

Out·On·The·Course

Peter Wisbey

GOLF has been played at North Foreland since 1903 when it was a nine-hole course called Kingsgate Golf Club. In 1909, Lord Northcliffe owned it. He extended it to 18 holes and also constructed an 18-hole pitch and putt course. The new holes were designed by Fowler and Simpson and the construction work was done by Frank Harris & Co. The name of the club was then changed to North Foreland Golf Club.

During the last world war, part of the course was taken over for defence purposes. When the club took over again, the course was reconstructed to the design of the late J.S.F. Morrison and the work was again carried out by Frank Harris & Co.

"I was born in Surrey and moved with my family at the age of 15 to Broadstairs in Kent," Peter, 37, said. "It was really sheer chance that brought me into greenkeeping. I was interested in farming at one time and then heard of a vacancy for a tractor driver at North Foreland. I applied for the job and that was the start of my career in greenkeeping. I have remained with this club for 19 happy years."

There are still two courses at North Foreland—the 18-hole pitch and putt layout is open to the public and an excellent test for beginners. Despite a high volume of play, the quality of turf on the greens is superb and, as Peter pointed out, is ample testimony to the benefits of a regime of minimum watering and fertilising.

The main course is situated on a commanding stretch of downs sweeping towards the sea and although it could not be termed a links, every hole on the course is within easy reach of the water. It has many characteristics of a good seaside course with an invigorating and astringent tang to the air. It is exposed to the elements and the chalky nature of the downland soil ensures good drainage and the establishment of a firm, resilient turf.

I was particularly impressed by the high standard of maintenance achieved by Peter and his staff and even after the long dry summer the greens were in good shape. The rest of the course seems to have withstood all the wear and tear of unremitting



Peter Wisbey—now a confirmed man of Kent—is head greenkeeper at North Foreland.

Interview by John Campbell.

play extremely well.

Peter has been married to Linda for 13 years. With their son Matthew, nine, they live in their own house near the golf course. Peter is articulate and intelligent with many interesting opinions on the future of the profession that are well worth listening to.

He does not have a golf handicap, but says, "I enjoy playing, although infrequently and not very well. My son is having lessons and hopefully we will play together more as time goes on. Being a family man, I spend a lot of time at home. I am not interested in any other sport—my main hobbies are my job and conservation of the countryside."

"A few years ago, I was on the wrong tack with my management programme, particularly regarding fertilisers and watering. At this point, I became interested in the philosophy of Jim Arthur, which is really traditional greenkeeping methods and the application of common sense. As our course is one of the R&A venues he visits, we now work together and I am delighted with the results."

Peter believes that having a keen and enthusiastic staff is half the battle,

helping to take a lot of the weight from his shoulders. "The strength of my team is six, which includes a full-time mechanic with a well-equipped workshop. They are all bright and conscientious young men who often contribute to the smooth running of the operation by coming up with good ideas on how to improve efficiency. Our mechanic Ron Farrington is invaluable and first assistant Robert Smith is an experienced and reliable man who works with the rest of the crew—David Paine, Stephen Hopper and Kevin Fuller—to maintain a high standard of upkeep."

Health and safety on the course is a subject Peter has strong views about.

"A golf course should provide its staff with all the safety clothing relevant to the job—that includes safety footwear, protective clothing, etc. In fact, anything that can save injury. I think all greenkeepers should wear protective headgear on the course as they do in the States. We provide helmets and my staff wear them if they want to. We have the understanding that, if they do get a crack on the head and they are not wearing the safety gear provided, the onus is on the individual.

"Clubs should look at all aspects of safety for staff—tractors should have either a roll cage or a safety cab fitted. I know from my dealings with safety officers that if an accident does occur due to lack of proper safety precautions, the golf club is liable, but it should not be necessary to wait until someone gets killed or badly injured.

"It is up to the head greenkeeper or course manager to put this case to the club committee and he should invite the safety officer to make an advisory visit, which is free, so that he can pinpoint areas of danger and submit a report.

"I think all head greenkeepers should do this, particularly when starting a new job. It's one of the first things they should look at because there are occasions when the head greenkeeper can be held responsible and, in fact, prosecuted for neglect."

As we toured the course on an electric golf buggy (incidentally, the only one in use), which had been offered to us by club professional Mike Lee, I realised the fine rapport

Peter has established with other club employees and his membership. He is highly respected. His whole attitude to his job and those around him is a worthy exercise in good public relations. Many contemporaries would do well to take a leaf out of Peter's book.

He is also a keen ornithologist and conservationist and has some interesting observations on how these pursuits affect his job. "I feel that conservation is very important, for the British countryside is under constant siege due to the daily depredations of man. Golf courses are where we can help preserve nature.

"Every course manager and greenkeeper should be aware of what their particular course has to offer in the way of habitat and conservation. On most courses, there are areas well out of play that should be left. I don't believe in weed spraying anywhere outside the semi-rough—I leave the ground and vegetation in its natural state.

"We look forward to seeing the different kinds of butterflies. Last year, we had over 22 species on the courses. We encourage conservation groups to work here, providing they do not interfere with play and, at the moment, we have a local group studying migratory birds.

"I think it makes the job far more interesting if you see a bird, plant or butterfly and know what it is and a little about its habitat. I feel that we are in charge of small nature reserves and have a responsibility to maintain and protect the natural heritage of the countryside."

For cutting the greens, Peter favours the Toro G.M.3. "I also like the Ransomes Mounted 5 gang units, which do a good job on the fairways. For the tees, we use the new Ransomes 180 seven-bladed mower," he said.

"Good reliable machinery is important to every greenkeeper and I think manufacturers should listen more to users. We have occasionally suggested improvements to machinery by writing to the company involved and have never even had the courtesy of a reply. Some of the major manufacturers should get out into the field more and take notice of the constructive comments by greenkeepers and those who actually use their equipment.

"On several occasions, we have actually had to modify things on new machines ourselves with no help from the manufacturer at all, which I do find a bit annoying".

As Peter is a one-club man who has
Continued overleaf...



Kingsgate Castle provides an impressive background to the main course's 16th green.



Greens are cut daily.



Farmura and Seamac are sprayed to keep turf healthy.



Peter places great emphasis on teamwork. Ron Farrington, David Paine, Robert Smith, Kevin Fuller and Steven Hopper are his righthand men.

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got on by hard work, I wondered what advice he had for young greenkeepers? "Those who aspire to reach the top of their profession should dedicate themselves to their work. It has to be your life—it's a career not a nine to five job and you must be there whatever the weather or the time. If it takes you longer than a normal working week to do the job properly, then you should be prepared to do that.

"The important thing is education and you should read everything about greenkeeping and acquire as much experience as possible. It is good to visit other courses, where there is always something new to be gleaned. The most valuable lesson I gained in greenkeeping was to listen and learn from others in the profession and apply the things that you think are applicable to your course and your circumstances.

"When people talk about experienced greenkeepers, in my opinion, experience really is making mistakes and learning from them. Everybody makes mistakes, but they should really only make the mistake once.

"I am also a great believer in letting the membership know about why, how and when you are doing jobs on the course by informing them through a monthly newsletter or in a report. Giving this advance information often helps to forestall complaints.

"As every greenkeeper knows, humorous incidents occur daily and I remember when we were installing our bulk petrol tank, an inquisitive club member asked one of the staff what the hell was going on. He was informed that the green committee was installing a nuclear fallout shelter for the green staff.

"With a change of attitude, the inquisitive golfer asked: 'What about the members?' 'I am sorry, it is only for the greenkeeping staff,' was the reply.

"The future of greenkeeping is in our own hands and EIGGA has set out to promote a more professional image and attitude to the job and improve the educational standards and facilities. The next few years will be the make or break of greenkeeping. A number of clubs that I like to call unenlightened are tending not to replace head greenkeepers and are putting the professional in charge as a 'course manager'. I consider this a retrograde step and think clubs that do this will probably live to regret it."



Bunkers are reveted to contain sand in windy conditions. The club secretary's house is also pictured.



First assistant Robert Smith cuts a hole on the short course.



The par-three course's 14th green is now 90 per cent fescue.



North Foreland's 13th.