What’s it like to be in charge of the golf course on the Marquess of Lansdowne’s Estate on Grade One Listed parkland designed by Capability Brown? It’s all in a day’s work for Jaey Goodchild as Steve Castle discovered.

Arriving at the Bowood Estate, which lies a few miles west of Chippenham in Wiltshire, felt like accidentally stumbling across the set of ‘Downton Abbey’ – and I half expected to be summoned for afternoon tea by the Marquess.

The spectacular 4000 hectare site boasts a famous Rhododendron Walk, a secret garden and an 18th century House. The proprietor is Charles Maurice Petty-Fitzmaurice, the 9th Marquess of Lansdowne – Bowood has been his family’s home for nearly 300 years. But my visit concentrated on the serious work that’s been taking place on the superb golf course.

Brisbane-born Jaey Goodchild is Head Greenkeeper at Bowood Golf and Country Club which covers around 200 acres of the huge site. It’s 18 holes of glorious parkland and a former Challenge Tour venue which measures an intimidating 7,309 yards from the blue tees and 6,878 from the white.

Jaey said: “It’s picture postcard stuff – just what you would expect one of Capability Brown’s works to be. But it’s very much a working Estate - there’s a gamekeeper and a sawmill with on-site carpenters. In fact the wooden posts for our yardage signs have been sourced from seasoned oak felled on site.”

Jaey came to Bowood in 2011, and his immediate aim was to improve the USGA greens which at that time had a high thatch content and high incidence of disease. When the team used to core, the greens suffered major pull-ups due to the lack of surface stability. The sward was weak with minimal root ing and they would spend hours repairing the greens after aeration.

“My first big challenge was convincing the proprietor, committee and members of the importance of curing this and find a way to fit it in to the schedule. This was difficult in the first year because I started in March when most of the year’s business had already been booked. So year one had to be a real ‘little and often’ approach to keep things ticking over with plenty of fine aeration and light topdressing.

“We schedule two hollow tining operations per year plus multiple micro solid tines and winter slitting. Last year we aerated the greens 14 times and always follow up with a light topdress, brushing and rolling to get the surfaces back on track. We’re giving the roots the opportunity to develop, bind the sward together and strengthen it. Now we’ve every confidence we’ll have zero pull-up when we aerate.

PROFILE
Name: Jaey Goodchild
Born: Brisbane, 5 December 1976
Hobbies: Kayaking, running
Favourite Sports Team: The Wallabies
Aussie rules

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Bowood had 940mm rainfall last year, 20% more than average, and the renovated greens stood up well remaining largely firm and dry. But the moisture did lead to more problems with disease.

“We had Fusarium in July which followed by Anthracnose, so in there and get the sand in there, little and often, and we haven’t tried anything too fancy. We’re at a point now where we can aerate, roll and have play that day and golfers don’t even notice we’ve done it.”

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We’ve got a massive amount of long rough. We cut and collect annually at the end of every season, and we’re gradually scarifying to thin out the heavy play areas”

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“We had Fusarium in July which followed by Anthracnose, so we’ve got a hectare and a half of green surface.”

Jaey Goodchild is the greenkeeping team’s lead turf specialist which convinced him that was the path he wanted to follow. He is fortunate to be able to call on many hours with the Park’s fine turf specialist which convinced him that the path he wanted to follow.

His first golf role was at Chobham in Surrey as an Assistant, before moving up to a Deputy role after only 18 months. Two years later he secured a role at The Richmond as a Deputy. All of his turf education was in the UK. He attended afternoon and evening classes at Merrist Wood to obtain a HNC in HND, before completing his Masters Degree in Sports Surface Technology at Cranfield University.

Jaey first arrived on these shores in December 1997 on a six-month backpacking trip - and has stayed ever since! His first job in the UK was landscaping at Hyde Park for two years. This involved spending many hours with the Park’s fine turf specialist which convinced him that was the path he wanted to follow.

The greenkeeping team comprises of nine full-time staff and the myriad other attractions on the course and we finish things annually at the end of every season, and we’re gradually scarifying to thin out the heavy play areas.

The greenkeeping team comprises of nine full-time staff plus some seasonals through the summer. This includes one mechanic – however he’s kept busy with jobs on the rest of the Estate as well as maintaining the greenkeeping team’s fleet. There are also eight gardeners looking after the spacious gardens, arboretum, the Rhododendron visitor centre, adventure play park and the myriad other attractions on site. So how does Jaey ensure that the greenkeeping team’s work is integrated with the rest of this large commercial operation?

“We plan a year in advance. If we want to do renovation work in the spring I book it in the previous August and all our customers are made aware of it in good time. We have a members liaison committee who I address on a regular basis. I always start off with the weather followed by a course report, then I update them on upcoming work.”

The hardest part is finding the balance between aesthetics, economics and speed of play. There’s a lot of arguing – sorry, I mean cooperation between myself and the pro Paul McLean on this! We spend a lot of time together every spring on cut lines, watching play and managing it all.”

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