Wall for one

Heswall Golf Club greets another spring with hope and enthusiasm - and optimism that a certain wall will still keep back the water.
Chris Boiling reports.

"If I were to die tomorrow, there'd be a queue a mile long for my job," says 60-year-old Bill Lawson, course manager at Heswall Golf Club, a 6,472-yard par 72 course on the Wirral between North Wales and Liverpool.

The 900-member club may not be as famous as its neighbour - Royal Liverpool - but Bill, who's been there since 1965, wouldn't swap it.

"I love it here. I enjoy working on this site, always have done. It's not famous and it will never hold anything other than county matches but if you see it dressed up with all the summer gear on the tees etc. and all the fairways striped, every green looking good, it's a very nice course to work on.

"It's a lovely site and it's a nice area. And I've had nothing but help from the committee and the members from day one. All right, you have some seasons when they don't go well and members lean on you a bit, but that's natural - you can't expect anything else because they..."
A difficult course to manage at this time of the year

don't understand your job."

One of the best things about the course is the view across 40 sq miles of marshes - a haven for wild ducks and geese - to the Irish Sea. But this location means it is a difficult course to manage at this time of year.

The biggest problem is the wind. It causes havoc with spraying, with the sprinklers, it can fry the grass and burn the trees (so much so that they can look like they're dying).

"It's very difficult to put an even cover of water on if you've got a gale force wind blowing across the Irish Sea - you end up with a bunker with plenty of water, the back of the green over-watered and the front with none on at all. And they dry off quickly," explains Bill.

If he starts watering the greens too early, he can have problems with weeds that most greenkeepers have never heard of - the seeds being blown from marsh plants onto his greens. Sometimes the wind is very cold, even in early spring, stopping growth and sometimes frying away the tops.

"If the cold winds blow, what grass you've already got on the greens will stop dead and very nearly fry away off the tops and leave you with very little growth at the end of March/beginning of April."

"You've got to greenkeep on a site like this - Derek Green at Royal Liverpool is the same - you really have to look at your golf course day by day. Don't make any decisions like I'll fer-

utilise a week on Wednesday because it won't work out. It's the same with when you want any spraying done. You've got to do it very early in the day because come 9 o'clock the wind will get up and you won't be able to spray. There'll be no room on the golf course anyway."

Early spring is a very difficult and hectic time of the year. Heswall is very rarely closed (one morning and two afternoons last year and then the weather was so awful no-one would want to go out) and there are no temporary greens (just a hole cut in the apron for when the greens are being worked on). Since the late 60s, when Jim Arthur was advising on the golf course, they have been carrying out a...
Most of the time we cut fairways twice a week and they hold'

Equipment at Heswall Golf Club
1 Ford tractor 3910
1 Ford tractor 1910
1 Ford tractor 1700
1 Huxtruck turf vehicle with topdresser
1 Sisis Hydromain with hollow tiner and sprayer
1 Greens Vertidrain
1 Huxley 358 Greensmower
2 Ransomes 171 greens tripex
2 Ransomes 100 tees mowers
1 Ransomes Hydraulic 5 fairway cutter
1 Ransomes Sportscutter Fairway
1 Ransomes Magna Rough
1 Trimac Front Loader
1 Lewis Landlord 200 Digger
2 Allen National 68s

rigorous programme of vertidraining and slitting. This has enabled members to play on the course all year round and meant that, come spring, Bill and his team have got a good surface with which to start the season.

Cutting

The greens are held down to 3/16ths until the end of March/beginning of April depending on the growth and then they ease just under that for the summer. "All through the summer we verticut the greens once a week, twice if we’ve got something special on in addition to cutting them every day. Come late October we vertidrain the greens and start slitting them. We also vertidrained the greens around Christmas and February – and, if we need to, we verticut them to clean them off. Following that, every Monday we slit down to 8in with a Sisis Hydromain slitting machine all through the winter to the first or second week in March. At least once a fortnight we use a 6ft brush behind the Hydromain and drag the greens with it to keep them open and dry and disease free. We hollow-core last week of March/first week of April, get the top dressing worked into the hollow and away they go."

"We don't slit if it's frosty but we don't like to miss a week and we certainly want them vertidrained three times a year."  

"This keeps them disease free and very, very dry. We like to start the season with a good playing surface and we like to have something to work with in March and April."

"The tees, apron and surrounds of the greens are held down to 1/4in right through the summer after vertidraining and slitting.

The fairways are cut just below 1/2in. After starting the season with two cuts using a set of old Ransomes sportscutters, the team go on to use Ransome Hydraulic 5s. "We'll give them a nice striped effect and we'll cut them once or twice a week."

"If we've got something on they may be cut during the days of the event but most of the time we can cut them twice a week and they'll hold because they're quality grasses and they don't grow fast."

"It's easy to maintain quality grass providing you don't spoil it by adding too much fertiliser or too much water."

Dressing

As soon as he sees a little bit of growth (hopefully at the end of March), he’ll very lightly top-dress the greens using a very sandy top-dress mix. "Then I'll watch day by day, end of March, first week of April, for the first sign that we've got a little bit of movement on the grass. I'll dress them with a fertiliser with just 8 percent nitrogen and no more and I'll wait to see what that does to the turf. If it starts to move within two or three weeks then all I'll keep doing is lightly top-dressing. I may go all the way through April and into May before I put any more fertiliser on them. We don't use a lot of fertiliser and we don't get a lot of disease on the greens today."

"If we can get some growth started by the end of March/beginning of April then I'm quite happy to hold them down until the middle or end of May. And then, depending what we've got on them, I'll lightly dress them again. And it really is nitrogen only or nitrogen and iron. It's a case of looking all the time and seeing what your greens are doing. It's the same with fairways."

"The fairways are heavily vertidrained so they'll grow all the grass we need and we've got quality fairways. The one thing we can't afford to do is to over-fertilise them so we will spray them with a liquid fertiliser about the end of April when it's picked up very easily and that's all they'll have and they'll be good quality fairways from the middle of April right until well, well into the autumn months, perhaps even November." (They looked pretty good to me in February after some heavy rain.)

"They'll never be over-fed. Same with the tees. We will liquid fertilise the tees with the same fertilisers as the fairways and hold them back as much as we possibly can. The one thing we don't want to do is turn Heswall into a parkland, so it's very little fertiliser when we think we need it and no more."

"The rough we let go to about 3ins and semi-rough to about 1 1/2ins. And great areas we leave uncut. Unless the trees are close to the green and we have to cut in between them, we leave them. The whole business about Heswall Golf Club is leaving it so that it looks like you're playing a piece of natural
Two of the holes are new

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- Chudleigh Golf Course
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- Ely City Golf Club
- Gittens Golf Club
- Glenageary Hotel
- Going and Streetley
- Hanley Castle Golf Club
- Harpenden Golf Club
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- Lingoold Park
- Malone Golf Club
- Massereene Golf Club
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- Mold Golf Club
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- Newport & Crookham Golf Club
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- Royal Liverpool Golf Club
- Ryde Golf Club
- St Andrews Links Trust
- St Albans Golf Club
- Southmore Golf Club
- Taunton & Picarison Golf Club
- Teign Golf Park Golf Course
- Telford Golf Club
- The Berkshire Golf Club
- The Vale Golf & Country Club
- Tunbridge Wells
- West End Golf Club
- Whitecliff Golf Club

Land that's been there for a long,
long time and not suddenly devel-
oped into a golf course. It's not a
difficult course when the wind
isn't blowing – it isn't long enough
and it probably isn't right enough –
but when the wind is blowing and
the weather is good, it's a
delight to play and work on."

A founder member of BIGGA
and a former vice chairman, he
has a team of five to help him,
including head greenkeeper Guy
Cannings, and he makes sure they
get properly trained. "I don't
believe in taking someone on
and using them as a labourer –
you don't get enough from him.
You get more from trained staff
although you may only have them
four or five years," says Bill, a
member of the liaison committee
at Reaseheath College. Ten
Heswall-trained greenkeepers now
have their own courses, including
Raymond Hunt at the Forest of
Arden. Mark Lewis has joined the
European Tour as a junior
agronomist.

Changes
Every hole has changed in some
way during Bill's 28 years as the
keeper of the greens. Two of the
holes – the 12th and 13th – are
brand new. The 18th has changed
completely. The bunkering on
most holes has changed to take
account of the modern game. "We
hope within the next two-three
years that most of the old bunk-
ering will be changed and there'll
be more modern bunkers on the
golf course than there are now.
Some of them we'll never change even
though they're old because they
look right. We don't stop, we
move gently on."

As well as regular spring main-
tenance, they plan to build three
tees and change two bunkers – if
the weather's kind to them.

They're also planning to plant
2,500 mixed pine and 2,000 gorse
plants to thicken up the areas that
already have trees (3,000 trees
have been planted there since
1965). These areas are mainly at
the top of the course, leaving the
bottom part bare so that nothing
blocks the superb views across the
marshes to the River Dee.

The clover-shaped lake is
about 50-yards wide, and brings
three to the number of lakes built
during Bill's reign.

"We decided a very long time
ago that we did not want a pretty-
pretty golf course. We did not
want lots of flowering shrubs,
flowering trees, anything that
looks pretty-pretty because when
you look out from the clubhouse
we like to see out onto the marsh
and it would not look right as a
pretty-pretty golf course."

"When the wind blows it has a
great effect on the golf. It does not
want to look like a public park." If
the wind blows the 151-yard 16th
isn't reachable with a driver.

Irrigation
They have just had a bore hole
put in by British Gypsum at the
bottom of the car park. The
£9,000 investment will give them
2,600 gallons an hour – "far in
excess of anything I'll want," says
Bill. The water goes into a 1,600-
gallon tank from which it feeds a
Watermation system using 3 – 1/4in pipes. This system was
installed in 1970 and has been
updated slowly as Watermation
bring out better quality heads.
The controller has been changed for a
TW2. Bill says impact systems are
better for this course because he
believes he gets better coverage in
windy conditions. The bore hole
means they can now water all the
tees and three fairways that are
downwind and have very hard
approaches.

Headache
Bill's biggest headache will come
in a few years time when the river
starts to encroach on the course.
Once, the wall at the bottom of
the course was 42ft high and in
1938 the sand yachting champios-
ships were held there with pure
white sand. Now only 4ft 6in is
visible because of the silting up
and the sand has become 40 sq
miles of marsh. Bill has seen the
marsh built up 4ft 6in in his lif-
time. And now when there's a
high tide and the wind blows
behind it, the water comes up to
the top of the wall.

When the wall disappears, the
course will undergo its most dra-
matic change and the flat area
everyone loves may disappear.
The course manager who does
eventually take over from Bill had
better bring his waders.