

He may be the mayor of Chippenham but the greenkeeper at Monkton Park still can't insure his machinery for theft.

He's the head greenkeeper of a nine-hole par 3 course. He's the club pro. He's a gliding instructor. And now he's the town mayor.

Mel Dawson has more hats than Gertrude Shilling. One minute he's changing the oil in his one and only ride-on mower, the next he's off to Windsor Castle to see his local Berkshire Wiltshire Regiment amalgamate with the Gloucesters and pick up new colours from the Duke of Edinburgh.

Wearing so many hats is not a problem for this 40-year-old father of two. He and wife Barbie have been at the course for 20 years and are used to working all hours to get the job done.

"It just means getting up a bit earlier," explained BIGGA member Mel. "If you were working 9-5, five days a week you couldn't do it, but we have a farmer's mentality. So far today we've only got half the fairways and greens cut because it's raining. If it dries up later we'll be out at 7pm or so finishing off. If there's work to be done, whether it's a Sunday, bank holiday or nine o'clock in the evening, we go out and do it. Because we're used to working like this we can fit in other things."

As mayor he is also chairman of the council and has to attend at least one council meeting a week.

As mayor he is also the first citizen of Chippenham so he has to open everything from a hockey club to a job centre to a school's fete. "It's good because you meet people who work hard in Chippenham who you'd never met before," he says. As a gliding instructor he spends most Sundays at the local club, where he has been flying for 20 years. His father was also a glider pilot and all four of his brothers are involved with aviation in some way.

As a greenkeeper, he has been looking after Monkton Park – which he promotes as 'The South West's Best Par 3 Course' – for 20 years and has been a member of BIGGA for four years. Last November he took on a YTS lad, 17-year-old Robert Jenkins (also a BIGGA member), to help him maintain the course and repair clubs. Barbie also does her fair share on the course. "I had a council meeting at 3 o'clock yesterday, so she was out there shovelling sand out of the trailer because we've got nowhere to store it," Mel told us.

But Barbie is mainly responsible for the snack bar and golf shop, and employs some casual labour to help her during the hectic, long summer days. Their 15 and 17-year-old daughters also lend a hand.

Satisfaction

Of all his duties, jobs and functions, it's green-keeping that gives Mel the most satisfaction.

"It's the thing I take the most pride in. Any greenkeeper likes his golfers to come up to him and say, 'The greens are looking nice today,' or 'The fairways are looking nice today'. It might only be 10 acres and a small golf course, but it's still nice when members come up and pay us a compliment.

"We do take a lot of pride in it, and because we take a lot of pride in it it's easier for me to get behind the counter and take £3 per round off people. If it's rained for four days and I haven't been able to do anything with it, I feel



Mower and mayor

guilty when people come to the shop to pay me money."

As you will have gathered by now, Mel is not a normal greenkeeper and Monkton Park is not a typical par 3 course. Set in 10 acres leased from the local council, it is kept to a very high standard considering the wear and tear it receives (including divots in the greens). There are 16 (a 17th is on its way) bunkers and holes which range in length from the 90-yard 9th to the 178-yard 5th. So experienced players – there are 50 club members – will have to use most irons in their bags. And it's not easy because most of the greens are small. The largest one is the 500sq yd double 8th/9th green. The total size of all the greens is about 2,500 sq yds – easily covered with four bags of fertiliser.

The fertiliser and the topdressing has to be brought onto the course by a Land Rover and two-ton trailer because it's in the middle of a public park and access is limited. Mel says he would like to topdress more often but because he has to have it bagged, it is too expensive. There is also the problem of how to apply it as most of the modern topdressing machinery is big and expensive.

The course, which is open 364 days of the year, 9am til dusk, used to be 14 holes all about 100 yards. Now the most obvious tees are still about 100 yards from the greens but there are also back mats on four holes for more experienced golfers, many of whom are also members of local 18-hole courses.

Mel and Barbie bought the business from Mel's boss, Frank Hill, a former touring pro, never dreaming they'd still be there 20 years and two children later.

Mel doesn't play much but holds the course record – 24. When he's played full-size courses he usually shoots in the mid-80s. "When I give up the gliding and council work I'm going to

work hard on my golf and get down to single figures," says the Mayor of Chippenham who got into politics through his father-in-law. When he married in '75, Barbie's father was the mayor. Later on, Mel was asked to get involved because of his contacts. He's been on the council for seven years and was deputy mayor last year.

But, even though he is mayor, he can't get his machinery insured for theft. This is because it is housed in a "remote" 25x10ft shed in the middle of the park and Mel put in a £3,000 claim last year (only his second in 20 years) when his Ransomes Auto-cert, chainsaw, strimmer and other equipment was stolen and his Sisis spiker was thrown in the nearby river (presumably because it was too heavy and the wheels had been removed).

Mel is trying to find a way round it, but at the moment he is taking much of the lighter equipment home with him. Taking on Robert may help because now it means that Mel and his landlords, the council, will have to meet health and safety standards, and that could mean a better, more secure shed.

"We've got decent machinery so we can get the golf course done quickly," says Mel, who wants to hang onto it. "We like to have the course look nice and play nice."

Just like any other normal greenkeeper.

MONKTON PARK EQUIPMENT

1 Sabo Kontinent 1200-3D, 1 Kubota G1700 ride-on mower, which doubles up as a utility vehicle, 1 Ransomes Super-cert greens mower, 1 Sisis Autoturfman spiker, which they use about once a month, 1 Echo strimmer, 1 Echo chainsaw, 1 Opitech Sprayer, 1 Cyclone fertiliser spreader, 1 old Amazone leaf sweeper, 1 Massey-Ferguson 135 tractor with gang mowers, 1 Land Rover with 2.5 tonne trailer. Irrigation is via two standpipes and 100m of hose.