Following a recent remark by BIGGA president Viscount Whitelaw that in years to come it may be difficult to keep the top greenkeepers in this country, Chris Boiling went to Holland to see what it’s like for three Brits working abroad.

Bill Garner hasn’t worked in the UK for ten years. After 16 years at Wilmslow (six as head greenkeeper), he became course manager at The Grange in Dublin. Then he saw a job advertised and in March 1988 became course manager at Hilversumsche, Holland’s fourth oldest course.

When I met him, Bill and his staff were busy preparing the 18-hole wooded heathland course for the Dutch Open. He says his aim is to “make it the best course in Holland.” He has no plans to return home yet: “The longer it goes on the harder it is to go back.”

The grass is greener for greenkeepers on the other side of the North Sea. After a quick tour of three Dutch clubs maintained by Brits, it’s easy to come to the conclusion that:
- Their maintenance facilities rank alongside the best clubs in Britain;
- Their machinery inventory would be the envy of most British greenkeepers; and
- They are treated better. They are treated as professionals by their employers and by club members, and are paid accordingly.

BIGGA’s former education chairman, Huw Parry, the former course manager at Bristol and Clifton who accompanied me on the lightning tour of The Netherlands, agrees: “Their facilities are certainly much better. They seem to be regarded more – especially the expats – as professional people. They certainly have a way of life that is far better than in the UK, but they seem to be under less pressure at the same time. The standards are different so the pressures are different. The standards in the UK are much greater, generally. I think they’ve got a much better working environment. They seem to have the machinery to do the job, they seem to have the money to spend on fertiliser, seeds and top dressings.

“I think at the end of the day as long as they’re producing a good product then the money is there for them, whereas back home many greenkeepers are fighting for everything they can get.”

Budgets

At the 5859m par 72 Hilversumsche Golf Club Bill Garner says he has a budget but he gets what he wants. “The course comes first here. If I need a machine then it’s planned.” He even has his own Hydroject 3000 and two Verti-drains. He spends
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About £80,000 on grass seed, sand and fertiliser.
Colin Fairley says he now spends more on servicing his machinery than he had in his budget at his previous clubs. "It's a new club run by company managers who realise you get what you pay for," he adds.

Adrian Simm says at his first club "machinery and money were no object". He says he had £1m worth of machinery and spent £120,000 a year on grass seed and fertiliser (although you have to bear in mind tax is paid on seed and fertiliser).

Size of team
Bill Garner has seven staff to maintain his 18-hole course. Colin Fairley has a staff of nine looking after 27 holes and par 3 course.

We were shocked when Adrian Simm said the greenkeeping staff at Amsterdamse comprised three greenkeepers and the course manager. Then we found out their only responsibility is the 18 greens, aprons, bunkers, tees and the tee bankings. Everything else is contracted out. The contractor has about 50 employees and looks after several courses and parks. They cut the fairways, semi rough and rough and carry out other tasks such as verti-draining and overseeding. "It takes a lot of pressure off me," says Adrian.

Bill adds: "The staff have been good to me. There were some difficulties in the beginning but you could get that going to Scotland."

Greens committee
Hilversumsche has a greens committee of three who take for five years. Bill Garner has had the same greens chairman for six years and, he says, "he backs me all the way when it comes to machines."

Colin works with five other people on his committee, each has his own function. They meet every six to eight weeks.

Amsterdamse has a greens committee of one whom Adrian sees for ten minutes every Monday morning with the general manager.

Life abroad
The course managers we met had a higher standard of living than many of their UK counterparts and their money was far superior, although it's an expensive place to live. Health insurance is partic-
Where the grass is greener

In 1990 the 60-year-old Amsterdamse Golf Club was forced to move to a new site when a new railway was built on nine holes. The remaining nine became the Amsterdamse Old Course and a new course – with pennicross and pure sand greens – was built in Halfweg. A year and a half after being built they were condemned by club members, the STRI’s Jeff Perris and Walter Wood, St Andrews’ links superintendent. They agreed the greens would never meet the required standard. The main cause was the very high pH level. The depth ranged from 20-60cm and the almost missing upper humusbed.

A decision was made to start again – at a cost of £100,000. “But we had no choice,” said club member and golf course architect Gerard Jol, who was commissioned to redesign the greens and direct the project.

His starting point with the new greens was more pin positions. He also made them smaller (from an average of 690m² to 550m²), more interesting and challenging.

The new greens were sewn with ordinary fescue, fescue and bent grasses, good temporary greens were constructed on the fairway, so disruption to members was kept to a minimum while the new greens were built and grown-in. The greens were open for play at the beginning of September 1993 with the mowing height kept to 8mm. In October, two years after the greens were condemned and one year after the reconstruction started, the Netherlands Golf Federation gave the club the ‘A-status’ it desired.

Casper Paulussen, Colin’s Dutch deputy, says: “Most Dutch people speak English so there is no problem with language.”

Family life
Living abroad is easier for the greenkeeper because he’s doing a job he enjoys. The key to success is how the wife and children adapt. “I think if my wife wasn’t happy we’d go back, but she is happy. She’s made some nice friends – Dutch and English,” says Bill Garner who is married with three children – girls aged seven and four and a boy who is nearly two. He says his family have adapted well to life abroad. His children – two of whom were born in Holland – all speak “perfect” English and Dutch.

Adrian is also married with three children (aged eight, five and three) who are learning to speak Dutch.

Adrian says the maintenance practices are very similar but “we’ve got more money to play with and full control of the budget.”

The language
If the signs on the courses are anything to go by, there should be no language problems. The ground under repair and ‘next tee’ signs were all in English.

Bill speaks Dutch, Adrian doesn’t but he says all of his staff speak English. Colin speaks a little Dutch but says half his staff are British anyhow – “there’s a shortage of qualified staff in the Netherlands,” he says, so he has employed several Brits.

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