



# A new beacon

Cape Wickham Links, one of the most talked about golf course developments in the world, opened its gates on 30 October 2015. ATM editor Brett Robinson catches up with Cape Wickham superintendent John Geary to look back at some of the unique challenges faced growing-in what is expected to be a world top 100 ranked course.

**Every hole at Cape Wickham, whether inland or hugging the coastline, vies for your attention, none more so than the spectacular 14th. A right-to-left bending par four, the 14th plays from an elevated tee toward a natural punchbowl green**

**J**ohn Geary can rattle them off as effortlessly as an apprentice can find ways to take a shortcut – Lahinch, Royal County Down, Cypress Point, The Old Course at St Andrews. A golf course architect tragic for all his 30-plus years in turf management, Geary has come to revere the innate magical qualities such courses possess and over the years he has made it a personal quest to visit them, ticking off many on what is an enviable greenkeeping bucket list.

As recently as July this year he spent three weeks visiting the famous links courses of Scotland and Ireland, including spending all four days at St Andrews for the 2015 Open Championship. Indeed, at 4am on the Saturday of the major, Geary was

out walking all 18 holes, absorbing the history and tradition and reaffirming in his own mind why the Old Course is the most unique and unrivalled piece of golfing real estate in the world.

Links golf and minimalist golf is Geary's passion and it is somewhat fitting then that over the past year he has played a significant role in helping bring to life what is currently one of the most talked about modern links developments in the world.

It was out of the blue in October 2014 when Geary fielded a call from Duncan Andrews, owner of Cape Wickham Links which was being developed on the northernmost part of King Island in Bass Strait. Set on 120 hectares of some of the best links land you will ever find and under the shadow of

Australia's tallest lighthouse, Cape Wickham was essentially constructed and already capturing the imagination of an industry both here and abroad.

Like many, Geary had read and heard just how good the Cape Wickham site was and duly accepted Andrews' offer to take up a six month placement as grow-in superintendent. At the time Geary was all set to see out his six months then return back to Victoria's Mornington Peninsula, but no sooner had he set foot on site than Cape Wickham rekindled a passion that only a superintendent can appreciate. A year on he's still firmly ensconced there and with the course officially opening its gates to the world on 30 October, in his own words "he has no intention of leaving just yet".

And he'd be a fool to. The wall-to-wall fescue Mike DeVries and Darius Oliver designed course is simply stunning and has all the hallmarks of being a world top 100 golf course. Australia currently has six if you go by Golf Magazine's 2015 list – Royal Melbourne West (12), Kingston Heath (28), Barnbogle Dunes (36), New South Wales (37), Ellerston (73) and Barnbogle Lost Farm (86) – and given the feedback from those pundits fortunate enough to have played it already, come the next rankings Cape Wickham could well be among them, some even boldly predicting top 20.

Bill Schultz, an American golf tragic who has played every world top 100 ranked course, could not have been more effusive. In his review of Cape

PHOTOS: CAPE WICKHAM LINKS/LARRY LAMBRECHT



From the opening tee shot to the very last putt, those who have been fortunate to play Cape Wickham have already lauded it not only for its design but inherently fun nature to play. Pictured is the 1st

Wickham on Golf Club Atlas, he rated the 1st as “the most dramatic and beautiful starting hole in golf”, ranked the 9th hole as “perhaps the greatest par 5 in the world along with the 13th hole at Augusta National” and claimed the par 4 18th hole, which wraps around Victoria Cove, is “one of the greatest finishing holes in the game”.

While Geary is well aware of the subjective nature of such lists and comments and is quick to shy away from making any predictions, he knows deep down that what Cape Wickham possesses is special and that in time it will be highly regarded.

“It certainly has the potential to be a world top 100 course and that is the hope of those involved with the development of Cape Wickham,” states Geary. “If you look at all the great courses in the world, there are generally a couple of characteristics that link them. All have a dramatic landscape, the bulk of them are built on sand and the vegetation is dramatic. Cape Wickham has all three.

“When I first set foot here it reminded me a lot of the Mornington Peninsula – but on steroids! I have never seen a more scenic site for a golf course and the way the layout interacts with the ocean is something to behold. There is a tremendous variety in the landscape and while the ocean holes are spectacular, those holes which head back up into the dunes are as good if not better in some cases.

“The great layouts don’t fight the land. They make the best use of the natural landforms and Mike and Darius have done a fantastic job of making

the most of them and highlighting them. Some of the comments we are getting back are just how understated the design is and that’s a real credit to them and the obvious thought that has gone into it.

“I have read that when Alister MacKenzie designed Cypress Point he deliberately softened the contours of the greens because he didn’t want them to compete with the course’s spectacular setting. I’ve never actually asked Mike or Darius whether that was the intent here, but that’s how it feels.

“From a golfing perspective as well it is just a fun course to play. The fairway widths are generous, there are a lot of bail out areas around the greens and there are some very heroic shots off tees and into greens. It’s extremely playable and when you get an easterly wind there are three par fours that are driveable. But when it’s blowing southwest it can be an absolute brute. That’s the beauty of links golf!”

### LIFEBLOOD

As spectacular and entrancing as the site is, Cape Wickham’s remoteness and exposure to the elements means there have been numerous challenges managing the course throughout the construction, grow-in and now general maintenance phases. To get to this point has been a monumental effort by all involved and Geary quickly attests he has had to draw upon all his years of experience during his time on the island.

In many respects his arrival at Cape Wickham on 10 November 2014 could not have been timelier. While the course had been expertly shaped and constructed by Turnpoint Constructions and the majority of the surfaces well on their way to establishing, it was within a matter of days of setting foot on the site that Geary identified a critical deficiency – water.

Just four days after starting Geary had fired off a comprehensive report which highlighted to management just how serious the water shortage was. At that time they were pumping between 0.5 and 0.6 megalitres a day from a number of nearby springs, but this was less than half of what was required according to Geary’s calculations, especially during the critical grow-in phase.

From that he put forward a number of short-term remedies, including sourcing water from nearby properties to installing a desalination plant. He also immediately prioritised areas of the course where water was most needed – recently seeded areas, greens and greens surrounds – and also overhauled irrigation practices whereby in windy conditions only hoses or knockers were to be used.

Even though highlighting and addressing the issue as soon as he got there, it was all too late for last summer. Just weeks into his tenure Geary had to switch off the fairway sprinklers and painfully watch them go backwards. Fescue is an amazingly resilient grass but due to its poor lateral growth can be hard to establish. With no water and therefore the inability to fertilise, Geary effectively lost a growing season. Even until recently, the water situation was still very much a hand to mouth proposition and compounding things was an unseasonably dry August-October period. October, normally King Island’s second wettest month of the year, yielded just 5mm.

It wasn’t until opening week that Geary and his crew could breathe a little easier. Cape Wickham was granted a temporary license by the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries and Environment which enables them to pump 180 megalitres over a six month period, with negotiations ongoing to secure long-term rights. Having the ability to fully utilise the course’s state-of-the-art Rain Bird Stratus system and 1500 heads for the first time has improved the fescue out of site and Geary is looking forward to a far more productive growing season.

As well as changing watering practices, Geary was also quick to alter fertiliser applications. Shortly after arriving N inputs on the greens were bumped up, with the crew going out religiously every 2-3 weeks with 0.1-0.2kg of actual N/100m<sup>2</sup> as well as dusting regularly. The fairways received alternating three-weekly applications of an NPK fertiliser and Dynamic Lifter/chook manure, but that was nipped in the bud due to the lack of water.

“I’ve done a couple of grow-ins over the years and this is certainly the most challenging,” says Geary. “It has been challenging regarding the water issues we have come up against but also getting your head around the climate and how dramatically it impacts everything you do.

“The wind obviously takes some getting used to. There’s nothing between King Island and South Africa and on some days the Roaring Forties just slam into the island. When the wind does hit, it’ll be up for 2-3 days then abate. In February and March though we had 12 days straight of gale force winds and I really did wonder what I had got myself into.

“Being right on the ocean salt spray has been a significant issue. There are days when you can see the sea mist rolling across the course and on average those holes closest to the ocean have taken twice as long to establish because of the salt spray. Some areas have been reseeded up to four times.



“For an 8-10 week period this winter we put growth covers on the 11th, 12th and 16th greens which are right by the ocean, and the difference they made was huge. We carry an EC metre to measure salinity levels and have been applying Calsap to help leach salts through the profile. Our water management practices are key and we have salt spray programmes set up in the irrigation system.”

### ISLAND LIFE

Along with addressing the water and fertility issues and getting to grips with the nuances of King Island’s unique climate, Geary has also had to adapt to the differences that come with island living.

Geary is the first to admit forward planning isn’t one of his fortes, but being at the very northern tip on a remote island in the middle of Bass Strait has necessitated a steep learning curve. Getting products or equipment to the course is both a logistical and costly exercise. A thousand litre shuttle of liquid fertiliser for instance can cost half as much again and take up to two weeks to be delivered as there is only one boat a week servicing the island from Melbourne.

Securing, managing and retaining staff also takes on a new dimension. As well as the cost of living on the island being high, getting experienced staff has been a challenge and Geary has been extremely fortunate to land the services of two

Cape Wickham is wall-to-wall fescue with a mix of Chewings, creeping red, hard and Shoreline slender red varieties. Pictured is the 17th from behind the green

There are a number of short par fours at Cape Wickham, but none better than the drivable 12th



Another short par four, the 10th plunges down towards the ocean





◀ Cape Wickham's 170m penultimate hole with the 18th stretching around Victoria Cove

highly experienced former superintendents in Martin Greenwood (ex-Kingston Heath and Peninsula) and Martin Rose (ex-Royal Canberra).

Rose and wife Jo moved to King Island earlier this year seeking a sea change after spending the past 10 years running a cafe. An invaluable addition, Rose was recently appointed assistant following the departure of Ash Hobson to Thirteenth Beach. Greenwood too has been a superb catch and is currently working a three week on-one week off shift.

"Between the three of us we have over 100 years' experience," laughs Geary. "But in all honesty they have been absolutely outstanding and bring so much knowledge and experience. There's been so much on the go here that I can let them run crews and do the jobs without needing to check up all the time. In fact, most of the time they're telling me how to do it! We wouldn't be where we are now were it not for them."

While you can plan and prepare for most eventualities, one thing Geary didn't count on was a maintenance shed fire in July. Just two days into his three week trip to Scotland and Ireland, he received a phone call that no superintendent wants to get. Likely caused by an electrical fault with a golf cart charger, the fire caused extensive damage to the shed which was less than 12 months old. Along with two golf carts, a triplex mower, spray rig and Flex 21 walk-behind mower were written off, while the shed had to be fully re-clad and repainted.

Then, to top things off, the mechanic cut a tendon in his finger while backlapping a mower and was off work for 10 weeks. Never a dull moment on the island.

#### THAT FEELING

While the weeks and months leading up to the opening were all about getting the weaker turf areas covered in, with the course now open the focus has very much switched to maintenance mode. Golfing numbers have been modest since opening but with

the outstanding feedback filtering through from those who have played the course, numbers will no doubt steadily increase over time.

Greens are being cut four times a week with triplexes at 3.5mm and tees and surrounds twice a week at 10mm. Cape Wickham's 30 hectares of fairways are being cut twice a week and from 18mm prior to opening they are currently 15mm and will eventually be taken down to 12mm-13mm. Even with the four par 3 fairways being cut at surrounds height, it still takes three fairway units a full day to cut the remaining 14 fairways.

"Right up until opening we were still heavily focused on a lot of grow-in and construction work, hydroseeding areas and returfing those weaker areas because we didn't have a proper grow-in last season," explains Geary. "There are still a few areas that are pretty raw, especially those four holes that were seeded last October. We've got 85 per cent coverage on holes 6, 13 and 15, so over the summer we'll focus on getting those areas up and then maturing the playing surfaces overall.

"Despite the challenges, I love being back in a hands-on capacity again. As all superintendents know there is nothing that beats the satisfaction this job gives you at times. I remember one time when I was growing-in St Andrews Beach, it was late one day and I was looking out across the 17th and 18th holes and thinking 'We're there!' and being so satisfied. I haven't quite got that feeling here yet but we are pretty close.

"The beauty of this place is that it varies from day to day. Yes it can blow hard, but then you get days like yesterday when it was absolutely pristine – the sun was out, there was no wind and I was standing on top of the ridge overlooking the 18th and watching a couple of cray boats fishing in Victoria Cove. The place was looking a picture and you just had to pinch yourself. I look forward to people coming down here and experiencing that and seeing what Cape Wickham is all about." 🌿

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