

Wall for one

Heswall Golf Club greets another spring with hope and enthusiasm – and optimism that a certain wall will still keep back the water.

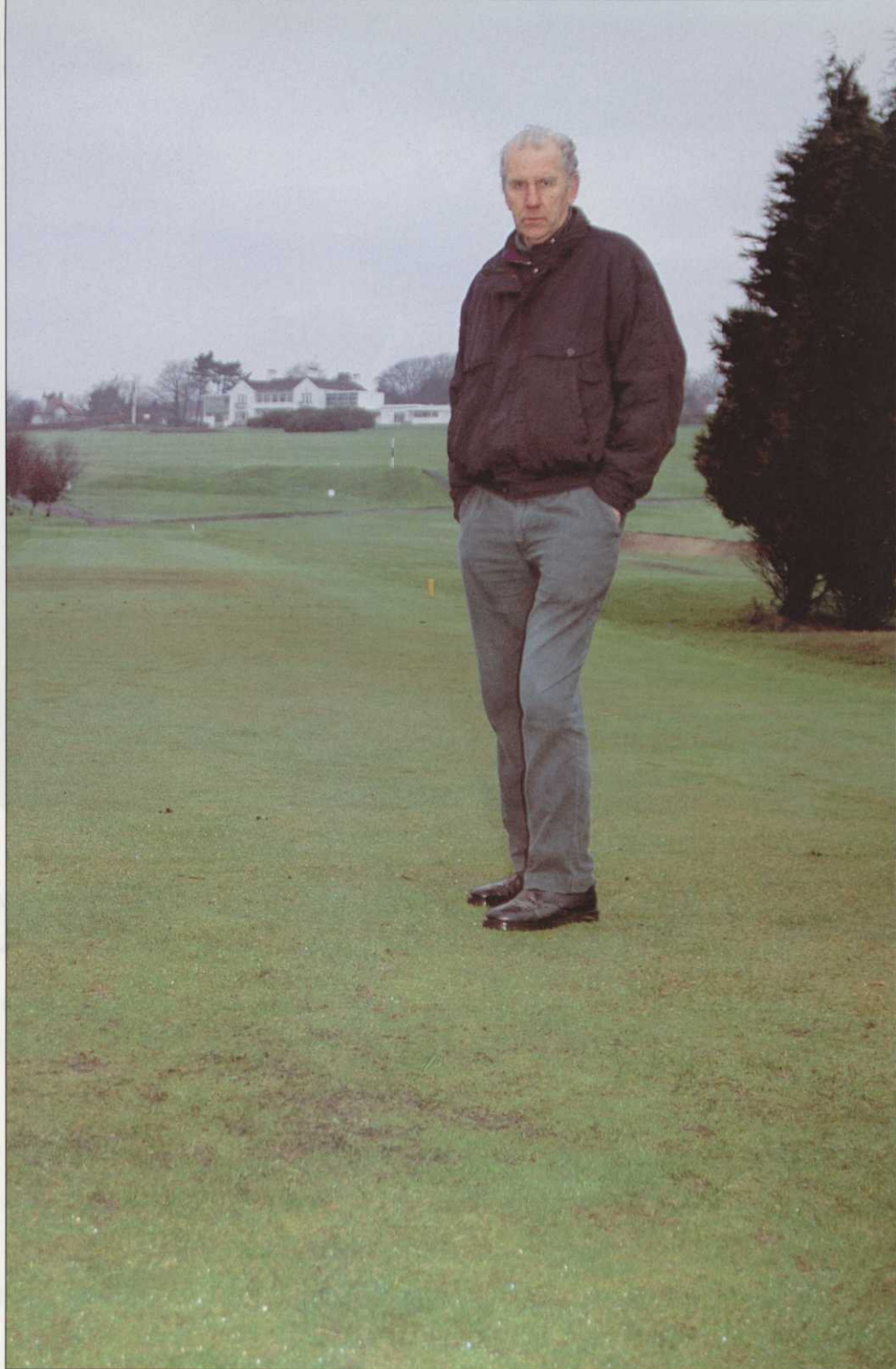
Chris Boiling reports.

If I were to die tomorrow, there'd be a queue a mile long for my job," says 60-year-old Bill Lawson, course manager at Heswall Golf Club, a 6,472-yard par 72 course on the Wirral between North Wales and Liverpool.

The 900-member club may not be as famous as its neighbour – Royal Liverpool – but Bill, who's been there since 1965, wouldn't swap it.

"I love it here. I enjoy working on this site, always have done. It's not famous and it will never hold anything other than county matches but if you see it dressed up with all the summer gear on the tees etc. and all the fairways striped, every green looking good, it's a very nice course to work on.

"It's a lovely site and it's a nice area. And I've had nothing but help from the committee and the members from day one. All right, you have some seasons when they don't go well and members lean on you a bit, but that's natural – you can't expect anything else because they



■ Have you seen a longer tee than this? Bill Lawson stands on the 83-yard long 12th tee – "It's difficult to maintain because everyone wants to play from the middle to go through the gap in the trees."

■ This wall is 42ft high, but only 4ft 6in remain visible because of the silting up of the estuary. When it disappears, so may a couple of holes!

'A difficult course to manage at this time of the year'

don't understand your job."

One of the best things about the course is the view across 40 sq miles of marshes – a haven for wild ducks and geese – to the Irish Sea. But this location means it is a difficult course to manage at this time of year.

The biggest problem is the wind. It causes havoc with spraying, with the sprinklers, it can fry the grass and burn the trees (so much so that they can look like they're dying).

"It's very difficult to put an even cover of water on if you've got a gale force wind blowing across the Irish Sea – you end up with a bunker with plenty of water, the back of the green over-watered and the front with none on at all. And they dry off quickly," explains Bill.

If he starts watering the greens too early, he can have problems with weeds that most greenkeepers have never heard of – the seeds being blown from marsh plants onto his greens. Sometimes the wind is very cold, even in early spring, stopping growth and sometimes frying away the tops.

"If the cold winds blow, what grass you've already got on the greens will stop dead and very nearly fry away off the tops and leave you with very little growth at the end of March/beginning of April.

"You've got to greenkeep on a site like this – Derek Green at Royal Liverpool is the same – you really have to look at your golf course day by day. Don't make any decisions like I'll fer-



The third lake takes shape between the 12th and 17th fairways

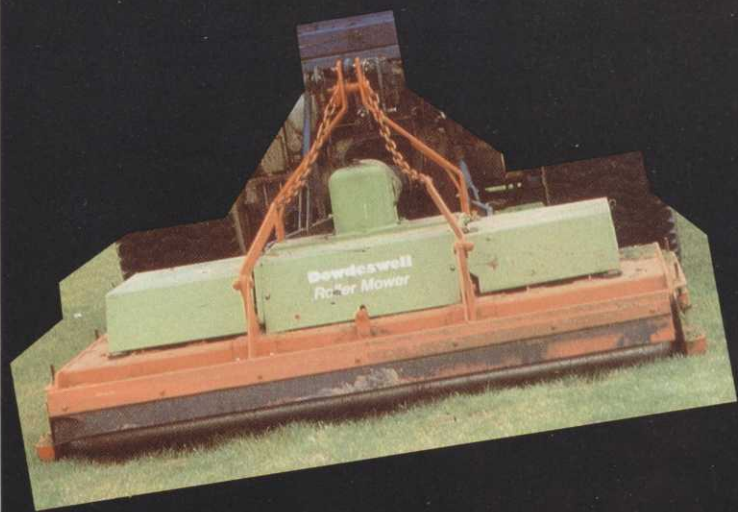
tilise a week on Wednesday because it won't work out. It's the same with when you want any spraying done. You've got to do it very early in the day because come 9 o'clock the wind will get up and you won't be able to spray. There'll be no room on the golf course anyway."

Early spring is a very difficult and hectic

time of the year. Heswall is very rarely closed (one morning and two afternoons last year and then the weather was so awful no-one would want to go out) and there are no temporary greens (just a hole cut in the apron for when the greens are being worked on). Since the late 60s, when Jim Arthur was advising on the golf course, they have been carrying out a

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'Most of the time we cut fairways twice a week and they hold'



The 18th green. Paraquat and industrial cleaning fluid sprayed on 15 greens caused a little headache. But they hollow-cored them, slit them, washed them, and brushed in a lot of chitted seed. Just as it broke they brushed in lots of top-dressing. It took about a year to get it right again

rigorous programme of vertidrainage and slitting. This has enabled members to play on the course all year round and meant that, come spring, Bill and his team have got a good surface with which to start the season.

Cutting

The greens are held down to 3/16ths until the end of April/beginning of May depending on the growth and then they ease just under that for the summer. "All through the summer we verticut the greens once a week, twice if we've got something special on in addition to cutting them every day. Come late October we vertidrain the greens and start slitting them. We also vertidrain the greens around Christmas and February – and, if we need to, we verticut them to clean them off. Following that, every Monday we slit down to 8in with a Sisis Hydromain slitting machine all through the winter to the first or second week in March. At least once a fortnight we put a 6ft brush behind the Hydromain and drag the greens with it to keep them open and dry and disease free. We hollow-core last week of March/first week of April, get the top dressing worked into the hollow and away they go.

"We don't slit if it's frosty but we don't like to miss a week and we certainly want them vertidrain three times a year.

"This keeps them disease free and very, very dry. We like to start the season with a good playing surface and we like to have something to work with in March and April."

The tees, apron and surrounds of the greens are held down to 1/4in right through the summer after vertidrainage and slitting.

The fairways are cut just below 1/2in. After starting the season with two cuts using a set of old Ransomes sportscutters, the team go on to use Ransome Hydraulic 5s. "We'll give them a

nice striped effect and we'll cut them once or twice a week.

"If we've got something on they may be cut during the days of the event but most of the time we can cut them twice a week and they'll hold because they're quality grasses and they don't grow fast.

"It's easy to maintain quality grass providing you don't spoil it by adding too much fertiliser or too much water."

Dressing

As soon as he sees a little bit of growth (hopefully at the end of March), he'll very lightly top-dress the greens using a very sandy top-dress mix. "Then I'll watch day by day, end of March, first week of April, for the first sign that we've got a little bit of movement on the grass. I'll dress them with a fertiliser with just 8 percent nitrogen and no more and I'll wait to see what that does to the turf. If it starts to

move within two or three weeks then all I'll keep doing is lightly top-dressing. I may go all the way through April and into May before I put any more fertiliser on them. We don't use a lot of fertiliser and we don't get a lot of disease on the greens today.

"If we can get some growth started by the end of March/beginning of April then I'm quite happy to hold them down until the middle or end of May. And then, depending what we've got on them, I'll lightly dress them again. And it really is nitrogen only or nitrogen and iron. It's a case of looking all the time and seeing what your greens are doing. It's the same with fairways.

"The fairways are heavily vertidrainage so they'll grow all the grass we need and we've got quality fairways. The one thing we can't afford to do is to over-fertilise them so we will spray them with a liquid fertiliser about the end of April when it's picked up very easily and that's all they'll have and they'll be good quality fairways from the middle of April right until well, well into the autumn months, perhaps even November." (They looked pretty good to me in February after some heavy rain.)

"They'll never be over-fed. Same with the tees. We will liquid fertilise the tees with the same fertilisers as the fairways and hold them back as much as we possibly can. The one thing we don't want to do is turn Heswall into a parkland, so it's very little fertiliser when we think we need it and no more.

"The rough we let go to about 3ins and semi-rough to about 1 1/2ins. And great areas we leave uncut. Unless the trees are close to the green and we have to cut in between them, we leave them. The whole business about Heswall Golf Club is leaving it so that it looks like you're playing a piece of natural

Equipment at Heswall Golf Club

- 1 Ford tractor 3910
- 1 Ford tractor 1910
- 1 Ford tractor 1700
- 1 Huxtruck turf vehicle with top-dresser
- 1 Sisis Hydromain with hollow tiner and sprayer
- 1 Greens Vertidrain
- 1 Huxley 358 Greensmower
- 2 Ransomes 171 greens triplex
- 2 Ransomes 180 tees mowers
- 1 Ransomes Hydraulic 5 fairway cutter
- 1 Ransomes Sportscutter Fairway
- 1 Ransomes Magna Rough
- 1 Trima Front Loader
- 1 Lewis Landlord 200 Digger
- 2 Allen National 68s

'Two of the holes are new'

land that's been there for a long, long time and not suddenly developed into a golf course. It's not a difficult course when the wind isn't blowing – it isn't long enough and it probably isn't tight enough – but when the wind is blowing and the weather is good, it's a delight to play and work on."

A founder member of BIGGA and a former vice chairman, he has a team of five to help him, including head greenkeeper Guy Cannings, and he makes sure they get properly trained. "I don't believe in taking someone on and using them as a labourer – you don't get enough from him. You get more from trained staff although you may only have them four or five years," says Bill, a member of the liaison committee at Reaseheath College. Ten Heswall-trained greenkeepers now have their own courses, including Raymond Hunt at the Forest of Arden. Mark Lewis has joined the European Tour as a junior agronomist.

Changes

Every hole has changed in some way during Bill's 28 years as the keeper of the greens. Two of the holes – the 12th and 13th – are brand new. The 18th has changed completely. The bunkering on most holes has changed to take account of the modern game. "We hope within the next two-three years that most of the old bunkering will be changed and there'll be more modern bunkers on the golf course than there are now. Some of them we'll never change even though they're old because they look right. We don't stop, we move gently on."

As well as regular spring maintenance, they plan to build three tees and change two bunkers – if the weather's kind to them.

They're also planning to plant 2,500 mixed pine and 2,000 gorse plants to thicken up the areas that already have trees (3,000 trees have been planted there since 1965). These areas are mainly at the top of the course, leaving the bottom part bare so that nothing blocks the superb views across the marshes to the River Dee.

Nearly 10 of the 148 acres are left alone, apart from a bit of tidying up. There is certainly no spraying. This is to bring in more wildlife.

A new lake is also being built, between the 12th and 17th fairways, to encourage the wild ducks and geese to breed on the golf course. "When the thousands of

duck and geese we have on the marsh decide to move inland for the mating season, we still want some of them to be on the golf course." The clover-shaped lake is about 50-yards wide, and brings to three the number of lakes built during Bill's reign.

"We decided a very long time ago that we did not want a pretty-pretty golf course. We did not want lots of flowering shrubs, flowering trees, anything that looks pretty-pretty because when you look out from the clubhouse we like to see out onto the marsh and it would not look right as a pretty-pretty golf course.

"When the wind blows it has a great effect on the golf. It does not want to look like a public park." If the wind blows the 151-yard 16th isn't reachable with a driver.

Irrigation

They have just had a bore hole put in by British Gypsum at the bottom of the car park. The £8,000 investment will give them 2,600 gallons an hour – "far in excess of anything I'll want," says Bill. The water goes into a 1,600-gallon tank from which it feeds a Watermation system using 3 – 1 1/4in pipes. This system was installed in 1970 and has been updated slowly as Watermation bring out better quality heads. The controller has been changed for a TW2. Bill says impact systems are better for this course because he believes he gets better coverage in windy conditions. The bore hole means they can now water all the tees and three fairways that are downwind and have very hard approaches.

Headache

Bill's biggest headache will come in a few years time when the river starts to encroach on the course. Once, the wall at the bottom of the course was 42ft high and in 1938 the sand yachting championships were held there on pure white sand. Now only 4ft 6in is visible because of the silting up and the sand has become 40 sq miles of marsh. Bill has seen the marsh built up 4ft 6in in his lifetime. And now when there's a high tide and the wind gets behind it, the water comes up to the top of the wall.

When the wall disappears, the course will undergo its most dramatic change and the flat area everyone loves may disappear. The course manager who does eventually take over from Bill had better bring his waders.



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