

In Edwardian times the coastal towns of East Lothian – of which Dunbar remains an acknowledged though now slightly bedraggled jewel, with two of its once-famous hotels fallen victim to pyromania, vandalism and dereliction – were considered prime ‘watering holes’ by the glitterati and crowned heads of Europe. They came to bathe in the sea and take the air, both of which were believed to be possessed with powers of healing and recuperation, at the same time often discovered golf for the very first time. Sadly, times have changed. The glitterati have moved to the Mediterranean and beyond and, with few exceptions, the crowned heads are either deposed, dispossessed or just plain hideaways.

Whilst it is probably true that new generations don't know what they're missing, Dunbar's abiding attraction – its famous golf course – remains the worst kept secret of all, whipping those continental tourist traps into a cocked hat by continually attracting discerning golfers from every corner of the globe. Once captivated, they keep coming back. If there's one thing that needs to be said, the powers-that-be at BIGGA certainly know how to pick 'em when it comes to cornering a National Championship site – in choosing Dunbar they have excelled themselves.

As an unabashed lover of links courses, I liken myself to a retired pro bike rider I once met who declared that when he caught sight of a racing saddle his bum began to itch! My itch, albeit in another part of the anatomy, begins when I first set eyes on a tract of pure linksland hard by the sea, the light sparkling off the waves and setting a scene that never fails to enchant – God knows, on first sight of Dunbar's East Links I could hardly contain myself. I desperately wanted to drag clubs from the car boot and plead for a tee time, but my itch remained an irritation that I couldn't get at to scratch, for I had come, dammit, only to work!

Golf in some form has been played along the coastal land around Dunbar since ancient times, indeed in Scottish Acts of Parliament dated 1457 and 1491 it was decreed that weapon practices were to be held and that the playing of fut-ball and golfe was to be ‘utterly cryit downe and not be used’. In 1616 two men from the neighbouring parish of Tynninghame were censured for playing ‘at ye nyneholis’ on Sundays and in 1640 a parish minister at Dunbar was disgraced for similarly engaging in ‘gouf’ on the Sabbath. The Dunbar Golfing Society, from which the present Dunbar Golf Club claims its lineage, was instituted as long ago as 1794.

If at first sight the links at Dunbar appear simply as God, Nature and Old Tom Morris created them, in no small measure this may be accredited to the supreme skills of Graham Wood, the club's course manager for close on two decades. It soon became obvious in our discussion that he sees his life's task not only as that of caring for Dunbar's playing surfaces, but also as keeper and preserver of an area blessed with exquisite natural charm – one that must be upheld at all costs. If that appears to be ‘over the top’ I make no apologies, for the course positively reeks old world charm and is all the better for it.

Graham Wood is 42 years old, married, with two teenage offspring (his son Paul is also a budding greenkeeper, having recently taken an apprenticeship at Winterfield), and he's a native of East Lothian. He began his career at Dunbar, serving a three year apprenticeship under the late Bill Paton, followed by four more years as journeyman before making a wee trip along the coast to become head man at Monkton Hall, Musselburgh. Three years later the lure of Dun-

Dunbar town, as seen from the links' edge



bar beckoned again and Graham, always highly respected by his peers as a master of his craft, was successful in landing the vacant head greenkeeper's job. He grinned as he said, “And here, fortunately, is where I've stayed”.

What maintenance regime does Graham employ? In a single word, the answer is ‘traditional’. “I was fortunate in training under Bill Paton,” he told me, “a craftsman who employed basic, indeed some might say old-fashioned, skills – he was steeped in common sense. He taught me the importance of traditional ways, of appreciating what turf needed, of handling it, smelling it, recognising possible problems before they happened. I remain an avowed traditionalist and I'm mean with fertiliser. We've a lot of fescue and I fight hard to keep the Poa down to minimal levels, so it's a case of on with a touch to bring some growth in spring and then starvation. I water by hand and don't find this a real problem, though quiet days are hard to come by so this often calls for night-time application. My topdressing is a mixture of loamy soil and white sand. Fungicides I apply as a preventative measure, prevention being better than cure, and once the growth is up I slit the greens and then let them burn a little – all these measures give me the quality of turf so vital for the links game”.

Quality the East Links certainly has, and character in abundance, but it must be stated here and now – Dunbar is no pushover! Let Graham, a mean five handicapper who plays ‘occasionally’ with his fellow greenkeepers, explain some its foibles and idiosyncrasies: “The course, 6,426 yards from the medal tees, has a par of 71. Three holes are played on the south side of an ancient beach wall, probably as old as the town itself, which stretches along much of the course and seems never to be out of play. After playing the third the course continues back over the wall on the narrow links beside the sea and rocky beach, the wall now to the players right. In all cases, over the wall is OB, so if there is one piece of advice I might offer BIGGA players it is ‘hit it straight and

# character

says course manager Graham Wood, 'there'll be no broken hearts...'



The Dunbar crew

keep the ball in play'. The beach is a lateral water hazard and the burn also may come into play. To keep a good score going it is vital to keep your head around 10, 11 and 12, where the course can be deceptive, and the 12th (The Point) in particular, at 459 yards, plays long as it is often played into a breeze. Around the ninth, Barns Ness lighthouse looms large as a feature, and at the 14th green is seen The Vaults, a listed building which is preserved from removal or improvement. The green at 13 (Pot) could best be described as 'character building'. The course record is six under par; so clearly it can be tamed.

That stated, it is always a testing course and with any sort of wind the greens can be fast – I don't have to make them fast with low cutting- 3/16" is the norm – for there is no need, the wind takes over and does the rest! The nature of the greens, minimally watered to do no more than keep the grass alive, lend themselves admirably to the chip and run, rather than the high pitch and stop – interestingly, some of the pro's bent on qualifying here for The Open at Muirfield last year manufactured the screw back shot to some good effect, though I suspect that most amateurs, even those with low handicaps, will find the pitch and run much more effective, indeed I see no disgrace in using the Texas Wedge from 20 yards off".

I smiled at mention of the Texas Wedge, for just a couple of hours earlier I'd bumped into a real live Texan doing the Lothian Tour. 'Where I come from', he drawled, 'we got winds that just blow your mind. We teach 'em early – golfers with class should be a highball drinkers and a low ball hitters!'

The team at Dunbar can rightly be seen as a 'lean machine', for there is no dead weight to be found with a staff of just five, Graham included. Dunbar is famous as a breeding ground for head greenkeepers, indeed the club is proud of its ability to produce future managers and doesn't attempt to hold the tight rein, so the team tends to be young

and bursting with gung-ho. Apart from a new apprentice John Tait, there's tractor driver Scott Jenkins, assistant Gordon Craft and first assistant David Brown. To a man they are fiercely pro Dunbar and though I only met them for a short time, I would opine that the club are lucky to have them, for their enthusiasm shines through.

Graham learned of BIGGA's interest in staging the National at Dunbar through a call from Elliott Small six months ago. Both he and the club were flattered and indeed expressed pleasure at entertaining upwards of 100 greenkeepers. For Graham, preparation will call for no mean tricks or devious cunning – Dunbar GC has played host to numerous top class tournaments and for qualifying in The Open, so he's used to staging 'big ones'. Though any tournament leaves the head man on tenterhooks, on this grand occasion he'll be nervous only of judgement by his peers – I assured him he need have no such qualms. What's more, I knew he meant it when he intimated that skulduggery would play no part in his game plan, "the course will simply be 'testing' and there'll be no broken hearts".

Finally, I took my 'itch' back home, though not before making a whistle-stop tour of the wee town, sucking in the still prevalent Edwardian atmosphere and delighting in its sheer Scottishness. For me, Dunbar evokes misty apparitions of Willie Park and his cronies, of niblicks, guttie balls and old world courtesies. It has a fine beach and grand sea fishing and there's a local nature trail and a nature reserve. I'll be back, dammit, no power on earth will keep me away!

## Major machinery in the Dunbar stable

- 2 Iseki tractors
- 1 Massey Ferguson Tractor Riddle
- 2 Trailer tippers
- 1 Spoon tiner/ Slit tiner
- 3 Supaturf Evenspeed spreaders
- 1 Sisis Hollow tiner
- 2 Toro TV5002 commercial rotaries
- 1 Powerscreen Rover 30
- 1 Charterhouse 1416 topdresser
- 2 Ransomes Marquis 31 mowers
- 5 Ransomes Super Auto Certes
- 1 Ryan Hollowtiner
- 3 Jacobsen Greens King IV Diesels
- 2 Utility vehicles (incl. new Mule)
- 1 Turfco turfcutter