FROM PARIS WITH LOVE...

In the last issue of GI Tony Martin offered advice for greenkeepers thinking of working in Europe. With last summer Ben Kelby left his role as Deputy Head Greenkeeper at Gatton Manor Golf Club to move to Golf de Joyeuse – one of the top courses in France. This was despite not being able to speak any French... here's his story.

I studied the BSc (Hons) Turfgrass Science at Myerscough College and worked at various clubs including Royal Melbourne until I applied for the role of Assistant Golf Course Superintendent at this course, which is west of Paris. It was the biggest decision of my life, but the lure of an exclusive complex, the challenge, and the opportunity to learn and develop under Steve Okula (who holds both the GCSA and MIG certificates) proved too much. So, after long discussions with friends inside and outside the industry and most importantly my partner Francesca, I decided to accept the offer and start learning French!

Golf de-Joyeuse was designed by R.T. Jones Sr., and opened in 1992. The greencore on both courses are sand-based with predominantly Poa/Creeping Bent based sward, whilst the tees are pure Creeping Bent. Both courses are situated on heavy clay throughout, and although the course boasts full fairway and tee drainage, the inherent drainage problems still persist after heavy rains.

Agronomically the course and maintenance practices are very similar to those in the UK, with an emphasis on fortnightly verticutting and topdressing alongside core aeration in both early spring and late summer. The main climatic difference to the UK is the disease pressure between the months of October and May.

Furthiarty and even weekly fungicide applications are absolutely essential in keeping a clean surface, which, along with the fertility of green speed and the fine details, is the most important aspect of the clubs mission statement.

If ever to say the relocation abroad has been easy then I would be lying. Problems with banks, car insurance and pet passports added costs and stress. I need to learning French via audio CDs for a number of weeks prior to the move, but in no way did this prepare me.

This was a complete shock to the system for the initial weeks, with the language barrier and the differences in greenkeeping culture being the most difficult. Unfortunately there is little or no career progression or educational path to follow within France for the trainee greenkeeper and apprenticeships are extremely rare. Most disappointing however, is the attitude towards the position of a greenkeeper, for most it is seen as a last resort.

The UK is extremely privileged to have such a supportive body in BIGGA alongside the various education establishments who offer turf related educational pathways. Nevertheless, after a few months, I was able to understand and most importantly, be understood. A year on, although far from fluent, I am much more confident with the language, allowing me to manage the 20-strong team.

By far the hardest issue was leaving friends and family and most importantly for the first three months, Francece. It was a lonely time, but luckily I was able to immerse myself into the new role alongside the online degree which I am currently studying.

The initial problems aside, the relocation has been fantastic and one that I would recommend to all. On top of everything, it’s been a superb opportunity to network and make new friendships. I feel extremely fortunate to experience and embrace changes that have occurred and do not regret for a moment taking the leap and choosing to relocate abroad.

I’d particularly like to thank Dave Edmundson at The Island Club, Jon White at Morfontaine and of course Steve Okula who has been a fantastic support from the beginning, and of course my incredibly supportive girlfriend.

It is rare to work within an industry that, if you allow it, can take you around the world. Make the most of it.

BIGGA SCOTTISH CONFERENCE ATTRACTS TOP SPEAKERS

The BIGGA Scottish Conference on Tuesday 5 March covers an extensive range of topics and attracts top speakers. To be held at the Carnegie Conference Centre in Dunfermline, registration opens at 8.30am and the first speaker at 9.30am will be Ronnie Malcolm, Management Consultant with Malcolm International, who will be presenting on ‘The Role of the Modern Greenkeeper’. This will include feedback from a UK survey of Course Managers.

Grant Fyloge, Course Manager at The Roxburghe, follows by explaining how he moved from his role as Deputy at G West to his first Course Manager job and will look at the challenges he’s already faced.

Next up will be Chris Haspell, Linlithgow Superintendent at Castle Stuart, and will include feedback from a UK survey of Course Managers.

The afternoon will see Bill Lawlor from the Xact Group lead an interactive Q&A session on turf drainage, with insights from leading turf health & safety for Greenkeepers’ using examples which have been documented in the media. Dr Christian Spangenberg, the RTTP regular contributor to Greenkeeper International - will then look at the facts, narratives and possible corrective measures surrounding Worm Control plus other topical subjects.

A highly interesting day will be rounded off by John Bambury, Course Superintendent at Trump International Links at Balmedie in Aberdeenshire, who will look at the technical challenges experienced in getting this exciting new development up and running.

In all, a day not to be missed. Places cost just £35 which includes lunch, and refreshments throughout. If you need any further information please contact BIGGA’s Regional Administrator for Scotland John Young on 07775-243-953, or johnyoung@bigga.co.uk.

BIGGA have been speaking to the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) about the level of interest and debate among members about the use of compost on golf courses. As it happens, WRAP has been sending information on key land managers about the use of compost & anaerobic digestate (biosturferm). As part of this, they are keen to get the opinions of golf greenkeepers, so we have joined forces to set up a short online survey to capture your opinions and experiences.

We would really appreciate you spending five minutes completing this survey. Please visit http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ WRAPBIGGASurvey to complete a quick and simple questionnaire.

Once we’ve got your responses we will publish a article containing your valuable feedback and some data from WRAP’s technical team.

WRAP will use the information to help them understand what needs to be done to provide information and support to the whole range of potential users of recycled organic material for land management.

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If you have any queries about the survey you can contact Tricia Scott, in WRAP’s Research & Evaluation team, on 01295 817887. For further information about WRAP’s work, please visit: www.wrap.org.uk/category/sector/ landscape-and-regeneration

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

Our latest featured greenkeeper blog comes from Josh Lexter at Longside Golf Club – a 18 hole parkland course in Aberdeenshire. Josh writes setting the blog less than three years ago, and was able to display images of the terrible flooding which recently affected the course. He says the blog has helped communicate with members from his club – and other clubs.

Head Greenkeeper, Josh said: “The course is built on a flat plain with river running right through the middle but we managed to reopen five days later.”

“We had sand washed out of bunkers, paths washed away and debris on the course. Loads of water came into the shed but everything was already up off the ground in case there was a flood.”

“I take photographs and post updates on my iPhone, so I can post on the blog while out on the course if necessary.”

“The members tell me that they find my blog interesting as they like to know what’s going on, ask questions or find out when I’m doing things. As well as the blog, I also use Twitter, which is also pretty helpful. I have a good number of followers including members from other clubs who have commented that they wish their greenkeepers would do similar work to what we’ve achieved here. In this day and age we need to be into social media and it’s growing so quickly that we need to adapt. On a more personal note, I feel that a blog is a great CV and most greenkeepers would benefit from keeping one.”

Check out Josh’s blog for yourself at http://blog.greenkeeperlinkedin.com, blogspot.co.uk / - and remember to contact steve.castle@bigga.co.uk if you have a blog, or know of a greenkeepers’ blog that has proved invaluable to you.