



# Royal Birkdale bounces back

by CHRIS BOILING

The £300,000 green rebuilding programme at Royal Birkdale is now complete.

Greenkeeper International went along to have a look and to talk to head greenkeeper Tom O'Brien who's preparing for his retirement after 16 years at the club.

**R**oyal Birkdale is on course to host the 1998 British Open. All the greens, heavily criticised during the '91 Open, have been dug up and remodelled. Five of them – 1, 2, 10, 15 and 17 – opened to much acclaim from members last year and the other 13 are due to come into play this spring.

Interviews for a new head greenkeeper are due to take place later this month. The new man will replace Tom O'Brien when he retires in October. Tom was the one unfairly blamed for the poor state of the greens in 1991. The flak still haunts him...

After spending the afternoon with Tom O'Brien, my mind drifted back to the entertainment at this year's BTME and in particular a line from a Les Miserables tune sung at the banquet dinner by the group West End Nights: *"There's a grief that can't be spoken, there's a pain goes on and on..."*

Tom O'Brien knows that pain. It's been hurting him since the '91 Open when several top golfers (but, interestingly, not the winner) publicly lambasted him for the state of his greens.

Normally, if you've got a pain you see a doctor. But, for Tom, there's no relief for his

suffering. "I've never got over it. I try to put it at the back of my mind but I don't think there's a day that goes by that I don't think on it," he told me.

Tom knows that on a world scale the fact that the greens weren't right for one competition isn't that important. But it doesn't ease the pain. "If you look at what's going on in the world today with the war in Yugoslavia – last night I saw a young girl whose arms had been blown off – and old ladies not feeling safe in their own homes, it doesn't matter. I know

A photograph of a golf course green. In the foreground, a large, well-maintained green is visible. In the middle ground, a red tractor is parked on a dirt path. The background shows a grassy hillside with some trees under a clear blue sky.

# Starting over

you should put things in perspective, but it still doesn't stop me thinking about it. It's still with me, it won't go away.

"The next Open I think I'll want to go away on holiday because it'll come up again, they'll show some photos on the television and they'll repeat all the criticism and bring it all back. I find it difficult to watch golf on telly because I wanted mine to be so nice, to be so good. And I worked damn hard too.

"When you put the effort in and see the results, that's fine. But when the effort goes in and you don't see the results... We all worked hard to get it right and it was a big disappointment to us all."

Tom has been at the Southport course for 16 years and a head greenkeeper since he was 23. He joined the profession 49 years ago when he went to his local club for a job. He stayed at Glasgow's Mount Ellen course for 17 years working his way up to head greenkeeper. Spells in France, Menorca and other courses in his native Scotland followed.

He knew things weren't going right at Birkdale as the '91 season unfolded. Various agronomists came in to advise him, including Jim Arthur and David Stansfield. He says he followed their advice "to the letter". And, at first, he thought they were right. "In the beginning the impression I formed was that if I tined, tined, tined, tined and cut down on the fertiliser that I would win the greens

round. No way! When we dug them up we realised that was the only answer."

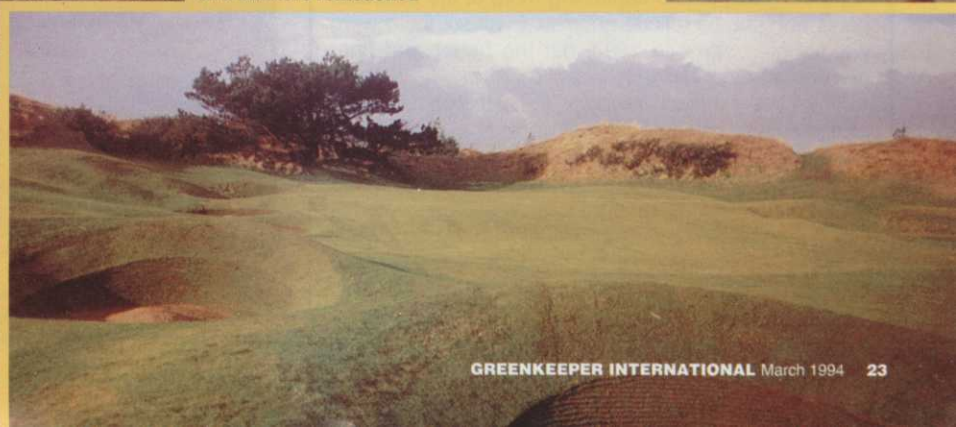
Now he is disillusioned with agronomists, except Jeff Perris, the STRI's advisor on the new greens.

"One agronomist came and said 'the greens need tining' – the green he was standing on had been vertidraind nine times. One says don't mention lime, another says put it on. One says sand causes root break, the other says it doesn't." But he followed what they said.

"All this advice, all those agronomists, people considered authorities, but when it all goes wrong it's the greenkeeper's fault 110 percent."



**Main picture: the 5th green, with rootzone layer**  
**Left: the stage before – digging it up**  
**Below: how it looks today, with the green finished and bunkers remodelled**



# Major success

ROYAL BIRKDALE started by replacing what Jeff Perris of the STRI calls "the most troublesome and the worst examples of an inhospitable and most inappropriate growing medium in which the grass was expected to thrive and present a good playing surface."

"This inhospitable growing medium comprised a very organic, moisture-retentive, fine, sandy medium which was reluctant to support a good quality, well-rooted sward."

So the decision was made to reconstruct the greens, replacing the inhospitable rootzone with a better material and at the same time taking the opportunity to redesign and recontour the greens where it was felt appropriate.

Work on the first five greens started in September 1992 and was completed by late October. These greens opened for play last spring. The reconstruction work and redesign was considered so successful that the club decided quite quickly that the remaining greens and the practice putting green should be done in 1993. Work started in late August and finished a few days before Christmas. The weather will dictate when they open in spring.

The same team has been involved in the work from the outset: Martin Hawtree (assisted by Ken Moodie) did the redesign while the technicalities were sorted out by the Sports Turf Research Institute (whose principle agronomists involved were Jeff Perris and James Westwood); John Greasley Ltd was the golf course contractor.

The reconstruction programme to the new designs went like this:

1. The turf was cut thinly and removed and stored on adjacent areas to the green and surrounds.
2. The layer of inhospitable, undesirable organic soil which often prevailed to a depth of about 5in was removed and disposed of.
3. The underlying 4in or so of more suitable sandy soil was removed and stockpiled.
4. The exposed underlying pure sand was then reshaped. Where additional material was needed a local Southport sand was imported (very similar to the natural Birkdale sand).
5. The stockpiled sandy soil taken from the green was then mixed with a specific imported medium-fine sand (often in the ratio of equal amounts by volume) and the resultant mixture replaced on the greens to provide the actual rootzone.
6. A proper turf bed was prepared and any necessary fertilising undertaken prior to replacement of the original turf. The STRI hopes that the more suitable growing medium on the greens will eventually improve the original quality of the annual meadow grass Birkdale turf to eventually include some bentgrass and maybe even fescue.

During the 1993 growing season the management of the first five greens took a little getting used to, according to Jeff Perris, the much sandier and freer rootzone clearly needs a little more fertilising and irrigation. "Hopefully, with the experience of 1993 behind us, it will prove possible to make significant improvements to the greens this year and in the coming years. It will, however, take some time to amend the turf from annual meadow grass to one containing more of the desirable bents and maybe fescue grasses. Even so, there were encouraging signs in 1993 that the better and finer grasses were beginning to establish.

"From the technical viewpoint, the club has been fully justified in remaking the greens and replacing the inhospitable, inappropriate black organic rootzone with a medium-fine sandy soil that most connoisseurs of true links courses would recognise as the ideal material. Whilst there was some slight variation in the sandy soil preserved from each green for further mixing with imported sand, the resultant mix shows a remarkable consistency."



The 6th before, during and after.  
Top picture shows the way it used to be.  
The middle picture shows returfing in progress following the remodelling of the green.  
The third picture shows the finished green before the right hand bunker was remodelled. Far right: the freshly returfed right-hand bunkers.

# comes just a little too late

He would probably have got away with the greens being soft and slow, except for one big mistake...

"I had been called to the office about the greens dropping in pace from 9 to 6 and they asked 'What can you do about it?' Well, what can you do about it when a tournament starts?"

"They asked 'What can you do to increase the pace?' I couldn't put the machines down because the greens were soft. I knew that. I said the only thing I can do is put the grimmers down a 1/16th and it might increase the speed. All the lads knew I'd been called to the office, they knew what had been discussed. They knew the greens were slow, they knew we were going to put the grimmers down, so I think they went out and thought this is right, this is what he wants. But, of course, it wasn't"

Instead of 1/16th, the grimmers had been put down to a 1/4.

"The words I used were '1/16th, just a 1/16th, just enough to kiss the grass.'" The words are etched on his mind, along with the thought: "If only I'd looked, if only I'd checked."

But, with everything going on, with meetings about scaffolding and TV towers to attend, he never did get around to checking the machines. An oversight that has devastated him.

"I'm the head greenkeeper, I must take the blame," he says.

The severe drop in mowing height killed much of the annual meadow grass which dominates this 105-year-old course's greens so – sin of all sins – they didn't look good on TV. "Imagine the armchair viewer listening to all the criticism. If he sees them looking nice and green and striped, he says 'I don't know what they're moaning about.' But if he sees them all discoloured, he says 'Well, they're right enough, something's wrong there.'"

Although Tom accepts responsibility for not checking the grimmers, this was not the problem, it just highlighted it. As Tom says: "They didn't spend a lot of money digging up 18 greens because I cut them too short."

"Immediately after the Open I'd have looked quite smart if I'd stood up and said 'It wasn't my fault, we adjusted the machines wrong' or something. But that wasn't the issue. That let the agronomists off the hook. What was really the issue was the greens were too soft. I know that, they were too soft. But I also came in for a lot of criticism that wasn't justified. I thought at the time the course was also too much for some of the pros. If someone came up to you during the Open and you weren't playing well and asked you what you thought of the course, what're you going to say? There were also some comments from them that they were thatchy, they were this and they were that. I'm not trying to be funny or smart but do you think they'd be interested in a golf lesson from me?"

Apart from the greens, the course was in

good condition but, as Tom points out, "You can't have a good golf course if it doesn't have good greens."

Now, as the Royal Birkdale Golf Club prepares to host its eighth Open Championship before the turn of the century, it has the greens to match. "We've got the best layout and now we've got the best greens," says club secretary Norman Crewe.

## Time for a change

"Immediately after the Open we started to think what could we do to get them right," says Tom. They'd tried most things in the build-up to the Open but nothing had worked. Then, when the £300,000 greens renovation programme began, they realised why.

"When we dug them up they were worse than we thought," explained Tom. There was a black layer about five inches thick and three of the greens had a clay base. "You could see all the tine marks in them, but they'd done nothing. It was like slicing or vertidrainage into tablet."



Newly revetted bunkers on the 6th. "Tom's a master at revetting," says club secretary Norman Crewe

Because Southport sand is very fine, the early contractors had mixed it with agricultural soil "which seemed to be the popular thing then – there was mushroom compost and all sorts of things in it," says Tom. Over the years this completely sealed the soil to form a solidified humus with the consistency of plasticine. "Once the operation had started, everyone realised it was the sensible thing to do and it should have been done a long time ago."

For a long time there had been a joke about selling Royal Birkdale's greens for fertiliser. It seems they could also have been sold as breeze blocks.

## Tougher greens

While they were digging up the greens, designer Martin Hawtree, whose grandfather Fred designed the present layout in 1932 (when it became a championship standard course) and whose father Fred Jnr laid out the new holes when the course was modified after the 1961 Open, took the opportunity to remodel them.

"We were looking to improve water surface run-off, to increase putting surface interest, and to harmonise green and green surround,

all of these matters to be attended to in the context of championship golf – neither making the approach to greens any easier or more receptive than they have been, nor eliminating the deceptive breaks and slopes in the present putting surfaces, nor making distances from fairway to green any easier to judge," Martin says was his brief.

Tom reckons the new greens will add two to three strokes to an average golfer's round.

Three of the greens – 3, 7 and 18 – have had major facelifts since they have been raised by 0.25-0.5m for drainage and salinity reasons. This means the bunkers on the 7th have become much deeper. The 3rd was also extended by four metres at the front to increase pin placement options.

Commenting on the new greens, Jeff Perris, of the STRI, says visitors will "note a tremendous change in the architecture of the greens as well as the firmness of the surface. The anticipated improvement in textural composition of the turf will no doubt take a little longer to achieve but already the redevelopment is being claimed a major success."

This "major success" has come a little late in the day for Tom O'Brien. "At least I have one season with them. It would have been worse if I'd have finished at the time of the Open, which I gave serious thought to. But I was unhappy going into the Open. Very, very, very, very unhappy. The greens weren't going right and there was no way I could correct it."

If you were preparing for the 1998 Open what would you do different, I wondered. "I wouldn't change my methods, but now I've got new greens the results would be different. I'd do the usual maintenance. Obviously I'd want to see it look its best. I'd think twice about some of the advice I got, that's for sure."

## Life after Birkdale

Tom is uncertain about what life after Birkdale has to offer. When I asked him what he'd like to do when he retires, he said: "God knows, I'd like to get something part-time. I don't want to sit around doing nothing." (His wife won't be retiring just yet.)

He's told some people he might return to Scotland, but he told me: "I don't think I'll move back. I've been really happy here. Southport is a great place to live."

He used to play a lot of golf, getting down to a nine handicap although it was "18 at the last count, 81 now". He may take it up again in his retirement. "I'd like to become a member of a club but it's difficult to get in," says the father of two grown-up sons.

Whatever he does, he'll never forget the '91 Open. The only thing that might erase that nightmare is hosting a successful Championship. But that responsibility will fall to one of the 60 applicants who applied for his job. Tom will have to content himself with the next best thing – the North West section are holding their autumn tournament there in September.