

THE DAY A GOLF COURSE DROWNED



**...and how
the men of
West Kilbride
brought it
back to life**

The prospect of staging the Scottish Boys' Matchplay Championship with only 16 greens was never really a starter and Jim Paton knew this only too well. It was foolish even to contemplate, yet on January 5th 1991 this greenkeeper's nightmare came true, caused by a monstrous storm dumping its full icy wrath directly over West Kilbride golf course during the afternoon. The destruction took less time than it takes to play a round of golf, the desolation indicating a score of 'two under', two holes gone to a watery grave. Yes indeed, a 16 hole championship course seemed a distinct possibility.

Subsequent reclamation of the course, including those sectors that were literally hurled into the raging sea, was of such military order and precision that the accomplishment might have drawn admiration from General Stormin' Norman himself.

The day started peacefully enough, though trouble was certainly brewing in the air and no golfer ventured out that day to tackle West Kilbride's fair links, which • 22

84 days – from total wreck



On previous page: a view of the 14th green looking northwards during the eye of the storm. Above: the same scene today

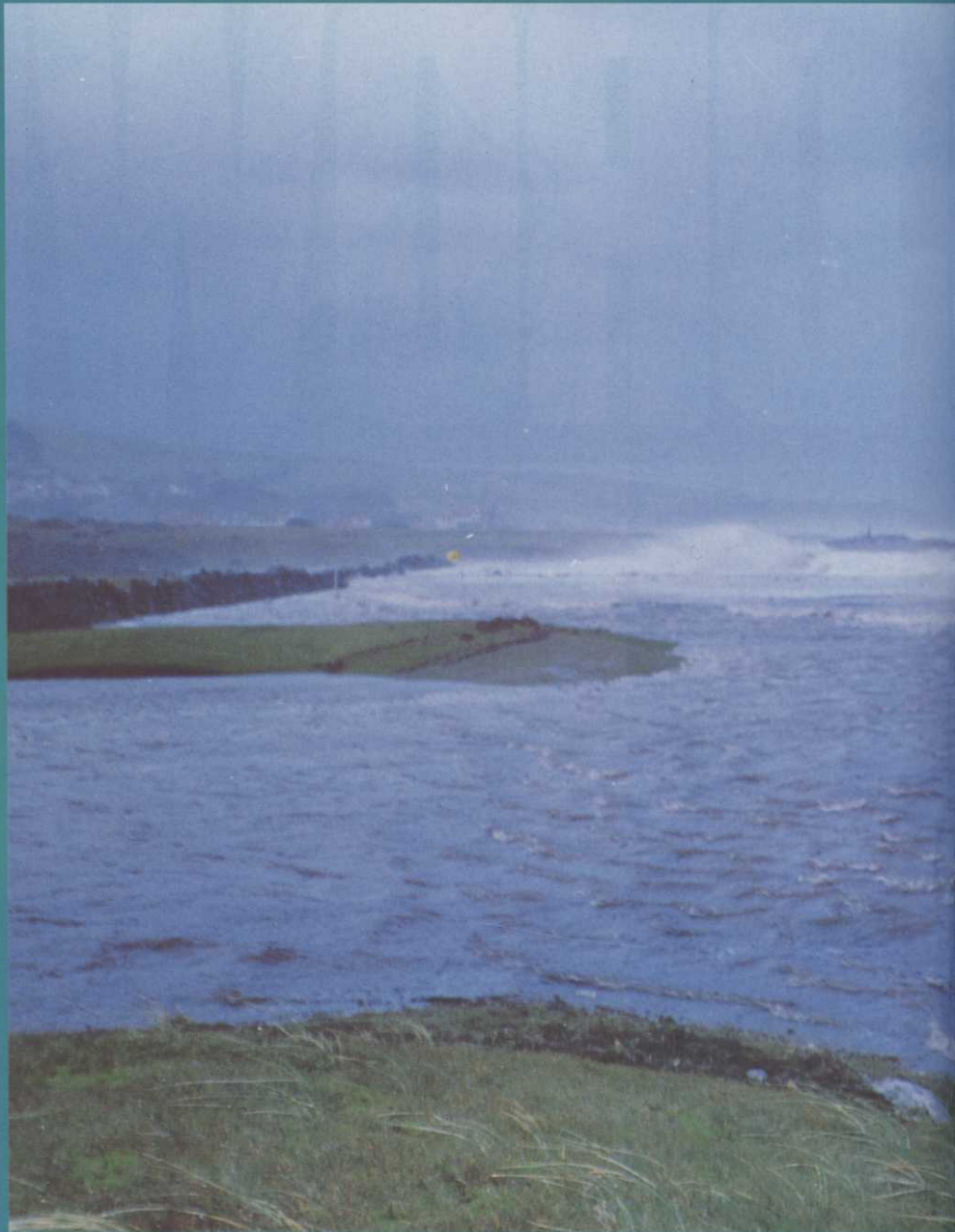


Above: What was left of the 14th tee – and what it looks like today, five months later

21 → are slap bang along the seashore of the Firth of Clyde and within sight of the Isle of Arran. Local wags are prone to quip 'if you can see the Isle it's going to rain, if you can't, it's already raining!'

At 1pm the storm eye hit West Kilbride, stripping vast chunks of golf course adjacent to the shore into the sea and dumping what was later called the six 'esses' – salt, silt, sand, shale, shells and seaweed – onto what but a few hours before had been the brightest jewel of golfing excellence twixt Troon and Greenock. The whole episode brought a brand new meaning to coastal erosion.

Men of West Kilbride – especially greenkeepers – are made of stern stuff and under the guidance of head greenkeeper Jim Paton, a masterplan was in operation within hours. Reviewing the aftermath, Jim's first priori-



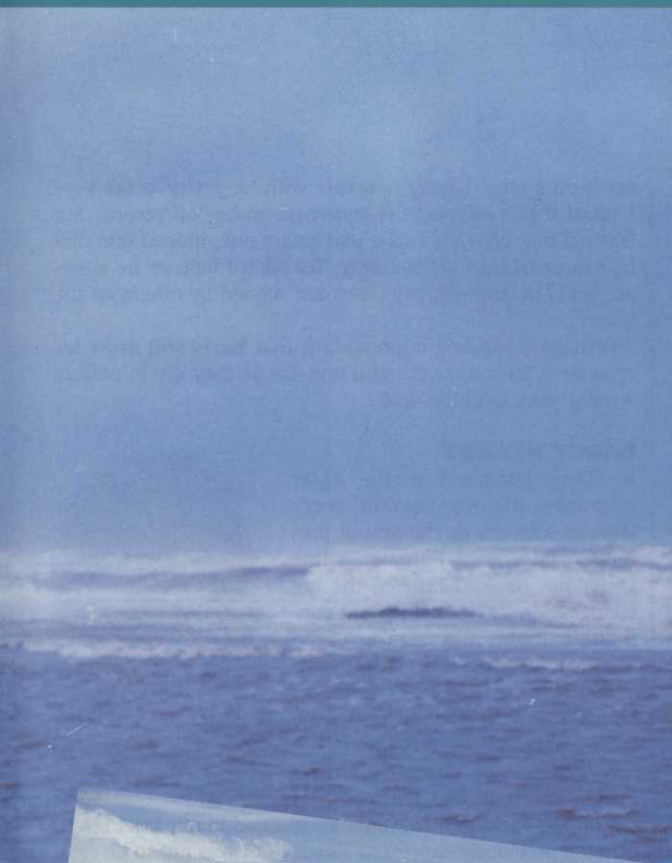
Same viewpoint, five months apart – but the dry stone wall to the left of the pictures is the only constant feature.

ty – since golfers will insist on playing their little game come what may – was to remove the hundreds of tons of detritus and wash away as much of the turf damaging salt water as was possible.

West Kilbride is no Titanic and there was never a thought of sinking, but Ayrshire is not Georgia and West Kilbride certainly doesn't have Augusta National's budget, machinery or manpower resources. This then was an exercise in hard graft, together with commandeering every available tractor, trailer, Cushman, wheelbarrow and willing shoulder.

All hands to the deck as the workforce sweated through the chill (it was January, remember) gave Jim hope that his primary aim – to speed recovery as swiftly as possible for member play – would soon be achieved and indeed, within 24 hours, the course rang once again

Back to totally respectable



The clean-up begins ...and is completed

to the sound of persimmon striking balata.

Damaged greens were nurtured back, though salt seemed unlikely to evaporate over a few days and this did cause problems of patchiness and burn-out, with traces still visible on two or three greens when I visited the links in June. The putting surfaces however, somehow miraculously remained firm and true.

Soon earth movers and excavators were scurrying across the wrecked beach, some good perhaps coming from the disaster in focussing attention, sharper than any plea made in council chambers, that erosion was a problem that would not go away. Subsequent efforts reveal solid progress made in dune and foreshore battlement re-enforcement, together with new tees and surfaced walkways immediately adjacent to the shoreline.

Like many a good drama this one had its happy end-

ing, for on April 1st – just 84 back-breaking days after the tempest – a proud Jim Paton and a relieved Club committee presented a rebuilt West Kilbride, complete and looking fresh as a young bride, to the cream of Scotland's youth for the Scottish Boys' Matchplay Championship. It would be grand to report the day loomed bright and sparky but it was not to be. The heavens opened once again and it rained and rained and rained – so much so that the Isle of Arran disappeared!

Somehow it didn't seem to matter to the boys, all of whom declared the event a great success, though there were sore backs nursed by Jim's stalwarts who stormed the breeches yet again, this time manning squeegees in their successful efforts to keep greens water-free. There's something about the cannie Scots, don't you know. It's called PRIDE.