a large number of poplars. John Nicholson, of John Nicholson Associates, visited and told the committee that they club was at a cross roads and that if they didn't do something about it they would lose the course.



INSET ABOVE: Carnage caused by the fire, and a barely recognisable Kubota tractor.

Turf disease protection that

after cut... - after cut... - after cut... - after cut... - after cut...



"We put together presentation for annual Forums and thanks to the techy expert on our team, Kris Shale-Martin, we produced computer models of how the course would look minus the trees we proposed to take out. The first year we showed them what we would do and the second year we were able to show them what we'd done and the benefits that could be seen in the depth of roots.

"We do these in the last week of the financial year in September then a week later the diggers go in and we start the projects we've told them about so they can see where their membership money is going."

It also means the main work is done by the end of November and the remainder of the winter programme can be carried out before the start of the next season.

One of Muswell Hill's real problems is drainage with several holes regularly out of play each year because of waterlogging.

"The course had no outlets so we went back to the basics, mole ploughed and put in trench drains as well as reinstating a burn on the 12th hole which has helped to dry out the golf course.

Listening to Matt and Kevin the amount of work they have got through in the last two and a half years is mind boggling, but the enthusiasm that ouses from them, and the rest of the team, is genuine and you believe Matt when he says that he often has to tell the guys to go home at the end of the day.

"It is great that we all started around the same time and I was keen to get the right team. None of us are hung up by how things have been done here in the past and we are free to put our own practices in place. The best thing is that I've got greenkeepers who think and that is a huge plus.

"I want to make Muswell Hill an academy for greenkeeper and will be thrilled when they leave to become Course Managers in their own right move on to climb the career ladder. We are well looked after here, we eat in the clubhouse every day and we have a great relationship with the Club Manager, Adrian Hobbs, and the rest of the staff," said Matt, who has also taken on the role of BIGGA's London Section Secretary.

While much of the work to reinstate the course has now been completed – and he general feeling

is that the new putting green and altered holes have improved rather than merely altered the course Matt is clear that there is still much work to do.

"There is still a lot to be done to take this club to the level I want to take it.

"We need to build our own reservoir as water, particularly in London, is going to become a real issue, while the bunker renovation programme is going to be massive.

"There is plenty of things to get our teeth into."

Those members who decided to remain with the club will be patting themselves on their back.

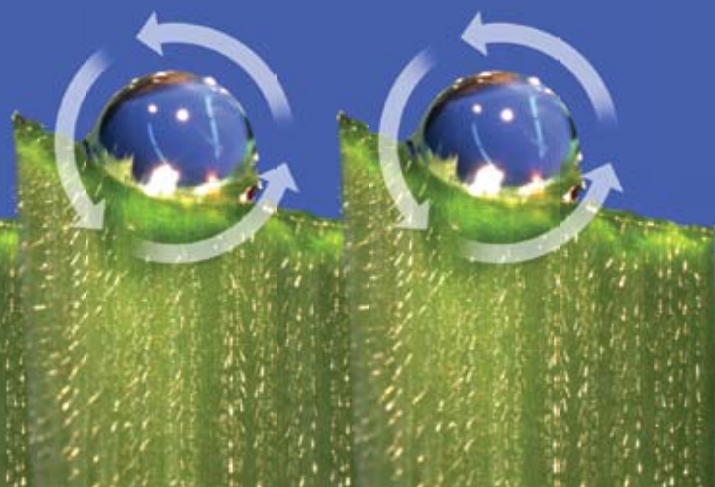
Not only them, however, as the club has added 100 to its membership within the last 12 months and seen record green fee and society takings.

It may be, although it didn't feel so at the time, that the great fire of 2007 was a wonderful opportunity for Matt and Muswell Hill Golf Club to move forward at a much faster rate than would have been possible had a new job and new wife been the extent of activity in the June of that month!



INSET ABOVE: More damage caused by the fire.

stays cut...
after cut... after cut...



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