

Coming up Trumps

The new Trump International Golf Links, in Aberdeen, has created numerous headlines and, as Scott MacCallum found out when he visited, it looks set to live up to all the hype



The spectacular par-five 14th is likely to become the signature hole





“I want this to be the best golf course in the world.” Those are the words Donald Trump has spoken to everyone involved in the development of Trump International Golf Links.

Quite a challenge, but for those lucky enough to have had a preview of the work being carried out on the Menie Estate, which hugs the rugged North Sea coastline, to the north of Aberdeen, it will certainly not fall short because of the quality of the land, or as a result of any lack of effort or attention to detail.

The course is built on a stretch of links land that could have been created especially for the game of

4th hole being seeded above and from a different angle, below, showing the interesting square tees

golf. Dunes the size of tower blocks, with valleys, the size and shape of fairways, running between them, were the raw material, but Architect, Martin Hawtree, Constructor, Sol Golf, and John Bambury of Create Turfgrass, have provided the skills to make the very most of what was there.

“Mr Trump promised the world the greatest golf course in the world and he isn’t a man to renege on a promise. We all genuinely believe that it will become the world’s greatest golf course,” said John, as we sat in the Trump offices, housed in an ancient stone lodge beside the course.

“When Mr Trump told me what he intended for the course my first thoughts were that it was an incredible challenge. That said, if my initial reaction was to have been daunted I would have steered clear, as this challenge is only going to grow and grow,” explained John, an Irishman who carries the relaxed air of confidence of a man in control of whatever circumstance should come his way.

So how do you face up to the challenge of producing a golf course so good that it is unmatched by anything else in the world?

“It’s a very simple thought process really. Everything you do, you then think - ‘How can I do it better tomorrow?’

“The bar is set very high. Our tee boxes have to be better than the best greens; our fairways have to be better than the best tee boxes and our greens have to be better than all the rest.”

John arrived on site in April, when just a handful of the holes had been shaped but none of the greens had been built. Since then the quality of the work and the pace at which this has been completed has been truly remarkable. Indeed, on the day of Greenkeeper International’s visit, at the end of September, the final fairway, the 4th, was being seeded, while all of the greens and bunkers had been finished.

John, a graduate of Penn State University, arrived in Aberdeen having worked on a number of grow-in projects in Ireland and with experience of working with Sol Golf.

“I think I ticked a lot of the boxes for the Trump Organisation and we got on very well. I presented them with a plan on how I would tackle the grow-in and I think they were impressed with this.

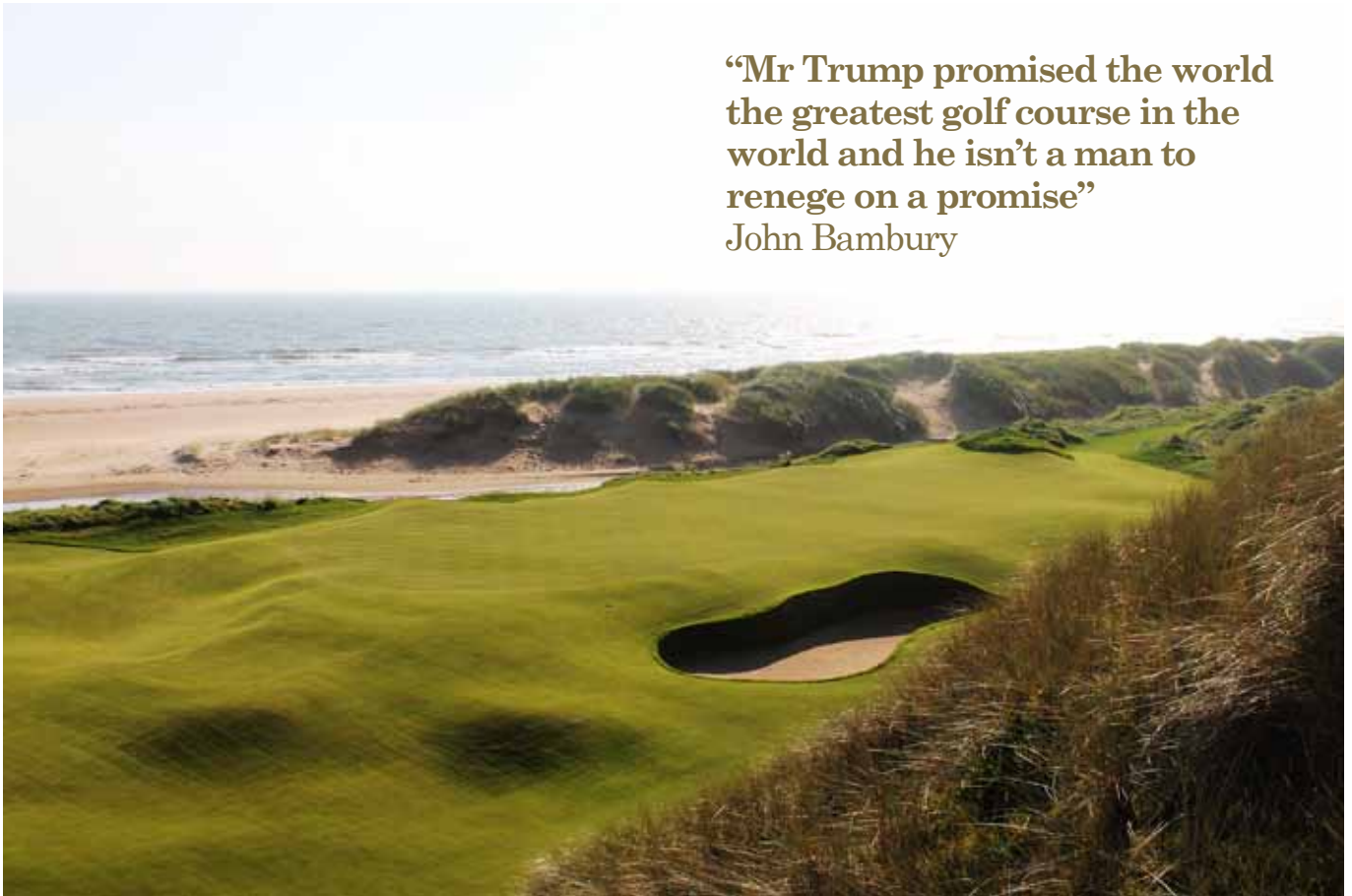
“It isn’t just about the turf, it’s about putting structures in place to cover every area.”

John’s first meeting was to compile an equipment list and this was carried out, with the Trump Organisation’s preferred supplier, John Deere, working closely with National Turf Manager for Turf



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Equipment, Paul Trowman, in the space of five days.

“We turned it around very quickly, but life is only as complicated as you make it and we gave John Deere what we needed, together with the specifications, and we agreed a deal.

The equipment has worked very well for us. You don’t want to bring in a whole fleet of equipment at the same time and have it sitting there, so John Deere worked with our timelines on this.

It all had to be suitable for ongoing maintenance as well as the grow-in,” said John, whose local dealer is Double A.

The new maintenance facility will come on stream before the winter begins to hit hard.

Having conducted a full evaluation of the site and its topography, much of which influenced the equipment requirements, the greenkeeping team was assembled.

“People have always been hired here based on enthusiasm and commitment and we undertook a robust interview process which identified a number of staff from the local area, which was always one of Mr Trump’s objectives.

“It wasn’t hard to find local guys, because there is a wealth of talent in the area,” said John, who revealed that Donald Trump, himself, is a 4 handicapper with a very keen

knowledge of course building and construction.”

With equipment and team in place the next biggest issue was the agronomic plan for the grow-in.

“Temperatures get down very low up here, even in the middle of summer, and any given day it can be five or six degrees in the morning and be up at 18 by three o’clock in the afternoon,” explained John, who was quick to thank Robert Patterson, Course Manager at Royal Aberdeen, for bringing him up to speed on the local climatic conditions.

“What I learned from Robert in half an hour would have taken two years to figure out otherwise.”

The information gleaned helped influence the programmes that were subsequently put in place.

“For example, for the fairway programme we mixed in a slow release mixture in with our seed mixture but found very quickly that the low temperatures were not allowing this to work effectively, so we had to come across with straight fertiliser very quickly after germination.

“We couldn’t take a long term – six to eight week – view, in terms of fertiliser programmes. The fairways had to be managed on a five to seven day basis and this made us very conscious of the disease potential.

“With the traditional bent fescue mix on greens, and the grown-in nutrition programme, you’ve really

ABOVE: The 3rd green skirts the beach



John Bambury

got to watch for disease. On top of that, you’ve got to factor in that it is young turf which has been grown in a completely different environment so careful management is even more vital.

“For that reason we used a lot of traditional cultural practices. For example, our greens were aerated within four to five weeks of going down to encourage the root structure to develop quickly.”

To create a rootzone, top soil which had been cultivated a couple of times a year by local farmers around the Estate, was used.

“We mixed this 80-20 with the sand, for the green surfaces, and this enabled us to hold a little more moisture in there, again to encourage better root development.

One of the main stand out features of the course will be those

Thank you to John Deere (right), The Trump Organisation and Martin Hawtree Associates for making this feature possible.





greens and surrounds which have been turfed with bent fescue, supplied by Tillers Turf, and transported to the north east.

"It was a bespoke mixture and Tiller's were harvesting it at 4.30am and transporting it to us in refrigerated lorries so that it would be fresh when it arrived.

"We are using 4.3 hectares of turf for the green and surround areas, We are creating a frame around the green, using the same turf for the approaches and the green surfaces - the only difference will be the height of cut - everything else, including the nutrient and the cultural programmes, is the same. Our fairways and tees are pure fescue so we will have this beautiful contrast between the pure fescue fairway and the frame of the green and surround of bent fescue. It works very well."

The team had to prepare for the possibility that the site wasn't going to have any rain at all and as it turned out it had very little moisture for the grow-in.

"We have an excellent Rainbird irrigation system, 64,000 metres of pipe throughout the site, and this was vital during the summer and autumn."

The striking feature of the course is the amazing dunes. Martin Hawtree has ensured that none of the tees can be seen from anywhere else on the golf course to maintain the natural feel. That can cause

issues however, as during a sand storm earlier in the year, four inches of sand was dumped over the entire course.

"We had planned for the eventuality but it was the afternoon from hell and it took seven guys three hours per tee working 15 hour days to clear all the sand. Looking on the positive, it was a hell of a top dressing application!"

The on-going work that has gone into stabilising the dunes, to prevent this from happening again, was genuinely eye watering.

"We had a dedicated team which hand planted 5.6 million sprigs of marram grass over the period of six months. They were brought in by Sol and once they had hit on a method that worked they were very quick, and we've had a 95% success rate," said John, who added that more marram planting will be carried out this winter.

John's next comment is one which almost goes without saying.

"Only a company with the vision and the resources of the Trump Organisation could contemplate such a planting process."

However, the accusation that any project could only hit such heights if budgets could be tweaked with the simple addition of an extra zero at the end doesn't wash with John.

"Money is spent very wisely in the Trump Organisation and every penny is thought about. I would say that 70% of my time is dealing

ABOVE: the recently seeded 18th hole with its 18 bunkers

with costs and making sure we are on budget. Obviously we do have contingencies in place.

"You can't just throw money at the equation. Money isn't the answer, planning is, and having structures in place is the answer. It's a business and everyone is in business to make money but you can make money and still deliver the best golf course in the world.

"Mr Trump is a wealthy man and Trump is a profitable organisation. If you visit any Trump golf course, or one of the company's buildings, you will find perfection. It is about achieving perfection but there are always budgets in place and it is sensibly resourced."

But that will never detract from the sheer scale of the golf course. The driving range, for example, is 22 acres in total with the ability to play for a North Tee or a South Tee while the putting green is an enormous 3,000 square metres.

"What Martin wanted to achieve was to take a little bit of inspira-

RIGHT: Donald Trump with the team at Trump International Golf Links

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tion from each of the holes and put that into the putting green. He has actually done the same on the 18th hole, on which, in addition to 18 bunkers, he has tried to bring in everything which brings you to the 18th," he enthused.

"This is not just a project. Everyone who works on it knows that they are taking part in history in the making and the holes we are producing will be known the world over will quickly become one of the world's elite courses. As a golf course it is always exceeding people's expectations."

There is no doubt that International Golf Links will become one of the world's elite golf courses in a very short space of time and, with the might of the Trump Organisation ensuring its high profile, a glittering future is guaranteed.

It will go straight into the upper reaches of the personal top 10s of anyone lucky enough to play when it opens next July, and undoubtedly beguile the golf magazine judges in time for the next ranking lists.



Architect, Martin Hawtree, takes time to answer a few Greenkeeper International questions about Trump International Golf Links



1. How did you come to be chosen for the most sought after new course project in world golf?

The introduction came through the R&A with whom I had been working at a number of Championship venues. I was at first appointed as a consultant, with Tommy Fazio taking the lead role, Fazio had worked on many Trump projects.

2 What were your initial impressions when you saw the land?

It was by far the most stimulating site I had seen in 40 years of working as a golf architect. It was Royal Aberdeen, Royal Birkdale, Ballyunion, rolled into one and more. The scale of the dunes is very hard to imagine.

3. Where do you start when the remit is to design the greatest golf course in the world?

Just like any other project the aim is to get the best out of a piece of land. If the site itself promises to be the best in the world then there is much to help you.

The most important need is for self-control; let the site do its work and don't try too hard to do something very special: otherwise you may get it wrong and the result may be artificial. In this case the site was also environmentally very sensitive so I allowed the golf course to develop naturally from the site and to fit it to the site.

It was a balance between exploiting the extraordinary assets of the site and blending the course environmentally. For the layout, some areas we avoided altogether; for the detailed design we replaced or translocated as much of the existing vegetation as possible.

4. What are you particularly pleased about as the course stands at the moment?

I know that the fact that the tees cannot be seen while out on the course is regarded as a masterstroke.

What pleases me most about the course is the sequence of holes, the way in which the holes move around the site, exploiting different views and site characteristics.

The site has a particularly rich vegetative tapestry. So few holes are seen before they are played; each hole a surprise, now broad, then narrow; now marram framed, then heather framed, now flanked by ecological zones, then flanked by winter lochs.

An extraordinary perambulation.

5. John Bambury said that the course builds to a conclusion with elements of holes all brought together on the spectacular 18th and its 18 bunkers. Can you explain a little more about that?

I am enthusiastic about the final holes, turning at the 16th tee and rising progressively through the 16th and 17th, demanding holes played the prevailing wind; and as you climb you have an inkling of what may come because you have seen spectacular holes at the 14th, but when it comes it is still a surprise and a wonderfully exhilarating experience as you look south across the whole course and on towards Aberdeen.

The styles of bunker on previous holes are all here, the variety of tee alignments and distances, the dividing of fairways, a large green best attacked from different angles depending on the position of the pin. Lots of options bound in a heady montage of sand, dune, marram, fescue, and water.

6. I understand Mr Trump and Mr Trump Jnr have been involved and suggested a few spectacular tees. What has Mr Trump been like to work with?

Mr Trump has been great to work with. Always helpful and willing to listen; always accessible whatever the time zone; always stimulating and asking questions; all couched in an extraordinary memory for the details of the site.

7. The opening of the course coincides with the centenary of Hawtree. You must be delighted to have it in the company portfolio?

Yes, it is a great way to move into our centenary year with the opening of the Trump course. There are few enough new courses about at the moment for the comfort of a new project to turn into a rare privilege. And I hope privilege is the key-note of this course, for those who have helped design and build and grow-in the course – which has depended upon an extraordinarily bonded teamwork - and for those who come and play in this wonderfully rich and spectacular landscape.