

Bookings up and hotel prices stay the same for BIGGA Turf Management Exhibition 1993

Bookings are UP on this time last year, for the BIGGA Turf Management Exhibition in Harrogate, with a number of companies exhibiting for the first time.

Although it's early days, the stage is set for another hugely successful event. The 1992 exhibition was hailed by many to be the best so far.

The majority of exhibitors who took space in this year's exhibition, have booked their positions again for January. Exhibitions Officer Debbie Savage believes exhibitors are moving more quickly this year, in order to secure the best stand spaces.

And there's further good news for delegates. The Old Swan Hotel, situated just around the

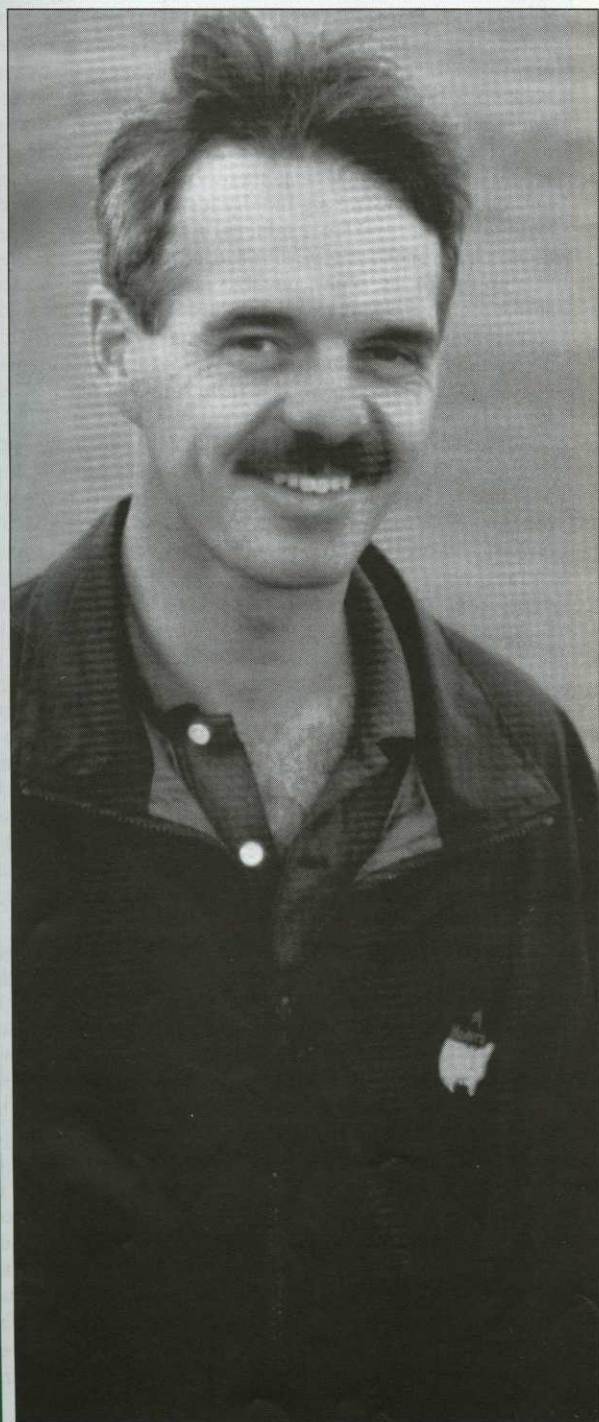


corner from the exhibition and focal point for a number of activities, have agreed to peg their prices for the 1993 BTME. Rates remain at £59 (single) per person and £72 (double) per room, including full English breakfast. Reservations can be made now by ringing direct on 0423 500055. Quote your atten-

dance to the BTME to reserve these rates.

As last year, the BTME Newline will be distributed in October. It will give visitors and delegates news and industry information on what they can expect to see at the show. Companies who have already booked their stand positions will soon be invited to contribute news of intended product launches, or any other relevant information. Information for the Newline can be sent straight away, however, to Debbie Savage at BIGGA HQ.

■ For more details about the show, or for a copy of the comprehensive BTME 1993 Information Pack, call Debbie on 03473 581 or fax 03473 8864.



THE OPEN

All eyes will soon be upon Muirfield for golf's premier tournament. Ready for the action is Chris Whittle, the course manager who went for his job with "guns blazing" for the chance to handle an Open venue. DAVID WHITE reports on the man and his mission

When the victor of the 121st Open Championship marches down the eighteenth fairway of Muirfield on July 19th, savouring the sweet smell of success and basking in the tumultuous cheers and adulation, there will be another who will share equally in that victory. His name? Christopher Alan Whittle, golf course manager to the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers at Muirfield, East Lothian, Scotland – the undisputed number one golf course in Great Britain.

Despite the clatter of grandstands being built and giant marquees being lifted high to the sky, the place that is Muirfield still retained its undoubted air of aristocratic elegance when I called to see Chris Whittle, so much so that the raising of voices or the revving of engines seemed tantamount to hooligan behaviour – one must always be on one's best mark in such august surroundings. Granted, the place was being turned into a circus arena for The Championship, with hundreds of contractors beavering away, but above the bustle Chris Whittle, pictured left, remained serenely calm, despite this being his Open preparation debut.

Chris and I had met before – at Royal Birkdale in '91 – and I had walked the links of Muirfield many times, falling for those subtle bunkers that lurk to trap the least weakness – fade or draw – and always impressed by the sheer discipline of the course: Muirfield wants good golf to be played, but it never allows liberties. I knew how good the course was as a golfing examination – now I could see that it was most exquisitely well kept. ➡

'Business as usual, but

My first question for Chris – I really wanted to know – was “how does an Englishman come to be managing the number one Scottish course, indeed the number one rated course in all of Britain, here in the very heartland of what many regard as Scotland’s Mecca”. His answer was honest and without an ounce of side – “Why not – I had always set my sights on managing an Open venue and when I saw this post advertised I went for it, all guns blazing”.

Chris’s story-book career in golf began in the time-honoured way as a schoolboy golfer who caddied on Formby Links. Although he became a banker on leaving school in 1971 this was short-lived, for he gave himself just six months in which to either like banking or quit – six months to the day he resigned! Straight to Formby he strode and asked for a job, which by good fortune was given to him, working as an apprentice greenkeeper under the inimitable Jimmy MacDonald, now head greenkeeper at Royal Lytham & St Annes.

“Jimmy has taught me just about everything I know”, Chris said, “he’s just about the best in the business and he certainly knows how to keep a ‘mean’ golf course”. Praise indeed, which perhaps explains why Chris needed no second bidding, on completion of five years at Formby, to join Jimmy at Royal Lytham. Good fortune continued when Jimmy’s deputy soon moved to Royal Dornoch, for Chris was offered the deputy’s job! Time moved on, skills were honed to perfection and Chris was ready in 1981 for his first ‘head’ job, close by at St Annes Old Links, a delicious course much loved by all who play upon it and known as a fine challenge for those who seek to qualify for The Open. The practice of keeping a ‘mean’ links continued at St Annes Old and in October 1988, well skilled and eminently well suited, Chris took up his present role as course manager of Muirfield.

“How does your present job as course manager manifest itself”, I asked, “Ninety per cent in directing and supervising the management of course and crew, with, if I’m lucky, ten per cent ‘hands-on’”, he replied. “The trouble is the minute I’m in a ‘hands-on’ situation, someone wants me, so my tendency now is to delegate more”.

He expanded on getting the job, telling the tale of driving from Lytham to Muirfield during Open week, the fateful Friday of the downpour and subsequent flooding, of turning on the TV in his hotel room and seeing Walter Woods pushing water off the ninth at Lytham. “I wondered what the hell was going on”, he grinned. “Could it happen at Muirfield”, I asked, “unlikely” the quick reply. “What happens here is that once the soil profile is wet it will take all the rain imaginable. It may show a temporary puddle or two, but once any dry layer is moist, which takes minutes, even if the heavens are open the course will drain beautifully – almost to the point of disbelief. Most of the sandy soil particles are uniform in size and the pull through is remarkable. One thing though, if there is a break in the drought, July will be the month, though God forbid it should happen during The Championship”.

Having been selected from a ‘field’ of 32 applicants, Chris started at Muirfield the week after the 1988 Home International Matches and just in time for winter preparations, so he quickly had to assess immediate needs, prioritise the work, and think about formulating a machinery replacement programme. “I’ve never had a bad employer”, Chris ventured, “but these folk are without doubt the best, good as their word, fully supportive in everything I do or ask for in my roll-over replacement programme, and very knowledgeable collectively in golf course management. They don’t want the place to be too green, they’re true links golfers to a

MUIRFIELD'S MAJOR MACHINERY

Daihatsu Jeep 1600 petrol*
David Brown 1190
Ford 1910
Kubota B8200 HST*
Kubota 1750 HST c/w Front Loader*
Ford 212& c/w Lewis Front Loader*
Ransomes Mounted 5 Hydraulic Mowers (8 blade)*
Ransomes Magna Quintuple Mowers
Votex Hayter Rotary Mower
Taarup Sialater Mower
Ransomes Merlin 300L Sprayer
Allman 220L Sprayer*
1.5 tonne Byre Tipping Trailer
1.5 tonne Kays Tipping Trailer*
1 tonne Wessex Tipping Trailer*
Wessex Transport Box*
Sisis Varicore*
Sisis Powaspread Topdresser*
Sisis Fineturf Slitter c/w Pressure Frame*
8/6 3-point Mounted Reversible Chain Harrows.
Ransomes 214 Verticut *
Ryan Renovaire Spiker*
Jacobsen Greens-King MkIVD c/w Greens units and Verticut units*
Jacobsen Tri-King 1671D*
Ransomes 180 Triple Mower
6 Ransomes Autocertes 20in. Mk3v
1 Ransomes Autocertes 20in. Mk2
2 Ransomes Autocertes 18in. MkB
3 Ransomes Marquis. 10 JLO Flymo GT2s
Allen Pro Brushcutter 43.

* Acquired over the past 4 years as part of a roll-over/replacement programme.

man, which is wonderful for me. We meet five times a year and I give my report on what has been done and what will be done. I also write an explanatory bulletin for the members notice board, which prepares them for any disruptive maintenance work and prevents futile questions”.

“Muirfield is about 200 miles north of the Fylde coast, but is much dryer, with around 50% less rain, though gales are a problem and an ‘overnighter’ will take upwards of 60 man-hours to replace bunker sand. We had eleven gales one spring, which took up most of my labour for weeks on end”.

“How long did it take you to get the course to your own personal high standards”, I asked, “well, it can never be perfect, for links maintenance is an on-going thing”, Chris replied. “We can seek perfection, but there is always something... the course is fully grassed, a mixture with a moderate degree of course grasses such as patches of rye, dating back to a time when seed for divoting was unspecified. We’re soon to start a campaign to remove this, for apart from the unsightly appearance it’s awkward to cut. The greens are fine, though we get a flush of *Poa annua* in April, but it soon goes as we are too dry for the weed to cope. We fertilise very little – I’m a minimal man in this respect and always have been – Jim Arthur proved to me the wisdom of this approach and I’m a devoted fan. Everything he ever showed me works very well and is so simple. Granted that sometimes it hurts before it gets better, but prevention is better than cure, of that I am convinced – ‘tis a pity more people don’t follow his creed, which, simply applied, is keep it basic”.

A typical playing season at Muirfield starts in April, though the Club don’t encourage stroke play and the average field for a medal is a mere handful. The proper game is foursomes. Weeds were a huge problem when Chris first arrived and over £2000 is spent annually on selective applications, not only for the course proper but also turf nurseries, paths and practice grounds – all call for treatment and they are now well on top of the problem. All watered is by hand – no automatic system – and though the idea of installing a system is discussed just about every year, the members express greater satisfaction in playing on a fine-textured, sometimes browning, turf at Muirfield than on a lush green one elsewhere! True links golf indeed. Chris opined that there might be an automatic need at the moment of Open Championship preparation, when they are busy chasing hosepipes around the course, but true to his minimalistic beliefs, he suggested that at the end of a season – any season – automatic water is about the last thing on his mind.

“Mainly the season is taken up with watering, weed spraying and mowing, just like any other course, and at the back-end of the year I usually get a Vertidrain in to treat at least part of the course, mainly fairways, tees and paths, and we begin our own aeration programme, with spiking, hollow tining, whatever is necessary. We also go mad on re-turfing, using our own nursery turf, because it must be down and rooted before the year end. This is very necessary, as we can get frost and gales, which really do crash in with a vengeance and bring us scuttling back to base to work on machinery or boundary work and scrub clearance. We are inundated with rabbits and employ contractors to do their worst – using gas; snares; shooting; ferrets or whatever. They are a huge problem and we actually had one tee collapse on us through underground burrowing: we backed a tractor on it and the whole thing sunk! We rebuilt it, fitted a reinforced plastic mesh below ground and have it netted off, which helps”.

“Tell me about your plans for The Open”, I asked. “It’s

more of it'

really business as usual, but more of it", Chris replied, "more intensive maintenance – and obviously we are protecting the greens and not cutting them quite so low – normally at this time we would cut at 3/16", mowing six days a week with three hand cuts and three by machine, but at the moment we are cutting at 1/4", though obviously we shall gradually lower to 1/8" when the Championship approaches – it will all be very gradual, ending up with a twice-daily cut using both hand machines and the Jacobsen Triplex, which we stipulated should have extra blades in the verticuts from 3/4" to 1/2" spacing – it's a great machine!

David Boocock, the STRI agronomist, is a regular caller, increasingly so during Open year and we think along the same lines. He's a great help and we sort out any problems together". I asked about the R&A influence, which Chris indicated was minimal, "I'm sure they would have greater input if things were not to their liking, and they've been around quite a bit over the past year playing, inspecting and walking the course. It seems they're happy. Bear in mind, however, I've worked at Clubs where major R&A events have been staged. I've had the Curtis Cup, Ryder Cup, English Amateur, British Amateur, Home Internationals, The Open whilst at Lytham and I've had the British Amateur since I've been here, so I'm not new to the task or the demands. The R&A folk work fantastically well, manage their side of this huge operation quite remarkably and ensure that contractors are in the right place and not running around where they shouldn't be – they smooth out a lot of wrinkles and are great at team work".

"Any particular problems this year", I asked, "Drought" the quickfire reply. "We have a bit of browning-off and moss is a recurring problem. It's been difficult to eradicate as we've had no growth to speak of until a few weeks go – just a typical East Lothian cold, dry spring – so we just get on with it. During the season we don't fertilise much, maybe two light feeds of an 8-0-0 on greens and tees, and this year we've dressed the fairways with a farmyard type slurry dressing, followed perhaps next year with a seaweed formula".

Almost inevitably my next question was, "what will you do to the greens, will you be doing anything special". Chris is a man who knows about tournament golf and has the answers: "Obviously we will increase the frequency of mowing, our greens are undulating and cutting at 1/8" will make them plenty fast enough. In the final analysis, of course, it will be down to the R&A to tell me if they are too fast, but I fancy they'll be fine. We cut at 1/8" for the British Amateur and they were plenty fast enough!" "Tell me about stimpmeter readings", I asked and again this was clearly answered by a man who knows: "I've got one but frankly I haven't found it helpful enough, undulations are such that you can get far too many variable readings – easily the best way to judge is to get out and play the course and all my nine staff are very observant players".

This team of nine includes a full time fitter, though with an increasingly large percentage of state-of-the-art machinery used, his time is now split 50/50 with on-course work. A good example of changing ancient for modern is seen on the cylinder grinding side: from somewhat archaic old grinders capable of handling only up to 30" reels, and resulting in an annual bill of £750 for off-site grinding, Muirfield workshops now boast an ultra modern Juno grinder and a Garfitts spin grinder – money and time savers both.

Another nice 'Whittle touch' is the thinking behind never spraying chemicals during playing time – an ecology move that may mean a 5am start -with Chris at the helm keeping his hand in – and again at 8pm for a couple of hours.

Turning thoughts to Open week proper, Chris is greatly looking forward to the big occasion, though he's far too busy to be nervous – "it may happen, who knows", he says with a wry grin. He'll be pleased to welcome the BIGGA support team in their distinctive regalia, is delighted that help from BIGGA is close at hand whenever it may be needed and is the Association's most enthusiastic supporter – "haven't we come on well in the past couple of years" his astute observation.

Great champions have been crowned at Muirfield and to a man they've heaped praise upon its hallowed acres. Five times winner, Tom Watson, acclaims Muirfield as a place where 'there isn't one poor hole on the course'. As the world's TV cameras flash the saga of The Open across the airwaves into billions of homes, many watching will also give silent thanks to Christopher Alan Whittle and his dedicated team of expert greenkeepers, maybe even waving a flag or two – quite rightly so.

