

Meet the rainmakers

Meet four golf clubs that have all invested in their professional and his or her facilities, which in every case has led to huge benefits back for the club, ranging from new membership enquiries to a higher degree of satisfaction from the existing members, writes **Andy Waple**

It's hard to imagine any golf club wanting to employ a rainmaker to help their business grow but an initiative being driven by the PGA is paying dividends for a number of forwarding thinking clubs.

The term 'rainmaker' used here doesn't refer to an ability to open the heavens in the middle of the monthly medal – it's modern jargon for a person who brings in new business, as if by magic.

Clubs the length and breadth of Britain would surely welcome a person like this during times when member retention and visitor income is falling and cost cutting is the norm.

According to the PGA, many of their new breed of young professionals are just this type of person – having been equipped with the necessary business skills to play a vital part in the financial health of golf clubs in addition to providing the traditional golfing expertise – and there are plenty of examples of where investing in the pro instead of making cuts has paid off.



David Colclough, the PGA's head of member education, said the trend of pruning costs and dispensing with a PGA qualified pro and his assistants is damaging and short sighted.

He said more clubs should take note that his organisation is equipping its members with the tools to help them: "The PGA has invested significantly in providing members with strategies and ideas on how to grow revenues both for themselves and the golf club where they work, through the 'Be A Rainmaker' initiative.

"We work to provide education, training and business opportunities that the pro can take advantage of to enhance the level of customer experience they can give, which **benefits the golf club in the longer term.**"

When Staffordshire-based Brocton Hall Golf Club appointed Nevil Bland as its head professional four years ago the recession was biting deep and clubs across the land were looking at their balance sheets, wondering where economies could be made.

Yet Brocton Hall bucked the trend, setting on Bland and his team with the brief to help the club's bottom line.

It backed him with investment in the pro shop and Bland enthusiastically seized the opportunity.

Bland has the typical 'rainmaker' attitude partly as a result of his PGA training.

"A large part of my job here is to engage and inspire those taking their first steps in the game, and to convert and retain members," he said.

On his appointment the club expanded the pro's facilities, converting



the disused second floor of the old barn-cum-pro shop, allowing Bland to set up a workshop, an area with two nets and a putting surface each bristling with high-technology.

A skilled club maker, Bland soon had members and golfers from surrounding areas flocking for custom fittings, adjustments and rebuilds.

Part of his workshop was moved downstairs to form a working display area behind a glass window, so visitors could see the action.

"We are the first port of call for all members and visitors so it needs to create a good impression. It is now named The Golf Centre and it's the hub of the club," said Bland.

Brocton Hall's bold decision, showing faith in its new professional and investing in the pro shop has paid off. The club has come alive and Bland's facilities are a magnet for golfers far and wide as evidenced by his e-newsletter that has 4,000 subscribers.

Brocton's manager secretary, Jeremy Duffy, said Bland plays a "vital role" in promoting the club.

He said: "Nevil must be one of the best club professionals in the country. I have nothing but admiration for the way he markets himself and the club. The Golf Centre is the first port of call for all visitors and there they are met with enthusiasm by Nevil and his highly-trained staff."

Down at Ross-on-Wye Golf Club, head professional Tim Hall is gathering

similar accolades for the way he has breathed new life into his club since he took up his position in 2012.

The club, like many others, had toyed with the idea of doing away with the professional's post but is now very glad it didn't.

Tim inherited a traditional members' club set up with a small pro shop with little trade or activity. But the club invested in its facilities, handing over an old office and the trolley shed to form an enlarged pro shop. It also gave the go-ahead for a makeover of the little-used practice area.

Hall, the Foremost Golf Professional of the Year 2013, played his part by equipping his new space with the latest technology and last year created his all-bells-and-whistles Tim Hall School of Golf (THSG) performance lab.

In just two years a club that was ticking along like so many others has been transformed into a talking point among the golfing community for miles around.

Under Hall's wing the club's junior membership has rocketed and the team of young pros at THSG attracts members and golfers from surrounding clubs, who can only look on in envy.

Another pro who has worked wonders is Matthew Gillingham, head professional at Wilmslow Golf Club since 2010.

With the backing of the club Matthew has modernised the pro shop, bringing in technology that proved an instant hit with members and introduced a popular

range of golf services, including workshops on the mental side of the game.

He also set his sights on revamping the club's little-used practice ground into the best facility in the area.

The board gave its backing, investing in car parking, a covered area, range balls and targets.

As a result club membership has blossomed, the number of lessons soared and even the most sceptical of members are over the moon.

Gillingham, PGA Professional of the Year in 2011, said: "Many have been having lessons and as a result more of them play in club competitions. Last year the club had a waiting list for membership for the first time in a while,



and a lot of the interest has been down to the new practice area.

"It was a big expense but it has proved a successful long-term investment. On a peak day we get through 8,000 to 10,000 balls."

Wilmslow's general manager, Gerard Heaslip, said: "Matthew is constantly trying to move the club forward and think beyond the normal confines to attract new visitors, societies, corporates and to developing relationships through to green fees or membership. It is essential for managers to have professionals who will think beyond the club's boundaries and strive to increase business not just for themselves but also for the club."

Some clubs have proved they can make savings as well as improve their professional's offer.

In 2010 Sheffield's Lees Hall Golf Club decided to change its business model to make savings, but decided it

wanted to attract a professional who could give members a first class service.

It appointed Andy Rossington, a former pro of the Peter Cowen Golf Academy in Rotherham, who set about changes with the help of the club and his business partners, the retailer Snainton Golf.

The pro shop benefited from a refit and an improved IT system that introduced a visitors' database.

Andy's partnership with Snainton Golf ensures members can choose from a wide range of constantly refreshed

quality equipment and clothing at competitive prices.

Additional benefits have been Andy's coaching – he's regarded as one of the best in south Yorkshire – being put to good use. For example, he has developed junior member Holly Morgan into an England schoolgirl international, bringing welcomed media exposure to the club.

"I'm a pro-active professional who appreciates the difficulties clubs face with the overall reduction in memberships. I'm involved in the management of the club and help to recruit, retain members and boost visitor numbers."

The final words go to Colclough who provides food for thought to all clubs pondering the future of their professionals.

"As all the home unions have stressed over the last few years, clubs do need to become more professional in the way they approach the running of the golf club. That should include the way in which the relationship with the club professional is approached. It is important for clubs to sit down and work out the value of the PGA professional.

"There needs to be more realistic discussions around the cost of golf operations at the club, and the expectations that the club has for how much revenue the professional is going to generate, which directly, or indirectly comes to the club. This is happening on a very infrequent basis at the moment."