

Changing times

Peter Billings has been a Course Manager at The Nottinghamshire for many years but has a rather unique experience of having worked for four different owners. Laurence Pithie met up with Peter to gain an insight into what these changes have meant to members, and the greenkeeping team





Peter Billings, whose father was Head Greenkeeper at Chevin GC in Derbyshire, had a keen interest in golf from an early age. He was Head Greenkeeper at Ruddington Grange GC by the tender age of 21 and played golf to a handicap of six. His skills soon gained the attention of the new owners of nearby Cotgrave Place (as it was formerly known) six miles east of Nottingham city centre.

Peter was offered the opportunity in 1989 to finalise the construction, grow-in and then manage this 27 hole parkland course which opened for play two years later.

He held this position until 2005, working under the ownership of American Golf (AG-UK) from 1996. During this time, the club was extended to 36 holes, giving members the choice of two first class golf courses.

After a three year spell in property development, Peter returned to Cotgrave Place in 2008 as Course Manager. By then, Crown Golf were the third new owners, having acquired the course from AG-UK. In 2010, the club was again sold, this time to a 'local' business consortium before being bought out by the present owner, Alan Hardy, a year later.

During this time the club was renamed The Nottinghamshire and has undergone numerous changes both on and off the course. In his 22 year tenure as Course Manager, Peter has worked at the same course, but under four different owners, each with differing objectives.

A major step forward

Although each change of ownership ran relatively smoothly, they were worrying times for employees as job security can never be guaranteed.

Since around 40% of golf courses within the UK are 'commercially' owned, the buying and selling of golf clubs is becoming more common. To find out more I asked Peter for his thoughts on these periods of uncertainty and how he managed these changes.

"The lead up to the first change early in 1996 was a worrying time for myself and my colleagues because it was becoming more obvious that finances were an issue. We were operating out of old farm buildings at the time and having to make do with temporary repairs to equipment. At one stage when we couldn't afford any more diesel, we managed to syphon off a few gallons from an old excavator to enable us to cut greens and tees. When I think back, these were tough times.

"When American Golf came knocking at the door it was like Christmas. They were fairly impressed with what we produced, working with very little, so they were optimistic about what we could achieve given a reasonable level of resources and input.

"Although I probably didn't realise it at the time, it proved to be a turning point for myself and the club. I was given the opportunity to develop and improve the course and implement plans, procedures and a budget in an organised and structured manner.

"This was an exciting time and two years later we were given the funds to build another nine holes, bringing us up to 36, while also moving our maintenance operation into larger converted premises."

Dark clouds on the horizon

Peter continued: "Up until 2003, we had good stability in virtually every area of management within the club while members' playing rights were guaranteed. The level of resource in terms of equipment,





staffing and materials was sufficient to deliver a good product and there was a good flow of information and communication to keep members informed of what was happening at their club.

“Staff training was working well and although we were a little distant from the other 20 or so clubs in the group which were predominantly in the south east, we felt very much part of a large organisation.

“Early in 2003, AG-UK was acquired by Goldman Sachs and although things carried on in much the same manner, all expenditure had to be justified several times over.

“Most, if not all capital expenditure ceased and there was a slight unease again when it was made known that the group was likely to be sold off.”

A temporary change in direction

“At the start of 2005 Crown Golf acquired AG-UK and for both club and staff, the transition was relatively smooth. However, funding remained tight.

Fortunately for me Les Howkins MG, who took on the role of Course Manager for three years at Cotgrave

Place, was heading to London and the job became vacant again.

“This time I was interviewed along with several other candidates and fortunately I was reappointed. Les left Cotgrave in good condition and I began to implement other procedures to add to those already in place. It was easy to pick up the pace again after a quick update on products and equipment.

“A large landfill operation was underway on nine holes, plus raising the range by a substantial height. This improved the course and helped fund improvements to the clubhouse. Although the level of funding could have been better, staffing levels remained the same and I was back on familiar territory, in a more stable environment.”

All change again

“By late 2009, Crown Golf started to consolidate their business in the south and it was only a matter of time before the club was sold.

This time we were more apprehensive. It was unlikely the club would be bought by another management company since all previous sales had gone to individual buyers.

“A Nottingham-based business consortium purchased the club in

2010 and changed its name to ‘The Nottinghamshire’ with a new image and branding.

“There was a general feeling of optimism within the club once the new owners presented their plans and objectives for the course and clubhouse to a meeting of 200 members.

Time would tell whether or not this could be delivered since a significant level of investment would be required.

The routing of the ‘Open’ course also changed which meant that the 9th became the 18th and finished in full view of the clubhouse.’

TOP LEFT: Recently built lake, complete with island drop zone
INSET ABOVE: Transplanted trees by Civic trees to protect new back tee
ABOVE: Astro-turf section at back of 14th tee
TOP RIGHT: Demanding tee shot from the 4th
RIGHT: Cut away section of 5th green showing profile
RIGHT BOTTOM: 1st green and lake timbers 24 years later

Turf Master One Ltd is grateful to Peter Billings and The Nottinghamshire for their support in producing this article.



Moving forward

Listening to Peter's account of his experiences, I was eager to find out what happened next. He explained: "After one year of minimal activity, Alan Hardy became the sole proprietor and almost immediately we stepped up a gear.

"The club was to become a 'destination' and more of a commercial business which would focus on weddings, parties and conferences.

"A new MD, Bill Mackenzie was hired to drive the business and I now liaise with Bill on a daily basis while meeting the owner as and when there are course issues or development plans to discuss; the latter being significant.

"The club has gone from strength to strength, increasing both membership and visitor play. Significant changes have been made to the clubhouse to meet the new objectives and it is now a modern club – it's buzzing.

"Since 2011 we have built eight tees, extended or created four lakes, several bunkers, new paths, transplanted numerous trees with a tree spade, altered one green and re-landscaped the side of a stream.

"This has had a positive impact

on the club and the members are blessed with continuing investment.

"We now have a Trilby tour event which is featured on Sky so the club is well recognised in the East Midlands and beyond.

"The club are also proud to have been selected as hosts for the English Girls' Open Championship in 2016."

Summary

I asked Peter to summarise his time at The Nottinghamshire.

"The key objective for the current owner is to deliver quality - on time. It is my responsibility to deliver that on the course.

"We have regular business meetings to ensure profitability and customer satisfaction and there is a good flow of information.

"I need to inform my bosses on agronomy matters while understanding their business needs. It's a two way process, learning from each other.

So what advice would he give others faced with ownership change?

"Don't be afraid of change, it may turn out for the better.

"Embrace it and put forward your ideas, be proactive, implement effectively and be professional."

about the author



Laurence Pithie MG

Laurence Pithie MG runs his own training and consultancy company, Turf Master One Ltd. With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.

