



Above, the 13th at The Duke's Course and below, the 18th Pictures by Brian Morgan

Aussie rules The Duke's Course

Australian Owen Browne is the Course Manager at St Andrews latest course the inland Dukes Course.

There are two things unusual about the latest St Andrews golf course to join the most illustrious stable in golf. The first is that, whisper it, The Duke's Course is not a links. It's not even particularly close to the sea being at least four or five miles from the famous piece of land shared by the Old, the New, the Jubilee, the Eden and the Strathtyrum courses and the second is that the Course Manager, Owen Browne, is not Scottish. He's not even British, but an Australian who until a couple of years ago was an assistant greenkeeper in his native Melbourne.

It may appear to be the greenkeeping equivalent of Coals to Newcastle but Owen has earned his chance having worked his way up from picking up stones when construction was in its early stages through the growing in period and was Head Greenkeeper by the time the Duke of York performed the opening ceremony just before The Open Championship at its more famous near neighbour – why do we always end up mentioning Neighbours in anything to do with Australia?

"It is something I could just dream about. It has exceeded my expectations I mean two years ago I was still an assistant greenkeeper



and now I've leapt up to one of the top jobs and it's very exciting," says 29 year-old Owen.

"I came over originally for a cousin's wedding in Ireland not intending to get a job on a golf course but I'd heard about the work of Thomson Woolveridge at St Andrews, came over and asked about a job."

The course is the first in the United King-

dom to be designed by five times Open Champion Peter Thomson, whose Australian link was carried on by Owen. Built on parkland a few miles inland of St Andrews at Craigtown The Duke's proffers many views of the famous old town from its high vantage points and is a course which gives the most accomplished of player an exacting test as well as an

'I'm a big fan of the greenkeeper education system in Australia. It is all done in great depth'

alternative to traditionalist Andrews links golf.

"I came to work as a labourer and picked up stones for the first three or four weeks," said Owen.

"I was later put in charge of growing in and worked closely with the construction supervisor who directed me in how to work in the Thomson Woolveridge style of construction," he explained.

In the next phase Owen worked with the landscaping team using knowledge acquired as a gardener in Melbourne to carry out work.

"I became Head Greenkeeper in November '94 but they didn't just hand me the job. It was advertised in Greenkeeper International and I believe a good set of candidates applied. When the course was handed over to the Old Course Hotel my title was changed to Course Manager."

A look at Owen's career takes us to the other side of the world and Melbourne where he first got an apprenticeship as a gardener with a local authority.

"I was awarded a scholarship to go over to New Zealand and spent a year working for another authority doing everything from tree surgery to nursery and forestry work and turf management.

"When I got back I was more interested in getting involved in turf management and got a job as Employee in Charge (Head Greenkeeper) at City of Northcote nine hole municipal course. After four and a half years I realised I didn't really know enough to go anywhere or have the experience to manage a course so I decided to take a step back and go to Kingston Heath which is ranked highly in Australia as an assistant.

"I spent two years there and studied under Graeme Rand, recognised as one of the leading Course Superintendents in Australia and did a two year course in Course Management..

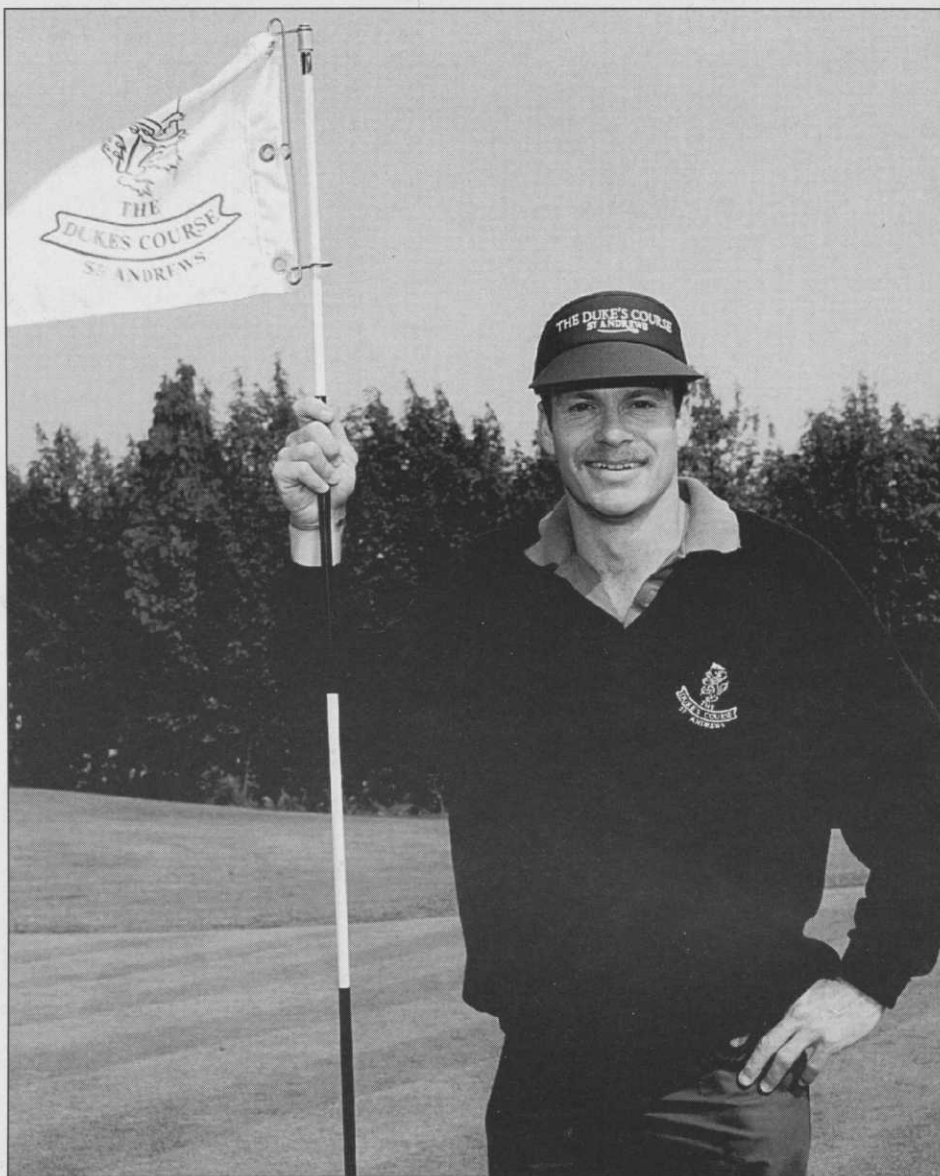
"I'm a big fan of the greenkeeper education system in Australia. It is all done in great depth. You'll concentrate on nutrition and only nutrition and are not distracted by anything else at the same time," he explains.

The new Duke's Course is typical of the Thomson Woolveridge style of design.

"Their courses are noted for their fairway mounding and the mounding off to the sides of the fairways. It is links style in a parkland setting and we have the pot style bunkering set into the mounds. The bunkers don't stand out but just sit in the mounds like you would find on a links."

Owen has a staff of seven including a mechanic and they will be heavily involved in putting in the drainage system as the course settles down.

"The principle is based on the run-off system of drainage. The water sheds off from the



fairway and is then collected or spread out into the rough. We do have a lot more drainage to put into the course over the next few years. You can't do it on a clay course effectively and properly without mixing in clay with the drainage material. It just clogs the system after a while.

"You need to have the course there and then put your drains into the worst spots when you know where they are otherwise you might be putting in drains you don't need," said Owen.

Surprisingly the drought which might have conspired to help make the course miss its official opening, on the Sunday prior to the Open, didn't slow the final stages of the course's construction.

"The drought didn't cause particular problems but a headache was caused by the fact we couldn't transfer enough water from our bottom dam to our top dam quickly enough. We were worried we might run out because for every days water we used we needed two and a half days to pump it to that dam. We do have our own bores and a wall to wall Water-mation irrigation system."

Owen's work at The Duke's has brought him into contact with one of Australia's sporting icons.

"Peter Thomson was a legend a hero to me and the first time I met him he knew me - he'd obviously asked someone who I was. He came into the room and said is anyone here I haven't met yet and there was a dozen guys

from the construction crew and I stuck my hand up a bit sheepishly. He said 'ah yes you're Owen aren't you?' That's the sort of style he's got. He makes you feel very comfortable.

"On a work front, he tells you what he wants and if it doesn't fit into the maintenance practices or is not possible to implement he will agree to change it. He's a great listener."

He even helps prevent Owen from becoming too homesick.

"When he comes over from Australia he always brings an Aussie Rules football magazine for me and sometimes a video as well."

One of the highlights of Owen's career so far was the opening of the course by HRH Duke of York just prior to The Open last year.

"I was very nervous that morning and I don't normally get nervous. There was nothing which could have gone wrong but I was really tense. It went so well though and I was standing on a grassy mound clutching my girlfriend's hand and I was almost squeezing the life out of it." Owen has integrated into the local community so well his girlfriend, Sandra, is the sister of Mark Brunton, Course Manager of the New Course at St Andrews.

He also does his bit for the education of young British greenkeepers.

"Ian Bishop from Elmwood brings a bus load of students to look over the course and it's great for me because it means I can improve my public speaking a bit."