



WIDE OPEN

Mother Nature gets a helping hand from a crew of seven in preparing for this year's Open Golf Championship. DAVID WHITE reports from Royal St George's

Reaching the links at Sandwich Bay, home of the Royal St George's Golf Club and arena for the 122nd Open Golf Championship, is rather like riding a Tardis time-warp machine.

Upon leaving London there's a lovely beginning buzz as thirty or so miles of M2 motorway are gobbled up with rapidity, followed by further encouragement in taking the dual-carriageway which loops around Canterbury, for negotiating that ancient city no longer causes the hassle it once did.

So far, so good, but once free of those 'Canterbury tails' the traveller starts to slip in reverse in terms of modernity. En route to Royal St George's he must negotiate the pretty but twisting and often inadequate A257, following this tiresome frustration with a mere dollop of Sandwich by-pass before plunging aeons back in time to negotiate the town's quaint, mysterious and ridiculously narrow streets, a route infinitely more charming to pedestrians than motorists.

Taking the one-way system, the driver should force himself to ignore the few out-of-character

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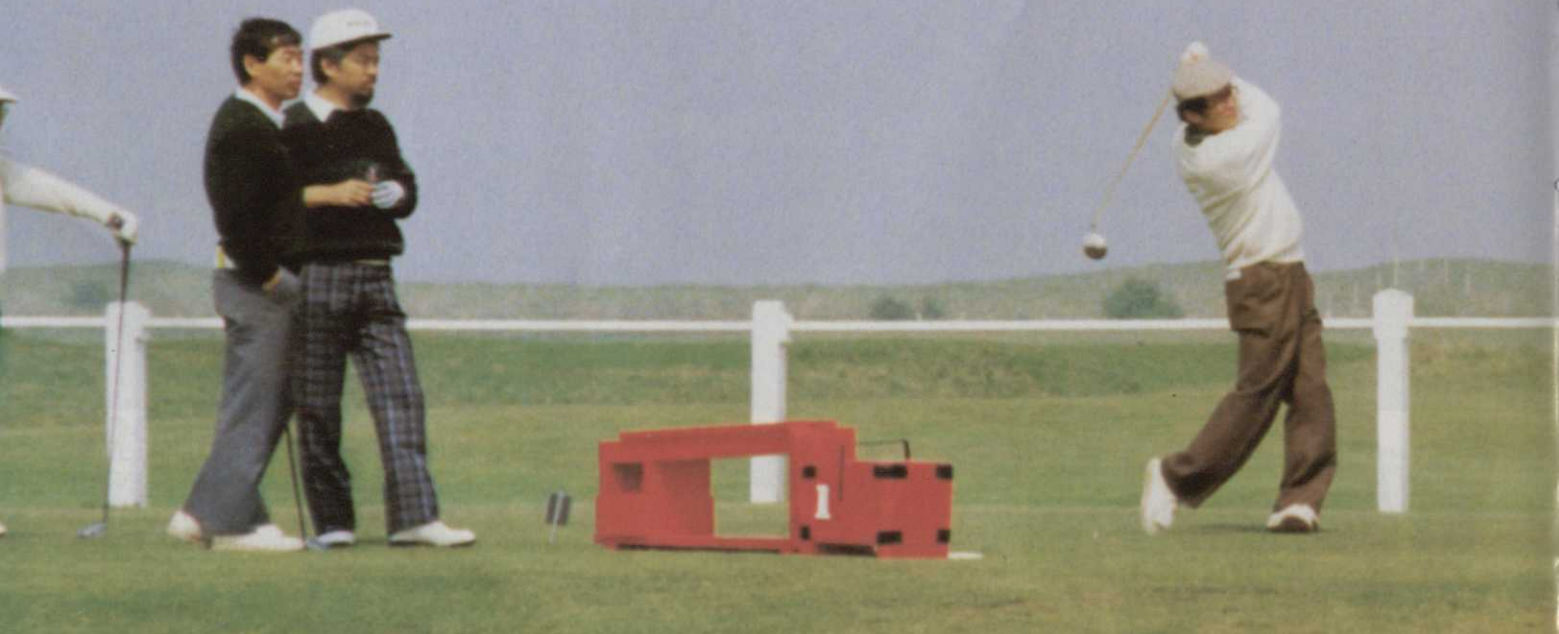


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'We've never ever seen the need to apply fertiliser on the fairway...'



21 → semi's as he leaves the medieval town of Sandwich behind, for suddenly and surprisingly he will come upon an unimposing driveway leading to a comfortable and imposing clubhouse that once was an old Kentish farmhouse. He will have entered the time warp – a place that transports a body back to a style that has survived almost all onslaught of modernity, together with a golf course that is often called the St Andrews of the South, though personally I liken it more to Muirfield, for it shares the same quality of spaciousness and detachment.

Visiting the course in April, I found it difficult to picture this little corner of Kent invaded by hordes of cashmere-sweatered grockles during Open week, for of all Royal St Georges' great characteristics, its greatest is its solitude. In all of its many guises it is a glorious place to golf – on a day when the sea mists swirl over the 'umps and 'ollows it is a place of mystery, when the sunlight shines and pirouettes on the waves across Pegwell Bay it is in a world of its own, isolated maybe, but the skylarks will sing their lungs out and the white cliffs of nearby Ramsgate will positively glow. As for the the wind, was there ever a links worthy of the name that didn't boast a blow – a links just isn't a links without a force seven charging in from the south west – though when storms roll in off the North Sea, Royal St George's can reduce giants to gibbering idiots and it is altogether

too much for players of moderate skill.

'Mother Nature is quite wonderful', I observed, as the club's head greenkeeper, Derek Scarborough, drove me round the course in his trusty Cushman. 'Yes', he replied, 'though what you see today shouldn't be credited to her alone, for this is down to Nature and seven men – she gets a fair share of help from my crew'. Derek Scarborough

PREVIOUS OPEN WINNERS AT ROYAL ST GEORGE'S

1894	John Henry Taylor
1899	Harry Vardon
1904	Jack White
1911	Harry Vardon
1922	Walter Hagen
1928	Walter Hagen
1932	Gene Sarazen
1934	Henry Cotton
1938	Reg Whitcombe
1949	Bobby Locke
1981	Bill Rogers
1985	Sandy Lyle

has been at the club since 1966, leaving Woodhall Spa to become Ralph Davis's assistant and in 1976 taking over the headship when Davis retired. This Open Championship will be the club's thirteenth and Derek's third, though for three of his crew it will be their first. As Derek pointed out, 1981 was undoubtedly a huge challenge as none of

them had been involved in an Open before, though the club is no stranger to the big event and has hosted Amateur Championships, Walker Cups and a European Amateur Team Championship, as well as jointly hosting, with Royal Cinque Ports Golf Club, the public schools 'old boy' spring bean-feast that is the Halford Hewitt.

Derek Scarborough appears the very epitome of calm, a man who seems content to let the madness of the world wash over him – I've never met a greenkeeper so laid back – as though he's preparing the course for a monthly medal. 'Of course', he said, 'preparing for The Open is still a challenge, but it hasn't got any harder, for you must understand that I attempt to keep the course in first class condition all the time'. Point taken, but hadn't certain things changed, I asked. Observing that the course had been relatively quiet prior to the '81 Open, Derek is of the opinion that now it seems everyone wants to play and this has obviously brought about some changes in the course maintenance programme. If pressed, he will admit that the Vertidrain is used a little more frequently, but more than anything he puts Royal St George's fine appearance and irresistible turf down to 'just routine maintenance and good greenkeeping practices. 'Yes', he says, 'the course is marvellous, all down to Nature and the crew' – he grins, but you feel it – I could sense it – he's very proud of his team.

THE MEN AND THEIR MACHINES:

- 1 Ransomes five-gang fairways unit
- 1 Ransomes GT
- 6 Ransomes Auto-Certes
- 1 Ransomes 180
- 3 Cushmans, c/w spikers/slitters/top dressers.
- 1 Vertidrain
- 2 Ford tractors
- 2 Massey Ferguson tractors
- 1 Kubota tractor



- 1 Trojan Rough-Cut
- 1 set x 5 Gangmowers
- 1 set Verti-cut units (Greens)
- 1 set Verti-cut units (Fairways)



Looking at the course it is easy to see why he is optimism personified, for he tells me that there are no problems, no diseases, and there's plenty of fescue sprouting. The weather (my visit was in April) had been kind, the course was 'looking great' and now they were hoping for kind weather during Open week. 'And if it rains continuously?', I ask. 'Well, the organisation of the course for The Open under R&A appointed agronomist David Stansfield, along with the club committee and The Championship committee, is programmed to the n'th degree, so nothing is left to chance. Being on sandy soil the course drains well -and I honestly don't envisage any problems in that respect, though we need good weather if only to keep the spectators happy'.

The programme leading up to The Open is one of 'business as usual' - with top dressing for the greens done with a mix of the club's own making, using sandy soil taken from fields adjacent to the course, a source sufficient to last well into the next century. Green cutting, normally done with triplexes, moves gradually toward pedestrian Ransomes Auto-Certes as The Open gets nearer, the better to obtain the finish, desired speeds and consistency required. This cutting routine with the Auto-Certes begins at first twice weekly in May, progressing to three, four, five and finally seven days a week as 'the big one' looms close. Blade settings begin at 3/16"

and are very gradually lowered to a minimum of 1/8" - 'we cannot go lower', he told me, 'for the green undulations just would not permit it'. Verticutting takes place twice weekly, greens are watered 'when necessary' and only 'just enough' is applied to keep them healthy - say five minutes each evening, dependent upon God's own contribution.

'We've never overseeded the greens', Derek declared, 'we don't need to, though of course we repair divots on tees and fairways using a proper selected mix. What's more, we've never ever seen the need to apply fertiliser on the fairways'.

In truth, the main cause for concern comes not from golfers but from those terrible twins, wind and erosion - and it was erosion that prompted the Royal St George's committee to instruct Brian Pierson a year or so ago to undertake the complete restoration and revetting of some 75 bunkers - representing about three quarters of the total bunker population. If solitude is one of Royal St George's outstanding characteristics, its bunkers are another - not flat and purposeless like the seashore, but greedy, jeering obstructions that have as great a psychological effect as any I've ever experienced. It's as though they lie around, challenging and defiant, waiting to put the player completely off his stroke. Pierson's have done a wizard job.

Another contractor had recently vacated

the links, having achieved what Derek described as 'a good kill' - in a single day of labour wiping out the irritation of daisies and clover on all the treated fairways. The staff meantime had applied Supertox to the greens and this also had achieved the desired effect - weed free putting surfaces.

Those putting surfaces are Royal St George's third outstanding characteristic, for many a match has been lost on its teasing and mischievous greens when the player's talent elsewhere has been beyond reproach. Most are big, all are undulating, each has hidden fall and slope to catch the unwary - all are infuriatingly cunning... and a drying wind can make them skin slick.

Come the hour the team - comprising Tony Adamo, Chris Marsh, Robin Holloway, Graham Royden, Neil Metcalf and Dennis French - will be on tenterhooks. The course will close for seven days to permit a last roundelay of fine-tuning and the greens will feel the mower blades nip over them at least twice a day. Sandwich's solitude will evaporate, but at a time when too many championship courses have compromised their integrity, were the ghost of Dr Laidlaw Purves to return he'd find the old girl he created much the same as when he left her, deceptive, mean, magnificent - and a terrific test of golf... which should cause Derek Scarborough's men to feel rather pleased with themselves.