



Hard life or easy life? Municipal course or exclusive private golf club? Greenkeeper International explores the working practices of two greenkeepers at each end of the course maintenance scale. We start with Ian Holoran at Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Centre



Ian Holoran near the par 3 6th. All the greenstaff are issued with high-visibility jackets, safety shoes and crash helmets

# For greenkeeper, read entertainer

**“W**e actually class ourselves as entertainers, rather than greenkeepers,” says Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Centre’s Ian Holoran. “We entertain 80,000 people a year, which isn’t bad going.”

His employers don’t call him a greenkeeper either. His official job title is foreman, although his job description would apply to most course managers and head greenkeep-

ers. And his team of three permanent staff are labelled ‘craftsmen/gardeners’, although they are all qualified in greenkeeping *and* horticulture, and all have spraying certificates.

This is just one of the differences I discovered during my visit to this municipal course.

Many golfers view municipal courses as “scruffy, badly-maintained eyesores,” according to BBC Golf. But, as the magazine goes on

to point out, many of Britain’s public courses offer “challenging golf, great scenery, good facilities and deliciously low green fees”.

Middlesbrough Municipal is one of these. Opened in 1978 on farmland three miles from the town centre, it is among BBC Golf’s list of the 18 finest public courses in the country.

Writer Mike Cable says it has been designed to cope efficiently with heavy traffic. “The

## 'When you come to tender for your own job every three years you know exactly how much you spend on materials, machinery and labour'

front nine holes are wide open, with broad fairways and big greens to help keep play moving on steadily, while the back nine holes are much more of a challenge, requiring shots into and across the prevailing wind and over becks."

### Different

Ian, 39, says working on a municipal course is no worse or better than working on a private course, it's just different. In some ways the municipal course can teach top private clubs a thing or two, especially when it comes to health and safety, training and looking after staff. For example, Ian has monthly meetings regarding health and safety. He recently went to one to discuss the dangers of needlestick injury. Many greenkeepers should be aware of the dangers of catching Hepatitis B and C and HIV from hypodermic needles discarded in woods and copses.

They also have verbal/physical abuse forms to fill in if club members have a go at them. They simply fill in the pink form and the club committee deal with the member. "They only do it once. Troublesome members are slung out," says Ian, chairman of BIGGA's Northern Region. They also have an impressive internal training programme. Among the courses on offer through Middlesbrough Borough Council are: time management, stress awareness, effective report writing, dealing with aggression, skills in communication, computer literacy, fire extinguishers, Health and Safety at Work Act, manual handling, identifying hazards, preparing for retirement and first aid. First-aid training is especially important because about 40% of the people playing the John Hamilton-Stutt course are retired.

This high standard of training and attention to detail has helped Middlesbrough Municipal Golf Centre achieve registration under BS5750, a coveted quality assurance standard. It means the golf course promises to deliver a certain standard of service, ie, that on any given day a certain number of staff will be on site and that at least one of them will be qualified in first-aid, that the clubhouse will be open for specified hours (8am-11.30pm), that the greens will be cut by a certain time (10.30am), that bunkers will be raked three or four times a week, and members will be told in advance that the course will be sprayed on such and such day with such and such chemical if the weather conditions prevail. In other words, there has to be good communication with the golfers.

If members have a problem or a question, they fill in a 'feedback card' and Ian has to have a written answer back to them within seven working days. The questions and answers are also displayed on a noticeboard in the clubhouse.

"It's worth everyone going for BS5750 registration because it means you're accepting a minimum standard," says Ian. "You have to



set a standard you can achieve rather than a vague wish. You have to set out everything, for example your criteria for closing the course." (see panel on Page 19).

Inspectors can come and check that standards are being maintained anytime without warning.

### Budgeting

Another major difference between Middlesbrough Municipal and private courses is the budgeting system. Everything – yes, everything – has a price. Moving the tee markers 156 times a year costs £2,987 and transplanting 681 trees took 93.3 hours and cost £536 in labour.

"You soon get used to this way of doing things," says Ian. "And when you come to tender for your own job every three years you know exactly how much you spend on materials, machinery and labour."

This system came into operation in 1989 with the introduction of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CTT). Ian, who has been in the greenkeeping and horticulture business for 22 years and started at the municipal golf course in 1986 as first assistant, is now employed by the Direct Service Organisation, which is contracted by the Client Section (the paymasters) who are answerable to the local council.

This change not only had a big impact on the organisation and admin of the greenstaff but also their maintenance practices.

"One thing Compulsory Competitive Tendering has done is focus councillors to look at the products being used and to question – especially with chemicals – whether it's the right thing to use, if it's environmentally friendly, if it's safe for the user and the customer and what are its effects? They also look at machinery and say 'You don't need two greens machines, one will do – it will just take you that little bit longer to do the job. Once you've cut all 18 greens you've finished with the machine and it's stood there doing nothing most of the day.'"

After peering inside what many greenkeepers would call a "lack of" equipment shed, I saw for myself how much Ian had been forced to streamline his machinery. There was a Jacobsen Greens King, a Ransomes GT, a Ransomes multi-mower, a Hydromain with topdresser and other accessories, an International tractor, a trailer and two sets of gang mowers.

"It's not a lot, but it's all we need," said Ian dismissively. "We have a better back-up service than most golf courses. We can borrow equipment from the parks department. They have nine tractors and six sets of gangs."

With three permanent staff, three extra summer workers and this arsenal, Ian has to counteract the effect of more than 80,000 pairs of feet trampling around the 6,333-yard par 71 course. Demand is high because the course is within a five iron of two housing estates, within a drive of another, and many

# 'Yes, it would be nice to have sand-based greens but as someone said, you can't grow grass in a desert'

of the big local employers, including British Steel and ICI, have been creating more 'leisure time' for the local workforce. Also, as BBC Golf said, the green fees are "deliciously low". Rounds cost £7.75 weekdays and £9.75 at weekends. Season ticket charges are £240 for adults, £160 for senior citizens and £95 for juniors

## Clay soil

Middlesbrough Municipal doesn't even have the luxury of sand greens to cope with this traffic. The 18 greens are based on clay soil and were built in the early '70s when 30,000 rounds a year seemed a lot.

No wonder the greens are 100% annual meadowgrass, while the tees, fairways and rough are ryegrass.

Ian's maintenance programme is similar to that used by many parkland course managers. He aims to fertilise the greens at the end of April – the exact timing is dependent on a rise in soil temperature. His staff will hollow-tine, followed by a fairly heavy topdressing with two tons per green brushed in.

Ian would like to have fast greens but it's not possible. He never cuts lower than 3/16ths and for some of the summer he raises the height of cut. "When we get more play, usually in and around British Open time, we raise the height of cut to 1/4 to protect the greens and we also feed three weeks prior to the championship."

During the 1989 Ryder Cup they raised the height of cut to 5/16ths to save the greens from the sudden upsurge in demand from people who "weren't really golfers," Ian said, choosing his words very carefully.

The greens are cut daily during the growing season and scarified once a week during the summer to keep the speed up and to maintain growth through the whole year.

The holes are changed at least three times a week during the winter and four or five times a week during the summer.

They are played all year except when it's frosty, but as an insurance the winter greens are maintained all year, treating them the same as tees by cutting them at 1/4, topdressing them three times a year, fertilising them frequently and spiking regularly.

As at most golf clubs, a tee extension programme is in operation to cope with the increased levels of play. But with only three winter staff and a lot of trees to tidy up in the winter, only one or two new tees are constructed each year, using turf from the golf centre's own 2,000sq m turf nursery. "With such a small staff we have to set ourselves targets we know we can achieve."

New tees are built to the same spec as the old ones, so they are not out of character with the rest of the course. Ian admits not all his colleagues agree with him over this, but he

## Middlesbrough Municipal's report on golf course closure due to inclement weather

### INTRODUCTION

The most contentious issue during severe weather conditions is the closure of the course, from a Leisure Management stance because of lost income and from season ticket holding players because of reduced leisure pursuits. This in turn has the effect of placing greenkeeping staff under considerable pressure and often in an impossible position.

### BACKGROUND

In recent years figures from the National Environmental Research Council show that from the end of 1988, for a four year period, partial drought conditions prevailed, allowing almost uninterrupted winter play. Poor weather during the autumn/winter of 1992/3 further deteriorated throughout the year culminating in the wettest autumn for 30 years. This has now continued into 1995 giving record monthly rainfalls.

### CURRENT SITUATION

Subsequent monitoring and site inspections by Landscape Management staff in recent weeks has confirmed that the closure of the course by greenkeeping staff has been justified. Due to standing water, waterlogged ground or frost and snow conditions, any attempt to play under these conditions would be very short sighted as considerable damage will occur even if used for only a very short period.

The current problems associated with high rainfall are magnified to a large extent by poor drainage and ground compaction. Because these are known problems, all short- and long-term improvements are aimed at improving soil-water dispersal, but

if play were to continue unabated all this would be for nothing.

Allowing play when the grass sward is waterlogged will lead to further compaction, further preventing water penetrating the soil surface. Player traffic – normal movement or trailed trolleys – moving over saturated turf will lead to:

- further soil compaction – compression of soil structure;
- loss of grass cover – mud smeared on greens will quickly lead to die out, increasing weed invasion and the likelihood of disease;
- exaggerated wear and tear;
- disrupted levels;
- deterioration of playing quality

A prime example of deteriorating play quality can be observed at the driving range. Conditions have rapidly declined along with income and the operator is now making claims for lost income. In my opinion, open play on the course would result very quickly in a similar situation.

Play during frost or snow conditions also causes damage to the grass sward. When plants are under stress, normal walking action can damage the cell structure, resulting in death or die back, and at the same time break off surface vegetation from the root mass. This is a particular problem with fine grass species associated with tees, aprons and greens.

### CONCLUSION

Continue with the proposed short- and long-term improvements, increase spiking or introduce verti-draining when ground conditions allow but, most of all, resist pressure to play when conditions are unsuitable.

replies: "We can't change

165 acres into a championship course, we've got to manage the course as it is."

This goes for the greens, too. "If we made one sand green there would not be the consistent playing surface of the other 17. Yes, it would be nice to have sand-based greens but as someone else said, 'You can't grow grass in a desert'. So you need the water, and in years to come water will be more scarce, and you need to feed them more, so the maintenance will be more costly."

### Fairways

Fairways are cut once a week in the growing season at 1/4in. "It usually takes two days to get round," says Ian. The rough, which has been likened to a cricket outfield, is also cut once a week to keep it down to a ball-finding 1in. That takes one man about four days.

As well as maintaining the 18-hole parkland course, the Middlesbrough greenstaff also look after a driving range and two spring meadows.

Nature Conser-

vancy, who make two visits a year, advise them on the maintenance of these meadows. Ian also takes advice from British Seed Houses and the Sports Turf Research Institute.

One of the biggest problems with the course is the drainage. Some localised drainage has been installed in the worst areas, and more work is planned but there isn't the budget to do the whole course. Regular spiking of the fairways, hiring a Verti-drain once a year (in the spring), and laying pathways is the answer in the meantime.

"We believe that the expected improvements will further enhance the facilities," says golf centre manager Maurice Gormley.

The trouble is, if they make it more appealing, they will attract even more golfers. Being busy from dawn to dusk most days of the year should be enough for any course – and certainly for any greenkeeper, foreman, entertainer or whatever he's called.



Lovely atmosphere, no great hassle... and according to one league table, the best nine hole course in the world. Bob Gee of Royal Worlington and Newmarket Golf Club explains why he thinks he's got the best job in greenkeeping



Royal Worlington's Martin Law, left and Bob Gee: they plan to stay at the course all their working lives

# The only way we'll leave is by being carried out in a box

**T**hese men admit they've got the easiest job in greenkeeping. There are only two of them maintaining one of the world's top 100 courses, but they wouldn't swap it for any other position. They wouldn't swap it for a course with an irrigation system, or one with USGA-spec greens.

Bob Gee, 52, has been the head greenkeeper at the Royal Worlington and Newmarket Golf Club, eight miles north-east of Newmarket, for 36 years and Martin Law, 46, has been assisting him for 27 years. They both joined the club from school and plan to stay there for the rest of their working lives, just as the previous team of Harry Rutter and Claude Rutherford did.

"No one leaves, they carry you out in a box. No one wants to leave, it's got a lovely atmosphere and there's no great hassle," says Bob, summing up the appeal of the club, which was founded in 1893, three years after the course came into existence.

You can tell Royal Worlington is special

## 'Colour is secondary. Greens should be firm and fast. We're growing a putting surface, not a crop'

as soon as you drive up and find the course virtually empty, yet there is a notice on the first tee stating 'No three or four balls permitted'.

Royal Worlington is the only nine-hole course in Golf World magazine's top 100 courses, and it has been decried by The New Yorker magazine as "far and away the best nine-hole course in the world". Much of its prominence is due to the fact that it is home of the Cambridge University golf team whose ranks have been filled with such influential characters as Bernard Darwin, who used to refer to it as "the sacred nine", Harry Colt, Henry Longhurst and Donald Steel.

Money alone will not buy you membership of this exclusive club. You have to know someone or be a Cambridge Blue to get in. This has led to accusations of it being snobby, but we saw no evidence of this during our visit to the club. The atmosphere was very relaxed and friendly and one member bought a round of drinks for the greenstaff and me.

The 102-year-old club has just 350 members and many of these only play once or twice a year. One member was playing his first round there for 30 years. This is one reason why Bob and Martin think they have it easy – Royal Worlington must be one of the few courses in the country that is under-played. Another reason why they are lucky is that the club was built on a superb parcel of land. It's in the middle of Suffolk, 55 miles from the sea, but the soil is a sandy loam that many links courses would love to own. "It's a fluke of nature. It's perfect for a golf course but not much good for anything else," says Bob.

The original plan in 1890 was to build 18 holes, but some of the acreage was rather marshy, so on the advice of Captain AM Ross, an experienced local golfer, the founders of the club chose to lay out nine holes on the sandy soil at the southern end of the plot and let it go at that. Captain Ross is credited with designing the original nine holes on the 60-acre site. A few changes were made in 1906 by an up-and-coming architect called Harry Colt. Over the last 89 years, no alterations of any consequence have been made.

Members appreciate that. In a



One of the toughest greens in golf: the 5th at Royal Worlington

fast-changing word it is a refreshing constant. As you drive down the road to the clubhouse, an old brick farmhouse painted cream, it is like entering a time warp.

I could just as easily have been meeting Harry and Claude as Bob and Martin. In fact, I would have liked to have talked to Harry who, during his long reign, set the standard of maintenance for the course. Rutter's secret was a minimum of watering, no fertiliser, and plenty of common sense.

Rutter had some unconventional but effective means of taking care of the course. One was the use of a squareboard rake, an implement whose head is a thin slab of wood through which nails have been driven so that their points protrude. Each March, employing these rude rakes, he tore the famous greens to pieces. A fortnight later, fresh young fescue grass of the finest texture would begin to establish itself. The rake may have gone but many of Rutter's principles are still being followed today.

### Original greens

As far as anyone knows, the greens are those laid out by Ross

or Colt, and have no drainage system. Yet they drain superbly. One minute they could be flooded, half an hour later they will be dry. "It's nothing we do, it's nature," says Bob appreciatively. He has hollow-cored them once and verti-drained them twice in the last ten years. But they are spiked a lot.

The greens are one of the main reasons why people remember this course. They have some of the most wicked contours in the world. Donald Steel describes the green on the famous par 3 5th as being shaped like a vaulting horse. The narrow green falls away abruptly on both sides – on the right, to a stream and, on the left, to a basin of thatchy rough 20ft below the green. There are no bunkers on this 170-yard hole. None are needed. From either side it takes a very deft recovery to stop the ball on the putting surface and prevent it from slipping down the slope on the other side. Tales of good golfers "ping-ponging" their way to an 11 are common.

The greens are not just renowned for their undulations, they are also famed for their

speed. They are always fast (measuring 10-11ft most days on the stimpmeter) and they are in superb condition.

They do not always look green but Bob says: "Colour is secondary. Greens should be firm and fast. We're growing a putting surface, not a crop. It doesn't matter how it looks as long as it putts well."

The sward is 45% fescue, 45% bents and 10% rubbish (Yorkshire fog and annual meadowgrass). Last year they were overseeded for the first time in 100 years. Bob chose Barenbrug's Bar 1 mixture containing Baruba/Bargreen chewings fescue and Heriot/Bar-dot browntop bent.

The greens are hand-watered when necessary. There is no irrigation system. Bob believes this is an advantage: "We don't need it. It's ruined more greens than anything. Not through the greenkeeper's fault, through members. They say, 'We've paid all that money for that expensive watering system – turn it on', whether the greens need it or not. 'They're looking a bit dry, put the water on'."

Bob says it is much easier to

ruin a good green than to make a bad green good. And the easiest way to ruin a green is by overwatering it and overfeeding it. At Royal Worlington they will never overwater their putting surfaces. "We can't. No one's going to stand there with a hosepipe for too long at 6 in the morning. Too little is always better than too much."

Hand-watering also means they can see which areas need it most.

Neither Bob nor Martin have had any formal greenkeeper training. They use the techniques they picked up from their predecessors. Bob was taught by Claude Rutherford, the head greenkeeper for 20 years, who was, before that, Harry Rutter's assistant for many, many more years. The only thing that has really changed during Bob's 36 years at the club is the machinery that's used.

When he came as a boy he used one of the original Ransomes Overgreen walk-behind triples; now he uses a Jacobsen Greens King Mk4 "because members like the greens cut before they play on a Sunday and there's no way I'm getting up at 4am."

They are cut every day in summer (never lower than 3/16ths and never striped) and once a week in winter (1/4in).

There are no temporary greens and you get the feeling 'temporaries' are as alien a concept at Worlington as change. "There should not be temporary greens anywhere in this country," says Bob, without meaning to sound arrogant, "because the weather is not that bad. If you look after the greens in the summer, you will not need temporary greens in the winter."

The course only closes if there is snow or if they've had rain on top of frozen greens and the top 1/4in thaws. "If we close the course, they know it's for the good of the course and we're not just being Bolshie."

They no longer mix their own topdressing, they buy it in. But since they've been doing this, they've had dry patch problems. To combat this they are using a wetting agent twice a year on

advice from the STRI who have been making annual visits for the last six or seven years.

Four times a year (April, May, June, July) they mix a little sulphate of ammonia, potash and iron with the topdressing.

#### No trolley ban

Trolleys are allowed all year. "Trolleys are banned from 9am on January 1 to 9.01am on January 1," jokes Bob. "It's a con, they tell people to buy wide-wheeled trolleys and then as soon as there's an ounce of rain they say you can't use them on the course. That's ridiculous. There's as much weight on the bottom of the trolley as there is on the bottom of your feet. You can use markers. But there are a lot of old people who can't play golf without trolleys. There are no trolley bans here," adds Bob, who admitted he uses a narrow-wheeled trolley to cart the hole-cutter around while changing the holes.

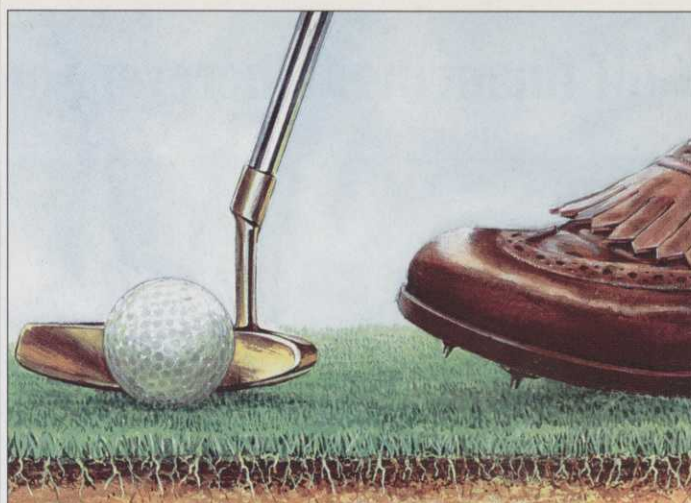
Another reason Bob feels lucky is that he has a superb chairman of green. Derek Rains has been in his post for five years and often lends a hand on the course. "He gets out on the tractor and pulls a dragmat across the greens. But he's not very good with a shovel," says Bob with a smile. One of his farm workers, Brian Hobbs, helps out on the course too, bringing a JCB with him to construct tees.

New tees are one of the few signs of change at the course. While other courses move bunkers to take account of technological advances in the game, many bunkers at Worlington lie in wait in case anyone turns up with a gutta-percha golf ball. But Bob was quick to point out that not all the bunkers were as obsolete as they appear. The bunker by the putting green, which you're not allowed to practise out of, comes into play if they swap the 9th green and the putting green.

One of the most famous throwbacks to the olden days is the small hole in the wall of the clubhouse lounge. That's the bar!

Although they don't like change, one change is imminent for Bob - his first contract of employment is being drawn up!

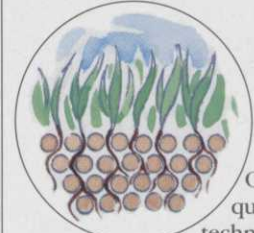
**TIP**  
"If you've got a patch of moss, put the pin there in the winter and let the golfers scratch it out for you"  
- Bob Gee



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