



Pymble shapes a **new future**

Over the past four years, during one of the most challenging periods the industry has faced, Pymble Golf Club in Sydney undertook a major course redevelopment ahead of its centenary celebrations this year. ATM editor Brett Robinson catches up with course superintendent David Stone to look back on the project, the multitude of challenges the construction team faced and the lasting legacy that has ultimately been created for the Pymble membership.



Over a four year period, Pymble Golf Club in Sydney's northern suburbs reconstructed all greens, tees and bunkers. The redevelopment works were timed to coincide with the club's 2024 centenary celebrations. Pictured is Pymble's par five 7th

PHOTOS: ADRIAN LOGUE AND DAVID STONE

As far as starts go, it was a first week that David Stone won't forget in a hurry. Arriving at Pymble Golf Club as its new course superintendent in March 2020 following a successful decade up the road at Bayview Golf Club, Stone was all set to tackle what was shaping up as a new and exciting chapter of his career. Having just come off a greens reconstruction project at Bayview, more of that was in the pipeline at Pymble which was also looking to embark on major works to improve its offering to members in what is a very competitive northern Sydney market.

Stone's enthusiasm, however, was somewhat tempered by the uncertainty of the time. A global pandemic was dominating the headlines and countries were quickly slamming their borders shut and enforcing strict lockdowns upon their citizens. Sure enough, Australia would soon follow suit and it just so happened that Stone's very first day in charge at Pymble would coincide with the first day of the country's first nationwide lockdown. The course was closed, the clubhouse locked up and his newly-inherited team, who he had barely met, were split into two teams as part of new COVID working protocols. It was an interesting introduction indeed.

Fast forward nearly four years and sitting in the Pymble clubhouse the week of the 2023 Australian Open last November, Stone can only smile and shake his head as he reflects on what was a very different time. He has just returned to the course after changing holes at The Lakes Golf Club for good mate Anthony Mills, who roped him in to volunteer for the week, while out on the course there is a flurry of activity as his crew races to turf the surrounds of a fairway bunker on the 10th hole ahead of some forecast storms later in the day.

While on the face of it those works were a simple turfing job, they actually marked part of a pretty significant juncture for the club. The new fairway bunkers on 10 were the very last component of Pymble's major course redevelopment project which had started back in late 2020, just months after Stone's arrival. During those years, the club would navigate one of the most challenging periods the industry has witnessed to boldly undertake the biggest project in its proud history. Coordinated to finish in time for the club's centenary in 2024, the works have not only set up Pymble for a strong future, they have also seen the course jump back into the Top 100 rankings for the first time in over a decade.

RECALIBRATION REQUIRED

Pymble Golf Club is located in the affluent Sydney suburb of St Ives. One of the city's elite Group 1 clubs, it resides on an undulating 41-hectare parcel of land surrounded on all sides by prime northern suburbs real estate. It's compact (just 6100m in length), it's unique and it's busy, with an active membership playing upwards of 70,000 rounds each year. While it has never held a major tournament, the course and environs have always been known for their high level of conditioning, while off the course the club prides itself as being one of the most socially active in Sydney. As Stone will tell you, the clubhouse is just as busy as the course most days, especially after the weekly competition rounds.

In bringing Stone on board as its new superintendent, Pymble had gained a vastly experienced practitioner. As well as his turf management skills, in the last six years at Bayview Stone had assumed the role of general manager as well, performing both duties after the club found itself in some troubled waters. Calling upon his expertise in

staff and project management, Stone steadied the ship and also oversaw the reconstruction of 14 greens in a four-year period. In a way, that project was an apprenticeship for what was to come at Pymble.

Prior to the current redevelopment, Pymble had dabbled in some masterplan works. Over a period of nearly 20 years, the club had reconstructed 10 greens to USGA spec under Ross Watson. As part of its new five-year Strategic Plan (2019-2024), the club had plans to do the remaining greens over another staged process and just a few months before Stone arrived it had appointed local Sydney architect James Wilcher (Golf by Design) to guide those works.

If truth be told, neither Stone nor Wilcher were overly enthusiastic about just doing the remaining greens. Yes, they needed to be reconstructed, but in doing so would leave the club with an inconsistent set of greens that varied in age and had different profiles. The Watson greens were anywhere from three to 17 years old and some of those were starting to show deficiencies. Additionally, there were a number of inherent problems elsewhere on the course that needed addressing, in particular the design and playability of the bunkers and the inadequate size of the tees for the level of traffic the course received. There were also questions over whether newer turf varieties could provide better playing conditions and streamline maintenance practices.

What was needed was a recalibration, so Stone and Wilcher put forward a case to the club to go all in – reconstruct all greens, tees and bunkers within the shortest possible timeframe. In doing so it would bring a level of consistency in terms of construction, maintenance and playability and it would also enable Wilcher to stamp his own design mark across the entire property.



Pymble's greens are now all A1/A4 bentgrass with a consistent rootzone profile comprising a 100mm gravel layer and 300mm layer of brown WM sand. Pictured is the 3rd

To that end, Stone went away and costed the redevelopment. Using an in-house model with contract shapers, he came back with a price tag of \$3.8 million which included robust contingencies due to the uncertain climate created by the pandemic. Having only been at the club a few months, Stone clearly recalls the extraordinary meeting he had with the Board that June to discuss his costings and their decision to ultimately pull the trigger.

"Club treasurer James Dunning looked at me and said, 'Let's do it,'" remembers Stone. "I nearly fell off my chair! I didn't know the financial situation of the club and hadn't worked at a club before which had that level of resources to be able to make that sort of decision. It was pretty amazing and huge credit goes to James (now club president) and then president Frank Woods for getting straight behind the idea of increasing both the scope of works and size of the budget and for assuring the Board it was achievable financially."

With the green light given, it set in motion a flurry of activity. Wilcher completed his designs which would address the aforementioned issues, while Stone began the arduous process of organising materials and sorting out logistics. Adding to that complexity was the club's stipulation that an 18-hole layout be in play at all times during the redevelopment. In early spring of 2020 the Board presented to the members its 'Shaping the Future' course redevelopment document which outlined their bold plan to get their buy in. Not surprisingly, it received overwhelming support.

INITIAL WORKS

With its centenary in 2024, the club had effectively four growing seasons in which to complete the redevelopment. The initial stage across the 2020-2021 growing season would focus on a raft of preparatory work that would set things up for the main works to begin the following season. This included constructing a number of spare holes and a new 2000m² bentgrass nursery to complement the existing stock it had on its two chipping greens (about 1000m²). Concerned about member fatigue throughout the reconstruction, Stone had recommended solid-turfing the greens rather than seeding them in order to reduce the time to get them back in play.

The spare holes would play a crucial role in enabling the club to keep an 18-hole layout in play at all times. Pymble has a unique course set up, with three separate loops of six holes and three-tee starts throughout the whole week (holes 1, 7 and 13). Prior to the redevelopment the club already had one spare hole, 18a, which doubles as a practice fairway and a chipping green adjacent to the par three 18th. It was decided to rebuild the chipping green adjacent to the 13th hole and turn that into a 140m par three (13a), while a push-up



Pictured top: Slotted drainage pipes were installed in the green bases so that the club could, if it chose to in the future, purchase SubAir units and connect them; Middle row: Major changes were made to the par three 11th with construction of a stone wall and creek system (left), while the greens sand was amended with coir fibre (right); Above: Greens were solid turfed so they could be brought back into play quicker

bentgrass green was constructed on spare land adjacent to the 12th (12a). That meant there was a spare hole in each six-hole loop, with one hole able to be taken out and worked on at a time while still maintaining a full 18-hole layout for members.

The early works also included an upgrade to the course's irrigation control system. New Rain Bird satellite boxes and software was installed in order to run a hybrid IC system. Essentially, all the existing areas would

continue to run from the multicore cables, while all new works would have IC from the boxes out, giving the club the capability to run additional sprinklers and back-to-back heads. The upgrades would also set the club up for future fairway irrigation and mainline works scheduled for 2025.

"For the most part, that first summer of works went to plan," reflects Stone. "Looking back, it all feels a bit of a blur, between taking over a new course, learning the property and



One of the biggest changes with the redevelopment is the style of bunkering. Numbers were reduced but area increased to around one hectare, with Wilcher's unique, semi-rugged style instantly recognisable

kicking off a major project simultaneously. At the same time, my wife Maddie was having our second baby, so everything was happening all at once. The one real positive to come out of that first summer was the quality staff that came on board who would become the backbone of the construction crew. That included Matt Tierney and apprentices Corey Calvert and Matt Ross. We also locked in Craig Brown as our lead shaper who would prove to be an integral part of the team."

KEY CHANGES

With the foundations in place, the following growing season (2021-2022) would kick off the first of three major work tranches. The redevelopment would see all greens, tees and bunkers reconstructed along with some design changes to a couple of holes, most notably the par three 11th which would include the construction of a stone wall and creek system around the front of the green. While the fairway corridors would remain relatively untouched and the existing kikuyu remain, from a turf management perspective some significant changes were about to occur elsewhere.

That started with the greens. Pymble had historically been a *Poa* greens course with the membership very pro-*Poa*. However, issues with *magnaporthe* that would regularly impact their conditioning, combined with advances in managing *Poa* in bentgrass, led Stone to convince the club that converting to an A1/A4 bentgrass blend would provide better playing conditions.

The other big change with the greens came with the drainage system and rootzone mix. Pymble is located in a notorious rain belt that stretches across the Turramurra, Pymble and St Ives area, with the course often coping some of the heaviest falls in Sydney. Combined with a heavily tree-lined layout and resultant shade and airflow issues, Stone recommended installing infrastructure for a SubAir system. During the greens construction process, the crew would install slotted drainage pipes so that the club could, if it chose to in the future, purchase the mobile SubAir units and connect them.

As for the rootzone mix, Stone would end up going with a brown WM Sand sourced from Newcastle. Although known as being a

much drier sand, Stone was comfortable with its selection due to annual rainfall levels together with the many microclimate and shade issues across the course. The WM sand also has a pH of 6 which helps offset the high pH levels (up to 8) in Pymble's irrigation water. The sand, which would also be used on tees, was amended with coir fibre at 2kg/100m² and spread to a depth of 300mm across a 100mm layer of 7mm gravel.

Overall, total greens area would increase from 0.8 hectares to 1.1ha, with the most significant change being the inclusion of a double green – 8 and 14 (see photos page 16). On average it would take the construction team three weeks to build each green and a further 3-4 weeks to grow them in using bentgrass harvested from the onsite nurseries.

"Solid turfing the greens was probably one of the best decisions we made," states Stone. "I'd done 14 greens at Bayview and wearing the other hat as general manager at the time you would often become the 'Minister for Complaints'. With a reconstruction like this there can be a lot of member fatigue with all the disruption. By solid turfing the greens we were able to reduce that element a little and also the risk of them being impacted by the weather. The members certainly appreciated the fact we were able to turn them around and get them back in play a lot quicker."

From a visual perspective, perhaps the biggest change with the redevelopment would come with the bunkering. Wilcher's unique, semi-rugged style is instantly recognisable, with no better example than the extensive complex down the right-hand side of the par four 13th (see photo below left).

As well as appearance, improving their playability was also at the forefront of the works. All bunkers would be lined with an 80mm layer of 10mm gravel and Klingstone polymer sprayed over the top. Used as part of recent course redevelopments at Strathfield (Sydney) and Nudgee (Brisbane), Klingstone had a number of benefits, the biggest of which was that Stone and his crew could apply it themselves. While the total number of bunkers was reduced (from 70 to 65), the new hazards have increased in total area to about 1ha and were finished off with fresh white bunker sand imported from the Benedict quarry in Cowra.

Complementing their new design, Wilcher was also keen for the bunker edges to have a specific look. To that end and with Stone wanting to limit the number of different grass types he and the crew would have to manage, he started the search for one that could be used on tees, green surrounds and bunker edges. Taking a trip out to Dad & Dave's Turf



The impressive bunkering on Pymble's 13th hole. Tahoma 31 couchgrass was used to give the bunker edges their unique rugged look

farm to initially look at zoysias, while there it was suggested he try the new couchgrass variety Tahoma 31. The following day farm owner Graeme Colless organised for 200m² to be delivered which Stone installed on a tee.

"I gave the Tahoma 31 its first mow after five days and instantly knew we were on to something," says Stone. "The speed with which it established was like nothing I'd seen. We then tried it on a bunker edge which is where it became an obvious choice given the way it thickened up and gave James that unique look he was after.

"I knew it was a risk given that we were the first club to use it, but we did our homework and I was confident I'd seen enough to make the call. It has worked out really well for us. As well as bunker edges, in most places we have installed a triplex-width ring (1.8m) around the greens and across all the tees and into some of our green surrounds.

"The Tahoma 31 seems to be a lot tougher than the Santa Ana we had previously. On some of our more shaded tees that get hammered through winter, the Tahoma 31 is as tough as an old boot and just hangs in there. Certainly coming out of our winters now we haven't had to re-turf tees like we used to. Previously we'd be replacing at least a couple of hundred square metres every year.



Works to the 10th fairway bunkers prior to last Christmas signalled the end of the huge four-year redevelopment

"Being new, we have fed it quite heavily to date. It's got a better herbicide tolerance than Santa Ana but it does need more Primo we have found. Around the greens we have it down to 8mm but it can be cut down as low as 5mm which we are hoping to get to eventually. The only real criticism is that it goes really dormant in winter. The contrast that provides around the bunkers looks good and as far as the tees and greens surrounds go we can use pigments."

Increasing the size of the tees was also a key component of the upgrade works. As Stone quips, "We sprinkled some commonsense over the tees and made them as big, as wide and as long as possible." With the course pumping through 70,000 rounds, the tees had always been problematic, especially in winter, and the sole goal for Stone was to provide better playing conditions and also reduce the maintenance headaches they had long given the staff.

RYEGRASS FOR SPORTSFIELDS



RYEGRASS BLENDS



High quality blend for the very best surfaces.



Mid-range blend for broad acre.



Economical blend for overseeding warm season grass in winter.

SINGLE VARIETIES



Very dark colour.



Highly rated for wear and density.



Fast germinator, excellent wear tolerance.



Turf type annual rye.



For the name of your nearest distributor call 03 9462 0340 www.adseed.com.au

PYMBLE GC COURSE REDEVELOPMENT A TRUE TEAM EFFORT

The magnitude and complexity of Pymble Golf Club's course redevelopment required buy-in from all parties.

Across every stage of the works, course superintendent David Stone would be fortunate that everyone would play their role, whether it was the initial support from the Board to go all in with the works, through to course architect James Wilcher, the shapers, suppliers and his crew. The finished product that they have all had a hand in creating is something that everyone has been proud to put their name to. Stone is quick to point out that the project would not have been a success without the great bunch of people involved, but there were two individuals in particular who he happily singles out for special mention and for very different reasons.

As any architect or superintendent knows, having an expert shaper performing the on-ground works can make or break any project and in Craig Brown Pymble had one of the best in the business. Well known throughout Sydney and NSW, Stone had seen first-hand Brown's skills and strengths, in particular his eye for detail, during the works they undertook together at Bayview. Additionally, Brown had worked on a number of other Wilcher design jobs and knew his approach and methodologies.

Reading the situation and knowing the challenging climate in which they were conducting the works, Pymble made sure they looked after Brown, who in turn gave the club a commitment that the works there would be his priority right until the final green was shaped and bunker constructed. The mutually beneficial arrangement reaped dividends with the quality of the finished product a testament to that.

"Craig was fantastic to work with," explains Stone. "None of the staff had done construction work before, so not only was he the shaper but he was also willing to teach the guys and show them how things were done, such as drainage and bunker construction. It was really good for the young guys on the crew and 2IC Chris Fiadino. Thanks to Craig they have learned some new skills which will assist them in their careers."

"At times, Craig's role expanded to managing the job site while I was off doing other things which was really beneficial. And because he had worked with James before he knew what his requirements were which made my life easier. James would come in to sign off on every stage of the construction works. It is always an interesting dynamic between the architect's creative flair and the superintendent's responsibilities of managing the budget and schedule, but the project management ran like clockwork."



Above: Key members of the Pymble team (from left) superintendent David Stone, lead shaper Craig Brown, Daniel Scott, Luke Clark, assistant superintendent Chris Fiadino, Corey Calvert and Matt Ross. Below: With the majority of work completed in-house, the Pymble crew were involved in every aspect and developed new skills as a result



Another individual who would make a cameo appearance in the early part of the redevelopment was David Warwick who had just departed Avondale Golf Club after nearly a quarter of century as superintendent. Having left there burnt out and in need of a change, the eight months that Warwick would spend at Pymble in 2021 and 2022 proved just the tonic as he himself looked to recalibrate. As it transpired, after his time at Pymble Warwick would go on to oversee the construction of a new boutique private course north of Sydney and most recently was appointed as a course project advisor at Pennant Hills Golf Club where he will assist newly-appointed superintendent Michael Hedger as part of the upcoming masterplan works there.

Welcoming his good mate on board was also a timely win for Stone. In Warwick he had a vastly experienced superintendent with significant construction experience who he could call upon for advice or bounce ideas off. His counsel across a number of areas, in particular establishing the new bentgrass nursery and preparing the turf so that it was

at its peak come harvesting and laying, would prove pivotal in ensuring a strong end result when solid-turfing the new greens. Above all else, Stone also knew that Warwick's easy-going nature and love for a bit of banter would quickly endear himself to the crew.

"As well as his experience, he also provided some wonderful comedic relief," recalls Stone with a broad grin. "Some of the banter in the lunch room was hilarious and even the first year apprentices would get stuck in to him. Dave is such a great bloke and the boys loved having him around."

"Dave will probably agree with me when I say that we both experienced one of the funniest days of our careers during his time here. We were spraying the first bunker with Klingstone which sets like concrete if it gets on you. We were having a few issues with the pump on the drum and it ended up going everywhere. I glued my phone, Dave glued his glasses and car keys. All our personal items got covered in the stuff. We eventually worked it out, but it's something we look back on now and have a good laugh about."

"There was no science about it or being clever with the tees," states Stone. "We didn't need to be flamboyant, we just needed them to be big in order to handle the traffic and wear. We are one of the busiest private clubs in Sydney and the tees get smashed. The members just want good turf to play off, so we increased them in size to about 1.2ha in total."

KEY CHALLENGES

Every construction project is different and brings its own set of unique challenges and that was certainly the case with the Pymble redevelopment. Sydney's weather, the uncertainty that the pandemic brought with it, not to mention maintaining 18 holes for play at all times, were just some of the challenges that Stone and the crews, both construction and maintenance, had to account for.

As previously mentioned, the project budget had a number of built-in contingencies (\$1.7 million no less) and that proved critical as some costs, for example sand and gravel, would rise as much as 30 per cent because of COVID. As far as materials were concerned, Stone had to be ultra organised, especially with drainage and irrigation components. All stock was pre-ordered and held in stock for when they were needed.

From his previous work at Bayview, Stone had forged some strong relationships with a number of key industry suppliers which would come in very handy during the Pymble works. Whether that was the sand and gravel suppliers (Veljohn and Benedict) or turf farm (Dad & Dave's), Stone was able to rest easy knowing that they would be able to make his requests a priority and supply everything on time and within their budget constraints. He was never let down.



Sydney's 'big wet' of 2022 wreaked havoc during stages of the project. Pictured is damage to the 12th green after a 240mm overnight dump

From a logistics perspective, one of the trickier aspects was managing the flow of work across the course and coordinating material deliveries and storage. With no haul roads through the course and soil bins that could only hold three truck-and-trailer loads at a time, every piece of gravel and grain of sand had to be double-handled. The clubhouse carpark became a makeshift dump site with trucks only able to tip materials between 5am and 6am on certain days. Staff had to then transport the material either to the bins or directly to the work sites. As a result of those constraints, works were staged from the extremities of the course inwards, also bearing in mind that they had to work on one hole from each of the three six-hole loops at the same time.

The first season of major course works started in August 2021. Just to throw another spanner in the works, a second COVID lockdown was announced just two weeks out from the start of that tranche. That initially caused a bit of concern as shaper Craig Brown

lived outside of the area, but because he fell under the essential worker rule he was allowed to travel to the course.

Ploughing on and with the addition of Brendan Parry (son of Craig) to the shaping team and the arrival of former Avondale superintendent David Warwick (*see more on that opposite*) and new assistant Chris Fiadino, the greens on 15, 2 and 11 were completed before Christmas. Brown returned in mid-January to work on a further three greens, however, Sydney's 'big wet' would eventually put the project behind schedule.

After 200mm in January 2022, following the completion of turving the 12th green one afternoon in early February, the course copped 240mm overnight, effectively destroying most of the work (*pictured above*). The rain would persist for the next few months and after tentatively opening up ground on the 3rd hole and shaping up a rough green base, 790mm would fall in March. April was thankfully less wet – 206mm – and they were able to finish off the 3rd by early May, at which time works were halted as winter had set in.

All up for the four months from the start of January to the end of April 2022, Pymble received nearly 1600mm. Total rainfall for 2022 would end up being 2749mm which is nearly two-and-a-half times their yearly average. Thankfully the next 12 months (2023) would yield just 951mm and meant that construction could progress at a far greater pace.

The second season of works kicked off in August 2022 and by the following May nine greens had been smashed out – the putter, 18, 6, 13, 7, the 8-14 double green, 9 and 10. During this stage, shapers Marc Lavermicocca and Daniel Scott joined the team which freed up Brown to concentrate on the bunkers.

Wiedenmann Terra Spike... the best in Deep Tyne Aeration.

www.fieldquip.com.au

☎ 1800 454 150
✉ sales@fieldquip.com.au

 **Wiedenmann**



One of the biggest design changes and undertakings of the project was the construction of a new double green – 8 and 14 – which measures 1225m². Pictured top is looking toward the green from the 8th tee, while the aerial photos show the complex before, during and after construction

With that stage complete, it would leave seven holes for the final stage. The club centenary was now fast approaching and with Stone eager to utilise the first three months of 2024 to really progress the final grow-in and establishment of the new turf areas, the club hatched a plan to complete the remaining holes between August and December 2023.

With Parry and Lavermicocca scheduled to jump across to works at Long Reef Golf Club, Pymble brought on board Luke Clark, a plumber by trade who would prove particularly useful with a large amount of drainage works scheduled across this tranche. Again aided by some good weather and round-the-clock efforts from the shaping team and crew, the last of the works was completed just before Christmas. In that time holes 16, 4, 5, 17, 1 and the chipping green were completed, while the 12th green was also rebuilt after a rethink over its shape.

A LASTING LEGACY

In the months since the last of the construction works were complete, Stone and his crew of 15 have set about fine-tuning the new surfaces as the club prepares to host a series of centenary celebration events. One event in

particular looms large on the horizon for Stone, with Pymble playing host to the NSWGCSA Rube Walkerden Day this November.

As if to put an exclamation mark on the challenges that were thrown up during the project, this summer has been particularly brutal across Sydney. Humidity levels have been off the charts, the worst that Stone can recall in his near 30 years in the industry. As an example of that, the last Thursday in February saw the course swelter through a 39-degree day with 90 per cent humidity!

Although stressful for the bentgrass greens, those conditions did provide some perfect growing conditions for the warm-season grasses which have flourished. Pymble's kikuyu fairways have undergone targeted aeration, topdressing and fertilising to repair vehicle damage from the construction and were also cored in January. The Tahoma 31 tees and aprons received a heavy renovation after Christmas and have had fortnightly nutrition applications since. Root development has been a key focus on the greens, with weekly nutrition and light dusting with kiln-dried sand. Due to the challenging conditions, the greens have only been cut with walk-behinds to limit stress.

"Looking back, it was incredibly challenging but also a very enjoyable and rewarding experience," says Stone of the redevelopment. "There were some stressful times with COVID, the unprecedented rainfall and maintaining the \$3.8 million budget. We also effectively transitioned across a whole new team during the project. We had quite the clean out of staff, with only three of the original crew left. That was quite challenging given we were going hard with the course works.

"Coming out of the project it has been great to see some of my younger crew members really develop their skills and confidence over the journey. Given that every aspect of the construction was done in-house, there was an opportunity to learn at every turn. Our young apprentices Matt and Corey, who were a key part of the construction team, have learned how to use excavators, spray Klingstone and install irrigation. They could go off and build a green on their own now!

"My 2IC Chris was incredible and the hours he put in was next level. Seeing those guys come out of their shell, who have never done anything like this before, and blossom has been one of the most rewarding aspects of the whole project."