Hard life or easy life? Municipal course or exclusive private golf club? Greenkeeper International explores the working practices of two greenkeepers at each end of the course maintenance scale. We start with Ian Holloran at Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Centre.

For greenkeeper, read entertainer

"We actually class ourselves as entertainers, rather than greenkeepers," says Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Centre's Ian Holloran. "We entertain 80,000 people a year, which isn't bad going."

His employers don't call him a greenkeeper either. His official job title is foreman, although his job description would apply to most course managers and head greenkeepers. And his team of three permanent staff are labelled 'craftsmen/gardeners', although they are all qualified in greenkeeping and horticulture, and all have spraying certificates.

This is just one of the differences I discovered during my visit to this municipal course. Many golfers view municipal courses as "scruffy, badly-maintained eyesores," according to BBC Golf. But, as the magazine goes on to point out, many of Britain's public courses offer "challenging golf, great scenery, good facilities and deliciously low green fees".

Middlesbrough Municipal is one of these. Opened in 1978 on farmland three miles from the town centre, it is among BBC Golf's list of the 18 finest public courses in the country.

Writer Mike Cable says it has been designed to cope efficiently with heavy traffic. "The
front nine holes are wide open, with broad fairways and big greens to help keep play moving on steadily, while the back nine holes are much more of a challenge, requiring shots into and across the prevailing wind and over becks."

**Different**

Ian, 39, says working on a municipal course is no worse or better than working on a private course, it’s just different. In some ways the municipal course can teach top private clubs a thing or two, especially when it comes to health and safety, training and looking after staff. For example, Ian has monthly meetings regarding health and safety. He recently went to one to discuss the dangers of needlestick injury. Many greenkeepers should be aware of the dangers of catching Hepatitis B and C and HIV from hypodermic needles discarded in woods and copses.

They also have verbal/physical abuse forms to fill in if club members have a go at them. They simply fill in the pink form and the club committee deal with the member. “They only do it once. Troublesome members are slung out,” says Ian, chairman of BIGGA’s Northern Region. They also have an impressive internal training programme. Among the courses on offer through Middlesbrough Borough Council are: time management, stress awareness, effective report writing, dealing with aggression, skills in communication, computer literacy, fire extinguishers, Health and Safety at Work Act, manual handling, identifying hazards, preparing for retirement and first aid. First-aid training is especially important because about 40% of the people playing the John Hamilton-Stutt course are retired.

This high standard of training and attention to detail has helped Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Centre achieve registration under BS5750, a coveted quality assurance standard. It means the golf course promises to deliver a certain standard of service, ie, that on any given day a certain number of staff will be on site and that at least one of them will be qualified in first-aid, that the clubhouse will be open for specified hours (8am-11.30pm), that the greens will be cut by a certain time (10.30am), that bunkers will be raked three or four times a week, and members will be told in advance that the course will be sprayed with such and such day with such and such chemical if the weather conditions prevail. In other words, there has to be good communication with the golfers.

If members have a problem or a question, they fill in a ‘feedback card’ and Ian has to have a written answer back to them within seven working days. The questions and answers are also displayed on a noticeboard in the clubhouse.

“It’s worth everyone going for BS5750 registration because it means you’re accepting a minimum standard,” says Ian. “You have to set a standard you can achieve rather than a vague wish. You have to set out everything, for example your criteria for closing the course.” *(see panel on Page 19)*

**Budgeting**

Another major difference between Middlesbrough Municipal and private courses is the budgeting system. Everything – yes, everything – has a price. Moving the tee markers 156 times a year costs £2,987 and transplanting 681 trees took 93.3 hours and cost £536 in labour.

“You soon get used to this way of doing things,” says Ian. “And when you come to tender for your own job every three years you know exactly how much you spend on materials, machinery and labour.”

This change not only had a big impact on the organisation and admin of the greens staff but also their maintenance practices.

“One thing Compulsory Competitive Tendering has done is focus councillors to look at the products being used and to question – especially with chemicals – whether it’s the right thing to use, if it’s environmentally friendly, if it’s safe for the user and the customer and what are its effects? They also look at machinery and say ‘You don’t need two greens machines, one will do’ – it will just take you little bit longer to do the job. Once you’ve cut all 18 greens you’ve finished with the machine and it’s stood there doing nothing most of the day.”

After peering inside what many greenkeepers would call a “lack of” equipment shed, I saw for myself how much Ian had been forced to streamline his machinery. There was a Jacobsen Greens King, a Ransomes GT, a Ransomes multi-mower, a Hydromain with topdresser and other accessories, an International tractor, a trailer and two sets of gang mowers.

“It’s not a lot, but it’s all we need,” said Ian dismissively. “We have a better back-up service than most golf courses. We can borrow equipment from the parks department. They have nine tractors and six sets of gams.”

With three permanent staff, three extra summer workers and this arsenal, Ian has to counteract the effect of more than 80,000 pairs of feet trampling around the 6,333-yard par 71 course. Demand is high because the course is within a five iron of two housing estates, within a drive of another, and many...
of the big local employers, including British Steel and ICI, have been creating more 'leisure time' for the local workforce. Also, as BBC Golf said, the green fees are "deliriously low". Rounds cost £7.75 weekdays and £9.75 at weekends. Season ticket charges are £240 for adults, £160 for senior citizens and £95 for juniors.

Clay soil

Middlesbrough Municipal doesn't even have the luxury of sand greens to cope with this traffic. The 18 greens are based on clay soil and were built in the early '70s when 30,000 rounds a year seemed a lot.

No wonder the greens are 100% annual meadowgrass, while the tees, fairways and rough are ryegrass.

Ian's maintenance programme is similar to that used by many parkland course managers. He aims to fertilise the greens at the end of April - the exact timing is dependent on a rise in soil temperature. His staff will hollow-tine, followed by a fairly heavy topdressing with two tons per green brushed in.

Ian would like to have fast greens but it's not possible. He never cuts lower than 3/16ths and for some of the summer he raises the height of cut. "When we get more play, usually in and around British Open time, we raise the height of cut to 1/4 to protect the greens and we also feed three weeks prior to the championship."

During the 1989 Ryder Cup they raised the height of cut to 5/16ths to save the greens from the sudden upsurge in demand from people who "weren't really golfers," Ian said, choosing his words very carefully.

The greens are cut daily during the growing season and scarified once a week during the summer to keep the speed up and to maintain growth through the whole year.

The holes are changed at least three times a week during the winter and four or five times a week during the summer.

They are played all year except when it's frosty, but as an insurance the winter greens are maintained all year, treating them the same as tees by cutting them at 1/4, topdressing them three times a year, fertilising them frequently and spiking regularly.

As at most golf clubs, a tee extension programme is in operation to cope with the increased levels of play. But with only three winter staff and a lot of trees to tidy up in the winter, only one or two new tees are constructed each year, using turf from the golf centre's own 2,000sq m turf nursery. "With such a small staff we have to set ourselves targets we know we can achieve."

New tees are built to the same spec as the old ones, so they are not out of character with the rest of the course. Ian admits not all his colleagues agree with him over this, but he replies: "We can't change 165 acres into a championship course, we've got to manage the course as it is."

This goes for the greens, too. "If we made one sand green there would not be the consistent playing surface of the other 17. Yes, it would be nice to have sand-based greens but as someone else said, 'You can't grow grass in a desert'. So you need the water, and in years to come water will be more scarce, and you need to feed them more, so the maintenance will be more costly."

Fairways

Fairways are cut once a week in the growing season at 1/4in. "It usually takes two days to get round," says Ian. The rough, which has been likened to a cricket outfield, is also cut once a week to keep it down to a ball-finding length. That takes one man about four days.

As well as maintaining the 18-hole parkland course, the Middlesbrough greensstaff also look after a driving range and two spring meadows.