



Royal Troon's Norman Fergusson gets the capital B.E.M. Left to right: Colonel Bryce Knox Lord Lt. of Ayrshire, Norman Fergusson B.E.M. D. H. D. Forsyth Captain Royal Troon, Major R. W. Henderson Deputy Lt. of Ayrshire outside of the clubhouse.

Royal Troon prepares for the 118th Open Championship

John Lelean, looks at the course preparation for Royal Troon's sixth staging of the most prestigious event in the golfing calendar.

It has been quite a year for Norman Fergusson, Royal Troon's Head Greenkeeper. He was awarded the British Empire Medal in the New Years Honour's list and now seven months later, will be taking the stage once more as the presenter of the golf course destined to be seen through the medium of television, by the largest audience since the Olympic Games. Providing the facilities for world wide television is just a part of Norman's vast programme of work at Royal Troon. Their commentary positions extend almost half the length of the 16th fairway, all to be linked into British Telecom international cables.

The latest request is for separate toilet facilities for the estimated 600 crew which have to be connected to the main sewerage system. This will mean yet another section of the fairway to be dug up for pipes to be laid, though he might well incorporate this excavation with a public crossing point to overcome the problem of relaying the turf. Answering the call of nature for the

army of broadcasters appeared to be quite a problem at Royal Lytham last year as they were missing for up to three quarters of an hour queueing at the public conveniences!

Greenkeeping at Troon is a family profession, Norman has been in charge for 30 years, succeeding his father, who held the top job for 40 years. Brother William is first assistant. He was born in the greenkeepers bungalow on the edge of the course, where his well tended garden is a constant conversation opener with guests at the adjacent hotel.

Royal Troon in the middle of June, with barely six weeks to bring the course to perfection, resembled a cross between a building site and a full scale army manoeuvre. Whilst the twelve greenkeepers were battling to nurture the grass on greens, tees and fairways, yellow British Telecom vans were everywhere, tent framework was under construction and a virtual battalion of scaffolders were erecting stands at every vantage point

around the course.

Add to that the TV towers, positioned to home in on every shot over 7,094 yards and greenkeepers at least will realise Norman and his crew were working under more than a degree of difficulty.

The mild winter enjoyed by all golf courses in the UK did enable the staff to progress a great deal of work on the course, including revetting 60 of the 80 plus bunkers. They have also put in a new sand trap on the left of the fairway up the eighteenth and built a championship tee some 27 yards further back to give the finish a bit of bite. The final hole now measures 452 yards, which will require at least a 5 iron for the second shot for even the big hitters.

If there is a north westerly gale blowing down the fairway from the clubhouse, then many will find it difficult to get up with a much longer iron.

Wind, the feature of all links courses can be particularly punishing at Royal Troon. Those who can remember the

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The 7th green with the Postage Stamp in the background

last time the Open was played here in 1982 will recall that Nick Price, runner up last year at Royal Lytham was in a commanding position, three shots clear of the field as he stood on the 13th tee. By the time he sunk his final putt on the 18th he had dropped four shots and handed the Open Championship to Tom Watson.

Who will eventually be proclaimed "Champion" was far from Norman's mind in June, his thoughts were how to ensure the course met with the requirements of the members and the R & A Championship Committee. Although his ultimate goal is a superb course without blemish for eight days at the end of July, it is after all a members course for their playing pleasure.

Not only does he have to maintain Royal Troon, given majestic status following the 1973 Open Championship, but also the 18 hole Portland course and the nine hole "childrens course", though both these courses will be submerged under tents and car parks for the duration. But leading up to the closure for play two weeks before the main event they have to be kept playable for the members.

The private clubs of Royal Troon and Portland are under the same committee management, but have separate clubhouses. To further complicate the arrangements, the ladies play the Portland course, but on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, they are allowed to play Royal Troon, though it must be said they find it a bit tough.

Last winter an exceptionally high tide swept up the Firth of Clyde, over the dunes on the sea side of the course, leaving a dreadful mess of debris that took weeks to clear.

It also washed away part of the outer edges of the opening holes, but the problem was solved by bringing in sand from further down the coast, banking it up and pegging down plastic netting. This has provided a secure base for the vegetation to grow through giving the fringe area greater strength. Though according to Norman, once the local press had the glimmer of a story that there had been a sea invasion it was not long before they were predicting that the Open Championship course was floating off into the Irish Sea.

Water is the one commodity that is needed prior to the beginning of July. This part of the Ayrshire coast has suffered in common with others from a pre-longed period of drought. Fairways need cutting barely once a week and the rough is little longer than the cut grass.

There is however plenty of water for the irrigation system, mainly Water-mation, changed over some years ago from Toro. A 22,000 gallon storage tank is fed from the Gyaws Burn, which conveniently runs through a pipe under the soil and machinery shed.

Under a wooden trap, some fifteen feet below runs pure Scottish water, "Quite good enough to drink", says Norman, though he agrees he has not tried it. A submersible pump switches in when the storage tank drops by a third. "Even in the longest period of drought there has always been running water through the burn", he added.

His irrigation will need updating with the latest computerised system at some time in the future, but for the time being it handles the two courses adequately. Two new safety cut outs have been incorporated recently, but

he finds they are so sensitive, the slightest malfunction will switch off the whole system.

Despite all the digging and cable laying around the course, to date there has only been one hiccup and that was up in front of the club house when a scaffolder, anchoring down a seating structure severed the main pipe. It was not long before Norman had a telephone call to his bungalow asking if course alterations were to include a lake.

A new piece of equipment, acquired this year on a recommendation from the consultant agronomist from the STRI has been the Australian manufactured Multi-core. This versatile machine has sets of hollow tines of various sizes, including some as slim as a pencil.

Royal Troon has been using the machine with the smallest tines in a close pattern to remove cores over some hard packed areas that despite the use of wetting agents will not take in water. Norman told me that it is as if the section of the greens affected had acquired a waterproof layer, probably caused by a one time fungal infection. The close pattern of small holes made by the machine hardly disturbs the surface and putting is not affected. After a top dressing of sand the green surface quickly returns to normal.

His most useful equipment item is a large soil riddler that will load top dressing on a conveyor belt into the Cushman. There were problems initially from fumes in the extensive soil shed, but this was overcome by feeding pipes out through the wall.

His soil shed would be the envy of most greenkeepers, spacious, good light and easy access from either end. An ideal place to prepare compost on

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a wet day.

Another good buy in recent years has been a small Kubota compact tractor, offered initially by a local caravan site owner in financial difficulties, who had used the machine with rotary cutters. The club thought at the price it would be ideal for rough cutting, but they have discovered the compact is multi-functional and is in constant demand for all manner of jobs around the course.

Norman added that they never thought they had need for a small compact tractor, though since it arrived it has never stop working.

One hazard for golfers playing the links over which he has little control is the nearby Prestwick Airport. Jumbos taking off for the USA and Canada, fly directly up the length of the course, with ear shattering noise. During the Open Championship, air traffic control have agreed that if conditions are right they will endeavour to change the flight path to direct aircraft away from the event, but if the prevailing wind is not in their favour then there is nothing to be done.

It is to be hoped Concorde will not be making an appearance as a spell of recent training flights shook the sur-

rounding properties to their foundations.

There is always a warm welcome at Royal Troon for visiting greenkeepers and course managers, a welcome that Norman thought might be extended to him on a recent trip to the USA. He mentioned to the Committee that he would like to visit Augusta and as Charlie Yates, winner of the Amateur Championship in 1938, had an official position at America's most exclusive club it was suggested he should be contacted to make the necessary arrangements.

Norman, not wanting any special treatment, decided it was not necessary, so he drove the 100 miles from his holiday home to the course and arrived unannounced.

He explained to the gate keeper, who he was, where he had come from and was somewhat "miffed" to be told to turn his car round and go. "I don't care where you've come from, nobody, but nobody comes past these gates". So he had no option but to drive a hundred miles back without seeing a blade of grass.

Later however he was introduced to other golf courses in the USA, where he said the welcome was quite outstanding. Not only was he given a

conducted tour but a golf buggy and set of clubs were put at his disposal. It was only after his return that he discovered Charlie Yates lived in the same town where he was staying and he passed by his house almost every day!

"I may have another go sometime in the future", said Norman, "but this time we will make prior arrangements". We are sure this warm and friendly Scot, will be given the red carpet treatment.

But to return to the Open Championship. Just who will emerge as the 1989 winner. Will it be a repeat for Seve Ballesteros, can Nick Faldo, the US Masters Champion add another crown, will Curtis Strange make it an Open double? Norman Fergusson has a sneaking regard for Nick Price. He would have won at Lytham had not Ballesteros produced a final round of 65, a score only achieved once previously on the last day of an Open Championship.

Although it is said a competitor only has one chance, Price has been there twice, perhaps it could be third time lucky. I am going to take Norman's tip with a small wager.



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