

# Out ● On ● The ● Course

## Bill Lawson



### John Campbell met EIGGA chairman and Heswall GC course manager Bill Lawson.

HESWALL is one of those delightful and interesting courses on the Wirral peninsula. It overlooks the Dee Estuary to the Welsh coast beyond and this contributes to an impressive panoramic backdrop.

Although it cannot be termed a

seaside course, it has all the essential ingredients, with a whiff of the ozone and gently undulating terrain. The exposed nature of the course layout and vagaries of wind and weather all combine to convey an illusion of links golf at its best.

The testing course's trim and tidy condition bears testimony to all the dedicated efforts of the articulate and likeable course manager Bill Lawson, 48, and his enthusiastic greenkeeping staff. "I'm a Liver-

*Continued overleaf...*

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The Dee Estuary and Welsh coast provide the backdrop as a Hydromain works the 18th green.

puddian," Bill said "and came to Heswall Golf Club 20 years ago with my wife Wyn because we liked the area." The couple now have a 16-year-old daughter Kirsty.

Bill is undoubtedly a knowledgeable and engaging personality who has the interests of his profession at heart. As chairman of the English and International Golf Greenkeepers' Association, his administrative ability and ambitious drive make him an ideal candidate for such a responsible position. Under his leadership, EIGGA is bound to progress in the right direction.

I'm pleased to say Bill is an avid reader of *Greenkeeper*. He added: "I would like to see a little more emphasis towards the younger greenkeeper. It pleased me to see a contribution from one of my staff in a recent issue. More young men in the business should be encouraged to write for the magazine — it's the ideal way to communicate."

But back to the man... How, I wondered, did he break into the profession?

"I came into it straight from school because I relished the challenge of an outdoor life. I started off working for a landscaping company building golf courses in the Merseyside area and was involved in the construction of Lee Park Golf Course on the outskirts of Liverpool, where I eventually became head greenkeeper. I moved to Heswall in 1965.

"Maintaining a golf course on its estuary is not an easy task — there is little shelter and we are often buffeted by the elements. The soil on the course is mainly heavy and the prevailing wind keeps it cold until well into the growing season. Therefore, spring growth is usually late with us. By comparison, there are tree lined courses of great quality, such as Sandiway and Delamere Forest, nearby and unfortunately golfers sometimes try to compare us with these sheltered courses where growth response is much more rapid early in the season.

"Another problem we have to contend with is the amount of weeds that move around the estuary. There are areas on my course where I must keep the rough under control. If I don't, weeds like spartina will quickly invade the turf. So I have to be constantly on the watch for any infestation of marshland weeds. Species such as toadrush, mat grass, etc, can quickly take over."

### Prospects

Bill has some interesting views on the prospects for young men coming into greenkeeping. "If a lad likes to work out of doors in all kinds of weather, I would recommend greenkeeping as a career, but I would like to see clubs give him

every opportunity right from the start of his employment," he said. "Education and training are important, so he should be allowed to attend the nearest and best college with the facilities and syllabus to teach the science of turf culture and other related subjects.

"Young lads should not be merely regarded as a source of cheap labour for a few years and then cast aside. This is a difficult time for greenkeeping — a lot of people don't understand a lot about our business and have too much to say about it. If a young man can stand the pressures, I would have no hesitation in advising him to take up greenkeeping. He has to be aware that a lot of diplomacy and tact is needed, for we have to deal with all kinds of people.

"Few greenkeepers could honestly say that criticism does not affect them. If it doesn't, then I am not too sure they think enough about the job. While we should be prepared to accept constructive criticism, there are times when we have to listen to unfair opinions about the course's condition after a golfer has had a bad round. One has to be thick-skinned at times to shrug off ill-timed remarks that are unjustified. We constantly tread a difficult path and it would be true to say that most greenkeepers worry about their jobs.

"I think greenkeeper training at present is as good as its ever been

and by saying that I don't mean it is perfect by any means. The educational facilities in Scotland are by far the best. But now that we in England have arrived at the stage of picking out four or five colleges with the right type of syllabus and lectures, educational training now is going forward and standards should gradually rise as this is reflected in better quality maintenance.

"The only thing that worries me is the difference of opinion over the type of greens we want. Golfers tend to forget that greenkeepers will produce what they can to the best of their ability. It is difficult for young men attending colleges to be told the way to prepare a golf green and then get other opinions through the media preaching something entirely different.

"I have been associated with greenkeeper training for the past 15 years and am involved with the Cheshire College of Agriculture. We have a close relationship with the English Golf Union and the liaison committee, as well as working closely with the trade. We are well in advance of most colleges now, but the thing

that concerns us still is the diversity of opinion in the media about greenkeeping practices. I think there should be uniformity of teaching on this subject, so there is no confusion in the minds of young men being trained.

"Greenkeeping experts, such as Jim Arthur, Peter Hayes and yourself are the only competent people with the length of experience to voice an opinion and I'm not sure about anybody else.

### Experience

"Once a head greenkeeper has had five years plus experience on his own course, he should have acquired enough local knowledge to allow him to adapt his skill and training to keep the course in satisfactory playing order to satisfy the membership. However, there are occasions when we have problems and it makes sense to bring in a properly qualified agronomist to give an independent, expert opinion. He can also help when it comes to getting an essential item of new machinery, for his advice may influence the committee on the

necessity to make the investment."

"We now have very efficient, sophisticated equipment for mowing, but I would like to see some improvements in the methods of aeration from shallow to deep penetration without causing quite so much disturbance to the playing surface of greens. I wouldn't deny that the modern machinery for this task does a good job, but this is one phase of maintenance that seems to upset a lot of golfers. There are times of the year when they accept that this kind of work has to be done and they are prepared to put up with a certain amount of inconvenience. But some of this work is completely unacceptable to them and I am inclined to agree.

"I would like to see improved methods of aeration for golf greens, whether it be hollow or slit tining, etc, at the depth we require with the minimum surface disturbance. The modern machinery for aeration is good, but I am concerned that it is getting bigger. It causes upheaval and does do a certain amount of damage to the turf. Only time will tell what the long term effects of some

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Heswall's clubhouse occupies a commanding position.

## Out ● On ● The ● Course Continued...

of our greenkeeping methods are going to be."

"Vandals are now part and parcel of modern society and greenkeepers have got to expect some intrusion at times from them. Their favourite game is to damage turf on the greens — having a reserve of quality turf can help restore good playing conditions as quickly as possible. I remember one occasion when we had some of our greens vandalised overnight before the Cheshire Championship. Huge lumps of turf were gouged out of the greens and it was a dismal sight, but we were undaunted.

"By patiently gathering up all the displaced bits of turf and painstakingly replacing them like pieces of a jigsaw, we were able to get the greens back into reasonable shape for play.

"Security at our isolated equipment sheds on the course is a problem that has become more serious over the last 18 months. We have had three break-ins in succession within that period and on each occasion the thieves took the petrol tanks off machines. The price of petrol makes it a much sought after commodity by villains and it is not a pleasant experience to open up your sheds in the morning and find all the petrol tanks gone, particularly when you have a heavy mowing schedule planned. I know from bitter experience that new petrol tanks are not easy to get in a hurry.

"We plan to increase security by fencing in the whole equipment compound and fitting the sheds with a burglar alarm and lights. Some of the machinery is now kept near the clubhouse."

With a keen interest in greenkeeper training, Bill has specific points on how to deal with staff. "The type of training I prefer to give a young lad from the first day he comes is, first and foremost, to make him part of the team and let him know that he is not being employed just to rake bunkers.

### Sophisticated

"I like to put him with other members of the staff handling sophisticated machinery. I don't mean that he should be using the equipment from day one, but once he has become familiar with the course, it is good for him to get acquainted with all the machinery at an early stage by talking to the operators and seeing how servicing is done.

"Any young man with enthusiasm and a keen interest soon picks things up and quickly learns some of the tricks of the trade. By patiently coaching him along and studying his attitude to the job, you soon find out when he is ready to handle expensive items of sophisticated equipment.

"Over the years we have trained seven young men who have had the ambition to succeed and they are

now all skilled greenkeepers in various parts of the country. One of them, I am pleased to say, has got himself a job in Delaware, USA. I have enjoyed the privilege of helping to expand their practical knowledge on many aspects of course maintenance and the club has always taken a keen interest in their training and education."

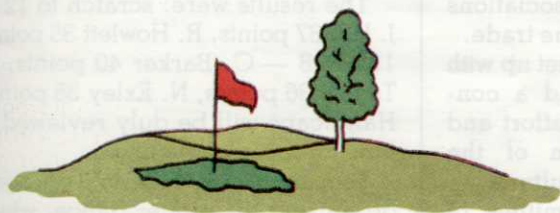
Bill remembers particular individuals who were a great help to him in the early days of his career. "I recall how helpful Tom Bridges, head greenkeeper at Royal Liverpool, was and also Bill Bridges of Wallasey Golf Club. They were men you could go and talk to because they had been in greenkeeping a long time. I also had lots of good advice from Duggie Pate at Royal Birkdale.

"I have always considered Heswall a beautiful site to work on and I'm fortunate in that respect. The clubhouse is in a commanding position overlooking most of the layout, so I can't afford to have an untidy course. At the same time, we don't pay too much attention to the ponds on the course, for we like to preserve a natural look to them. We do some work on the edges to keep them opened up for the wild duck that visit us from the river, but we don't keep them groomed like they do on American courses.

"Most of our rough can easily get very thick, so we have to keep it cut short. I like to look upon Heswall as the kind of course that all players will enjoy and, as far as I'm concerned, that is the object of the exercise. The pattern of greenkeeping on any golf course is largely up to the man in charge and it is up to him to maintain a standard of upkeep that will please the membership. That has always been my policy."

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