

Kings of the castle



DAVID WHITE discovers a jewel nestling in the Edinburgh suburbs

Leaving the by-pass which skirts forever round the City of Edinburgh, bound to keep an appointment with Willie Blair at Kingsknowe Golf Club, I missed seeing any 'KINGSKNOWE THIS WAY' signs and for a while became hopelessly lost in a jungle of look-alike, mostly post-war housing. Recalling Pete Seeger's famous song, I thought the place could easily have been Pete's role model. The song begins "Little boxes, on the hillside, and they're all made out of ticky-tacky, little boxes,

little boxes, and they all look just the same".

Left with my own homing device and lacking guidance from the natives, all of whom seemed to vapourise as I searched, I scabbled around following instinct rather than map, before catching a sudden sweet glimpse – through high and extremely sturdy chainlink fencing – of Kingsknowe's lovely little golf course, a view that conjured up a wicked thought: a rose amongst thorns! Peering through the grill I sensed how it must feel to

be imprisoned and how inmates must react, looking out at the promised land – yet knowing it is out of reach. Granted, I was on the outside looking in, but Kingsknowe Golf Club seemed just such a place, inviting freedom and escape from an otherwise cramped suburb, a course overshadowed to the south by high-rise blocks and surrounded by an assemblage of anonymous houses and other assorted bits of 'ticky-tacky', yet with lush green fairways that beckoned and beguiled. → 18



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'One of James Braid's

17 ➔ Do I malign this suburb of Edinburgh? I think not; for I reckon residents who have the Kingsknowe course on their patch are positively blessed. Further, as I later discovered, they are thrice blessed, for a tail-end of the Pentland Hills nips at their back door, peering moodily across the fairways. As a bonus, the views north to the Ocle Hills and especially toward Edinburgh Castle some five miles distant are simply stunning.

The course at Kingsknowe was opened in 1908, long before the ugly high-rise apartments were plonked out of place, certainly before the majority of Kingsknowe's surrounding housing plots attracted land-hungry developers. It is easy then to imagine how the territory must have appeared when James Braid cast his expert eye over what is now Kingsknowe Golf Club. Braid, Open Champion for the fourth time, obviously was not too busy with exhibitions to turn down the chance of an honest guinea or two for course design, and he must have liked what he saw, for this layout is simply one of his cleverest. It began life as a par 74 in the days of hickory, and is now par 69, stretched to its fullest extent to be no longer than 5975 yards. There is no vast grandeur as may be found at Gleneagles;

Willie Blair:
'master of the
golf course
rather than
its puppet'



where Braid designed The Kings, but with the meagre acreage allotted he certainly turned up trumps. The proof is there to see: Braid's only creation in the whole of Edinburgh is no simple rose amongst thorns, as I had surmised originally, rather a wee gem set fair in the outer perimeter of this ancient city.

Willie Blair, a man hugely proud of his greenkeeping heritage, is the custodian of Jimmy Braid's rather special patch. It was Willie who'd suggested my visit, urging me to 'come cast your eyes over a great little city course'. En route for Dunbar, I needed no second bidding.

Willie's greenkeeping career followed an

almost perfect learning curve, for he was apprenticed to the legendary Andrew Anderson at Gullane, a man oft likened to a professor and one who ensured his charges were expertly tutored in the art of greenkeeping. In the event Willie stayed with Andrew for close on fifteen years, giving every credit to this sadly missed old sage, declaring Andrew as the one who taught him everything. As a single example of the clever way Andrew worked, Willie told how during one season at Gullane the team lifted, rebuilt and restored six greens - without the membership knowing! Of course, those were the days before Arnie's Army, before courses were as overplayed as they are now and before the game, fuelled by TV, had reached fever pitch.

Readers travelling through East Lothian will surely have noticed the Lothianburn Golf Club, hard by the main road into Edinburgh. Slap on the east slope of the Pentlands, laden bounteously with broom and gorse, it was until recently over-run also with sheep! It was to this mountain-goat territory that Willie made his move after over fourteen years at Gullane, poached, would you believe, by two Gullane members who happened to be members also at Lothianburn. They'd seen how well Willie

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cleverest layouts...'

performed as foreman on Gullane's Number Two, they knew his greenkeeping pedigree to be beyond reproach and they wanted him as their head greenkeeper. They persuaded the 29 year old to bring his wife and three youngsters to the wicked city!

From seaside links to heavy clay-based hillside site, when Willie arrived at Lothianburn it was so run-down that folk declared even raking the bunkers would show a big improvement! In the event, Willie took the place by the scruff and gave it a thorough shakedown, spending eight happy years there and leaving it a much better golf course than anyone could have imagined. He left to take over at Kingsknowe after Peter Dodds departed to Royal Aberdeen.

Working on just three golf courses in close on 40 years (he's been at Kingsknowe now for some 17 years) seems to me pretty good indication of dedication to the task, and in summarising that dedication it seems also that Willie thrives on what I'll call the 'high aggravation' factor.

Certainly there was aggravation aplenty at Lothianburn, with claggy clay and rocks galore, sheep to dodge, no water at all, not a single tap until Willie installed one, all this on a course that defied the laws of gravity. Now at Kingsknowe he works within the confines of just 110 acres: every inch parkland, every inch cultivated and every inch (including rough) cut to some degree, all in the interests of keeping the overplayed areas uncluttered, of speeding players through.

His course again is on clay, which is nobody's friend, and his predominantly meadowgrass greens grow on old clay puddle constructions (save one, the 17th). What's more, he's surrounded, literally, by a ten feet high fence, a la Colditz! What purpose does it serve? It keeps *some* of the vandals at bay (though last year alone over 400 flag sticks were stolen) and reminds, if nothing else, of trespass boundaries. Kingsknowe members cannot enjoy the luxury of timber benches, fibreglass flagpoles or decorative chains round tees – these simply would disappear. Last year the club lost, in addition to flags, some £15,000 of equipment to burglary, which has resulted in an elaborate alarm system being installed at the sheds.

On the course it's a case always of keeping the hard-played greens in good shape with, Willie hints, 'an old head and a little sulphate of iron'. Rather more, it is a case of composting the surfaces regularly (every six weeks or so) with sandy loam (which Willie swears by), and keeping the overly lush fairways cut every single day (he just can't stop 'em growing), in the summer months. Keeping thatch at bay demands regular spring and autumn hollow coring and the utilising of groomers and verticutters, Willie believing in working these tools hard and scarifying the daylight out of the Poa annua. With 600 members and a busy schedule of visiting societies to keep happy, this

is the only way he can manage – and it works.

He's mean on fertiliser, mean on water, in fact he's a believer in Jim Arthur's regime of austerity in greenkeeping, following it almost to the letter, though he admits he couldn't get away with one Arthurian practice – slitting in the summer months – certain that his members, '600 amateur greenkeepers', wouldn't stand for it.

Willie doesn't think he'll ever move away from Kingsknowe, content in the satisfaction the job gives him, happy to be working with a great crew and pleased to be amongst 'good club people who are nice to work with'. He's an honorary member of the club, he sits on committee, prepares monthly reports and presents his own budget. Granted he seeks approval for such expenditure, which is normal enough, but Willie feels he's master of the golf course rather than its puppet, not having to rush for 'second opinions'. In a nutshell, he appears to have Kingsknowe licked, though I reiterate, he thrives on conditions from which I would run a mile: those that would top my 'high aggravation' list.

There can be but few greenkeepers who don't know 'Our Willie', especially through Association activities. He's been secretary of the Scottish East section for 15 years, beginning with SGGA and latterly SIGGA before amalgamation some five years ago into BIGGA. He says "I don't know what I'd do without it", and one is moved by his sincerity, aware that he's the Association's most ardent ambassador, devoted to the hurly-burly; the selling of a greenkeeping philosophy. He gets peeved when discussing those greenkeepers who distance themselves from BIGGA. Far too many, he thinks, even in such a golfing enclave as Edinburgh. "They say they won't join because they don't play golf", he says, "but the Association was never set up for golf alone. We're about education, about seminars, about training people and helping them to be

better at their job" – OK Willie, I'm convinced!

I found myself charmed by Kingsknowe, despite first reservations, and Willie Blair warmed me greatly. As we ended he leaned across, grinned, and spoke directly into my recorder: "I'm just a routine worker", he whispered, "I never say a word out of place and I get on well with everyone"...OK Willie, I believe you, I'm convinced!



On the horizon at Kingsknowe GC: top, the clubhouse with Braid Hills behind; one view across to the 'high rise horrors'; and a city vista, with Edinburgh castle in the background