

Welsh wizardry at work

Royal St David's Golf Club, venue for BIGGA's National Tournament, is in the highly capable hands of Roger Kerry. In search of champagne air and a meeting with the Club's amiable Welsh greenkeeping wizard, DAVID WHITE found himself breathing the real atmosphere of golf, mingled with a mellow air of tradition...



The glorious triumphs of amateur golfer Harold Horsfall Hilton, winner of countless titles including two Open Championships in 1892 and 1897, a US Amateur title in 1911 and three British Amateur Championships in 1900, 1901 and 1911, are forever enshrined in golf's glittering Vallhala. That Hilton was inordinately fond of Royal St Davids at Harlech is equally well recorded; and it is in memory of this great warrior that members compete for

the Harold Hilton Gold Medal, one of their premier trophies.

Wandering through the delightfully atmospheric clubhouse, still mercifully free from plasticised twentieth century 'improvements', one can almost feel the ghost of Harold beckoning, pointing to the honours boards with satisfaction and giving the Hilton nod of approval. The place positively reeks of history and upon its hallowed walls some very famous names peer down, written in gold leaf as winners of major Club titles.

Amongst them, the golfing achievements of Welshman Roger Kerry appear – on the Hilton Gold Medal winners board no less – and although his golfing prowess is well recorded as part of the Club's illustrious history; it is for entirely different achievements that Roger will perhaps be best remembered.

Roger Kerry, pictured, is Royal St David's Head Greenkeeper, a linksland course that is one of Britain's finest and certainly the most atmospherically alluring of all. Harlech itself is a quiet little town, and one might be forgiven for thinking that notwithstanding the brooding Castle and the



staggering views across to the mountains of Snowdonia it may well have settled into being a quick photographic stop on the Welsh tourist route. Forgiven perhaps but totally, utterly wrong; for the biggest draw – the main and everlasting attraction – is the links course in care of Roger Kerry, a talented low handicap golfer and a dedicated greenkeeper.

Keeping a true links course in top class order has never been easy, for quite apart from the constant vagaries of wind and salt-laden air, there is the feeling that one ought not to tamper too much with what is in every way natural. The original architect of St David's (it became 'Royal' around 1905) is not recorded, perhaps because these great links apparently just 'happened', with a party of men hell bent on getting out to play using crude work tools along with what Mother Nature and the elements had provided. Simplistic perhaps, but apart from some sympathetic work done on bunkering in 1960 by dear old Fred Hawtree, the course remains pretty well intact and like all good seaside courses has a natural 'feel' about it. The skillful layout fol-



lows the contour of the dunes and hillocks and consequently no two fairways run parallel, with tantalising breezes keeping even the most talented golfer guessing. Host to BIGGA's National Tournament in August, it plays to 6427 yards with a par of 69 and a SSS of 71 and comprises five threes, eleven fours and two fives.

Returning to Roger – the proud keeper of the green – this 42 year old has been at Royal St David's for 13 years, working in harmony with a dedicated staff of five, including deputy head greenkeeper John Kerry, Roger's twin brother. All staff are BIGGA members and three are keen golfers. The first thing that strikes home in talking with him is just how progressive the thinking behind the place really is. This is no sleepy little Welsh backwater, far from it, and the Club has grasped the nettle firmly with regard to 'The Way Forward' and practices what the R and A preaches by fielding a green committee of just three, Roger included. This pioneering attitude is very much to Roger's liking, with green chairman, Alan Ellis, having held office for ten unbroken years and very much a personal friend. In other ways they are also streaks ahead, with progress seen to work in more subtle ways. Roger's full membership of the Club is encouraged (their greenkeepers deservedly pay just 25% of the fee) and is a good example of forward thinking and a clear way of eliminating 'them and us' attitudes still prevalent at some Clubs – of forelock pulling and knowing one's place. Royal St David's progression is such that other Clubs might do well to emulate them.

We talked of earlier visits from Jim Arthur and how his timely advice stood the course in such good stead. He recalled how Jim would insist on certain practices being carried out and how closely the more recent recommendations of STRI's agronomist Roger Evans still follow Jim's edicts of a decade ago. Greens are slit upwards of 20 times a year and dressed with a 50/50 mixture of Fen dress and local dune sand, with a once niggling problem with Dry patch now eliminated. From being almost 100% meadow grass they now have some 65% bents on greens and about 50% bent on fairways.

In 1990, during drought conditions, a calculated decision was made to allow the fairways to burn-out and this helped to eliminate many unwelcome invaders. Lies, like all good links courses, are inclined to be tight and greens are usually slick, the native sandy loam and seaside weather allowing little or no backspin. On that score, Roger expressed surprise at the 'Americanisation' of Royal Birkdale during The Open held there in 1983. 'It wasn't links golf as we know it', he said, and recalled how some members became fired with the idea of seeing the same target style golf at Royal St Davids. They soon came to appreciate that it wasn't right for such a traditional course, one where the style lends itself to the

Roger Kerry on the BIGGA National Tournament: 'I'll not be trying for anything unusual or try to 'trick' the course up... presentation will be my main goal and I'll be aiming for a course that will be both fair and a good test of golf. But I shall be on tenterhooks until the final putt is sunk'

run-up shot. 'When BIGGA members come here in August they will find precious little back-spin' says Roger, and suggests that practice with fairway woods will pay dividends, especially on some of the longer par fours, where a well-struck wood may be necessary to get up in regulation. There are 100 bunkers, placed strategically to catch the wild tee shot, though few, if any, come into play for long second shots, where running-on through wide approaches is the name of the game.

Of the Club itself, there are 700 members, of which about 400 are non-local. The Club operates a graduated membership package with subscriptions reducing as one moves further away from Harlech. Needless to say it is fully subscribed with long waiting lists. A vast increase in traffic, both of members and a continuous stream of visitors, has taken place over the past decade and play continues unabated throughout the year. It is to the great credit of Roger's team that the course looks and plays so well despite this

huge increase. Only once in 1990 was the course closed – whilst waiting for a thaw – though when surface frost is prevalent he quite rightly holds players at bay for two or three hours to prevent damage. 'Inevitably one gets a few grumbles', he grins, 'though in the main our members appreciate that such restrictions are for their own good, and the results speak for themselves'. Conversely, if there is one thing that perhaps rankles Roger it is the growing use of 'buggies'; and whilst no words were spoken as we watched one such machine being driven at maniac speed on ancient ground clearly unsuited – and subsequently ending up out of control and flying full speed over a precious green – his eyebrows raised in a "can you believe it" air of resignation. I have an idea the culprit was a visitor, but whoever he may have been, it is my opinion that venerated linksland is no place for these cursed modern contraptions. I'm equally certain that Harold Hilton, who walked at a spanking pace everywhere, would NOT approve!

Roger is a founder committee member of the new North Wales Section and speaks proudly of the achievements made in that sphere, of bringing North Wales into the mainstream. He is also an advocate of greenkeeper education and in practicing what he preaches, attends Reaseheath for Phase III management training. He sees his own progress in terms of earning potential inextricably linked with gaining further qualifications and as part of that pattern now presents five-year plans to the Club. As a result he is largely responsible for deciding his own policy and course maintenance strategy. 'The Club is a good one to work for' he says, with their policy of keeping abreast with up to date machinery something he applauds. His particular preference is for Toro machinery for greens and tees and these get upgraded every five years.

Asked about the forthcoming BIGGA National Tournament, Roger intimated that although he is no stranger to the big event – indeed International tournaments are often held at Royal St David's and the Welsh Ladies Championship was scheduled for just two weeks hence – he is more apprehensive at the thought of 120 greenkeepers casting their expert eye over his links than almost any other. 'I'll not be trying for anything unusual or try to 'trick' the course up', he said, 'presentation will be my main goal and I'll be aiming for a course that will be both fair and a good test of golf. But I shall be on tenterhooks until the final putt is sunk'. I left him with an assurance that if the course was as good in August as it is now he need have no such fears.

Leaving Harlech I took time for a whistlestop tour of the beautiful countryside and to wander into the Italianate fairytale village of Portmeirion, a jewel of a place just a few miles distant. For BIGGA members and partners, it all adds up to a wonderful August week that should not be missed.