

Get the low down on Cooden Beach

Cooden Beach, right on the south coast, is probably the lowest golf course in the country. As Scott MacCallum found out it's not only right at the bottom of the map it's so low it's well below sea level.

To all intents and purposes Stefan Antolik appears quite normal. He doesn't have any obvious quirks or mannerisms to mark him down as someone different but, in reality, he is probably unique among British greenkeepers.

Stefan is Head Greenkeeper at Cooden Beach Golf Club, Bexhill on Sea, the venue for this year's National Tournament sponsored by Miracle Professional, and it was the matter of fact way in which he said "To be honest I hope we have a dry year" which makes him just a little bit unusual.

So why is it that while 99.9% of greenkeepers have been enrolling in night classes to sharpen up rain dance routines Stefan is happy to keep his dancing shoes in the cupboard?

Well, the answer lies in the fact that it is perhaps not Stefan who is unique but his golf course. Cooden Beach is built on reclaimed land and is in places up to seven metres below sea level. There are certain spots where you have to look up to see boats sailing past within a few yards of the course for heaven's sake.

"There can be few courses in the country which are below sea level and there can't be many which are entirely SSSI sites," explained Stefan, who is only the fourth Head Greenkeeping in the Club's 85 year history.

Although beside the sea Cooden Beach isn't built on sand. Go down 18 inches under the silt and you'd find two feet of clay and under the clay, three feet of decaying timber. Below



Stefan Antolik: Head Greenkeeper

that there is lovely blue alluvium clay.

"That's excellent for ponds as it retains the water well but it doesn't allow the course to drain."

The answer is to pump water off the golf course and this is exactly what happens at Cooden Beach where a pump is a necessary piece of equipment and the club has one which can operate at 3,000 gallons a minute.

"If we go beyond the prescribed limit of rainfall on the course we pump out to sea so we can control the water levels throughout the course."

What it all means is that Cooden Beach is a popular place to be in the summer when the

rest of the country's golf courses are gasping for drop of water.

"People know that we will have grass cover and reasonably lush fairways," explained Stefan.

The downside, and there always is one, is the winter when as Stefan so succinctly put it, "you really have to paddle your way round".

"We spend in the region of £3,000-£5,000 a year on drainage and a lot of it is surface drainage to greens which we do ourselves as a team."

But perhaps the courses was never designed for winter play.

"In the past when membership subscriptions were light compared to now golfers would be members of Cooden for summer play and members of Rye, eight miles down the road, for winter play. Cooden was never played in the winter."

It brings Stefan nicely on to his pet subject. One he aired during the final of the '94 ICI Premier Greenkeeper of the Year Competition, in which he finished runner-up behind David Walden, when he was asked what one aspect of golf would he change.

"I said I'd make waterproof clothing illegal in golf. The biggest burden to any greenkeeper is Goretex waterproof clothing because if he's going to get soaked to the skin he's not going to go. Now he can come in off the course in any conditions as dry as when he set foot in it and in a lot of instances that's to the detriment of the course," explained Stefan.

Stefan is coming up for his sixth year at the club following on from his predecessor who was in position for 40 years.

"When I started here the greens were on almost 100 millimetres of thatch, it had been very much a case of feed, water and cut. We still have spongy greens but the thatch layer is

now around 20-25 millimetres," he explained.

While being SSSI means a prohibition on spraying of insecticides and weed killers and that written permission must be sought before using certain fungicides it doesn't preclude the installation of more ponds on the course.

"The reason we have SSSI status is that we have invertebrates and crustaceans in the dyke system and anything we can do to stabilise the water level in the dykes is welcomed by English Nature. By digging a pond, and we've put in five, it enlarges the catchment area and the water holding capacity so the surface levels don't fluctuate as much."

The National Tournament, sponsored by Miracle Professional, competitors will face a fine test of golf and one which has faced some of the greatest players ever to wield a niblick. The venue for many challenge matches in the early days no less a figure than James Braid described it as "a good sporting course" while the other two members of the Great Triumvirate Vardon and Taylor also played Cooden. Famous golfing members have been Harold Hilton, two time Open Champion and the greatest amateur until Bobby Jones' arrival who also was the first Editor of Golf Monthly magazine and, still a member, Joyce Wethered now known as Lady Heathcoat Amory, whom Bobby Jones described as being the best golfer he'd ever seen, male or female.

The Professional was once Fred Robson, who played in the first Ryder Cup match and who twice was runner-up in The Open. He was instrumental in bringing Walter Hagen to the course for a challenge match which Robson won. It is fair to say that every big name in golf played the course in its early history.

Conceived by the 8th Earl De la War, who had originally intended it to be a motor racing circuit, it was designed by Herbert Fowler who designed Walton Heath.

It is still an extremely traditional course and one of the few remaining "foursomes clubs" in the country although the rules have been relaxed slightly in recent times.

"The fairways are very generous and the rough it set at a height that an aging membership can get out of but we may tighten it up a little bit for the greenkeepers - we might forget where the mowers are for a week or two before they come!" joked Stefan.

Water comes into play on three holes but there are holes that are bounded by dykes.

Every hole is an individual and on all but a couple of them you could stand in the middle of the fairway and hit a driver in any direction and not touch another hole.

"There are 246 acres of which 232 are SSSI - only the clubhouse and the small practice area are not."

The 9th is regarded as perhaps the finest hole on the course but Stefan has made a few alterations to the 8th and lengthened it to around 530 yards making it another to remember.



"The highest part of the course is the 13th green which is level with the ground floor of the clubhouse and from the 13th you can get a lovely view of Eastbourne and Beachy Head.

Although set low wind is a large part of the course's armoury.

"There were only eight days last year when we could spray which meant wind speed of under 5mph. I don't think the greenkeepers would play on a course where there wasn't a wind," laughed Stefan.

As a marker to how windy it gets Stefan uses quarter rather than half tee flags as the wind pulls the half flags out of the hole.

"I'm really looking forward to welcoming the National competitors. Greenkeepers are generally far more understanding of the problems that we face than the average golfer. There is no greater critic than the person who is paying your wages."

Bexhill-on-Sea offers much for the holiday-maker. The De La War Pavilion theatre has shows most nights in the summer, there are two nightclubs while a short train ride to Ashford sets you up for a trip through the chunnel to France for the day.

With Brighton and Eastbourne not far away and the Battle of Hastings country for any history buff to explore the 1997 National Tournament sponsored by Miracle Professional is an attractive proposition for BIGGA members and their families.

1997 NATIONAL GOLF TOURNAMENT

The Cooden Beach Golf Club

Cooden Beach, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex

4th, 5th and 6th August 1997

Sponsored by

MIRACLE

Miracle Professional

Anyone wishing to enter the
Tournament should contact Karen
Conroy at BIGGA Headquarters
Tel 01347 838581