Preventing
for a major championship

The Bell's Scottish Open is only a four-day event, but the staff at Gleneagles have been preparing for it for 13 years.

Preparations began as soon as Gleneagles became a private company in 1981. Six years later it staged its first championship; now the greenkeepers at the five-star resort – all 34 of them – are set for their eighth event, with many top pros treating it as a warm-up to the Open Championship.

The Bell's Scottish Open at Gleneagles' 80-year-old King's Course has become part of the annual routine for the greenkeepers there, but it has taken a great deal of effort to get to the stage where everything appears to run smoothly.

When Gleneagles became a private company the first thing they did was refurbish the hotel and invest in a new country club facility. Current owners Guinness have added other sports facilities (such as the Jackie Stewart Shooting School and an equestrian centre), and new maintenance facilities.

As well as transforming the workshops, they also transformed the greenkeeping management structure “to ensure a top-quality golf product year round”.

Each of the courses (four then but the new Jack Nicklaus designed Monarch's replaced two of them) was given a head greenkeeper, deputy head greenkeeper, other greenkeepers and apprentices. The King's Course has eight full-time and three seasonal staff, there are eight greenkeepers on the Queen's and 15 on the Monarch's. Each course has its own machinery and maintenance facility with mess room.

“This new structure immediately created a sense of responsibility and identity amongst the estates staff plus some very healthy competition between the staff and their charges,” says Jimmy Kidd, the director of turfgrass management at Glenengles Golf Developments.

While the new clubhouse, offices, golf shop and computerised golf reservations facilities

Jimmy Kidd, Scott Fenwick and Chris Boiling explain how the staff at Gleneagles stop the Bell's from taking its toll on the King's Course.
were being built, the King’s Course was undergoing some fairly critical assessment to review strategy, playability, crowd movement, television cabling, tented village services, car parking etc. An estates survey was commissioned and a grand plan with proposals and costings was presented to the managing director for approval. What they were looking for was: crowd comfort, good first and lasting impressions of the event, services such as TV and septic tanks to be hidden, first class car parking with shuttle service to the golf course (“as first impressions are of utmost importance”), and quality catering.

“All of these items are simpler to action and calculate for if you are designing a course today with championships in mind – not, as in our case, the first championship for 20 years and never before with an anticipated 50-60,000 spectators in year one, growing upwards to 115,000 as we’re expecting this year,” said Mr Kidd, who has been in greenkeeping for 34 years, 11 of which have been at Gleneagles.

Critical assessment of the James Braid-designed course revealed a weakness in length and strategy. Basically, it was an attractive resort course suited to the moderate player and local championships, not world-class events.

So 12 new tees were built during the winters of 1983/84, lengthening the course from 6450 yards to almost 6900 yards. The strategy of the course was developed by improved teeing ground placement, taking into account Braid’s bunkers which had been taken out of play over the years by the improvements to golfing equipment and maintenance practices.

A conscious decision was taken at this stage also to restore the King’s Course bunkers to the original Braid concept: no large wastelands of sand but beautifully contoured grass faces ‘gathering’ the ball. “The genius of Braid was made apparent to greenstaff at our communications meetings while discussing the restoration – not one ounce of wind blown sand from his bunkers on our exposed location was apparent after 70 years of play and maintenance. The grassy swales created in front of them always took account of the prevailing winds,” Mr Kidd points out.

Works proceeded on the greens, too, to get them up to European Tour event standard – fast, firm and true whilst holding a well struck shot. This proved difficult to achieve at first in 1983 because of low investment, poor equipment and a lack of maintenance structure plus over-utilisation of the course had seriously diminished the quality of the holes.

Modern equipment in the form of aerators was brought in to break down the layers of thatch, somas at a controlled rate which and affecting playability – especially during periods of inclement weather. A verti-drain unit with 8in hollow core and 12in x 3/4in and 1/2in solid tines with applied surface ‘heave’ or ‘no heave’ was constantly used to introduce air to the rootzone. Greens surfaces too being built, the King’s Course was undergoing some fairly critical assessment to review strategy, playability, crowd movement, television cabling, tented village services, car parking etc. An estates survey was commissioned and a grand plan with proposals and costings was presented to the managing director for approval. What they were looking for was: crowd comfort, good first and lasting impressions of the event, services such as TV and septic tanks to be hidden, first class car parking with shuttle service to the golf course (“as first impressions are of utmost importance”), and quality catering.

“All of these items are simpler to action and calculate for if you are designing a course today with championships in mind – not, as in our case, the first championship for 20 years and never before with an anticipated 50-60,000 spectators in year one, growing upwards to 115,000 as we’re expecting this year,” said Mr Kidd, who has been in greenkeeping for 34 years, 11 of which have been at Gleneagles.

Critical assessment of the James Braid-designed course revealed a weakness in length and strategy. Basically, it was an attractive resort course suited to the moderate player and local championships, not world-class events.

So 12 new tees were built during the winters of 1983/84, lengthening the course from 6450 yards to almost 6900 yards. The strategy of the course was developed by improved teeing ground placement, taking into account Braid’s bunkers which had been taken out of play over the years by the improvements to golfing equipment and maintenance practices.

A conscious decision was taken at this stage also to restore the King’s Course bunkers to the original Braid concept: no large wastelands of sand but beautifully contoured grass faces ‘gathering’ the ball. “The genius of Braid was made apparent to greenstaff at our communications meetings while discussing the restoration – not one ounce of wind blown sand from his bunkers on our exposed location was apparent after 70 years of play and maintenance. The grassy swales created in front of them always took account of the prevailing winds,” Mr Kidd points out.

Works proceeded on the greens, too, to get them up to European Tour event standard – fast, firm and true whilst holding a well struck shot. This proved difficult to achieve at first in 1983 because of low investment, poor equipment and a lack of maintenance structure plus over-utilisation of the course had seriously diminished the quality of the holes.

Modern equipment in the form of aerators was brought in to break down the layers of thatch, somas at a controlled rate which and affecting playability – especially during periods of inclement weather. A verti-drain unit with 8in hollow core and 12in x 3/4in and 1/2in solid tines with applied surface ‘heave’ or ‘no heave’ was constantly used to introduce air to the rootzone. Greens surfaces too being built, the King’s Course was undergoing some fairly critical assessment to review strategy, playability, crowd movement, television cabling, tented village services, car parking etc. An estates survey was commissioned and a grand plan with proposals and costings was presented to the managing director for approval. What they were looking for was: crowd comfort, good first and lasting impressions of the event, services such as TV and septic tanks to be hidden, first class car parking with shuttle service to the golf course (“as first impressions are of utmost importance”), and quality catering.

“All of these items are simpler to action and calculate for if you are designing a course today with championships in mind – not, as in our case, the first championship for 20 years and never before with an anticipated 50-60,000 spectators in year one, growing upwards to 115,000 as we’re expecting this year,” said Mr Kidd, who has been in greenkeeping for 34 years, 11 of which have been at Gleneagles.

Critical assessment of the James Braid-designed course revealed a weakness in length and strategy. Basically, it was an attractive resort course suited to the moderate player and local championships, not world-class events.

So 12 new tees were built during the winters of 1983/84, lengthening the course from 6450 yards to almost 6900 yards. The strategy of the course was developed by improved teeing ground placement, taking into account Braid’s bunkers which had been taken out of play over the years by the improvements to golfing equipment and maintenance practices.

A conscious decision was taken at this stage also to restore the King’s Course bunkers to the original Braid concept: no large wastelands of sand but beautifully contoured grass faces ‘gathering’ the ball. “The genius of Braid was made apparent to greenstaff at our communications meetings while discussing the restoration – not one ounce of wind blown sand from his bunkers on our exposed location was apparent after 70 years of play and maintenance. The grassy swales created in front of them always took account of the prevailing winds,” Mr Kidd points out.

Works proceeded on the greens, too, to get them up to European Tour event standard – fast, firm and true whilst holding a well struck shot. This proved difficult to achieve at first in 1983 because of low investment, poor equipment and a lack of maintenance structure plus over-utilisation of the course had seriously diminished the quality of the holes.

Modern equipment in the form of aerators was brought in to break down the layers of thatch, somas at a controlled rate which and affecting playability – especially during periods of inclement weather. A verti-drain unit with 8in hollow core and 12in x 3/4in and 1/2in solid tines with applied surface ‘heave’ or ‘no heave’ was constantly used to introduce air to the rootzone. Greens surfaces too being built, the King’s Course was undergoing some fairly critical assessment to review strategy, playability, crowd movement, television cabling, tented village services, car parking etc. An estates survey was commissioned and a grand plan with proposals and costings was presented to the managing director for approval. What they were looking for was: crowd comfort, good first and lasting impressions of the event, services such as TV and septic tanks to be hidden, first class car parking with shuttle service to the golf course (“as first impressions are of utmost importance”), and quality catering.

“All of these items are simpler to action and calculate for if you are designing a course today with championships in mind – not, as in our case, the first championship for 20 years and never before with an anticipated 50-60,000 spectators in year one, growing upwards to 115,000 as we’re expecting this year,” said Mr Kidd, who has been in greenkeeping for 34 years, 11 of which have been at Gleneagles.

Critical assessment of the James Braid-designed course revealed a weakness in length and strategy. Basically, it was an attractive resort course suited to the moderate player and local championships, not world-class events.

So 12 new tees were built during the winters of 1983/84, lengthening the course from 6450 yards to almost 6900 yards. The strategy of the course was developed by improved teeing ground placement, taking into account Braid’s bunkers which had been taken out of play over the years by the improvements to golfing equipment and maintenance practices.

A conscious decision was taken at this stage also to restore the King’s Course bunkers to the original Braid concept: no large wastelands of sand but beautifully contoured grass faces ‘gathering’ the ball. “The genius of Braid was made apparent to greenstaff at our communications meetings while discussing the restoration – not one ounce of wind blown sand from his bunkers on our exposed location was apparent after 70 years of play and maintenance. The grassy swales created in front of them always took account of the prevailing winds,” Mr Kidd points out.

Works proceeded on the greens, too, to get them up to European Tour event standard – fast, firm and true whilst holding a well struck shot. This proved difficult to achieve at first in 1983 because of low investment, poor equipment and a lack of maintenance structure plus over-utilisation of the course had seriously diminished the quality of the holes.

Modern equipment in the form of aerators was brought in to break down the layers of thatch, somas at a controlled rate which and affecting playability – especially during periods of inclement weather. A verti-drain unit with 8in hollow core and 12in x 3/4in and 1/2in solid tines with applied surface ‘heave’ or ‘no heave’ was constantly used to introduce air to the rootzone. Greens surfaces.
real growth occurs, generally mid to late May.

No greens topdressing will take place until ground temperatures rise and there are some indications of natural growth. Once the ground temperature reaches approximately 42 degrees and some real bent grass growth occurs naturally, a consistent and regular topdressing programme is initiated to within three weeks or less of the actual event, coupled with a light verti-cutting programme every 7-10 days. Scott Fenwick, the course's head greenkeeper, says the greens receive about eight topdressings — “fortnightly depending on the weather” — starting in April and using five parts sand, one part peat. All greens approaches receive similar treatment to the greens. Generally, the greens are hollow-cored in September, verti-drained in November and spiked from February onwards.

Fairways will be verti-cut and topdressed regularly, too. Peat is added to the high ridges.

One application of a slow release granular fertiliser at the start of the season is backed up with an early summer dressing of organic nitrogen applied six to eight weeks prior to the event and, thereafter, they use an organic nitrogen liquid feed coupled with a wetting agent and trace elements.

The height of cut on all areas will be gradually reduced. The greens, for example, will come down from 5/16th over the winter to 1/4in, to 3/16 to 5/32 then down to 1/8in. The greens are cut as required over the winter, maybe once a month. Once growth starts they are cut twice a week. From about the end of April it is stepped up to three or four times a week, and during the summer it is daily. During the event they will be cut two or three times a day, depending on the speed. Greens like the 1st with steep slopes will miss a cut if they are too fast. “The idea is to get them all the same speed,” says Scott. Speeds are monitored weekly from May onwards, and daily with a fortnight to go.

The tees come down from 5/16th to 1/4in, with the cutting stepped up during the growing season from three times a week to daily the week before and during the tournament. Fairways come down from 1/2in in winter to 3/8in in the summer. In the winter they’re cut every 4-6 weeks. Once there is some growth they are cut weekly, then 2-3 times a week and from ten days out they are cut daily with a Jacobsen LF100. Divots are filled all season but the programme is increased from weekly to daily as the tournament nears. The green approaches are slightly shorter than the fairways at 3/16ths.

The rough is never cut and the semi rough varies from 1 1/4 to 2ins.

Seed head suppression of the Poa annua percentage within the sward is the greenstaffs' main concern prior to the event. They achieve this by limiting the pressure applied to the plant — as the height of cut is lowered, drought is effected and nitrogen levels drop. A pre-tournament 'cocktail' liquid feed comprising 20 ltrs liquid Alginure, 10 ltrs Firmura Green and 5 ltrs Aqua-Gro mixed in 250 ltrs of water per acre is prepared and sprayed, both to reduce seed head production and discourage dew on greens, tees and fairways.

The minimum amount of water is used, with the irrigation carefully monitored and any dry spots on the severely undulating greens hand-watered. Wetting agents are used monthly during the growing season.

As the competition approaches, the whole course is put under a microscope for prospective ‘ground under repair’ areas — the aim being not to use any white paint.

The bunkers are not only trimmed and re-sanded as required, but also ‘pre-tested’ which, in 1997, resulted in 22 greenkeepers working around the clock to take sand out of 110 bunkers. Now they aim for depths of 4ins of sand in the base and 2in up the faces.

The spectator crossing points and paths, which are regularly verti-drained, dewatered, sprayed and edged during the season, are given a freshen up.

A month prior to the championship, play on the King's Course is cut back to about 60 per cent and totally banned between the hours of 3 and 6pm. In the evenings it is restricted to members and hotel residents only. The course closes completely for two days only prior to the first practice round.

During the competition the King's Course greenkeepers are backed up by the staff from the Queen's and Monarch's courses. The staff arrive on site at 4.15 for a 4.30am start and work until about 8am. After play they come back at 5 or 6pm and work till 10 or 10.30pm. Greens are prepared by pedestrian mowers — Ransomes Auto-certs with brush attachments — each evening following play and each morning. Green approaches are done every morning, tees and fairways each evening using lightweight ride-on units and Tripex tee mowers.

All tee and fairway divots are filled with seed and sand mix each evening after cutting, to avoid smear.

"It can be a lot of hassle leading up to it but when it's all done it's all worth it. When you see what you've produced on the TV, it's quite satisfying," says Scott, who is preparing for his fourth Bell's Scottish Open.

If you want to know, look in the Bell's Bible

All the information relating to the competition and its aftermath is kept in a "Bell's Bible", formed by Jimmy Kidd given to all the key personnel at Gleneagles, including golf course superintendent Ross Monaghan and Scott Fenwick. The folder is divided into 31 sections, with separate sections for all the information relating to, for example, King's Course preparations, practice area preparation, wet weather systems and contacts, key contacts, floral decor, and tented village/buildings.

The King's Course preparation section includes a 'general tasks checklist' which includes appraising stairways, pathways, septic tanks, course furniture, spectator walkways, tees netting, bog mire, hole cups and TV compound, ordering what's necessary and putting dates down for when the work started and was completed. It also acts as a reminder to raise maintenance orders for the bridges, shelters and tee fences.

When you're holding a major event each year, it's easier to build up this information and these checklists. But it means nothing is overlooked or left to chance. And it means that the Bell's doesn't take its toll on the course or staff.