



A dream fulfilled

Jim McKenzie bought into the dream of a Welsh businessman in 1993. In October that dream becomes a reality. Scott MacCallum visited Celtic Manor to hear the story

Back in 1993, a wealthy businessman talked passionately to a talented young greenkeeper about his vision of building a golf course. It was a tough pitch, not because the idea of building a course over the land surrounding the house where the meeting was taking place was so outrageous, but because of the sheer scale of what he was describing.

The land, in a South Wales valley on the outskirts of Newport, was beautiful, but it had never echoed to an anguished cry of “Fore!”, nor had it heard the satisfying sound of a ball dropping four inches into a cup, but this man was talking about holding European Tour events over it. He was even talking about hosting a Ryder Cup!

Some 17 years on I sat in a luxury clubhouse overlooking the magnificent golf course that in 141

days time would host the Ryder Cup, listening to that same young greenkeeper recount how he felt when he listened to Sir Terry Matthews, the owner of Celtic Manor Resort, explain his dreams for the future.

“When he started to talk about golf tournaments and Ryder Cups, I thought he was absolutely nuts,” said Jim McKenzie, who was in the process of considering leaving The Wentworth Club, where he



worked under Chris Kennedy, and heading west.

“Within an hour though, if he’d asked me to punch my way through the wall I’d have asked him which hand he wanted me to use. He was that much of an inspirational character.”

It would be fair to suggest that even Terry Matthews, and his reach for the stars philosophy, would never have envisaged what ultimately has been achieved in

the time since he sat with Jim in that house – where he’d been born incidentally - looking out at the beautiful Usk Valley.

Five golf courses, 10 Wales Opens, a superb five star hotel, two incredible clubhouses, a Golf Academy, a home for the Welsh Golf Union, innumerable world class events and, at the beginning of October this year, the pinnacle of it all – that Ryder Cup.

“The Ryder Cup is the third larg-

est sporting event in the world in terms of television viewers after the Olympics and the World Cup,” said Jim, who is now the third longest serving employee of Celtic Manor.

“As Wales will never host an Olympics or a World Cup this is as big as it gets.”

All the work that has been carried out at Celtic Manor has been done with a view to hosting the Cup. The first golf course built was the Roman Road which was followed

ABOVE: 18th on the Roman Road

Photographs in this article courtesy of The Celtic Manor resort, Newport, South Wales



2010 Ryder Cup
Captain, Colin
Montgomerie, with
Jim McKenzie

“Within an hour though, if he’d asked me to punch my way through the wall I’d have asked him which hand he wanted me to use. He was that much of an inspirational character.”

Jim McKenzie

by Wentwood Hills, over which the first five Wales Opens were played and which was originally intended to be the Ryder Cup course.

“Halfway through the bidding process it became clear that something would have to be done to alleviate the 104 metre drop that course was famous for. More land was acquired and plans for what is now the 2010 course were drawn up.”

Not content with ensuring that the 24 players would have a course worthy of the most famous team event in sport, another course, this one designed by the 2010 Ryder



Cup Captain, Colin Montgomerie, and carrying his name, was also built.

“At one stage we had between 200 and 300 contractors on site at the same time building the Montgomerie Course and remodelling bits of the Wentwood Hills course.”

It’s a quirky factoid that over a four year period – ‘04 to ‘08 - the Wales Open, which is owned and promoted by Celtic Manor was played over three different golf courses – Wentwood Hills, Roman Road and the 2010 course. Not bad for one venue.

But Jim is used to dealing with logistical problems during a career which has seen him at one stage hold the title of Director of Golf, dealing with all of the playing side of the game as well as the greenkeeping side.

He is currently Director of Golf Courses and Estates Management - as well as being an official spokesman for the Welsh Assembly on the Ryder Cup and being interviewed by media from all over the world.

The Ryder Cup bid was secured

in 2001 and originally earmarked for 2009. The postponement of the 2001 match because of 9/11 meant the rescheduling of all subsequent matches to even years.

Much of Celtic Manor’s bid success was founded on the golfing legacy that would be left by the match. The benefits of that will be seen in Welsh golf for years to come but much of what Jim and his team have dealt with is of a more immediate nature.

“We opened a bridge in November last year which is basically to take members and guests to the new, temporary, practice ground which has been built because the existing practice ground will house the tented village.”

The scale of the Ryder Cup can be seen from the statistic that the tented village for the Wales Open requires three articulated lorries to bring in the scaffolding – the Ryder Cup needs 890 lorries!

Road ways for newly tarmaced television compounds, and throughout the site, have been built while the massive car and coach



parks will probably only be fully utilised for that one week in October.

“There is a semi permanent feel to the whole thing and we will need every one of the 141 days we have left to get everything into shape,” said Jim, who had the additional problem of dealing with a 20% staff reduction through redundancy last year as the Resort took action to preserve its long term future.

To compound matters further the annual Wales Open is still being held at the beginning of this month.

“We decided that May Day was the cut off for any significant changes we wanted to make to the course because of the Wales Open. If it hadn’t been in the calendar we could have made changes much closer to the date,” explained Jim, who has turned 2010 into an even more special year by getting married on June 20.

One problem, caused by the rapid growth and expansion of Celtic Manor, which has recently been resolved is that of the Maintenance facility which was originally built to

service the Roman Road course and its 12-16 staff.

“Towards the end we had more than 50 working out of it with three fleets of equipment and it was taking half an hour for a triple to drive to the 1st tee of the 2010 course. We went through an extraordinary number of tyres and a lot of fuel while guys were spending perhaps an hour and a half each day just travelling between the Maintenance facility and the course.”

The purchase of a farm in the middle of the 2010 course has cut that travel time to 90 seconds and provided a superb facility for machinery, aggregate, administration as well as home for three of the team.

Although completely different events the Wales Open will be used to hone some of the areas they will need for the Ryder Cup and is particularly useful when it comes to timing certain tasks.

“The Ryder Cup is three weeks later than its traditional slot, because of events which have been added to the US Tour and this adds



ABOVE: 9th green on the Roman Road
MAIN ABOVE: 14th on Twenty-ten



BELOW: 1st on the Twenty-ten

to the pressure. I don’t envy Scott (Fenwick) at Gleneagles in 2014 and I know this is why Sweden pulled their bid – it gets dark in Sweden at 6pm in October.

“Here daylight will be 7am and the 1st tee time is 7.45am. As it stands the Home Captain doesn’t have to decide if he wants to start with Foursomes or Fourballs for some time yet. If Monty goes for Fourballs a round will take about five hours and I will have a bit more breathing space to ready the course, but if he decides to go for Foursomes they will be round in four hours and at every green much earlier and my guys will have to be really, really quick,” explained Jim, while in the room behind us Europe’s newest superstar, Rory McIlroy, was taking part in a photo shoot.

“We have to assume that it is Foursomes for the sake of planning. The first game will be on the 2nd green by 8.10am so by that time I will have had to have had the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 13th and 14th cut and by the time they get to the 5th I’m going to have



“With supervision and mechanical support, people reading the magazine will work it out for themselves. We will have a team of around 120 working on the golf course”

Jim McKenzie

to have had the 17th cut. So it looks like we will have one huge team on the practice ground – which for the first time ever will be floodlit – and six or seven separate teams working on the golf course.”

Jim also points out that Celtic Manor is not like Wentworth where you could have 100 people working on the 4th fairway with golf on the 3rd and no-one would know.

“This is a big open site and basically they don’t want to see us and they don’t want to hear us if it can be helped.”

The Celtic Manor team is very strong with many guys having

worked on all 10 Wales Opens and been involved in the building of the golf courses.

“The three Head Greenkeepers, Gary Connell, on the 2010; Paul Davies, on the Roman Road, and Nick Vickery, on the Montgomerie, as well as Neil Shepherd, the Irrigation Technician and Cal Callaby, our Workshop Manager are all excellent. You never hear me talking about my team. They all work with me, not for me.”

The logistics and the sheer numbers involved is quite mind boggling.

“We can’t have someone cutting the 1st green then moving to the 4th because that would be too noisy and too visual by that time, and if he broke down on the 1st we’d have a real problem. We’ll have two guys cutting the 1st then going to the 9th and two guys cutting the 2nd then going to the 10th so that they can get away, and so on. Then there will be between 12 and 14 guys cutting fairways so that the fairways of the first six holes will be cut within 20 minutes, the same number cutting tees. With supervi-

sion and mechanical support people reading the magazine will work it out for themselves. We will have a team of around 120 working on the golf course.”

That additional work force will be made up of volunteers drawn in the main from golf clubs in Wales and the South West and a few trusted friends from further afield.

“The reason for this is two-fold. One, it is only fair that Welsh greenkeepers who have invested their heart and soul into the Welsh Ryder Cup can be a part of it, and two, logistically accommodation is a problem so most of the local guys will travel from home and car share wherever possible. South Wales Section Secretary, Steve Chappell, and Regional Administrator, Jane Jones, have been instrumental in pulling this together.”

Although the match itself lasts for just three days the volunteers have to report to Celtic Manor on the Saturday before – six days before a ball is struck in anger.

“They will be inducted on the Saturday with insurance issues





addressed and risk assessments carried out and we go into lockdown on the Sunday. On Monday evening the teams arrive and they start practice on Tuesday before a ticket paying gallery of 45,000.

“Monday therefore is the only opportunity we have for our volunteers to work out there and learn the ropes. It wouldn’t look professional to be teaching guys in front of the players or the galleries,” said Jim, who has struck deals with the Match’s official suppliers including Pro Quip for uniforms and has also worked closely with his own suppliers, including Toro, Bernhard’s ClubCar and the like.

Weather permitting – and while the course has proven itself to be well draining fog is an issue that can’t be so easily resolved – the work will involve some very intense period of activity followed by long periods of downtime and so arrangements have been made for table tennis, pool tables, dart boards etc.

So what will Jim be doing during the week and what will he be 2feeling?

“I’ve recently been given my schedule for the week and to be honest I’ve put a line through a lot of it. I’ll have a lot of close friends here that week so I’d like to think I’d have time with them. I’ve been fortunate to visit Ryder Cups at Valhalla, the Country Club in Boston and The Belfry and spoken to Superintendents, who have had Ryder Cups. I have also visited Augusta for The Masters, as, like us, they own and operate their own event.”

One of his abiding memories, however, was four years ago when he spent a week at K Club during last European Ryder Cup.

“Jerry (Byrne) did an incredible job at the K Club and dealt amazingly with a hurricane coming through during the week. My main memory of that week was not the match itself but an hour after it had finished. I was in the tented village and some of the players and caddies were up on stage singing Amarillo with a band. I heard a cheer and turned round to see Jerry come into the village on the back of a buggy holding the biggest bottle of champagne you’ve ever



seen. People who didn’t even know him but must have thought he was important were cheering him.”

I’m sure that on the evening of October 3 there will be two such bottles of champagne. One in the hands of Sir Terry Matthews and the other being clutched by the man he convinced to buy into his dream – Jim McKenzie.