



Foxhills

YOUR CLUB IN THE COUNTRY

Ian Hayton - The Visionary

When Ian Hayton decided to pay £1.4m for the Foxhills estate in 1983 his friends and family thought he was "off his head". "I certainly did not see what it was, I saw what it could be," said Ian.

What he saw was the potential to build a country club that welcomed families, and a golf club that treated women and children as equals - quite a rare vision in the early eighties. "When my boys were young you were restricted where you could take them. I remember driving down to Deal once with them - I couldn't even get a meal because they wouldn't allow them in pubs.

"This philosophy seemed to spread and there was nowhere the family could go. Now the country is family-obsessed in pubs and places like Happy Eater, but in '83 children were not even to be seen, let alone heard!"

Nowadays, largely thanks to Tiger Woods, golf is big business and headline news. Back then the boom in the sport was still to happen. "The hype didn't happen until we won the Ryder Cup in '85 - then it started to get active. But when we took over, there were 300 golf members and 400 on the racquet side."

Ian acquired a club which needed a major financial investment and a lot of personal care. "It was not being given the attention that I felt it deserved," he said. His first action was to appoint Bryan and Jane Benson to administer it. Bryan had been managing Pennyhill Park, previously owned by Ian. "I took him out to lunch to ask him and he had a fit!" Ian recalls. "In fact, most people thought I was misguided in buying the estate.

"It looked like a very difficult hill to climb. There were about eight different coloured carpets on the ground floor of the Manor, and there were partitions everywhere. The bar was a U-shaped Western type - and was really quite frightening! The restaurant was closed, the Pine Room was a children's play area, the Clubhouse was an offensively skinny building, and the courses were in poor condition."

We began by closing down and refurbishing the Manor restaurant, which re-opened four months later. The Clubhouse was then extended, and work has continued ever since. Fairway irrigation and drainage on all three golf courses in recent years has taken the investment to over £20m.

As well as the monetary investment, a lot of work was needed to rebuild the reputation of the courses. Two years after they opened in 1975 they hosted the European PGA Tour Players' Championship. What followed was hardly complimentary, with players the first to criticise.



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"The courses were in poor condition; they'd had no money spent on them. Denis Thatcher once told me that in the early days he broke two clubs on the stones." Ian remembers vividly his first AGM with the golf members. "It was mutiny! Somebody asked me 'How do we know you've got the money to do it?' I said, 'You'll be the first to know if I haven't.' I asked them to stick with me, and they did. Ever since the members have contributed greatly.

We didn't put the fees up for two years because I didn't see any value in that. I didn't take any new members on for about 18 months. We wanted to get it as right as possible and were the first club in the country to make a feature of being a all-service family club. We looked after ladies as well - there were very few when we came."

Today Foxhills has more women and children playing golf than practically any other club in the country. Ian's vision is now a reality.

One of his first decisions was to build the par 3 Manor Course on what at the time was grazing land. "That to me gives more pleasure than anything else," he said. "I see dads and mums playing with the kids in the long summer evenings and it's a joy to watch."

Incredible Staff

Ian is quick to praise former managing director Bryan Benson and his wife Jane. "He's put the flesh on the bones. He has been responsible all these years in making it work. He was the Head Chef at Pennyhill Park when we first met and was always giving me advice!

"I asked him to come on out of the kitchen and join me in management, and he - along with an incredible staff - has really made it work at Foxhills. Most of the senior staff have been with us a long time and their input and professionalism has been invaluable, particularly Linda Reade who, until 2005, looked after our finances and administration."

Another such senior member is Ian's son Marc, who after serving a 10-year apprenticeship as director in charge of marketing and sales, was appointed Managing Director in April 2005. "I'm very proud of him and he gives me great pleasure," says Ian. "He's highly imaginative and we laugh a lot together."

Following the imminent opening of the new bedrooms, Ian's next challenges include development of a new health club and spa, and a new bar overlooking the golf courses. As always, his focus is on making sure members are looked after and Foxhills' special family orientation is retained. "I still get a great charge coming in and especially seeing the youngsters taking part in the many activities."

Clearly not the voice of someone "off their head" back in 1983!