

The stress an Open success can bring...

THE sudden death recently, at 51, of Russell Brown, course manager of the Turnberry Hotel golf courses, venue for next year's Open Championship, emphasises the strains on those looking after the courses where the world's premier event is played, writes Jim Arthur..

It is usual for the press and TV commentators alike to fail to appreciate the problems in setting up the Open Championship. It takes years of careful preparation to stage and by no means all of it is pure greenkeeping, what with spectator paths, lorry-ways and the tented village, all of which fall on the back of the head greenkeeper. Even if he is not necessarily involved in all the decisions, it is he who has to implement them.

I recall after one Open, a BBC commentator deigned to talk to the head man. He asked when the course would be back in good order again. The reply was along the lines of, "I rather thought it was right now." Likewise, when the weather intervenes, greens like those at Muirfield in 1980, where there were six weeks of rain prior to the off, are criticised and the fairways come in for 'too much irrigation' comments. In that particular case, it was a rather ill-informed statement as there weren't even pop-ups around the greens! Sadly, I feel some of those responsible are presenting courses not so much for golfers as for TV viewers.

The Open is not going anywhere new in the foreseeable future, if ever, so it is largely a question of starting preparations for the next one on the following Monday, repairing the damage off the course, for the course in itself probably suffers less during the Open week than in normal play. There is little time to relax and all too little time before the Open is back again.

Today, of course, the head men of all the Open Championship courses have seen at least one, if not several Opens, and can afford to be a great deal more relaxed,

but it is still a worrying time and you always have to be prepared to give instant first aid in the event of accidents, such as hydraulic pipe bursts, or errant courting couples in Minis cavorting over greens just before the championship, which we suffered at Turnberry!

Turnberry was different - as, indeed, in a different way, was Royal St George's in 1981 where there had not been an Open Championship since 1938. In both cases, of course, the experts derided the R & A's choice - in fairness, not primarily on the basis of course quality and character, but over such aspects as accessibility, accommodation and car parks.

Turnberry was selected in 1974 as the venue for the Amateur Championship in 1976 and the Open in 1977. At once, the decision was attacked as mad by the Press and, looking at the state of the over-fertilised annual meadow grass greens and lush fairways, suffering from severe drought damage early that year, with only two years to get it right, you might have thought it was a bold decision.

It was my lot to be told by the championship committee to sort things out and much sorting had to be done. This included the removal of those who had become complacent, looking after courses that saw little play when the hotel shut in autumn. The management, too, was swayed, wanting a pretty course for television rather than the great test of golf, which many think is Mackenzie Ross' best links course and which it proved to be in 1977.

Monthly visits

I literally had to act as head greenkeeper with almost monthly visits until responsibility could be devolved on to Jim McCubbin. We had to correct the mistakes of decades of mismanagement designed to make the courses look nice and green. The first task

was to find some 500 tons of black, sandy, top spit soil for basic top dressing and the rebuilding of greens.

Nothing happened for three months. There were the usual excuses that it was not available until the man charged with the task was clearly given to understand that if he did not find it, someone else would and he would not be needed. It was found within a month.

Of course, you cannot reverse the mistakes of years overnight, but a good team convinced of the correctness of an agreed programme, well directed and encouraged by a skilled head man who developed new potential under the increased responsibility, generously provided with the tools (machines and materials) to do the job, was bound to show results.

In the event, the Open at Turnberry was hailed as a major success by the same Press that, only six months earlier, was prophesying doom and disaster. The Ailsa links were not, of course, perfect, but the course was eminently playable, with fast, firm greens, tight lies, good tees and especially good aprons and approaches. It provided one of the most exciting finishes of any recent Open - a two-horse race between Watson and Nicklaus, with the rest of the field nowhere. Only three players, including the two leading gladiators, broke par for the four rounds. So much for the Ailsa being criticised as too easy.

Virtually every aspect of greenkeeping had to be altered or reversed in 1974 and this included re-equipping both courses and updating the inefficient irrigation system. Because of the effects of the prolonged drought in 1975 and 1976 on the annual meadow grass-dominated fairways and the need to carry out intensive applications of fenpeat and over-seeding, the Amateur was moved, not so much because of the condition of the course, but because we needed to be able to carry out intensive remedial work

RUSSELL BROWN CONTINUED

without suffering the restraints imposed by preparation for a major championship.

It is remarkable how short memories are. Within a space of two years, those same experts who derided the R & A's choice and who said the course would never be ready in time were claiming, equally exaggeratedly, that the links were perfection personified. What is irritating is that these critics never learn and even last autumn one commentator was pontificating on the hotel steps that the course was dead, it would take years to restore and would never be ready for the Open in 1986.

A month later, when I saw the course in October after a week or so of rain, everything was perfectly satisfactory. The problem was that the course water supply depended on what was left after the hotel had taken its share and it was a very dry summer with an abnormal demand. We now have an independent bore-hole supply - so that problem is solved.

In 1982, Jim McCubbin retired and Russell Brown, from Perth, was selected to take charge. Previously, he had been in command at Prince's which, while hosting Open Championship qualifying rounds, is a great track in its own right.

Even more investment in the courses was carried out by the new owners of Turnberry Hotel and Russell was in charge of implementing many quite major changes, advised by Donald Steel, to improve the Ailsa Course. One of the most significant was removing and recontouring a long length of dune top by the 6th green to provide greater space for pedestrian traffic, caught, in the past, between the 6th green and the 7th tee. Even a few months after massive cut and fill operations, the recontouring was so skilfully done (by Brian Pierson) that it looked as if it had been there for ever.

Even more spectacular were extensions to the 9th and 11th tees with massive retaining walls, built up, as Russell proudly told me last month, without so much as a trapped finger - a major engineering effort that we called Hadrian's Wall and which, perhaps, will be his 'memorial'.

The year 1985 was doubly worrying for anyone charged with preparing a course for an Open Championship in 1986. The

severe drought of 1984 had left some remedial work to be done, but the winter, though not as severe as further south, was snowy enough to stop work and then came one of the coldest and latest springs anyone can remember. After an all too brief spell of fine weather at Whit, the Ayrshire coast suffered, in common with most of Scotland, monsoon conditions with almost incessant rain from June to mid-October. Ten inches of rain fell in September alone, ceasing, in fact, only on the day I carried out my regular examination of the course in mid-October. I was happy to find everything in excellent and promising order and the effects of the wet weather and heavy play on the greens were about to be corrected by Verti-Draining for the second year running.

Luckily, the Ailsa course can, as a hotel course, be closed for three months, which makes the preparation for the Open much easier, but it has been exceptionally busy all summer despite the rain. The weather has the last word and we are dependent on it, but a good greenkeeper can make intelligent guesses once he knows his course and Russell was beginning to do this with accuracy. He said that if you could see Ailsa Craig, it was going to rain if you couldn't, it was raining! This was very true last summer.

To those who knew him well, Russell, although a quiet and rather withdrawn man, had an equally quiet sense of humour. His staff respected him and worked indefatigably for him. He was a first-class, skilled and caring greenkeeper and perhaps tended to keep his worries to himself too much.

Naturally, there was a vast amount of preparatory work still to do but, the very day before he died, Russell spent the whole day with his first assistant walking the course and detailing precisely the work programme for the coming months.

Greenkeeping has lost a most able, deep thinking and sincere man and as honest as the day to himself, his employers and his course. I have lost a good friend and an able ally who was interested in everything he observed. It is a great shame that he will not be there to take the credit for another great Open Championship at Turnberry for which he had made so many preparations.



Russell's beloved Turnberry, with the Ailsa Course in great shape.