Brian Turner has no doubt about what becoming Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award winner means to him as he told Scott MacCallum

When Sunningdale Course Manager Brian Turner learned what becoming the third Toro Excellence in Greenkeeping Award winner meant to him he said “It's the icing on the cake.”

And Brian's case, when the cake in question means his own greenkeeping career, you can tell he is particularly proud of his achievement.

Sunningdale Golf Club has always played a huge part in his life. He is a native of the town, he'd caddied at the club, he was, and still is, an Artisan member and, when he started greenkeeping, it was as a 19 year-old member of the Sunningdale staff having shelled thoughts of becoming a professional golfer - his current handicap is 1 and he has been as low as +1.

That affection was the magnet that drew Brian back to the club three years ago when he had an excellent job at Worpleston Golf Club.

“It was always my dream to return to Sunningdale as Course Manager and I was delighted when I got the job in '96,” said Brian.

His CV contains the names of three prestigious golf clubs located within a radius that would be covered by very few number of Tiger Wood drives.

“I left Sunningdale to move to Wentworth. I was in my early 20s, about to get married and there was accommodation with the Wentworth job,” explained Brian.

Over the next 12 years he rose to become Head Greenkeeper on the West Course before the job of Head Greenkeeper at Worpleston came up. He spent 13 years at the club, even winning the famous Worpleston Foursomes during this time there.

“Sunningdale was the only place I would have left Worpleston for as I had a really good job there - I could play golf with the members and had a very good relationship with everyone at the club. I thoroughly enjoyed my experiences,” he said.

When the job became available in '96 Brian wasn't going to apply as, for him to get it, a tradition going back to when the club was founded, would have to be broken.

“Finally I decided to give it a go and I was asked questions I gave totally honest answers,” said Brian, who was 30 when he took the post.

Since taking on one of the most sought after jobs in golf, Brian has concentrated on the presentation of the Willie Park-designed Old Course and the Harry Colt-designed New while he has also worked hard to reduce the thatch build up in the greens.

“We do a tremendous amount of aeration which can be a nightmare for the golfer and, as a result, a nightmare for us...you know you're going to get flak but you just have to bite the bullet.”

Should the golfing calendar oblige, Brian likes to do his major aeration in August, something he started while at Worpleston.

“Hollow tining was always something that was done in spring and autumn but I never felt it was the right time of year because the recovery rate is slower and the greens are softer. I thought August would be a great month to do it in as the soil is warm and the grass is still growing, while you don't have to worry about smearing as the cores come out nice and cleanly.”

“I said to Worpleston that I'd like to do it, we tried it and within two weeks you wouldn't have known we'd hollow tined. You’d be surprised how many people now hollow tine in August. I used to be against hollow tining but you can do it because of the recovery rate, it is warmer and the grass is still growing, while you don't have to worry about smearing as the cores come out nice and cleanly.”

The vertidrain does leave the surface a little bobbly and uneven but it helps reduce thatch build up in the greens. He has also worked hard to reduce the thatch build up in the greens.

“All the club's Head Greenkeepers or Course Managers had been Scotsmen until I came along,” explained Brian.

“But the club also broke with tradition when appointing its last club professional because when Keith Maxwell got the job he was the first not to have been a Ryder Cup player. They obviously didn't mind breaking with tradition now and again... which was good for me.”

“Eventually I decided to give it a go as there was no harm in trying and I made the short list.”

The fact that he felt he had nothing to lose “relaxed him come the big day.”

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and someone who handles the irrigation.

While Brian is overall Course Manager his Deputy and Head Greenkeeper on the Old Course is Mark Opendaaw with Tony Bonnett, Head Greenkeeper on the New Course. Each course is maintained to the same high standard.

"One of the problems we have is that we have many more rounds over the Old that we do the New - 35,000 against 27,000. If members have a choice they would just play the Old so we have course order on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday with two balls on one course and three balls on the other and we change this around.

"Since '97 when Abbotts installed the new irrigation system we've closed the Old for four days a week Monday to Thursday through January to give the course a rest and you can really see the difference on the strength of it."

In recent years Sunningdale has been the venue for several large events including the European Open and the Walker Cup while it hosted the Weetabix British Ladies in '97 and will do so again in 2001.

"During the biggest of the events the practice range was used as a car park and the 18th hole of the New Course became the practice range and it's not really big enough for European events now.

"We do miss them as they are a real buzz and I admire people like Chris Kennedy who cope with two a year." That's not to say that big name players don't visit Sunningdale which is close to where many of Europe's top golfers base themselves.

"Darren Clarke and Paul McGinley play a lot, Paul actually walks his dog around the course, while Sam Torrance was at Sunningdale as an assistant, and often comes over for a game."

Others include Wayne Riley, Richard Boxall and Tony Johnstone, who often can be seen honing his renowned sand skills in the practice bunker.

Brian was entered for the Toro Excellence Award by his Secretary, Stuart Zeuill.

"I thought about entering before but there was always an element of fear that you're not going to do well and coming from a well known club puts on added pressure."

His regional course visit was conducted by Eric James and Brian wasn't 100% confident of getting through to the final.

"I didn't think I was going to get through, to tell you the truth, as Eric also had to see other people who entered before who must have had a very good chance."

This modesty continued to BIGGA HOUSE where Brian was genuinely surprised when his name was read out as the winner.

"It was a bit like being at the Oscars hearing 'And the winner is...,' and I was really surprised when it was my name that followed. I'd spoken to the other five guys and any one of them could have won it.

"The thing I was pleased about was the experience of taking part. It's all right reading about it in the magazine but until you do it you don't know what it's about and what you can gain from it," said Brian.

"I was self taught when I started as BIGGA wasn't around then. To learn about the grass plant I went to evening classes at Kingston College and had to pay for it myself."

The reaction within the club to Brian's triumph has been very positive.

"The Secretary is over the moon as are the lads here as it is not only a feather in my cap, but for them as well."