By Royal appointment

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He has a tough act to follow. Last July The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers put on a superb show for the worldwide TV audience complete with stunning weather. But it turns out that Craig is extremely familiar with Muirfield because it was such a part of the fabric of the links that his funeral cortege completed a circuit of the course before he was laid to rest.

Then came the job of finding Derek’s successor. He recalled: “I saw the job advertised, and after coming here for the presentation party at the 2002 Open Championship convinced me to stick at it. I love The Open, I’ve watched it every single year since 1985, and the prospect of being in charge of one of the Open venues was incredible.”

2005 proved to be a sad year at Royal Liverpool as the hugely respected head greenkeeper Derek Green died. He was such a part of the fabric of the links that his funeral cortege completed a circuit of the course before he was laid to rest.

Craig admitted that he had to keep most of his more ambitious plans in check initially, knowing The Open was just over a year away. “During my first six weeks here there was no rain whatsoever, and I began to understand some of the challenges, particularly as the irrigation system was too old and needed replacing.

“The main issue that Derek had been tackling was the area from the tee to the start of the fairway. It was worn out. So he came up with the excellent strategy of putting paths in to reduce the wear and tear.

“The thing I didn’t like about the paths was their ash composition. They tended to throw up dust and this was exacerbated in 2006 because it was so dry.

“So I decided to take things in a different direction, probably because of the time I spent at Muirfield where all paths are grass. I wanted a more natural look with meadowgrass, ryegrass and fescue paths, properly irrigated, with traffic flowing round.

“I knew I would have egg on my face if it didn’t work. But it has worked and aesthetically it’s fantastic. Of course, we wouldn’t be where we are now with the paths if it hadn’t been for the hard work Derek and the team had put in before I arrived.

“It was really proud to see how fabulous the course looked on TV when we held the British Women’s Open in 2012. It was very wet that summer as everyone knows, but
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He has a tough act to follow. Last July The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers put on a superb show for the worldwide TV audience complete with stunning weather. But it turns out that Craig is extremely familiar with Muirfield, as he spent most of his career at the legendary East Lothian links.

Prior to that, as a golf-obsessed youngster he became a member at Harburn Golf Club in West Lothian before he was a teenager. At 16, he dreamed of becoming a professional golfer but being a few shots shy of the standard required, he accepted a greenkeeping apprenticeship at Harburn combined with studying at Oatridge Agricultural College. He was keen to rejoin his mother’s side of the family back in East Lothian, as he spent most of his career at the Royal Birkdale.

“I worked my way up through the ranks, also working on the mechanical side and then became Deputy under Colin Irvine. After a few years, the day comes when you think, ‘I need to move on, do my own thing’. A couple of Head Greenkeeper jobs came up and I got nowhere – I didn’t even get an interview. I did then turn one role down, then I had some more interviews but with no joy. I started to wonder what I was doing wrong, although I think some things in life are partly down to luck and mine seemed to be out at that time. ‘I even considered a change of career as I’d done a bit of landscaping. But watching Colin with the presentation party at the 2002 Open Championship convinced me to stick at it. I love The Open, I’ve watched it every single year since 1985, and the prospect of being in charge of one of the Open venues was incredible.”

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Then came the job of finding Derek’s successor.

He recalled: “I saw the job advertised, and after coming here for the interview I knew it was the sort of role I was prepared to relocate my young family for. I started in June 2005.

“It’s amazing how your brain comes back to life when you get your first Course Manager position – you realise that the education you had 20 years ago is still in there somewhere! When you’re Deputy you know that ultimately, everything comes down to the head guy and maybe you get set in your ways.

But when you’re the head guy, you walk round the course buzzing with all manner of ideas. You ask questions and challenge things.”

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the condition was still spot on. I knew that if I could match that condition for The Open I would be made up, and that remains my aim.”

Recently, the ten-strong team led by Craig and his Deputy Paul Gardner (who has been with the club since leaving school 28 years ago) have concentrated on the paths, lengthened a few Championship tees slightly, and altered the definition and size of some of the bunkers.

At last year’s Championships, Craig discussed expectations for the 2014 Open with agronomist Stuart Ormondroyd.

Craig explained: “Some of the readings on the Clegg at Muirfield were 130. I’ve been getting 115. I asked him what our target should be. “He said we should be aiming for 115-125, moisture levels of 10-12%, and green speeds of ten in 200. “I’d been getting 110. I know that if I could match that condition for The Open I would be made up, and that remains my aim.”

Craig ensured he always walks down the middle, the way I would like to play it – although in reality I’m lucky to play four holes like that! I put myself in the shoes of a visiting golfer or member so I’ve constantly got a feel for how the course is progressing.

“Ultimately, a management role comes with some paperwork but try and keep that to a minimum. I like working and being on the course, watching the guys at work and keeping them on their toes. I’m very much a working greenkeeper.

“Five years ago I said that by the time the 2014 Open came around, I would almost have my vision in place and we are nearly there. A couple of wet summers followed by a couple of dry summers can scupper your plans, as anybody knows, but I’m reasonably happy. I don’t think any greenkeeper is ever 100% happy!”

What advice would he give an aspiring young greenkeeper?

“Respect your boss, and all the guys you work with – be a team player. There are too many people in all walks of life who don’t work hard enough. When I take someone on here, I’m not looking for a superstar. I’m looking for a decent, respectful greenkeeper who wants to learn.”

Craig ensured he always walks the course at least once a week to get a feel for how it’s progressing and spot any potential issues.

He added: “I walk down the middle, the way I would like to play it – although in reality I’m lucky to play four holes like that! I put myself in the shoes of a visiting golfer or member so I’ve constantly got a feel for how the course is progressing.

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With that, after a fully enjoyable and engrossing chat, Craig heads back on to the links. Here’s to a successful tournament, and a well-deserved ovation for Craig and his team during the presentations on 20 July.

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