

Yorkshire's true links

Scott MacCallum visits Cleveland Golf Club and meets a man who leaves no stone unturned in making his home-town course as good as it can be





It is an interesting fact, well it certainly was to me, that Cleveland Golf Club, in Redcar, is the only true links course in Yorkshire.

That piece of information was one of many which emerged from a meeting with Course Manager, Ian Pemberton, whose enthusiasm for the job is quite infectious.

Ian moved to his home-town club four years ago, from the inland Bedale Golf Club, and since then he has barely taken a backward step in ensuring that the course develops.

"The club has a great history. It was founded in 1887 and really is a sleeping giant," said Ian,

"I would say that I have managed to get a lot further forward than I could ever have hoped in the four years I've been here, I told them that it would be a five year plan but I think we zapped that in about two and a half."

Looking around the course you would find no reason to suggest that Ian was exaggerating.

His first task on arrival was to make improvements to the rough,

an area which had been causing problems for some time.

"The rough had become unmanageable over a number of years. It was overgrown and unkempt, too many balls were being lost and as a result play had slowed and green fee revenue had fallen off.

"Aesthetically, it looked unsightly and, from a wildlife point of view, it was stifling the fresh growth because it couldn't get through," he explained.

Ian and the team brought in an Amazone flail mower and got to work.

"It was a laborious task and it took two years to get it where we wanted, but it was very worthwhile. We now have improved the native flora and fauna and turned it back into proper links rough," explained Ian.

While this work was being carried they had worked hard on improving the club's practice ground and also looked at the 18th and 10th fairways, which were, by his own admission, "wall to wall chickweed".

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"We had some samples taken and the potash levels were non-existent – there just wasn't any potash in them at all – and the balance was never going to allow anything to grow."

"We corrected that with a potash feed, very low in nitrogen, and then over-seeded with pure fescue and up to now we've been very pleased with the results."

But the biggest project Ian and the team have undertaken over the last three years has seen a significant change to the look of Cleveland Golf Club, while also seeing the development of an innovative project which has



brought additional revenue into the club.

It originated in 2002 when Persimmon Homes purchased land from the local authority, on which three of the holes were laid out, with a view to building luxury houses with spectacular views of the North Sea.

In anticipation of the work going ahead three new holes were built out on the dunes, the 14th, 15th and 16th, which certainly haven't taken anything away from the quality of the course and in the case of the 15th, a par-3 over water, provided a hole which would grace many courses.

"The planning process for the houses took a long time during which time I arrived. I felt that would could take advantage of the building process and acquire some of the sandy soil that would be removed for foundations and move it on to the golf course.

"I contacted Lee Penrose, at the STRI, who together with Henry Bechelet, were extremely helpful in advising me how best to go about it – I would have needed a minimum

of two feet of sand to be able to grow the desired grasses."

It seemed the perfect plan with the golf course being able to develop using rootzone which couldn't be any more perfect for the job.

However, local objections saw the Persimmon housing development fail to win planning approval and Ian was forced to abandon his plans for the course or find an alternative solution.

Not a man to be beaten down and showing a resourcefulness that is common among many greenkeepers he tracked down a local recycling contractor.

"Keith Rutherford was looking for an area in which to dispose of soil and brick and we were looking for the material to create character and definition to an area of the course around the 3rd and 4th holes which was fairly featureless and full of small peaks and hollows, making it very difficult to maintain."

Ian's aim was to create an inland dune and build new tees with the material with the added bonus that



MAIN ABOVE: A view from the top of the new dune

INSET ABOVE: The new dune adds definition to the right side of the 3rd hole

the club would generate income from the material brought in.

"It's a win-win situation for us," said Ian, who admits to being the driving force behind the project.

"The Chairman of Green, Dave Atfield, has been extremely supportive during this process, but he sometimes hides when he sees me coming at him with another idea," joked Ian.

That 20,000 tonnes has enable Ian to build a huge inland dune, five to eight metres high, to add definition to the right side of the 3rd hole and a backdrop to the



The stunning par 3 on the 15th

7th green to ensure that there is no distraction to people putting of those playing off the nearby 12th tee.

“The great thing is that the digger operator, the digger and its diesel is paid for by the contractor so we don’t have any outgoing at all,” said Ian, who admits he has been very lucky that the operator has shown a real flare for the work and a desire to do it as well as he can.

“He is outstanding – a craftsman!” is Ian’s assessment.

It is an on-going programme and the current Club Captain, Keith Cooper, has also identified an area behind the 4th green which he feels would benefit from a mound.

“That would be purely for aesthetics, to shield the hole from the Steel Works, which borders the course, but we are aware that too much would be as damaging as nothing at all as it could alter the character of the place beyond all recognition.”

However, the work so far has received great acclaim from the membership and improved that particular area of the golf course no end.

“The one small downside is having lorries driving over the course to deliver their loads.

“We can have as many as 20

wagons a day while other days we may only have three and others none at all but we looked at the situation and got in touch with the council to identify the shortest possible route over the course for access.

“All the drivers are informed that the golfers’ safety takes priority and we don’t have any problems.”

Ian is very much an advocate of good traditional sustainable golf.

“We’ve just applied Rescue to a couple of greens and achieved a successful outcome, but it’s minimal feed – we just do a 3-0-8 to start them off and then go on to liquids while we will put on a half rate 4-0-24 application at the back end of the year just to ensure they are healthy going into the winter.”

He was particularly pleased a couple of years ago when the club hosted an R&A Sustainable Golf Seminar when Nick Park, a member of the Golf Course Committee and a great advocate of Sustainable Golf, complimented him on the quality and quantity of fescue in the greens.

In his four years at the club, Ian and the team have continued to build tees and now the vast majority of the project, designed to add length to the course, has been done.

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**Ian Pemberton,
Course Manager**



The huge artificial dune continues to grow



The mini Swilken Bridge built by a member

“We totally amended the 1st; done the 2nd, built two on the 3rd; 4th not yet; 5th – we’ve plans for that incorporating the ing; 6th, we’ve extended and recontoured; extended the 7th, added extra length to the 8th; done the 9th; extended the 10th at the back and levelled it off and built a path by the side; 11th nothing yet; 12th nothing yet; 13, 14, 15 and 16 yes; 17 not yet, and 18 yes,” he reeled off, showing that he is as adept when it comes to memory as he is with course construction.

“We do it all in-house and I’ve got a great team here – Deputy Les Hunt, who has been here 20 years; Jamie Chester, who has been here 18 years; Kevin Bartram, who has been here 12 years and Aiden Coates, who has been here three,” said Ian, who added that Kevin and Aiden have proven themselves to be particularly skilled when it comes to building steps and paths.

The club has a very strong membership, and green fees have seen a marked increase over the last couple of years.

“We had a member, Bill Franks, come in and build us a mini Swilken Bridge while he also helped us construct the litter bins, with bricks given to us by Keith

Rutherford, that we have on the course. People take a pride in the club and it’s great to see.”

As I was leaving Ian pointed out another member who was repairing one of the outside lights on the clubhouse wall.

Ian was always aware of the fact that he had arrived at a links from an inland course and that he was particularly careful to steer clear of anything which might have been perceived of bringing parkland to the seaside.

“That said, I’m not a big advocate of the great divide between links greenkeepers and parkland greenkeepers. I class myself as a greenkeeper as simple as that. I love my job passionately and it is about grass be it on links or parkland.”

“The only difference is that we can be a lot drier at times, reaction times to implement any required maintenance has to be immediate. Always be proactive not reactive.”

Having achieved so much in his first four years Ian now has his sights set on becoming an Open Qualifying venue and has already been in touch with the R&A to set up a visit of the course in 2011.

It would be a fitting reward for the only true links in the largest county in the country.

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