



FAR LEFT: The new site offer spectacular views of the countryside

ABOVE TOP: The course is being built to a high specification

ABOVE LEFT AND ABOVE INSET: MJ Abbotts can have as many as 40 people on site and a great deal of plant

course on the land including that of the original course but we finally decided to keep and upgrade the old course and have the new one built on land that Graham bought from a neighbouring farmer,” explained Brian, who took over as Course Manager three years ago.

The in-house team rebuilt all 18 greens and surrounds adding bunkers and designing the new USGA guideline style greens.

“We had a free hand to build and design the greens and we made them very undulating. The course is short – under 6000 yards – and we felt that we had to add interest to the golfing challenge by doing something with the greens and surrounds.”

The course – now known as The Filly – offers a real feel-good golfing experience for the mid handicapper with the short but interesting holes presenting some solid birdie opportunities to average golfers enjoying a good day.

The current clubhouse is a traditional old cricket pavilion which really looks the part situated in the middle of the course but it will soon be replaced by the brand new version to serve both courses.

Having agreed that The Filly could never be stretched to present a genuine challenge to the top players the decision to build just such a course was taken and New Zealand-born architect, Scott McPherson, who worked on the St Andrews Bay (now Fairmont) courses, was offered the challenge of creating a course that hopefully in time will become one of the best in the North East and perhaps beyond.

“Scott is a real disciple of Harry Colt and he came up with some drawings which carried the Colt influence – open trenches and old stone walls etc.”

Another Colt trait was minimal earth moving but given a site which had been farmland until Graham

Wylie’s purchase of the land, a certain amount of shape shifting had to be carried out to create an interesting layout.

Indeed, judging by the amount of MJ Abbott plant and manpower on the site in early August Harry Colt would have been truly amazed, and comparisons with what he had required to create the likes of Sunningdale and Wentworth and at Close House would be staggering.

“Scott is on the site on a regular basis and the speed at which Abbotts work means that there is always something to see when I come up to the site, something I do most days. It makes coming to work very exciting.

“There is anything up to 40 guys working on site and they are all extremely professional and helpful, especially Mike Heath, the on-site Project Manager. I must admit we were all delighted when Abbotts won the contract,” revealed Brian.



Monthly meetings are held to keep everyone up to speed and make any decisions that are required to be made as the work progresses.

"It is a very free draining site. Like many in the area we have had some torrential rain in the past few weeks and it has drained very quickly which I'm very pleased to see and Mike or Scott will come to me if they feel there is something I need to have input into including the steepness of bunker faces or a areas that make have draining issues – something I do have experience of from my time at Slaley."

The new course which will be known as The Colt – in tribute to the man who influenced it and also to reflect Graham Wylie's strong interest in horse racing, hence The Filly and The Colt – offers some spectacular views of the Geordie countryside and some of the holes will become stars in their own rights. The 14th is a feature hole. At around 160 yards the green is surrounded by trees and from a playing and architectural perspective looks magnificent. Brian thinks so too, but is sure the hole will give him headaches.

"The green will struggle for light and air and I'm sure I'm going to be pulling my hair out. I'm going to have my hands full," he smiled, while fully appreciating the qualities that the hole will bring to the course.

As part of the preparation for taking over the running of what will be a high quality golfing venue Brian and some of his colleagues have been visiting courses in other parts of the country to get a feel for how they do the job.

"We've visited the likes of Celtic Manor, and The Grove and learned a great deal from seeing how they operate. Graham wanted us to see how five star facilities and high quality golf courses run and see the standards they achieve.

"He really wants to create something special in this area and is the type of guy who will be looking for an event, whether it be main Tour, Seniors or Ladies, to establish the new course."

Having the resources to build a golf course during a recession makes it far easier to achieve a top quality job at a competitive price and it would be perfectly positioned if it were to open around the time the world, and the country, emerge from the financial doldrums.

Brian has really enjoyed his time since becoming Course Manager and is relishing the steep learning curve he is on.

"I did apply for some head man jobs while I was at Slaley but now know that I wasn't really ready. Coming here, taking on more responsibility, learning from Steve, and having him as a mentor,

meant that I was ready to take on the job when he left. I'm happy to take on responsibility. I do worry about things – I don't think you'd be normal if you didn't, but I enjoy the challenges of the job."

Some of that enjoyment may be derived for the fact that there is no committee structure at Close House.

"Graham definitely wants things to be right and he puts the right people in position to make it happen and then lets professional people get on with the job."

They are hoping to start seeding this autumn but the onus is getting the job right rather than finished and if it spills over to next spring no-one would be overly concerned. It will be sown out with traditional bent fescue mix – the same as The Filly – and the team which stands at seven at the moment but which will increase substantially, will maintain the two courses to a similar standard

"The plan is to have a light opening next autumn then, hopefully, the Grand Opening in the spring of 2011."

When that happens Brian's professional life will move on to the next chapter, but you can be sure that whatever challenges he faces he will treat in the same manner that he has with those he has tackled so far.

"We had a free hand to build and design the greens, and added interest to the golfing challenge by doing something with the greens and surrounds."



Brian Clark,
Course Manager

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Czech This Out!

**Ex-Pat, Graham Shiel, gives you
a flavour of life working on a golf
course in the **Czech Republic****







Golf Park Plzen (Pilsen) is an 18 hole, par 71 5597 metre, course. It is five years old, work having started on it in 2003 and it opened in August, 2004.

The Architect was German, Christopher Stadler, and the construction work was carried out by the German-based company Sommerfeld A.G.

The course differs from others in the Czech Republic in that most of the 18 holes are laid out in a line - following the river Klabava up stream to the beautiful large Ejpvovice lake where we have our famous par 3 11th hole - an island green.

The course is set in a forest of birch and alder trees along the river, giving it a feel of a much more mature course than its four and half years imply. We have 40 golf carts for hire with tarmac cart paths around the course.

Golf Park Plzen was voted Golf Course of the Year 2008 in the Czech Republic, by the readers of Golf Digest, and also the Best Individual Hole of the Year in 2008, for our 11th, which also won this award in 2006 and 2007. In 2007 we were placed fourth as Course of the Year - with our 16th coming in 4th and 6th in 2008 in the individual hole category. There were only two golf clubs that had more than one hole in the top ten. In all other categories in 2008 we were in 2nd place: Best Service; Best Restaurant, Best Pro-Shop and Best Value for Money. So 2008 was a good year for us.

The problem now is trying to stay in the top group, as the team and I have set the standard, we must keep there or even improve in the years to come.

Without my greenkeeping team it would not have been possible to

achieve the results we have, so a big thank you must go to them all, with a special mention to my First Assistant, Jan Csizmar, who also acts as my interpreter until I learn Czech!

I have five full time staff and myself, plus one part time lad, but in the summer there can be anywhere up to 10 people working on the golf course .

I came to G.P. Plzen as Course Manager at the start of 2007 after working in Germany as a Head Greenkeeper and Course Manager for 15 years. The golf course was not in too bad a condition, mainly being in need of a tidy up; sorting out some staff problems and re-training the greenkeeping team in the ways that we should work and present the golf course - not so easy when you don't speak the lingo! (I really should speak some Czech as my wife is Czech, but we speak German to one another).

As golf is only just starting to take off here in the Czech Republic there is a problem getting workers with any knowledge of greenkeeping or golf. It has reached the point where I will have a new man, and ask him to go out and rake the bunkers, and he will reply, "What's a bunker?"

It sounds easy - just some tidying up to do, but there was a lot of work to do in the attention to detail and teaching the staff to look at the job in hand and not be, "That's ok. It will do". I have worked hard to give them an idea of the standards that are required, and then get to the stage where they take some pride in what they have done.

In the time I have been here we have built three new bunkers, two tees and several new fairway drains.



We are always looking at ways to improve the course and, with one eye on environment, the golf club is planning to re-open a old long unused hydro-electric site near the 7th, to supply the golf club/hotel and restaurant's power needs. How green is that?!

Also, this year, we will be implementing a more organic based fertiliser programme for the Greens and Tees. We have a more traditional greens grass mix using *Agrostis capillaries*, *Festuca rubra commutata* and *Festuca rubra trichophylla*, with a low feed and watering programme. Mowing heights for the Greens are normal: 5mm down 4.5mm and with this we get a good speed on the greens.

The golf club is privately owned by four men so we have no committees. Thankfully this means more stable and consistent decision making at the top.

Golf Park Plzen is also known for its four live crocodiles, which live in the clubhouse, but we will be getting an outside pen soon for summer use. I did suggest that they be named Miroslav, Petr, Jan and Ivan after the four owners...and I've still got my job!

INSET ABOVE: the greenkeeping team. Back row (from left to right): Ondrej Batik, Vasil Orsah, Graham Shiel and Jan Csizmar.

MAIN RIGHT: Aerial shot of the picturesque countryside surrounding the 3rd and 5th Greens



about the author

I started greenkeeping in 1980 at Bolton Old Links Golf Club, and worked at golf clubs in the north west until I moved to Germany in 1991 and then on to Czech Republic. I have been a member of BIGGA from the start, and before that a member of EIGGA.



Ragwort

an unusual and unwelcome weed of fine turf

Dr Terry Mabbett shares his intimate knowledge of Ragwort, in this month's L&D Feature

Ragwort (*Senecio* sp) is a lot of things but a weed of fine turf is generally not one, so it was surprising to see well-established rosette-stage ragwort plants in abundance on a tee of otherwise well-managed turf on a prestige golf course in Hertfordshire.

Greenkeepers are accustomed to seeing ragwort in the rough, on the margins of courses and even in the car park but not on the fairway let alone on tees.

After thinking about ragwort as a weed I am not totally surprised it can establish in fine turf just like its relative the dandelion, and especially since there was another unusual and related weed called bristly ox-tongue (*Picris echioides*) in equal abundance. Ragwort and bristly ox-tongue are not normally regarded as weeds of established fine turf because they should be eliminated by mowing. However like dandelion, which is an acknowledged weed of fine turf, they are members of the Asteraceae (Compositae) and therefore have many common traits. All produce huge numbers of seed, possess tap

root systems and develop prostrate rosette habits in early growth stages with broad, light-blocking leaves which lay flat on the turf, all key factors for weed success in turf.

Despite its injurious weed status which is governed by nominally strict legislation swathes of golden ragwort still appear on set-aside agricultural land and railway embankments, showing the weed is never far away. With seed production potentials up to 150,000 per plant per season, and efficient wind-assisted fruit and seed dispersal (by pappus/parachute), it would not be surprising if some ragwort seeds found their way into fine turf. Moreover germination rate is high at 70% with seeds staying dormant for several years at least.

Perhaps more surprising is ragwort establishing in 'tight' and well managed fine turf cut frequently and treated with selective herbicides to control mainstream turf weeds like common daisy, white clover and dandelion.

This tee was clearly cut frequently to optimum height and showed evidence of selective weed control. There were only minute amounts

of white clover and the occasional dandelion although the adjacent fairway supported large patches of white clover in flower.

Tees adjacent to high populations of ragwort (and bristly-ox-tongue) will be vulnerable to invasion with turf damage during teeing-off providing easily exploitable germination sites and niches. On the other hand the ultra tight and undamaged turf on golfing greens should avoid invasion. Indeed the green on the preceding hole, just 30 metres away and even closer to the railway, was completely free of ragwort and bristly ox-tongue and all other broad-leaved weeds.

You only have to look at ragwort's botanical relative the dandelion to see why, if given the opportunity, it can establish in fine turf. Dandelion displays a rosette of leaves flat against the ground positioned apical meristem (growing point) barely above soil level. Leaves are clipped during mowing but the growing point survives to produce more leaves. Leaves with a low-expand rapidly blocking light to the surrounding turf grass plants, allowing dandelions to establish at



This article comes to you courtesy of the BIGGA Learning and Development Fund.

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Well established ragwort on the tee, clipped though not killed off by mowing



Ragwort established just outside of the tee



Ragwort newly established on the tee and already surviving regular and appropriate height cutting



Bristly ox-tongue growing on the tee at the same frequency as ragwort to which it is closely related.



Ragwort is related to dandelion (shown here) with broadly similar characteristics to this acknowledged weed of fine turf.



A well established ragwort plant that has clearly exploited divot damage on the tee.

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