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# Course Report

## Gavin Simkins

Looking back at January 2020, I'm sure not many of us expected to use the word lockdown so much, and I don't think many of us had heard of furlough, let alone understood what it meant!!

I felt some trepidation about the coming year, but this was due to the added workload of growing in the new holes. With an opening date of spring 2021, it felt like there would be enough time to get the course ready. Little did we know how much of a difficult and different year 2020 would be.

The weather last year was the usual mix that the UK is famous for. We had one day of snow, on 27th February, and for the first time ever, we were closed for a day on 9th February due to winds of 70 mph from storm Clara. I remember walking the course and nearly getting blown over!!

Our total rainfall for 2020 was 660mm, which is above our average, and the first time we have had above average rain in years. Our driest spell was from mid-March to the end of May with 41mm in 11 weeks. After that we had a relatively normal weather pattern for summer and autumn. The wettest month of the year was October, which measured 99mm. This unfortunately set the course up particularly wet heading into winter.

There were a couple of days we had to close after heavy rain early in the year, and again towards the end of the year, but we still managed to stay open more than other local courses, which is always pleasing.

Our greens maintenance programme started well, with a hollow core of the greens on 16th March. All the greens were completed and cleared in a day, allowing us to prepare them for top dressing with sand the following week. Then on 23rd March the lockdown was announced. In hindsight, we were fortunate to finish this, as restrictions were put on the work allowed on the course during the lockdown. Having no golfers out on the course was very strange but something we had to get used to. Thankfully we had already had the sand delivered so we took the chance of having a clear course to add all the 20 tonnes to the greens in 3 amounts during the next week, brushing it in every day, as we didn't have to worry about the disruption to play. We then left the greens alone for 2 weeks to allow the grass to recover before the first cut, unheard of during normal conditions.

During lockdown we reduced all mowing to the minimum requirements needed to keep a course 'ticking over'. All other work or maintenance was only allowed if necessary, however, we managed to keep our greens aeration programme on track throughout the year, despite the restrictions. On top of the hollow core we completed 7 solid tine aerations on the greens, to reduce compaction and improve the root growth. We also completed 8 verti-cut operations to control lateral growth, 4 solid tine aerations to the tees and 2 to the greens approaches. These really help recovery and improve rooting.

All of our fertiliser applications were carried out at the usual times as they were necessary for the health of the grass. We were not prepared to compromise the quality of the course by cutting back on any required inputs. The spring granular fertiliser was applied to greens, tees and approaches during the first lockdown and the autumn ones were added in October. We also have a monthly fungicide application that is sprayed on as a preventative from September through to December. This has proven to be successful, keeping the greens relatively free from disease in recent years.

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From May through to September we sprayed the greens monthly with a liquid fertiliser containing iron, seaweed and micronutrients in order to keep the greens healthy, with a consistent growth.

In early September we hired a contractor to spray most of the existing course with a weedkiller to remove the weeds on the fairways and rough. Clover had become particularly prevalent in some areas, and a few broadleaf weeds were beginning to take hold, which is not ideal for golf.

With lockdown restricting working practices, reduced greenkeeping numbers and the workload of the new holes, we unfortunately have not been able to get as many course maintenance jobs done as we would have expected. Hopefully this spring we can get round to trimming and tidying the tree plantations before the leaves come out and we also hope to get more general maintenance jobs done around the course. These don't affect the play of the course much but just need doing to keep everything looking tidy and 'ship shape'.

## Course Extension

90% of the seeding had been completed by the autumn of 2019, but due to the ground being too wet, Contour Golf (the Company building the course for Oakland Golf) had to leave site. The areas to be finished were around the 4th tee, 9th green and the area on the old 6th hole (17th green and 2nd and 18th tee) and included the seeding of the 9th and 17th greens.

Contour returned to site on 26th March, just after the lockdown had been announced. Thankfully, the work only required 2 or 3 staff so all new social distancing rules could be followed and obviously this work could not be done from home!

In the same week we carried out our first cut of the whole seeded area with our newly purchased tractor and mower. This continued weekly throughout the growing season.

Contour took around 3 weeks to complete the required works and seeding, including 2 greens and tees.

Unfortunately, in April we entered the driest spell of the year. We only had 41mm of rain in April and May. This really didn't help. In order to get the irrigation to the greens working we had to undertake emergency works, at a large financial cost. Fortunately, being on site I was able to react quickly and we called in our irrigation company to complete all the repair work in time. The greens were starting to show signs of stress, but with lots of early morning and late evening watering, they slowly recovered and started to grow. I remember that from early April we watered the greens twice a day, everyday for about 25 days to help get the grass established.

We applied our first fertiliser on the 7 completed greens in April and the 2 newly seeded ones followed in early May. From thereon we fertilised every month to make sure the growth was strong and consistent. The first cut of the greens was in late May, which was carried out with a rotary 'garden' mower at 20mm. This starts the process called tillering, where the grass thickens naturally to produce the nice 'carpet' like texture required before the height can be gradually lowered.

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By July the greens were being cut twice weekly and we had reduced the height to 15mm. It was around this time we decided, with a little persuasion and excitement from John Finnigan, to organise a test event in September. The 26th was decided as the best date and this helped to give the team a focal point to aim at and pushed us to reduce the heights on all surfaces a bit quicker so the course would be in a playable condition.

In August the greens were cut with our cylinder greens hand mower for the first time at 10mm. This made a significant difference in the visual quality of the grass and they started to look more like 'proper' greens.

In September the height was lowered to 8mm, reduced the tees to 20mm and cut the fairways, with our main fairway mower, for the first time at 30mm, reducing to 20mm in time for the anticipated Test Event. With around 150 members taking part, the day was a great success, if a little cold and windy. We received a lot of positive feedback and welcomed the few comments that we could consider addressing before opening. Funds from the day have contributed significantly to the landscaping fund. Along with Ian Comerford's tree donation from Woodland Trust and other donations, we are pleased to say that we have nearly enough for the new course planting programme.

During the winter period the new greens are now cut at 7mm and when you consider the 'old' greens are cut at 6mm in the winter, we haven't got far to go to even them up in the spring. The other areas have all been cut a couple of times, with the last tees, approaches and fairway cut taking place in early December.

Whilst the contractor was on site in September, we took the opportunity to have the whole extension area sprayed with weedkiller, to remove the weeds that were beginning to grow throughout the course. This may need to be repeated before opening to prevent them from returning.

After the seeding was completed, Contour Golf spent a couple of weeks cleaning out the bunkers. We used this time to fill in two that we deemed unnecessary and make a new one. Once Contour had cleared out the bunkers we could have just put the sand in but we decided we needed a longer term solution to prevent sand contamination, sand wash down and waterlogging. We looked at a couple of options and decided to use a combination of Eco Bunker edge and a capillary concrete base. One of the reasons was that these could be done inhouse over a period of time to suit us and our requirements. The team were very keen to be involved and we are looking forward to completing the works ourselves.

We employed Eco Bunker to do the required works on the new practice bunker near the new putting green. We were very pleased with the result so decided to employ them for a week to help get us started and teach the greenkeepers how to build the bunkers to their requirements. After this, we carried on and completed 12 bunkers ourselves, with just one more to do in the spring. So far we have used 8 pallets of artificial turf supplied by Eco Bunker, 20 big bags of builders sand and 60 bags of cement!

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Once the Eco Edge is in place then natural turf needs to be put around the top of the bunker to join the artificial edge to the grass and give the finish needed. We have completed nine so far, using 6 pallets of turf, with more to finish when the ground is dryer in the spring.

We have the task of putting the capillary concrete in the bunker bases before the sand can be put in and hope to complete as many as we can before opening.

We have also been doing works on the 'old' 9 in preparation of the 18 holes opening. A new red tee and blue tee have been built and turfed on the new 1st hole, along with a path at the side to allow for a golfers standing area before teeing off.

The ditch on the 11th hole has been piped ahead of this being filled in, and grassed over to help golfers play the hole without having to play across a ditch, with the added benefit of speeding up play.

A route has been cut through the trees behind the 'old' 8th green to allow for access to the 2nd tee when playing the 18 holes, and we need to cut another route behind the 'old' 7th hole for access to the 4th tee.

At present, we are working through our 2021 maintenance plan for the course, taking into account that we will be 18 holes. The new greens will play a little different to the old greens, due to being established for nearly 30 years, but we aim to treat them the same as much as possible. More fertiliser and water will be required, but if we keep the heights the same across the course then eventually they will even out. They will also need more regular topdressing with sand to keep them smooth and rolling nicely. Those of you who have been members since the early days may remember the course and the greens in particular taking a while to settle down and mature into the lovely surfaces we have now.

We have a lot of work to do in preparation, but we are all very much looking forward to the new 18 holes opening in May 2021.

On behalf of Lee, Harry and Steve, I'd like to thank you for your continued support and wish you all a great golfing year ahead.

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