

Best of

Scott MacCallum visits the home of Hampshire Cricket where a superb new golf course is being built to complement the already superb cricket facilities



Two sports dominate our summer and they can be encapsulated, albeit in cliché form, by the anguished cry of “Fore!” and the sound of leather on willow.

Golf and cricket provide weekend relief for large chunks of the population, and for a few lucky ones other times of the week as well. Golfers do play cricket and cricketers do play golf, but they tend to keep the two pursuits separate - no-one has that much spare time! - until now that is...

INSET CENTRE: Head Groundsman, Nigel Gray (left) and Course Manager, Julian Covey (right)

BELOW: In-fill arriving on site

The Rose Bowl, in Southampton, is home to Hampshire Cricket and the newest venue on the Test playing rota. In addition a superb 18 hole golf course is currently under construction, alongside the ground, to replace an existing nine hole. Cricket and golf working in harness!

The spectacular cricket ground has already hosted a Test Match – last June’s match with Sri Lanka, which was so rain affected that Head Groundsman, Nigel Gray, was regarded by many experts as the Man of the Match. He actually did win the Test Match Special Champagne Moment award.

Despite the weather it was regarded as a triumph, with the wicket being roundly applauded, and it marked a significant milestone in the progress of The Rose Bowl, with the new golf course another key development.

“We knew that Hampshire Cricket wouldn’t work as purely a domestic cricket ground and a nine hole golf course – there just

wasn’t sufficient earning potential to maintain the facility,” explained Managing Director, Glenn Delve.

“We had a fantastic facility for cricket and 160 acres available for golf, but only had nine holes on it.”

Having decided to invest in a new 18 holes, the plan which was hatched to make it happen could be regarded as a piece of outstanding “outside the box” thinking, and will lead to The Rose Bowl gaining its new course for the princely sum of £1.

And it is all down to importing inert in-fill.

“It was one of our more interesting days in the office when we realised we could have a £5 million golf course for £1,” said Glenn.

“It’s a very interesting business model, not completely unheard of but for the quality of golf course we are building it is unusual.”

The constructor, Keltbray Golf Environmental, handles all aspects of the project, from first spade in the ground to signing off on a completed golf course.



both worlds



"We charge a tipping fee and a proportion of that goes towards building the golf course and any other infrastructure, then there are our building costs and whatever left is our profit," explained Dave Coussell, the Project Manager for Keltbray.

"We charge the same for pure virgin dig soil as they do for those loads which are in need of cleaning and screening but the material is constantly monitored for quality and anything that does not meet the required standard is either rejected or put into quarantine and sent for testing," he explained.

"If we get nice clean clay we use that for tee or green complexes, while the poorer loads, which may include concrete will be crushed and used for the internal road.

Julian Covey joined The Rose Bowl as Course Manager in mid 2010, and is maintaining the existing nine hole course, along with his Deputy, Ian Reeves, and Assistant, Joe Weston, as part of a three man team, as well as co-ordinating the

temporary lay-out which will be used by the membership while the new course is under construction.

"It is such an exciting venture, particularly at a time when the golf boom has slowed down," explained Julian, who has been involved in greenkeeping since he left school and who has been involved with Hampshire Cricket since his son, Ryan, played age group cricket for the County. Ryan is now a greenkeeper at Worldham GC working with his older brother, Richard, who is Course Manager.

Julian has been greenkeeping at a number of clubs in his career including Liphook, Isle of Purbeck, Hindhead, Old Thorns and The Tytherington Club in Macclesfield and moved into golf course construction in the early '90s.

"I have the best of both world's here. A project to work on and a course to maintain. It's a real professional challenge but with emotional ties. I love the hustle and bustle of a construction project, but this one allows me to be at home and I can



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Paramount among the thinking for the new 18 holes was to ensure that the existing club members always had a good quality 9 holes to play until the new course came on stream.

INSET ABOVE: A tee is rebuilt on the course



“The project is split into ten different phases with the objective always to make sure that the current members always have nine holes to play and that means putting in some temporary holes, which might be there for two or three years,” explained Julian, who added that the one downside of an in-fill generated project is that it can only move at the pace of the house building and construction industry which generated so much of the in-fill.

“It would have been easy to have given the members nine little par-3s, but nobody wanted that.”

Part of the brief was that the golf course had to act as a car park for the cricket ground when Test matches, ODIs or big Twenty20 matches come to town.

“It was a condition of planning that we incorporate an exit route through the course for cars attend-

ing the cricket while the 1st fairway is used for corporate parking. The road is also used as the haul road for the lorries moving around the site for depositing the imported material-fill,” explained Julian.

Once the new course has been completed new areas for parking – spurs off the road – will be identified.

“We are lucky that where the car parking is, it is relatively dry. In fact we had a few hundred cars on our existing 1st fairway just a couple of weeks ago and you wouldn’t know,” said Julian.

While the quality of the inert in-fill arriving at the site may vary, what goes into the construction will meet very exacting standards.

“During the construction it is my job to see that all materials, the gravels, the rootzones etc are all tested by a laboratory and ensure that it performs to the correct specification ie particle size, percolation rates, compatibility etc. We spot test every 500 tonnes that comes on site to ensure that it is within the tolerance levels of the lab tested material. I am absolutely comfortable that there are no compromises as anyone is only as good as their last job and this is a high profile project, Keltbray will ensure that the golf course is constructed to the highest standard.”

The timescale for the new course is around four to five years but is dependent on the rate of the importation.

“The time scale is fine as we will always have nine holes open for play, while nine holes are growing



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in then we will flip them over and let the new holes grow in.

“Within the temporary lay-out we are losing two of the existing greens so we will build temporary greens out of the the rootzone and turf from the old greens,” explained Julian, for whom all the experience he has accumulated over 35 years of greenkeeping is coming together on this one project.

“I’ve got the greenkeeping experience, and the construction and the grow-in skills all coming together and it is down to me to ensure that the Rose Bowl gets what is specified within the contract. It’s certainly

the most exciting project I’ve ever been involved with,” said Julian.

When the major cricket matches take place Julian and his team swap their dark blue uniforms, for the light blue of the cricket ground staff and join Nigel Gray’s team.

“If you love cricket, as I do, the chance to get involved in Test matches or one days is fantastic. The golf course is closed and we’re under Nigel’s wing.

“If it’s a lovely sunny day you’ve got little to do, but on the Saturday of the Sri Lanka Test we had the covers on and off 10 times and, believe me, they are heavy when

they are covered in water.”

Julian and Nigel often talk about the issues that affect their two strands of the sports’ turf maintenance business.

“It is really interesting to learn about preparing a cricket wicket. If you look at what we do for golf, we don’t like compaction, but with cricket they compact as hard as they can in the summer and then relieve it in the winter by spiking etc.”

Nigel has been Head Groundsman for 21 years – including 10 at the previous County Ground, and having been in at the start at The



Rose Bowl he was able to construct the square exactly as he wanted.

"The top layer is four inches of screened clay/loam, the next eight inches is unscreened clay/loam and the eight inches below that is road stone," revealed Nigel, who added that following successful experiments on a pitch including more sand, three more of the square's 20 pitches are being rebuilt over the winter in this style.

"We spent a lot of time having One Day Internationals so we approached the Test Match like having five ODI's in a row. I was confident that the pitch was pretty good, and that we were doing the right things in the right way, so that took a lot of the pressure off," he explained.

"Basically all pitch preparation follows a similar path and you are trying to create one which is hard, fast, bouncy, although you have to adjust procedures for a one day game - you wouldn't want it to be quite as bouncy as a Test match pitch because over five days you want players to have a chance to display all their abilities. For a one dayer, you want the bat to be able to hit the ball and runs to be scored, which makes for an entertaining game."

The procedure employed on a one day pitch to reduce the bounce flies against any thoughts a lay person would have on the matter.

"We probably roll a one day pitch a little more which has the

effect of calming it down. You can go beyond the point of rolling it to make it bouncier and it deadens it - there is an optimum point at which you get maximum bounce," explained Nigel, who added that the aim of a Test Match groundsman is, weather permitting, to have the game going into the last afternoon.

Preparing a pitch to suit the home bowling attack is also regarded as fair practice.

"England have three six foot seven bowlers, so if we produce a bouncy pitch we were going to get more out of it than the Sri Lankans, who are six foot, tops.

"It was in England's interest to produce fast bouncy pitches and at home you have the chance to produce something like that," said Nigel, who prior to Julian's arrival oversaw the maintenance of the golf course as well.

With the hotel - which will overlook the ground and double up as a Media Centre and corporate hospitality venue for matches - due to commence construction in the near future, and the golf course underway, the opportunity to ensure year round usage is getting closer. but in the meantime the Rose Bowl is also being used as a popular concert venue, with acts including the likes of Oasis and Neil Diamond strutting their stuff while the fireworks displays are also extremely popular.

"We build a stage on the outfield

facing east and cover the square with trackway," explained Nigel.

"When we had a Billy Joel concert a couple of years ago we had a T20 match on the Saturday, started building the stage on the Sunday, had the concert on the Thursday and then had another T20 the following Tuesday."

As part of the planning regulations for the golf course environmental consultant, Matt Johns, has been a regular visitor ensuring environmental issues were at the top of everyone's thoughts.

"I put together some very detailed management plans which were a condition of the planning approval.

"There is a landscape management plan; a woodland management plan and a nature conservation plan which all come together," explained Matt, who is on site at least once a fortnight as the course is constructed.

It certainly is an exciting project and with a method of construction which may prove to be a model for many future course construction processes and once fully completed it should satisfy the desires of both golfers and cricketers.

Below: The greenkeeping team

