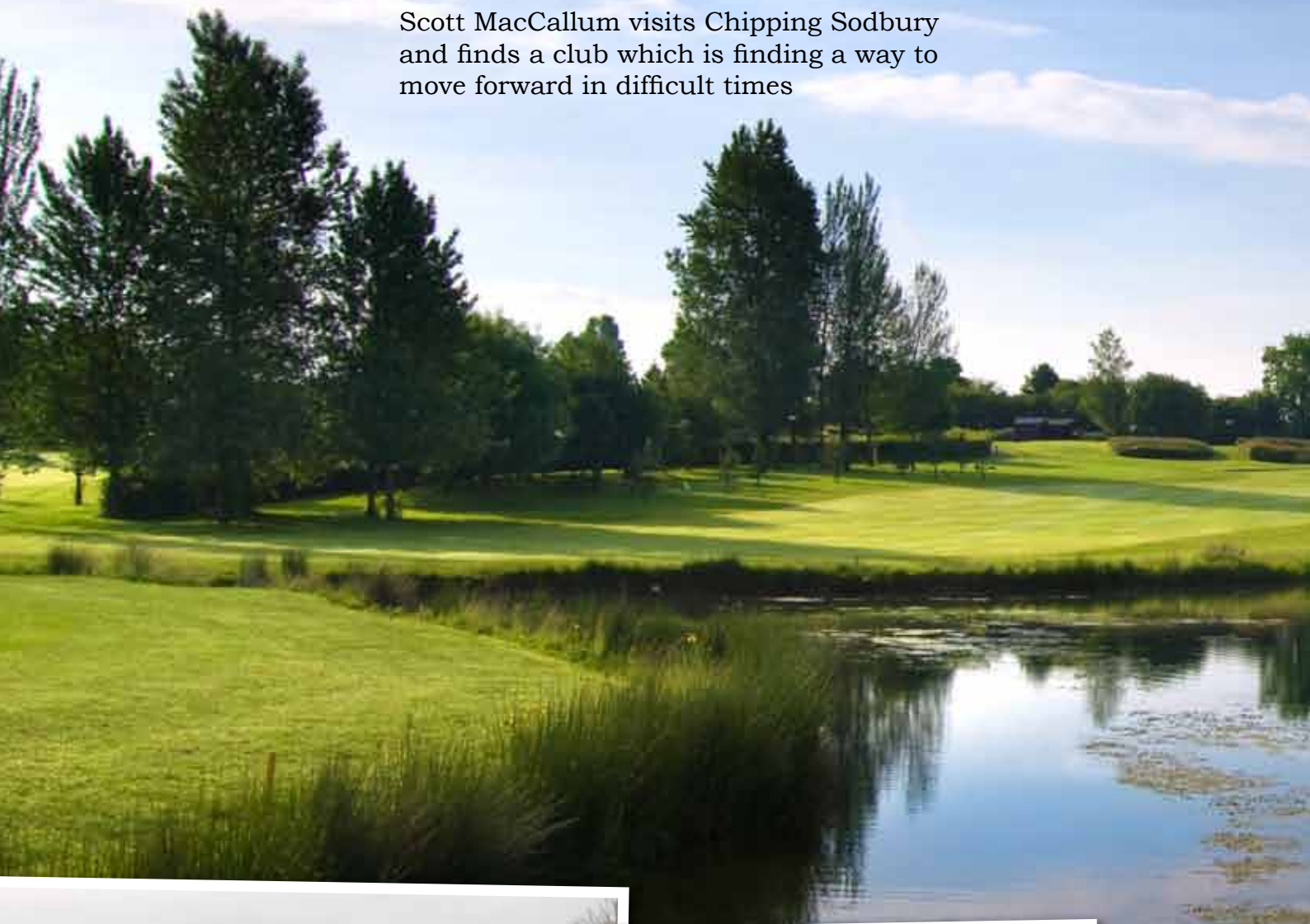


Finding the key to progress

Scott MacCallum visits Chipping Sodbury
and finds a club which is finding a way to
move forward in difficult times





LEFT: MJ Abbott working
MAIN IMAGE: 9th hole
RIGHT: MJ Abbott putting in
Irrigation systems



Arriving in Chipping Sodbury Golf Club's car park on a mid week morning in early January, off season, what struck me was the activity.

There was barely a parking space to be found, while a glance out to the golf course highlighted a course full of players, comfortably working around the diggers and 360s which were doing the donkey work on a large irrigation installation project.

You didn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce that here is a successful go-ahead golf club. But how is it able to ride against the tide, at a time when many clubs are struggling to make ends meet?

Club Manager, Bob Williams, doesn't claim to have all the answers, but he has been extremely pro-active in identifying the problems and coming up with potential solutions.

One thing he is very sure of, however, is the need for the Club Manager and the Course Manager/Head Greenkeeper to have a good and close working relationship.

"The golf course is the most important asset any golf club has," said Bob, who works extremely closely with Head Greenkeeper, John Keenaghan, as well as the Club Chairman, Mike Darby.

"I do think this is where a lot of clubs get into difficulties – when the relationship between the two main people in the club is not cemented and they are not moving forward, together and at the same level," said Bob, who also wears another hat as Chairman of the EGU Marketing & Sponsorship Committee.

That level of commitment has led to the investment in a new Toro irrigation system; however, it is the

preparatory work that has gone into changing the club and making it all possible that is particularly impressive.

"About three years ago we got to a stage where we felt that things had to change or the club was going to be faced with serious problems. Membership was declining, and the lack of new enquiries was becoming a worrying factor, it was a trend that we just could not allow to continue – and survive!" said Bob, who added that at the time the club operated a straight forward full, five-day, junior plus a number of senior categories.

"After reviewing the options and looking at what was happening in different parts of the country we managed to persuade the committee and the membership that we needed to review and change our membership structure completely. The main change was the introduction of the 'Flexi-Play' category, which at that time, was £350 per year, plus £10 for every round played – an ideal opportunity for the 35-50 age group who cannot justify £800 and only play once every weekend.

"We marketed this category as 'F100' with the intention of limiting the number to no more than 100. It was important that this category did not see themselves as being discriminated against, hence the 'F100' members have always been entitled to full voting rights.

Full membership was marketed as 'F1', and to emphasise that this was the pinnacle of the membership categories a number of add-on benefits were created including free range balls throughout the week, two free lessons with the pro each year and a discount busi-



MAIN ABOVE: 6th hole
INSET ABOVE: John Keenaghan (left) with Bob Williams (right)



ness card which gave discounts to local companies," explained Bob, who also explained that a Family membership had been introduced with children up to the age of 14 becoming a junior member at no additional charge.

With the new categories in place for the last two years on-going research has revealed that 'Flexi-play' members average approximately 15 to 20 rounds a year, which ultimately suggests that their membership is costing around £550 per annum.

In needing to counter the high weekend usage the club also reduced the membership fee for five day memberships as an encouragement to senior members to play between Monday and Friday, thus freeing up the weekends for those unable to play during the week. This then allowed the final piece of the membership jigsaw which was designed as an incentive for younger members who wish to play at weekends.

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fee that increases year by year until the age of 30. The objective to reduce the age profile of the club, which at present is having positive results. A lot of the younger guys who are members of other sports clubs in the area have joined, and for the last few years we have run an inter sports club golf tournament, which has proved very popular,” said Bob, who revealed that the club had brought in 88 new members in the last year.

But this is not a time to let the grass grow under their feet (excuse the pun), the intention this year is to profile their green fee charges between high usage periods and off peak.

“We will have a peak time Wednesday and Friday when visitors will pay the full fee. If you want to play Monday, Tuesday or Thursday you will pay another fee and after 2.30pm it will be another rate. In the summer after 6pm you will be able to play for just £12.”

Having set about revamping the membership structure the on-courses issues could now be

addressed in earnest. John had been coping with a failing irrigation system for several seasons – the early ‘80s Watermation system coming to the end of its useful existence, helped along the way by a freak weather event.

“We think we had a lightening strike which took out the automated system about three years ago. A power surge burned the computer right out and took out all the decoders,” recalled John.

The consequences of this were that for the last two years hand watering or manually operating the irrigation was the only way forward. “We were able to use the sprinklers on the green but we had to turn them on and off by hand and, as you lose so much by evaporation doing it during the day, I ended up working through the night just watering greens.”

John would start around 11.30pm – driving to a green, turning on the sprinklers, letting them do their stuff for around 10 to 15 minutes before switching them off and moving on to the next green.

“I’d get finished around 6am, go in, brief the team before going home for a sleep before getting back to the course a couple of hours later. At its worst I did it for two weeks in the late spring early summer of last year, these were desperate times that needed desperate measures, fortunately it wasn’t a dry summer,” said John, a BIGGA member for 15 years.

Knowing this was not a situation that could be allowed to continue for too long, Bob, together with John, began looking at ways of funding a new system.

“When we had the blow-out we didn’t have the cash to put in a new system straight away and we took that conscious decision to hand water and hope that we didn’t have a burning hot summer,” said Bob.

“We then had to make a decision whether to go for another year knowing that it was extremely labour intensive and the system, which was failing, might not hold out for another year.”

To move the process along Bob commissioned irrigation consul-



**ABOVE: Irrigation system layout
MAIN ABOVE: New 16th hole**



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tant, Roger Davey, of Irritech, in 2010, to draw up plans and specifications for a new system.

“It meant that even if we couldn’t afford it at least we’d have the drawings in place and we’d be ready to go when the time came,” he explained.

The decision to go came last year and the contract was put out to tender.

“The view was that it was essential, we couldn’t fudge it for another year and we had to fund it somehow. We’d held the English County Finals in 2009 which was a great success. Chipping Sodbury was on the map and there was no point in letting it slip back,” said Bob.

“The golf course is the main product of a golf club and then everything else falls in behind it. We had to make sure that the product was right.” But finding the funding for such an extensive project was not a simple process and a degree of lateral thinking was employed to make it happen.

“We work closely with a local brewery and organised a loan in the form of a retrospective discount for the beverage that we would be buying from them.”

That raised a significant sum but was still a long way short of the lowest tender that had been received for the irrigation contract.

“We had in mind what our financial ceiling was, so more work was needed. We decided to remove tees from the irrigation system, at least



MAIN ABOVE: 3rd hole
INSET ABOVE: Chipping
Sodbury team

for the time being, leaving it just as greens and approaches, and by doing this it meant that we were in the ball game,” said Bob.

Then, with their existing five year Toro agreement coming to an end, the club negotiated a new deal, including the irrigation materials which generated an extra discount. This, coupled with an additional agreement with Toro’s financial arm, brought about another favourable deal over the next eight years and meant that the financial target had been reached.

Or it would have been had it not been for the VAT partial exemption issue.

“A membership club doesn’t charge VAT on fees so therefore it can’t claim all of its VAT back so that meant that we were going to be around £20,000 short. “To compensate we went out and sold a number of Life Memberships which took us over our target,” said Bob. Having secured the finance MJ Abbott was awarded the contract, on a fixed price basis and work started in December.

“I was secretary at Long Ashton Golf Club when we did a similar irrigation project about ten years ago and I would say that potential contractors are an awful lot more competitive now. They have had to sharpen their pencils otherwise the work would be priced out of everyone’s market.”

With work due to be completed

this month or early next, John is excited about the new system.

“It will transform the course. We are based primarily on clay and this has meant that our approaches are prone to cracking in dry weather. With the ability to water I’ll be able to top dress and overseed them and bring the height of cut down, which will be a huge improvement with the added bonus of being able to use them as temporary greens in the winter. At the moment they have had to go on lush areas around the green,” said John, who felt that it was far easier to hand water tees than greens and approaches without being interrupted or get in the way of golfers.

An infectious enthusiast for the industry John arrived in it slightly later in life, having started out as a carpenter, but he has wasted no time catching up. “I took up golf at Filton Golf Club when I had to retire from rugby as a consequence of fracturing my skull twice. Head Greenkeeper, Nick Wilson asked if I’d build him a driving range bay which I did and then started helping out on the course when I could.

“The building trade was quiet at the time and Nick asked if I wanted to join the green staff and that was it. I took quite a pay cut but I was put on Level 2 at Cannington and really found a passion for the work,” said John, who is now a category one player and playing off a handicap of 4.

His route to Chipping Sodbury, initially as Deputy, came via Filton, The Kendleshire, The Players and the Manor House at Castle Coombe, and he was promoted to Head Greenkeeper five years ago.”

He has also been a member of several BIGGA Open Support Teams and credits that for some of the course preparation he was able to employ for the English County Finals.

In addition to the irrigation project an on-going tree removal programme is being carried out. “We have a lot of leylandii planted to give quick definition in the 60s and they are coming to the end of their time and we are removing them and replacing them with indigenous trees.

“We have taken out over 250 leylandii and 30 poplars and planted over 450 native trees in the last five years,” explained John.

Chipping Sodbury Golf Club is a fine example of a regular members’ golf club where the management team is pulling together for the greater benefit of everyone.

It shows just what can be achieved.