

To the Manor born

In his latest article on greenkeepers taking on increasingly diverse roles, Laurence Pithie met Paul Bishop, who combines the roles of Course Manager and Estate Manager at the Manor House Hotel Golf Club in Wiltshire





Paul began his career as an apprentice greenkeeper at Haywards Heath Golf Club in 1980. Having gained valuable knowledge and experience, he became Head Greenkeeper at Tunbridge Wells, and after spells at East Sussex National and Hever Castle he accepted the role of Course Manager at the then Castle Combe Golf course in 1994.

Apart from the club changing its name to that of the Manor House Hotel and Golf Club (part of Exclusive Golf and Hotels), Paul rebuilt five greens and numerous tees and bunkers.

At that time, eight full time staff were employed to maintain the golf course, plus three gardeners to maintain the hotel grounds and gardens.

Recognising the various changes in the industry and the need to be

more business orientated, Paul gained qualifications in Enterprise and Business Management as well as an Intermediate Diploma in Sports Turf Management and a Management Course at Cranfield University: these would prove extremely beneficial in the future.

MANAGEMENT CHANGES

In 2004 the head gardener resigned. This presented an opportunity to evaluate the way in which the entire estate was being managed, and whether it was possible to streamline the business for greater efficiency.

Prior to that, the only input from maintenance was the mowing of the Manor Hotel lawns. Having given the proposed Estate Manager role due consideration, Paul accepted the wider responsibilities it would entail and set about implement-

ing the various changes that were necessary. Paul takes up the story.

“There was inevitably some reluctance to change from both staff and golf club members and it was essential to achieve the right balance of staff between the hotel grounds and golf course.

“Having added responsibility for the gardens meant that I needed a much better understanding of horticulture since the kitchen garden, orchard and flower beds were now part of my remit.

“I had to challenge myself and to further progress my career, I enrolled on the one year Royal Horticulture Society Level 2 course at nearby Lackham College.

“At first it was a strange experience embarking on day release to learn more about crops, fruit and vegetables, plant selection, composting and landscape design; a far cry from turf grass manage-





MANOR HOUSE TEAM: Rob Preston, John Murzyn, Tim Fry, Gian Povey, Paul Bishop, Tony Simmons, Charlie Gaisford, Steve Pickthall, Chris Cowley.

BELOW: Paul with Gloucester Old Spot pigs



ment! But having at least a basic understanding of horticulture was essential if I was to succeed in my new role.”

ROLE DIVERSITY

Paul continued: “With separate budgets for the golf course and the hotel grounds to produce, implement and control, it became obvious that I needed to ensure that I had the support of a dedicated team that I could rely upon.

“Although I was on familiar ground with golf course management, I would be relying heavily on the skills of others within the hotel grounds which were several hundred metres away from the golf course.

“I was satisfied that my two key positions of Deputy Course Manager and Mechanic were undertaken by Gian Povey and Charlie Gaisford respectively; both of whom were suitably qualified and experienced.

“With a good support team on the course and a sound management structure already in place, I could at least focus more attention on the aspect of the business that I was less familiar with.

“For me this was a steep learning curve as I gradually got to grips with the seasonal requirements of vegetable production and plant breeding, while still maintaining the golf course to the required

standard. But I knew that if this aspect of the business was to fulfil its potential then further changes would be required.”

MOVING FORWARD

With the downturn in the economy being fully felt by 2008, Paul knew there was a need to further enhance what they were capable of producing on site, and one of the key objectives was to offer hotel guests locally produced food as much as possible.

This was seen as a drive towards greater sustainability and offering hotel guests something extra.

Paul added: “For this to be achieved there would be a planned expansion of the vegetable garden, the creation of a poly tunnel to supply micro-veg and herbs to the Hotel’s Executive Chef and the introduction of livestock.

“At first this was a daunting task and once again highlighted the need to hire the right people with the appropriate knowledge, skill set and above all, the right attitude to be part of a dedicated team.

“John Rowlands, an ex-livestock farmer with a horticulture background, was appointed in the new role as Garden Supervisor and is assisted by one full time and one part time gardener.

“Fast forward to 2013 and we now have 65 chickens, several Gloucester Old Spot pigs, a large

log store, a continually expanding vegetable garden and enhanced shrub and flower borders.

“Fresh salad and vegetables are supplied to the hotel daily, along with 40 to 50 eggs, this benefits every hotel guest as they tuck into fresh eggs for breakfast.

“Having livestock on site requires a licence from DEFRA as well as one for the movement of animals to market several times each year; not always an easy task when the pigs escaped on one occasion and had to be rounded up.

“Had this been on camera, it would have been a YouTube sensation!

“Home produced pork is available all year round and other produce which is required by the hotel is sourced from surrounding farms wherever possible.

“Foliar feeding the greens in the morning and pigs and chickens in the afternoon with pellets is all in a days’ work at the Manor.”

WORK ROUTINES AND CHALLENGES

With such a diverse role and high expectations from golfers and hotel guests, having a well-planned work program is essential for the business to thrive in both areas.

Paul’s typical day during the summer starts at 5.40am at the golf course with a brief meeting with his deputy, who then assigns work



Gardeners Robert Hobbs, John Rowlands, and Theresa Macfarlane in poly tunnel within the hotel grounds

tasks which are listed on the staff bulletin board.

Greens staff commence work at 6am and then it's all hands on deck for everyone including Paul.

He is very much a working manager and is encouraged to put his own stamp on the Estate, working with the General Manager Stephen Browning and the Exclusive Golf Manager Steve Slinger.

With regards to the challenges being faced on and off the golf course, Paul explained:

"The Manor House course is very diverse with an abundance of flora and fauna and therefore needs to be sensitively managed within its unique environment of woodland,

valleys, stream, ponds and grass-land.

"This is a very undulating course with some steep sided valleys so safety is a primary consideration.

"One of our biggest challenges is managing the 85 bunkers, also dealing with shade and sometimes limited air circulation around a few of the greens keeps us on our toes. Our fertiliser input for sand based greens is low at around 90kgs N/Ha per annum. This limits our OM level which means our need for coring or deep scarifying is minimal. Regular light topdressings are carried out with a Dakota top dresser and monthly aeration is achieved with a lightweight Redexim Vertidrain 7117.

"Without major disruption to the playing surfaces in season, we can virtually guarantee good playing surfaces at all times. There are many challenges on the Estate, and our biggest on the course is achieving consistently smooth fast greens. This has been greatly enhanced by our recent purchase of a Tru-Turf roller – one of the best pieces of equipment I have purchased. Our greatest challenge on the hotel grounds is to meet our requirement to produce sufficient fresh produce. We are reliant on reasonable weather although we do have the benefit of the poly tunnel."

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SUMMARY

Paul's role at The Manor House certainly requires a diverse range of agronomic, management and horticulture skills as well as a working knowledge of dealing with livestock. He also plays a leading role in implementing best practices and health and safety measures at the company's other course in Sussex as well as five other hotel grounds.

Paul concludes: "This is a rewarding position and I'm sure there are other hotel operated courses where similar opportunities could arise.

"My advice would be; don't be afraid to have a go. Learning new skills is essential for understanding any business but perhaps the key is to ensure that you hire the right staff with passion and aptitude for the job required."

about the author



Laurence Pithie MG

Laurence Pithie MG runs his own training and consultancy company, Turf Master One Ltd. Previously he spent 17 years managing multi-site golf operations in the UK. With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.

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