

OPEN

Invitation

Tom O'Brien was instantly impressed with Royal Birkdale when he walked the course for the first time 13 years ago. At the age of 48, he accepted the Head Greenkeeper's post in what could have been his last opportunity to handle an Open Championship, as well as his first. JOHN NELSON met the man who is again preparing his course for a world-class test of golf

Tom O'Brien, B.E.M., is the name. On his shoulders rests the reputation of Royal Birkdale for providing a world-class test of golf at The 120th Open in July. It could not be in better hands.

Tom's the head greenkeeper and this will be his second Open preparation. He had his baptism in 1983 and although it was an experience not without its traumas, his course was universally acclaimed. Now, once again, he's in the hot seat, under the spotlight. What kind of man is he? How has he gone about preparing the course? Was it a benefit having done it before? How can other head greenkeepers gain from such experience?

Golf and greenkeeping have been his whole life. Indeed, he grew up as part of the Scottish tradition whereby golf was the natural thing to do. Everyone played and virtually every village had its own course. He comes from Muirhead, Glasgow originally and on leaving school immediately started a career as a greenkeeper. He joined his local club – Mount Ellen – as the junior member of its green staff.

Mount Ellen is a downland course and Tom joined a team of four. He stayed 17 years and there he learnt his craft – as well as marrying a local girl and raising two sons. In those days – as always I guess – it was the head greenkeeper who determined whether or not you made the grade. Tom was lucky. The Mount Ellen head insisted on the highest standards, taught Tom all he knew, and made sure he got a thorough training. It was all practical training and know-how, of course. Tom didn't have the opportunity for studying college theory, but this didn't turn him against academic learning or against those who were college trained. He accepts the academic view – except when it goes against common-sense! He was taught always to listen to other views – and then make up his own mind.

Anyway it paid off. He was able to join the ranks of head greenkeeper and get his own course. It was not initially



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→ in Scotland, but France, where he became 'superintendent' at a USAF Base course near Paris. He liked it there, but eventually felt the urge to return to Scotland. He successfully applied for the head greenkeeper post at Gullane, with its three courses. This was his first exposure to links courses and he was, and remains, full of praise for the Gullane links.

He also got to know Muirfield and its head greenkeeper. Muirfield was a current venue for The Open and the Gullane links were used for qualifying. It was at Gullane that he first began to have ambitions to handle an Open Championship. He realised, however, that this would mean leaving Gullane and although he speculated about Muirfield he decided it would be foolish to wait for the vacancy of head greenkeeper to occur since there was no guarantee of his getting it. He would have to look elsewhere.

Then as now, there were just seven Open Championship venues, four in Scotland and three in England, so the choice was limited. He accepted the need for patience and resigned himself to possibly a long wait.

The first to become vacant was Royal Birkdale in 1978. Tom discussed it with his wife, applied – and the rest, as they say, is history. He was 48, and felt this could well be his last opportunity – as well as his first!

Arriving early, he walked the course and was instantly impressed. Notwithstanding the splendour of Gullane, he'd never seen a more inviting course and it instantly appealed. 'You can tell immediately' he said, 'if a course is for you', and Royal Birkdale was. He felt at home with its sense of feel, of visual appeal and scale, and it all felt right.

Tom hadn't rated his chances over highly. He lacked academic qualifications, but had 33 years experience of greenkeeping, caring for top class links courses as well as downland and parkland courses and, of course, he was a successful head greenkeeper.

He got the job and he's never looked back. He's enjoyed every minute and the family immediately took to Southport where they've settled. When the day comes to retire, he'll stay there.

He was all set to realise every greenkeeper's ambition – to handle an Open Championship. This was to be in 1983, so he had ample opportunity to get to know his course and its idiosyncrasies – and to worry about it, of course. In the event – apart from one hiccup – it all turned out alright. But he found it a humbling experience. 'The realisation comes' he said, 'that you've been entrusted with ensuring that your course stand up to scrutiny – that it provides the best test for the world's best golfers'.

The R&A help beforehand by inviting head greenkeepers from all Open venues to be its guests at prior Opens, and in Tom's case he was to visit four other venues before his own ordeal.

He now thinks he was perhaps a bit too cautious with his cutting of the greens in 1983 and also revealed that it was during this, his first Open, that he suffered his greatest



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upset. A 'phone call in the early hours told that the 6th green had been sabotaged. Could he come at once? He was collected by police car.

Vandals had dug it up in six places to a depth and width of over a foot and slogans had been spray painted all over the green. A protest group claimed responsibility. Tom inspected the damage by torchlight and made plans for a 4am start to patch things up. But by daylight it was obvious that it would take months to restore the green to its former glory. It must have come close to breaking Tom's heart. He said he'd never felt so low.

In the event, start of play was delayed by just 20 minutes – to allow the repair work to be completed. The tee was brought forward 30-40 yards to make it possible to carry the cross bunkers and then play a short iron to the green. Damaged areas were designated G.U.R. and two undamaged avenues allowed players to replace their ball to hole out. Part of the fringe was cut to make it part of the putting surface. Five white slogans were repainted green to make them less legible and the BBC agreed not to give any TV exposure, thus minimising the publicity sought by the vandals.

The R&A subsequently stated that it would meet any cost involved and give any assistance required in restoring the green to the very fine standard of the other 17 greens.

Tom explained his preparation for this year's Open – especially the greens – and his thinking behind it. He was somewhat sceptical about media talk that there was a special programme. 'Royal Birkdale', he said, 'is a members' course and they expect to be able to play on it every day.'

So his programme is special every day. The course must be maintained in first class condition 365 days a year – including Christmas Day! Unlike Augusta, the course is not closed for work to be carried out without interruption. Nor is there the luxury of a few days grace once The Open is over. People queue to be first to play the course the very next day.

It's all very well for tournament players to say that the greens will be great for members when they leave. He appreciates the need for greens to be at their peak from the beginning of the tournament, but they don't have to maintain them afterwards – day in, day out – or carry the can if he loses them afterwards. The same applies to tees, for although some are created just for The Open, many are not. Many are members tees of limited size, and used continually up to, during and immediately after by members and visitors. Some holes would lose their character if played from new tees, the 9th being a good example, for they would have to remove the legendary marker post landmark for the drive!

Having said this, Tom readily admitted that he took his preparation for The Open very seriously. His approach is systematic and includes aeration, feeding, minimum watering and measured grass cutting.

Commenting on the quality of Birkdale sand, he said it was very fine, didn't retain water and therefore must be kept



Royal Birkdale's working calendar

AERATION: Throughout the year Tom O'Brien aerates the greens weekly, stepped up at the back end of the year to 2/3 times a week.

TOP DRESSING: He dresses the greens once a month before The Open with a Buxton sand of a consistent grade and particle size, specified by the STRI.

VERTICUTS: Every two weeks until two weeks before the tournament.

TURF GROOMING: He uses Turf Groomers all the time. The height is adjusted according to grass growth.

GRASS GROWTH: Greens are cut every day. In January, February and March there isn't much growth because the turf is links grass and east winds retard development. It's more a case of trimming than cutting – he calls it 'topping'.

GRASS CUTS: He cuts in two directions at 90 degrees. During The Open week he cuts the greens three times a day – once early morning, twice at night.

LENGTH OF CUT: Before The Open – three-sixteenths, during The Open – one-eighth of an inch.

WATERING: Yes, he uses water, but only if absolutely necessary.

damp but not swamped. This, he emphasised, is where local knowledge was so important – as it was with the weather – and why he would stick with his hard-won knowledge about his own course and not be overawed by those who, whilst undisputably expert in their own fields, lacked detailed local knowledge.

The variable and unpredictable local weather proved that a rigid programme wouldn't work. To plan to carry out the same jobs every Monday morning would result in complete frustration. Thus he'd learnt to adapt to what each day brought with it.

Asked if the snow in February, which stayed around, had affected his schedule, he opined that it had been a blessing in disguise. It allowed the ground to rest and there had been no ill-effects, the often magnifying action of sun on snow causing no burn-up.

Happy with his preparation up to the start of the golf season, he'd been very gratified when the R&A at their first Open preview for the media, held in March, declared themselves very satisfied with the course.

But then he'd had to cope with a prolonged drought. Throughout May there'd been the least rainfall for 100 years. The Weather Centre reported a record low of 8.4mm for the month and there was no sign of rain to come!

Nonetheless conscious that he would be judged by his greens, he drew a contrast between Birkdale and Augusta, where the one topic of player conversation would be the greens and their speed compared with previous years, by saying that his test of golf started with each tee and the winner would be the one who played the best golf from tee to green as well as putting the best.

His greens, he promised, would have enough pace to pose a real challenge although they would not be as fast as Augusta. Nor did they have Augusta's severe undulations – in fact they appear on TV as seemingly bland and flat. But they do have their own subtleties – ask any member!

It's his policy to make all the greens the same speed, but he must work with the natural conditions and these vary for different greens. 'The 6th is probably the fastest' he said, 'but take, for example, the 2nd and 8th and compare them.' The 2nd is sheltered from the sun and protected from wind by trees, whereas the 8th is exposed and unprotected. He confessed he didn't use a stimpmeter or pentrometer but had his own ways to measure speed and firmness.

He smiled with gentle irony as he told of the extra staff drafted in for The Open. 'If they're necessary now, they're surely necessary all the time, aren't they?' he asked.

A golfer himself, he thought it helped him as a greenkeeper. He plays much less now and his handicap has risen from nine to nearer 18. He doesn't play at Royal Birkdale although he started off that way, finding he didn't enjoy his golf as he was always seeing little things that demanded attention. Now he plays at Southport Old Links and by playing away from home any perceived problems are not his, and he enjoys his golf.

He is looking forward to his second Open Championship, not least because he meets greenkeepers from other Open venues and BIGGA members who come to help him keep the course in good order during the event. For their part I am sure they also will be looking forward to meeting Tom. I doubt if any other greenkeeper is held in higher esteem than Tom O'Brien, Head Greenkeeper, Royal Birkdale Golf Club.

● The author, John Nelson, is a member at Hillside, one of the four Open qualifying courses.