

# It's all work and all play

**DAVID WHITE catches up with IAN HOLORAN, head greenkeeper at one of Britain's busiest municipal courses**



The Open Championship was properly a time for jubilation and cheering from golfers throughout the land. As Britain's highest profile annual golfing event, we wouldn't expect or want it any other way. One group of greenkeeping professionals, however, did not necessarily cheer, rather they prepared themselves for a guaranteed onslaught from tyros who, having witnessed Messrs Faldo and Cook in full flow on TV, instantly wanted to emulate the posturings of the professionals. I refer, of course, to those whose job it is to care for the needs of the multitude of would-be golfers who literally invade public courses in their thousands following The Open.

This information is straight from the horse's mouth, or more specifically from the lips of Ian Holoran, the talented and infinitely patient head greenkeeper at one of Britain's busiest council run courses, the 69,000 rounds per annum (and rising) Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Course, a facility with almost uninterrupted bookings every seven minutes, dawn to dusk.

The decision to build a 'golf for all' municipal course was taken in 1965, a move regarded at the time as somewhat speculative. Progress toward construction was a case of dragging feet, but work finally commenced in 1973 over some 120 acres of land farmed by the local council, land which produced wheat and turnips to the very end of its arable life. The council worked to a design prepared by golf course architect J Hamilton Stutt, though the firm had no part, advisory or otherwise, in the construction, this being carried out by local authority staff under the direction of the assistant parks manager. In hindsight it may now be assumed that written specifications were at best a hit and miss affair, but the course nevertheless has stood the test of time and constant bombardment.

It is interesting to note that in 1976 the soil was described by a senior council official (also a farmer) as free draining 'sandy loam' and that grasses selected were 'essentially of the fine-leaved variety'. The recommendation before opening was to apply lime so that the grass could be 'thickened-up' and that a head greenkeeper be appointed as soon as possible. An interest in statements nearly 20 years old sharpens on listening to Ian Holoran in 1992, who says "the greens, like the rest of the course, are on heavy clay and present a major compaction problem, the grass cover is mostly *Poa annua*" – one is left to ponder the ethereal disappearance of the sandy loam, whilst fully understanding the grass species change!

Since completion, the intake of players has been substantial and has risen steadily from a first year total of around 40,000 to the 1990/91 figure of 69,400 – in the past five years the course has been closed for just a handful of days!

Returning to Ian, he told me that his two greatest difficulties are compaction and wear, which go together like peaches and cream. The course is 6411 yards par 71, with greens occupying 13740 sq. metres, though tees are a miserly 6040 sq. m in total, since no one in 1973 envisaged the golf explosion that was to come. As one might imagine, there are more divots removed per year than a JCB could move earth in an hour, working flat out! Only by using pre-germinated seed mixed with top soil can Ian hope to achieve some head-start on repair work and the problem is a battle with nature and against pounding feet. He uses a Vertidrain whenever funds allow and regularly hollow-tines, followed by top dressing.

The problem of overworked ground is compounded by lack of funds following Compulsory Competitive Tendering. CCT can, as everyone knows, guarantee only the least cost and not necessarily

the best quality or value for money. To give credit though, Middlesbrough certainly are giving value, having won the CCT contract after specifying that all leisure facility provisions be under one tender, which made bidding by private companies difficult if not impossible. CCT in a nutshell states that tenders must be competitive and show a profit – a tall order. That stated, once the contract is won the inflexible restraints of fixed costings must be strictly adhered to, creating tight belts all round and making for a leaner and meaner set-up.

To achieve success, each job is described, ie. 'golf tee/replace all divots' and dimensions are carefully measured. Times and frequencies are scheduled, targets are set and these must be achieved! In the case of greens and tees cutting, this often means dodging the golfers and flitting hither and yon, wherever a gap appears.

Another problem, perhaps more common to municipal courses than their private counterparts, is vandalism. As Ian pointed out, the Middlesbrough course is surrounded by a housing estate and a school, a breeding ground for spoilers.

Despite the employment of course rangers they lose flags and poles almost daily – in Ian's words, "I think by the end of 1992 every kid in Middlesbrough will have his own flagpole". Compounding the difficulties, the fourth green has a bunker which is "well placed as a BMX track, such that it attracts the bikers after sundown". Bunkers must be raked but they dare not leave rakes out – they just disappear. The bunkers also attract children, who delight in using them as sand pit playgrounds, making repair and renovation constant – it is to Ian's great credit that the course remains in such fine fettle.

Ian, who is 35, is no newcomer to local authority work, having worked for some 19 years in the Parks and Sportsgrounds division, starting straight from school and entering an apprenticeship which covered bowling and cricket, soccer pitches and other fine turf areas. The training was thorough, he learnt well and was soon second in command at Stewarts Park – Middlesbrough's finest – complete with bowling greens and a miniature golf course. His rise has been progressive, to say the least.

The opportunity arose in 1987 for Ian to move into golf proper and in 1989 he became head greenkeeper (or contract foreman, as he is titled in council terms) – since which he hasn't looked back. In reviewing his greenkeeping career, especially from the time he became involved 100% in caring for golf course turf, Ian gladly acknowledges the guidance and encouragement offered by such stalwarts as George Malcolm (Middlesbrough, Brass Castle), Bruce Burnell (Eaglescliffe)

and Roger Shaw (Brancepeth Castle). At the onset he was modest enough to admit that he had things to learn and these men from BIGGA or BGGGA as it was then, were beacons on which to steer his particular ship.

Listening to him now it is apparent that he is not only a man of knowledge properly acquired in the field, but a deep thinker who analyses every question thoroughly before answering – you can sense his mental gears slipping into over-drive. He's been the proud chairman in the Northern region for some two years, having progressed from early committee work to regional rep. and thence to vice-chairman. He believes fervently in putting back more than he has taken from the profession and is a vigorous campaigner for the BIGGA cause.

Above all, Ian is proud. Proud of his course, for he believes that at £6 for a mid-week round it represents fine value for money, proud of his dedicated team, especially second-in-command, stalwart John Coles and proud of the standards he sets. He took up golf on entering 'the profession' and plays twice a week over Middlesbrough and campaigns his 13 handicap in BIGGA section events whenever time allows – locals tell me he's a hard man to beat!

He's always looking for new ways to improve the Middlesbrough course and has some pretty strong views on winter golf. "None of my winter greens are 'temporary' in the sometimes accepted sense of just close cutting an adjacent patch and sticking a flag in", he declared. "I prepare proper winter greens year round and they play like proper greens".

"What about winter tees", I asked. Again a thoughtful pause – "People just don't like playing off artificial tees, which is surprising as they happily accept them at driving range bays. I believe the problem is one of acceptance of a proper base and clean material, one that is big enough, clean enough and sound enough: not a filthy pad surrounded by a sea of mud – manufacturers should really be applying themselves to solving this difficulty. We do our best with limited space and we are extending tees wherever possible and plan to lay paths with wood chip or similar materials. The biggest problem is getting golfers to accept that a summer route cannot necessarily be a winter one. Believe it or not, we stake and wire off routes and yet still see golfers lifting their pull-carts over what is an unbelievably difficult hazard".

Our talk was constantly of standards, and in closing Ian had this to say – "If there is a yardstick for municipal golf – and it's certainly my yardstick – it is that we must get away from the lesser image portrayed and seek always to produce a standard that will have them clamouring to come back for more" – No doubt about it, the times, they are a changin'.

**'We must get away from the lesser image portrayed'**