

ROCKLIFFE HALL ARTICLE (Parts 1 & 2) by Martyn Jones

Part 1: A Jewel in the Golfing Crown for the North East

The country estate where Middlesbrough Football Club has a state-of-the-art training facility will soon be complemented by a new luxury leisure development.

Rockcliffe Hall Limited is developing Rockcliffe Hotel and Golf Resort on a 150-hectare complex adjacent to the Club's prestigious training ground at Hurworth, near Darlington. The brainchild of Middlesbrough's Chairman Steve Gibson, it is planned that the development will become the North East's newest five-star leisure attraction.

The historic Rockcliffe Hall, a run-down 19th Century mansion, is being sensitively converted and authentically renovated and refurbished to create a luxury 63-bedroom hotel. The impressive red brick building with ashlar dressings, a patterned slate roof topped with ornate ridge tiles, and tall decorative chimneystacks, will form the main structure of the hotel complex. However, it is also being vastly expanded with a grand, modern but sympathetically designed extension.

Three restaurants, each offering the very finest in contemporary dining will be featured within the hotel to compliment its conference and banqueting suites. Luxurious spa, health and beauty, and gym facilities will cater for everybody's relaxation and fitness needs, offering the very best in treatments and accoutrements sourced from all over the world.

State of the art entertainment systems and the most comfortable and luxurious furnishings will be matched in its 18 self-catered apart-hotel style rooms, adjacent to the main hotel building,

A private housing development of 24 luxurious new homes, in keeping with the rest of the plans, completes a new look for Rockcliffe Hall and a new talk-about destination in the North East.

The hotel and adjoining features will provide the very highest standards in comfort and leisure, unmatched and unrivalled in the North East, bringing together the very

best in modern facilities in classical and historic surroundings. Up to 500 jobs will be created in constructing and ultimately staffing the new development.

This attention to detail right the way across the development is going to make Rockliffe Hall a standout location that blends great history with luxurious and state-of-the-art additions. It will be a must-see development for all visitors, not just from the region but also from across the UK and further afield, and will put the area firmly on the international sporting map. Peter Hodges, from Shepherd Construction, the main building contractors for the site, said: "Maintaining, restoring and enhancing the hall's historical elements is the number one priority, and will help create a fantastically grand, yet contemporary new development."

The jewel in the crown for golf enthusiasts is an exclusive new golf course that, at over 7,800 yards from the back tees, will become one of Europe's longest - a course that sensitively harmonises with the existing landscape whilst adding striking features that will make it one of the most exciting new courses in the UK.

The golf course is situated to the south of the Hall and covers an area of approximately 116.2ha. The southern and eastern boundaries are defined by the River Tees. Middlesbrough Football Club's training ground and sports complex lies immediately to the west.

Designed by Marc Westenberg of the renowned golf course design firm Hawtree Ltd., Oxford, and a Senior Member of the European Institute of Golf Course Architects, the par 72 course combines modern with traditional, classic with dramatic. The primary strength of any course lies in its routing - without a strong routing, a golf course can never be great. It is the backbone of a course and underpins all the other elements of a notable design. At Rockliffe Hall, Westenberg has brilliantly routed golf holes in a bold and original fashion.

Areas of wetland habitat have been introduced as part of flood attenuation measures. The development introduces new landscape features and habitat areas into an area of farmland that was ecologically poor and devoid of any features of special landscape value. New landform and planting will integrate the site into the surrounding

countryside, creating a more diverse and visually richer landscape with a range of appropriate habitats.

A flood risk assessment was conducted during the planning phase and the course has been masterfully routed through the flood plain to serve this essential role whilst ensuring that the playability of the holes is not jeopardised. Ever conscious of the environmental responsibilities of a golf course designer, Westenberg has preserved and even enhanced this vital wildlife habitat.

Guy Holmes, a director of Browne Smith Baker, principal architects for the Rockliffe Hall development said that creating the course on a flood plain had proved an immense challenge to the golf course designer and constructors. "We have to accept floods and deal with them, and let the water go out sensibly. It's been a very involved engineering exercise," he said.

It won't be an easy course – far from it! It certainly is not a course for the faint hearted. The strategy of the course will demand that golfers play creatively, considering a variety of options, controlling trajectory, and assessing different situations throughout a round. It offers opportunities to be heroic, yet incorporates subtleties that will require the most delicate of touches. It provides drama, yet sits comfortably in its tranquil setting. Its length, variety, and strategic bunkering will make it one of the most testing courses for golfers of any ability.

An extensive driving range, grass-roofed clubhouse and practice area completes what will be one of the most enjoyable and best-presented golf facilities in Europe

But the creation of a great golf course does not lie solely in the hands of an architect. It requires collaboration between many disciplines – designer, hydrologist, ecologist, constructor, and maintenance team.

Master golf course constructors M.J. Abbott Limited have moved almost 1 million cubic metres of earth during construction and have designed and installed complex gravity and pumped drainage systems. They have also installed a state of the art Rainbird irrigation system to greens, surrounds, tees and fairways.

Due to be opened in June 2009, MJ Abbott will have completed all aspects of the construction including earth moving, shaping, drainage, irrigation, cultivation, lake construction, landscaping, and early maintenance. Commenting on the highly testing layout, Contracts Director Nigel Wyatt said, "The vision applied to the plans is second to none. Not only will it be a stunning course, but the distance from the back tees will make it a challenge for even the world's greatest golfers."

The recently appointed Course Manager, David Cuthbertson, speaks highly of the workmanship of the MJ Abbott team, "I enjoy a great relationship with the contractors and their attention to detail reassures me that I won't be plagued by hidden faults, a curse that all too often occurs with new constructions. They've worked to the highest standards and are prepared to go that extra mile to make things right".

Constructed to USGA recommendations, the greens are seeded with a blend of creeping bentgrass varieties (Penn A4 and G6) and will be maintained to the highest standards. A fleet of Toro equipment will make up the bulk of the machinery inventory and David anticipates a staff of 16, comprising 12 full-time and 4 casuals, including a mechanic and irrigation technician, by the time the course is open for play.

David, who was at Slaley Hall for 12 years before accepting the post at Rockliffe, is a staunch Sunderland FC fan but is now proud of his association with Middlesbrough FC. He welcomes the challenges and responsibilities of such a prestigious development and is fully aware of its economic and historical importance to the area.

Rockliffe Hall, as we know it today, is a Grade II listed building and is steeped in grand North East history. Original plans for the hall date back to 1774, but it wasn't until the 1800's that the Hall and the estate started taking shape. Records from the 1820's list it as being known as Pilmore House. Then, the Pilmore Estate belonged to Robert Surtees of Redworth, a celebrated Co. Durham Historian and was habited by his more famous cousin, landscape painter Thomas Surtees Raine.

In 1851 the estate came under the ownership of Alfred Backhouse, a Quaker banker, and major developments were made. He built Pilmore Hall on the land for himself

and his wife, Rachel, a member of the Barclay family, also of banking fame. Pilmore Hall was an elegant mansion with magnificent facilities for hunting and fishing.

Soon after gaining ownership, Backhouse swiftly commissioned fellow Quaker and relative by marriage, Alfred Waterhouse to rebuild much of the main building and re-landscape the estate.

The estate stayed in the Backhouse family until 1897, when a Captain Forester bought it as a sporting estate. During his occupancy, the estate switched names from Pilmore to Rockliffe.

Later, a Colonel R. Clayton Swan purchased it, and, in 1918, the Earl of Southampton bought the estate and lived there on and off until 1948. Lord Southampton was a keen horseman and Master of Foxhounds and an even keener cricket fan. He had a pitch laid out on the estate so that his workers could play the locals from Croft Cricket Club. Croft and Hurworth cricketers and the Rockliffe estate workers eventually merged to form one club, Rockliffe Park Cricket Club, of which Lord Southampton was the first president. Rockliffe Park C C still exists and the team plays on the same pitch to this day.

The Rockliffe Park estate was bought by the Brothers of St John of God and converted into a hospital in 1950. Some 18 years later Durham County Council compulsorily purchased it for use as a Community Centre.

Sadly, it stood empty for several years and was left to petty vandals until, in 1996, Middlesbrough Football Club bought Rockliffe Park, where it established its new training facilities.

The estate has not been without incident. In 1903 and again in 1974, buildings were badly damaged by fire. In 1944 a light aircraft crashed into the grounds, luckily missing any buildings and causing only damage to trees and the landscape. It has even had its brush with stardom and parts of the grounds were used as backdrop for some scenes from the Michael Caine hit *Get Carter* in 1971.

It would now appear that Rockliffe Park is destined to enjoy stardom once again!

Part 2: The Ground Can Reveal Many a Dark Secret

Construction of the new championship golf course on the historic Rockcliffe Hall estate at Hurworth near Darlington has tested the ingenuity of the golf course architect and the MJ Abbott construction team. Despite the proximity of the River Tees along the southern and eastern boundaries of the site, a stipulation of planning consent was that no drainage could be discharged into the river. Consequently, wetland areas have had to be created and are now a primary feature of the low-lying areas of the golf course. Lowland and marshland wild flower mixes will be established, creating wildlife havens and enriching the botanical diversity.

A complex arrangement of pipes and surface contouring directs extraneous water to the wetland zones, themselves being an intrinsic part of the flood attenuation measures. Designed to cope with 1 in 100 years flood intensities, it would be expected that their effectiveness would be difficult to ascertain. Not so! Three such floods have occurred in the last ten years. And the extremely wet year of 2007 was an ideal year to test the design. It passed with flying colours!

The nature of the site posed still further challenges to the MJ Abbott team. The high water table in the area where a 60,000 square metre main irrigation lake was to be situated necessitated the installation of a drainage system below the lake liner. Without such a system, the lake liner would rise and fall with the level of the groundwater. The company's engineers designed an ingenious and complex scheme of pipes and control chambers to avert the problem. Nigel Wyatt, Contracts Director for MJ Abbott Limited and Chairman of the Land Drainage Contractors Association said, "The intrinsic properties of the site demanded a novel solution. As contractors we periodically meet such challenges but our team of experienced engineers are skilled and creative. Rarely is a problem too great for them".

The original concept of the golf course architect, Marc Westenberg, was to locate an irrigation reservoir outside the boundary of the golf course, in an area where no groundwater problem would occur. However, soon after excavation commenced, the remains of a Roman settlement were unearthed and 15 archaeologists descended on

the site, declaring that the area was of historic importance and could not be excavated. An alternative location for the reservoir had to be incorporated into a revised golf course layout.

The new irrigation lake has, however, given rise to two of the most dramatic holes on the course. The par 4, 4th hole demands a heroic tee shot that skirts the edge of the lake. How much of the lake a player carries is dependent on skill and nerve. The par 3, 5th hole is definitely not for the faint-hearted. An island green, surrounded by water and guarded by threatening pot bunkers at its entrance will intimidate all but the most confident of players.

The environmental benefits of the lake have been maximised by incorporating shallow marginal shelves and reed beds, providing valuable wildlife habitats. Five unobtrusive Otterbine aerators will preserve water quality and the pump house is skilfully camouflaged. Submersible pumps are also hidden from view in concealed chambers. There are no unsightly pipes, no dangling cables, and no ugly buildings.

With a project of this size, it's very easy for any small delay to have a major knock-on effect. The result is that completion dates can drift by weeks or even months. Days lost through weather conditions or down days, as they are known, can cause severe problems to both the contractor and their clients in lost time, financial additions and hazardous conditions.

It is testament to M J Abbott that the construction schedule has remained on course despite the tricky summer and autumnal conditions of 2007. Work commenced in May 2007 but, following one month of good weather, there followed seven weeks of some of the wettest weather on record. Devastating deluges brought work to a standstill and 65 employees stood idle, waiting for a change in fortune. Once more favourable conditions returned, a vast array of equipment and workers were directed to the site. Amazingly, they were back on track by late August and they were ready to seed 9 holes.

Rockcliffe Hall estate is nestled within a rural community, situated close to the delightful, unspoilt village of Hurworth, near Darlington; a tranquil hamlet of picture

postcard charm. Looking towards the village green at Hurworth life would appear to have always been idyllic.

But a dark secret lurks beneath the tranquillity of the village. For far below the village green lie the remains of more than 1,000 souls who fell victim to the Great Plague in 1665. The bodies lay ten deep in three mass graves covered with a layer of lime to aid decomposition.

There is no marker and no plaque telling of the horror that almost wiped out the 750-strong village - leaving only 75 behind to mourn their dead. But if you look closely the evidence is plain to see.

Three huge dips in the village green map out the massive pits where the bodies were piled up one on top of another until the graves were full. According to records kept in the village church until only a short time ago, as many as 1,500 people are believed to have been buried beneath the picturesque green.

Bodies from other nearby villages were ferried across the River Tees and brought to Knell Gate, a narrow passageway linking the river to the green, and a bell was rung to warn villagers to go inside their homes. Then along the narrow village track came a lone gravedigger with a cart laden with lime, filled at one of the huge storage pits housed in the appropriately named Lime Yard next to the Bay Horse pub. He worked alone, placing the bodies into the newest pit before burying them in lime. Only once the pit was full was soil piled on the top and the grave closed.

The sandy soil underneath the green continues to move with topsoil falling into the spaces once occupied by corpses. The huge hollows remain a permanent memorial to this human tragedy.

Over the years, as the road between the green has been dug up to lay pipes and cables, workmen have come face to face with skulls and bones that were laid there. Not knowing whether their gruesome find was the foul deed of some serial killer, the police were always called to the scene. There seemed a time in the 1970's when sirens in the village were almost a monthly occurrence. As the workmen dug deeper skeletons popped out of the ground to greet them. All of them thought they had

uncovered a murder. But the vicar of All Saints church would rush out and explain everything to the police. The bones would then be re-buried where they had come from.

The secret past of the village was recorded on parchment scrolls by the then vicar, Rev Thomas Thompson. The scrolls lay in a giant safe in the vestry of All Saints church. They recounted the village's history right back to the 16th century and detailed the time the plague struck the village. The records were written in beautiful old English hand writing and clearly recalled the bodies arriving by Knell Gate, the lime pits in Lime Yard, and the local farmers and tradesman who dug the three mass graves to bury the local victims.

At the beginning the writing was very neat but as the Rev Thompson himself was struck down, the writing became very shaky and hardly legible. Then, by the last entry, it just tailed off as if he died writing.

But the history of Hurworth it is not all doom and gloom. A village history written in 1900 by Edith Katherine Harper for her nephew Robert reveals that it does have a lighter side.

Once a thriving industrial village filled with linen weavers, many of the original residents were related to each other, being born to only a handful of families. That could have been why old John Tiplady, known as "Jack Tip" was said to have been one of the village's oddest residents. Keeping himself to himself and only seen out at the strangest times of day and night, he had a penchant for cleaning and tidying the village. He never spoke to anyone and nobody dared speak to him.

Current residents of the village are delighted that the area is now being offered a new lease of life with the development of the Rockliffe estate. The 5-star hotel, spa and leisure complex, and championship golf course will bring a fresh economic boom to the area and will place it firmly on the international sporting map.

Warwick Brindle, of Rockliffe Hall Developments, said: "People have asked 'why here?' But we're 15 minutes from the Yorkshire Dales, 20 minutes from a beautiful coastline and the moors, and 40 minutes from Newcastle. It's a fantastic setting."

Guy Holmes, a director of Browne Smith Baker, principal architects for the Rockliffe Hall development added: "Come the 2012 Olympics, there's going to be a lot of international teams wanting such quality sports and spa facilities. There are huge opportunities here."

The village of Hurworth may conceal a dark and murky past but its future is definitely bright and clear. Where suffering and death once signalled its demise, recreation and health will soon herald its prosperity.