

Just

by DAVID WHITE

It is not surprising that greenkeepers look to great locations for their own National Championships; and a quick perusal of previous sites upon which our champions have been crowned will reveal no weaknesses in that sphere, our quest being always for challenging courses that bring out the best in the best players.

Littlestone is no exception, located in that corner of Kent noted for its fine turf – a veritable gem of a links course so close to the sea we snuff the salt deep in our nostrils. It is a wonderful test of golf, playing host throughout its 104 year history to a multitude of championships, including use as a qualifying course for The Open.

This attraction as a championship site is easily explained, for though at first glance Littlestone appears to be wide open and begging to be murdered, it defends its honour with subtlety rather than great length and has an unusually high number of outstandingly fine holes. The fairways are quite wide, the turf a delight; and the greens are always swift but never impossible – and therein lies the rub. The greens are quite small, they are well defended by bunkers that properly defend – indeed every single one of its 94 strategic bunkers (added to at various times by James Braid and Alistair Mackenzie) play an absolute part in giving the course its reputation, this despite arguments that rage over the modern ball and its 'lengthy' nature. Add to this the breezes that sometimes snarl in over the English Channel, with their propensity to dry out those holding characteristics found inland; and you have a course where finesse beats the erratic slogger every time.

Malcolm Grand, the Club's dedicated head greenkeeper, is of the opinion that the run-up shot – the bump and run – will be the shot to practice; and as one who has dedicated all his working life to his craft whilst spending the majority of his time on linksland courses, his opinion is one would-be champions will do well to heed.

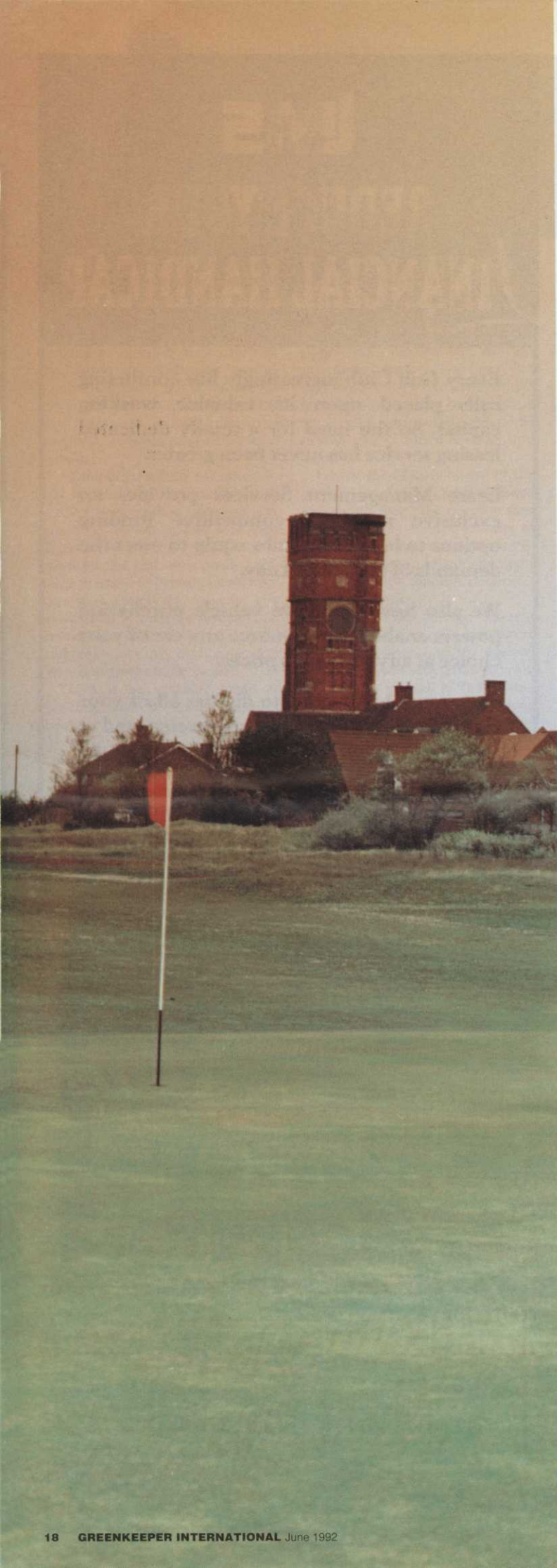
Meeting him was a real pleasure, made the more so by his immediate declaration that greenkeeping is a career that gives him huge pleasure and satisfaction, and when I learned that this love had been forged from early links with Rye – just down the road from Littlestone – where his father was in charge of the victuals at that famous Club, it came as no surprise.

Taking up the story, Malcolm told me that without parental pressure – though heeding Dad's sound counsel – he opted for the attraction of working in golf and joined the Rye greenkeeping crew under Frank Arnold, straight from school at 17, a move he has never regretted. There must be something about the magic of the place, for the 'Grand' invasion of golf continued when Malcolm's younger brothers, Simon and Garth, both took up greenkeeping careers at Rye; and though Simon has now moved to Highgate as first assistant, Garth remains a dedicated Rye man, working under Trevor Ockendon, who took over as head when Frank Arnold retired.

In the event, Malcolm left Rye following six very happy years in which he learned his craft well, moving for the first time to an inland course at Newark, though Malcolm and Trevor Ockendon remain good friends to this day, sharing in the same delights and challenges of managing true linksland golf.

Joining Newark as first assistant, Malcolm was to work a different type of course entirely, one where lushness prevailed and where tree planting (necessary following the front nine coming under the plough during World War II) was a seemingly continuous activity. Two years as first assistant was followed with promotion when head greenkeeper Les Bakin retired; and for a further six years Malcolm was the 'main man' – in his own words, 'a happy time at a happy Club'.

Inevitably for a Southerner, the urge to return to one's roots remained strong, though it was quite by chance that Littlestone came to Malcolm's attention. On a visit in 1986 to attend his sister's wedding at Rye (where else!) he heard on the



Grand, Malcolm!

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'grapevine' that Littlestone were seeking the services of a head greenkeeper and hot-footed along for a pow-wow with secretary Bill Bailey, who offered him the job straight away!

I asked him if he had inherited any problems at Littlestone, the answer being a categorical *no!* 'The course was in lovely condition', he said, 'indeed, just as it has always been'. Offering an opinion as to this phenomenon, he suggested that perhaps it was because in the so-called boom years when everyone was mucking their greens up by applying fertiliser by the truck-load, Littlestone had the good sense not to waste their money. 'Are you still mean with fertiliser', I asked, to which Malcolm grinned before replying, 'the fertiliser reps get fed up calling on me, for we use so little. Last year we used none at all save a liquid 50/50 feed dressing on the greens – just to keep them pretty – and you can see for yourself how good they are'.

Indeed, I have to admit those Littlestone greens putt as well as they look, which is very well indeed; and would opine that this might also be down to the intelligent use of water. Throughout those aforementioned boom years Littlestone was without automatic irrigation, and although they now have this facility, the past two years have seen drought orders enforced, with minimal night-time watering only. Though forced upon them, this is in many ways a blessing for the predominating bents and fescues, kept to perfection principally by the use of the hand-held hose.

'I'm very happy with the Watermation system installed, complete with TW2 controller, and it's a boon if used intelligently', says Malcolm, though he chuckled when recalling early conversations with the installer: 'how does all this high-tech stuff work?' he asked, 'don't know', came the reply! He has it mastered now, thanks to some schooling at a Watermation training session, though he thinks the real learning is largely down to experimentation and using the system – playing with it.

If I am allowed another opinion here, I would suggest that Malcolm's avowed credo – minimal watering at a rate just enough to keep the grass alive, is extremely sound indeed, for

though links golf is different – with its humps and hollows, its bounds and ricochets – it is this very difference that makes it attractive beyond measure. The green committee at Littlestone do well to insist upon maintaining the status quo, for once a links course is allowed to degenerate (not too harsh a word) into lushness and 'green grass at any price', the quality that is links golf is lost forever!

We talked of visits from the STRI, Malcolm pointing to the advisory reports emanating from agronomist David Stansfield and suggesting that nothing much had changed over the years. 'From Jim Arthur's earlier visits, when he was agronomist for the R&A Championship Committee, down to the present visits of David Stansfield, the same sensible, logical and

workable ideas still persist, he said, 'Jim Arthur's policies are still very much with us, albeit written with a different pencil – nothing much changes, which pleases me'.

Malcolm has had one big surprise this year, a pleasant one but a surprise nonetheless. I asked him when he first learned about the BIGGA Championships coming to Littlestone. 'When you shook my hand four months ago, on the first of your photographic visits', was his candid reply. 'When you came and said to me "getting ready for the big one?", I thought you were referring to the English

Ladies Stroke Play Championship, which is here at the end of July. I didn't let on to you, but I had no idea; and it was only when I got home and found my latest copy of Greenkeeper International that I realised you were not kidding!'

It says something for the man that he took this surprise in such good spirit, and as he was quick to point out, 'we are always ready for the big occasion anyway, my policy being that the course should be as good for a monthly medal as a British title championship. Big events don't frighten me, but I would be kidding you if I didn't feel a little apprehensive at the thought of being judged by my peers – I've no holiday booked until the event is history and I'll be on tenterhooks until the BIGGA Championship is over – then I'll either be sacked or relaxed!' He laughed at this com-

ment, but I have a sneaky feeling he'll be relaxing come sundown on August 12th.

'Will you be 'tricking' up the course in any way, creating anything out of the ordinary?', I asked. He grinned – 'I'll look to make it as tough as its 6,424 yards can play for those three days, but at Littlestone in August the weather will do all the tricking for us. The course can and probably will dry out to an extent that will make it 'fiery' and the run-in approach shot will be called for, though players may get a false impression from the grassy fairways on the first five or six holes. There is no logical reason why these fairways should yield more grass cover – perhaps it's how reclamation from the sea has left us – but we often need only to gang-mow just these six, leaving the rest! Green speed will also be dictated somewhat by nature, which means fairly fast – or downright rapid if the drying winds take control! I rarely need to cut lower than 3/16" on the mainly fescue/bent surfaces. We've a wee bit of *Poa annua*, but I verticut the life out of it – weekly if the greens look as though they can stand it – and the slit-tiner gets used regularly, with as many passes as possible, from the end of summer 'till spring. The greens drain freely and we never have any surface water even after a downpour, nevertheless I run the Vertidrain over every two years or so – largely as a safety measure'.

Malcolm is confident that if the weather holds to form – which means little rain – tight lies will be the order of the day, which will please the better players no end. He has supreme confidence in his loyal staff; with first assistant, John Stickels, having no less than 22 years service with the Club – a veritable Godsend. 'They're a fantastic crew: dedicated, loyal and very hard working – I cannot praise them highly enough' – commendation indeed!



Malcolm Grand: 'I'll be on tenterhooks until the BIGGA Championship is over'

MAJOR MACHINERY AND EQUIPMENT IN THE LITTLESTONE STABLE

5 Tractors: (2) John Deere (1) Kubota (2) Old Internationals	3 Lloyds Paladins 1 6' Perfect rotary 1 each Cushman drag-net, top-dresser, sprayer, multi-depth aerator and brush.
2 Cushman trucks	1 Ryman Sod cutter
2 Ransome 180s	1 John Deere brush cutter
1 Jacobsen Tri-King	1 McConnel Ditch-King
2 sets Ransomes Hydraulic Mounted 5s	1 Royer Power Screen
1 set Ransomes 214 rough-cut and thatching reels	1 Compost shredder
2 Toro greens mowers (GM3 & GM300)	3 Tipping trailers

● Machinery is shared with the adjacent Warren course, which is also maintained by the Littlestone team. An additional nine holes at the Warren have recently been constructed by Malcolm Grand and his crew.