

Balbirnie awakes

Balbirnie Park Golf Club lies to the north east of Glenrothes and is encompassed in 416 acres of attractive parkland and woodland gardens. Within its precincts are some of the most important historic features in Fife. These range from our beautiful golf course to archaeological sites dating from the late Neolithic period of around 2900 BC including a ritual site of some significance and a stone circle and burial site. A classical mansion of the 18th century stands guard over the first tee and its magnificence is enjoyed by many overseas visitors.

The course itself is a treasure chest of environmental delights, and its flora include many special and magnificent trees, these include majestic Oak and Beech through to the introduced species such as the mighty Wellingtonia, Atlas Cedar and Black Pine. But what really makes Balbirnie special lies in its outstanding collection of Rhododendrons brought to our shores from India by the Balfour family in the early 18th century.

To add to these delights the course's wildlife is next to none and even in winter months the rich vegetation of Balbirnie give shelter to an interesting variety of birdlife including mixed flocks of blue tits, coal tits and great tits, and yes readers this is Balbirnie and not Baywatch!

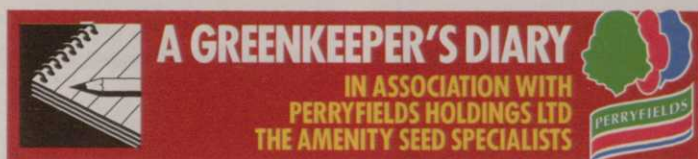
The down side to this heaven on earth is that extra care and management have to be practised while looking after our golf course, here we must sustain and create ongoing environmental habitats for the things we share the park with.

March

Well hopefully spring is here, but when you work on a golf course two degrees nearer the Arctic circle than Moscow anything is possible. The demise of this winter ends the 33rd one as a Greenkeeper, they don't get any harder, just shorter.

It's been a busy winter for us with many projects being successfully completed, and it is now time to tune the course in readiness for commencement of summer competition play towards the end of the month.

The first half of the month continues opportune slitting, this operation ceases before our famous easterlies decide to dry



and open up the slits adding more frustration to our early, heavy competition play. Top dressings are initiated to iron our surface winter desiccation, this allows me to maintain a realistic cutting height while creating smooth surfaces.

These operations are incorporated to include tees and aprons. If a window of good weather is evident then I will apply a lawn



MARCH

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BALBIRNIE PARK

sand to both greens and tees, this I usually mix myself as I have for over thirty years using a recipe handed down to me as a boy using double salts giving the mixture a greater killing power to the occasional weed that may have crept in over the winter.

March also sees the start-up of the irrigation system and wait for it, we actually start to irrigate our greens. Horror you cry but believe you me I know my greens, as I do my Malts, and a conscious, calculated decision has to be adopted in order to prevent the abysmal clays from drying out (if allowed to dry out a hydrophobic situation is sustained throughout the spring unless excessive rain occurs). This early irrigation programme is backed up by incorporating a wetting agent at the maximum dosage.

A lot of effort this winter has been directed towards tree and scrub clearing in our many woods and plantations. Here careful consideration is vital, do I remove a healthy tree in order that its neighbour may grow as nature intended. One must evaluate

these decisions on the trees' merit or indeed its downfalls, is it aesthetically appealing to the parks well-being or does it hold significant value as a habitat for the park's wildlife? Decisions of this nature are never easy and are not taken lightly. Thankfully a lot of this work has been based on necessity. At Balbirnie in the early 80s many poplars were planted in order to achieve instant plantations and protect the indigenous species planted at the same time. Thankfully I can now remove them in order to afford light, air and nutrients to the courses natural species.

Hopefully by mid-March all plantation work will be negotiated and wild life corridors left for our friends, bat boxes added or repaired, pipistrelle bats are many and can be seen towards the end of a long summer evening.

Other work tackled in March will include the reinstatement of our many paths. Both surfaces and edgings have to be taken into consideration, all bunkers replenished and edged, out of bounds clearly defined and posts painted etc. All walkways and other badly wintered areas will be vertidrain, overseeded and top-dressed.

Balbirnie awakes, towards the end of the month this sleeping giant comes out of hibernation, grasses are in abundance and therefore a full cutting programme is implemented, heights in accordance to weather. Previous to this awakening my staff and myself have walked the course on many occasions discussing new cutting techniques, traffic routes etc. The input from my staff on those walks always broaden my horizons and arrest any misconceptions that it is me who makes Balbirnie the delight it certainly is.

Management

By March all the staff should be fully cognizant with all new machinery purchased. This would include adjustments, operational skills, service intervals and methods. At Balbirnie each piece of

machinery has its own log which allows a history to be recorded of its performance and reliability. This record can be useful in future purchase or if needed in warranty claims.

By this time of the year at Balbirnie tenders have been received and orders placed for most of my requirements for the coming season. The daily checking of invoices to sanction payment is very much in force, other chemical duties would include the daily log book, recording work schedules, attendance, chemical usage and weather conditions, and if unlucky the reporting of accidents under RIDDOR, touch wood the later is seldom needed at my course.

March will also keep me busy with the involvement of a feasibility study incorporating specifications for a new golf facility that we fully intend to implement in the near future. This project will be built within the confines of the estate on land we had the good fortune to purchase. The land in question forms a beautiful pasture gently rolling with a light sandy loam soil and framed with an abundance of more magnificent trees.

Being the custodian at Balbirnie is of great importance to me, as is my part-time job as lecturer in greenkeeping at what I would consider to be the best college in Europe, Elmwood, especially with the completion of our own 18 hole golf course. March gives me plenty of scope to bring my students down to Balbirnie for practical work based assessment and when they have reached the desired level of competence and are fully aware of the underpinning knowledge it allows me to stamp the GTC manual. This gives the student a feel good factor and contributes to a record of their practical skills for prospective employers. All in all March at Balbirnie can be both a very rewarding and busy month of the year and I love every single day spent within its polices.

Well enough from me, I've got some bunkers to rake - have a good season!

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