

The Northern Echo

Your campaigning newspaper
Founded 1870 No 42,633

COMMENT

A lukewarm solution

GORDON Brown's long-awaited energy-package is a step in the right direction. But it is a hesitant step rather than a bold stride.

We welcome the fact that millions of people are to get free insulation for their homes because that makes long-term sense. The reduction of the country's energy consumption has to be the overriding objective.

But no one should get too excited by the Prime Minister's pledge that energy companies, which are making huge profits at a time of impending recession, are to contribute £910m towards the cost of the package.

Even if we could be confident that the companies will take the hit, it is nowhere near a big enough contribution to the problems millions of people will face in meeting their soaring fuel bills.

Mr Brown had hardly drawn breath after making his announcement before the Association of Electricity Producers was undermining his promise that the cost of the energy-saving measures would not be passed on to customers.

"Whenever people impose costs on an industry like ours – or indeed just about any other industry – the bill to some extent always ends up with the customer," said the association's chief executive David Porter.

In other words, the Prime Minister can make all the promises he wants, but he's living in cloud cuckoo land if he thinks customers are not going to pay the price sooner or later.

The political problem for Gordon Brown is that the people of Britain had been led to expect more help with fuel costs – and he hasn't delivered enough.

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 Head office: Priestgate, Darlington, Co Durham, DL1 1NF
 The Northern Echo (price 40p) is published by Newsquest (North East) Ltd – a Gannett company – at Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NF and printed by Newsquest (York) Ltd at Walmgate, York, YO1 1YN.

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FIELD OF DREAMS: Designer Marc Westenborg at Middlesbrough Football Club's golf course at Hurworth

GOLF courses are like big balls of clay. Honestly. Every adorned vase, every ornate pot starts as a ball of clay. The clay is not special – it could become a schoolboy's model, destined for the back shelf. Likewise, it could become a sculptor's masterpiece, given pride of place. The clay's destiny is shaped by its artist.

Fields are like that. Most lead mundane lives, tied to a potato's production cycle. Some, if they're lucky, get oil seed rape, or something similarly spectacular. But, every so often, a field gets the Wedgwood treatment: cut, carved and crafted into a glistening golf course, destined for tees and woods, not tractors and wellies.

This field, nestling on the Tees north bank in Hurworth, near Darlington, used to grow potatoes. It was that big ball of clay. Two years on, the fields are fairways, the bogs are bunkers and the blobs of brown are glistening greens. It isn't change. It's a metamorphosis, a 400-yard tee shot from one extreme to another.

Middlesbrough Football Club's training ground, Rockliffe Park, is next door and this course is their baby. Steve Gibson, the chairman, must have been sitting in the canteen, surveyed the potato field next door, and thought: I could have a decent golf course there. So, like millionaires do, he did.

Once complete – it's due to open next summer – the course will be almost 7,900 yards, one of Europe's longest. The 375-acre site will include a 63-bedroom, five-star hotel, lodges, apartments, spa, conference centre, leisure centre and restaurant. Which should keep Premiership footballers entertained for a good 15 minutes.

The course designer is Marc Westenborg, of golf architects Hawtree, based in Oxfordshire. Is his the world's best job? "I have got a fantastic job," he says. "There's nothing more satisfying than seeing a golf course you have put on a piece of paper become reality."

Marc has a 12 handicap. "Probably the best handicap for a course designer," he says. He admits there's room for "Tiger Tees", so is there room for us hackers? Some golfers are pleased to get the thing airborne, let alone straight.

"The trick is to make a course look difficult,



Middlesbrough Football Club's new golf course, due to open next year, is nearing completion. But how do you turn a potato field into a golf course? **Owen Amos** takes a tour to find out

but play easy," he says. "Ninety nine point nine per cent of golfers can't play as well as Tiger Woods, so we have to get this right for them. It's got to be a challenge, enjoyable and fair. We want someone to come here, have the worst round of his life, but still have a thoroughly enjoyable time doing it."

I'm sure I can manage half that arrangement. But, while the average hole is almost 440 yards – the longest hole, the seventh, is 640 – the duffers' interest is maintained. "There are quite large greens, gently undulating and very wide, expansive fairways, making it playable for most golfers," says Westenborg.

Designing courses, though, is about more than tee there, fairway there, green there. Every dip and drop is planned. Every nuance is deliberate, like a master with a paintbrush. There's a reason the fairway's shaped like this, there's a reason the green slopes like that.

Take bunkers. Westenborg sprays the outline. If the cutters miss the line – say by six inches – the line is re-sprayed and the bunker re-cut. Even the sand's colour is specified: English brown rather than Spanish white. Likewise, in the course's embryonic stage, the designer might decide a hill is half a metre too high. It gets dropped.

"When you start, you spend a lot of time on course with the shapers," he says. "I might spend a few hours with the guys, saying raise that, soften that, put that bunker here, that bunker there. It can change at the last minute – and almost always does."

Making the course charming, yet challenging is, though, just half the work. A course strength – the Tees snaking round the boundary – is also a weakness. The course is slap bang in the river's flood plain. Only planned water features are welcome here.

"It's a beautiful setting, on the hook of the

river," says Westenborg. "No power cables, no public footpaths. The only complication was the flood plain." The course is designed to cope with a "100-year storm" – the worst storm you'd expect in a century. Huge lakes have been created – the biggest has a mile circumference – with the removed soil used to raise tees, greens and shape fairways. As Westenborg says: "Nothing has been brought on, nothing has been taken off. It all balances out."

THE lake, already, is home to a family of swans. Neither Westenborg nor course management know where they're from, but guess they've hopped over from the Tees, intrigued by the new playground. Swan Lake also has a wildlife island and 220,000 trees have been planted round the course. Don't tell this designer golf is bad for the environment. Unless you want your head bitten off.

"This was a potato field, with the farmer dumping all sorts of pesticides and chemicals on here," he says. "Now we have a golf course that doesn't use a fraction of the fertiliser a farm does. Golf courses are incredibly environmentally friendly."

In the lake, alongside the eco-island, is a green: polished, shiny, and tempting. Just don't call it a signature hole. "I hate the term signature hole," says Westenborg. "That's saying it's more beautiful or more fun, or more enjoyable, than others."

And there're not many courses where a bad tee shot can start in one county and end in another. The Tees is the boundary between Durham and Yorkshire. Out of bounds? Rockliffe golfers can call out of county.

Westenborg – who thinks the course has turned out "absolutely fantastically" – even thinks it could host showcase events. "They could potentially hold some of the big tournaments here," he says. "Tented village on the (football club's) training ground, perhaps? I don't know what the groundsman would say, though."

From tatty field to Tiger's field? Not bad for a farm in Hurworth.