

The 1998 Open sees Royal Birkdale Head Greenkeeper, Chris Whittle, becoming the sole member of an exclusive club. He spoke with Scott MacCallum...

Record breaker



The dream of many young greenkeepers is to be the head man at an Open venue. It is a laudable ambition but one which only a very few will ever realise. There is, after all, only one Open a year, on a very select rota and Head Greenkeepers at Open venues don't tend to move too often.

This year, however, a man creates a new record when he becomes the first man to have prepared two different courses for Open Championships. Chris Whittle was the Head Greenkeeper at Muirfield when Nick Faldo won The Open in 1992 and this year he will be the man at the helm at Royal Birkdale when the world's best descend on Southport.

Record breaker



Royal Birkdale
Head Greenkeeper,
Chris Whittle

In fact, Chris can take it one stage further when you take into account that he was Jimmy MacDonald's Deputy at Royal Lytham in 1979 when Seve Ballesteros won The Open for the first time.

"I must confess that I hadn't really given it a thought. I've been too busy to think about things like that," said Chris, whose full CV includes Formby, when he was an apprentice under Jimmy MacDonald; then following Jimmy to Royal Lytham, where he also worked on both Ryder and Curtis Cups; St Annes Old Links which was his first headship; Muirfield and now Royal Birkdale.

He admits that it could only have been Birkdale, where he has been for three and a half years, that lured him away from Muirfield.

"I loved Muirfield and think of it as a very special place but Birkdale has always been my favourite golf course, bar none. I used to caddie here as a youngster and this was the course on which I always wanted to work. Being Head Greenkeeper here is my dream job," said Chris.

That said, he was so content at Muirfield that he agonised for three months before finally sending in his Birkdale application, and admits that when he visited the course he almost had second thoughts.

"The greens were a problem, the irrigation system was defunct, there

was dry patch on the fairways and remedying the tree problem was probably the biggest task of the lot. But I felt that if I hadn't taken the job I'd always have wondered... so you have to go for it then, don't you?" he said, before adding, "But I'm glad I did."

Birkdale's difficulties had been exposed in the most public and cruelest of fashions when Ian Baker-Finch won the 1991 Open on greens which were universally vilified, forcing then Head Greenkeeper, Tom O'Brien, to endure an experience no-one would wish on their worst enemy.

A combination of long standing degeneration which caused the greens to be slow and soft, compounded by an error on a grimmer height setting, which killed the annual meadow grass, meant that the '91 Open will always be remembered for its bad greens.

"I walked on a few of them in '91 and they tended to look worse than they were. They were far from perfect but it was very much a visual thing," recalled Chris, whose own Open at Muirfield was, by coincidence, the following year.

"It's not fair what happened to Tom O'Brien and I don't think I would have coped with the situation as well as he did," he added.

The severity of the situation, and inherent admission that Birkdale

had been sitting on a long term problem, was apparent when the decision was taken to rebuild totally the greens under the guidance of the STRI.

Chris arrived at the club after the new greens had already been laid, some of them twice, and quickly realised that it was not the end of the problems.

"It was clear that the grass was only living in the top layer because what was below was very sandy. It was pretty much thatch in a lot of places and we had to encourage the roots to go down, which meant diluting and removing some of the rich top layers.

"Some greens were 100% poa while the best were 90% poa, 10% bent and we wanted to change to bent-fescue greens. We hollow tined regularly and topped dressed but this in itself caused problems because there was no rooting and the turf was plucking. In the first year I think we put 200 tonnes of top dressing on and most of the greens had been hollow tined at two inch centres at least 12 or 13 times.

"The members were very good and let me close the greens from September to Easter a couple of years ago. It did help that The Open was coming as we all knew it had to be right by then," said Chris (44), who returned to Royal



Lytham two years ago to help his old boss during Open week.

"At least now we have a mixed sward of bent, a little fescue and poa. It's just a matter of tipping the balance in favour of bent-fescue. That's going to take a long time."

As well as the extensive work Chris and his team have carried out they have had to cope with the inevitable grindings of the rumour mill which suggested that the R&A might just replace Birkdale in 1998 as the Open venue.

"Some of the rumours were just ridiculous. What I can say is that no-one once came to me and said if this doesn't succeed you'll lose The Open. That pressure was never put on us," said Chris.

While it was the greens which commanded the most attention at Birkdale it was the trees which caused the greatest headaches.

"The white poplars were virtually choking the golf course. There were even tree roots underneath the new greens which we had to dig out. The roots were round drains and sprinklers. On the new 16th green a root had even gone underneath a bunker, up through the bunker face and underneath the green."

In addition to the practical dif-

ficulties of getting the roots out of the ground the project had to be sold to the membership. Fortunately that didn't prove to be as difficult as they feared.

"The course was actually changing from a links to an inland course so we did a presentation to the members about what we were going to do and why. We expected to be bombarded by questions but those we got were very sensible and very few.

"A lot of trees were small suckers, spreading off other trees and over the last three years we have cleared trees ranging in height from 40 feet down to about 30 inches over an area totalling at least 60,000 square yards."

It was this clearance work which led to the club's entry in BIGGA's Golf Environment Award, in association with Amazone and Rhone Poulenc being the Regional winner.

"We got a lot of help from the Sefton Life Project with regard to advice and practical help," explained Chris.

Removing the roots proved to be a complicated business.

"We tried grubbing them out, pulling them out, cutting to ground level, stump grinding, but eventually found that the best way was to cut to ground level.

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Record breaker

Machinery Inventory

Ford 2910 tractor
Kubota 2150 tractor c/w front loader
Kubota ST30 tractor
Kubota L4200 tractor c/w front loader
1.5 tonne trailer
2.5 tonne trailer
3 tonne trailer
4 tonne trailer
Land Rover
2 Cushmans C/W TD 1500 topdresser, Slitter and Core harvester
Multi-Core MC15
Hardi 4001 sprayer
1.5 metre vertidrain
Charterhouse Vertiseeder
40" rotovator
Amazone Groundkeeper rough mower
Lloyds semi rough gang mowers
Ransomes Mounted Hydraulic gang mowers
Jacobsen 3810 fairway mower
Jacobsen Triking
Jacobsen Mk V greens triplex
2 Jacobsen Mk1V greens triplex
Toro GM3 triplex
5 Ransomes Certes
5 Lloyds Paladins
6 Flymo
2 strimmers
2 Reciprocators
Ryan Turf Cutter

stump treat, to prevent regrowth, and then wait until the summer when some suckers came up and then spray those off. When we got a unit cost worked out we put the work out to a contractor."

A lot of the tees have been discovered to be full of roots and Chris is already planning to rebuild many of them.

As we spoke the final touches to the revamped watering system were being carried out with 63 well points hopefully ending a situation when a dependence on the mains supply resulted in Chris scaling everything down by 40%.

To the question "At what stage did you feel you had everything under control?" Chris laughed.

"I don't think I have yet. Ask me after The Open. I only felt I was beginning to get to grips with it this spring but I'm still not happy because the greens are not of the quality that I'm used to having...but I will get there."

Being in the unique situation of having been in charge of two of the best golf courses in the world Chris is able to compare Muirfield and Birkdale.

"Birkdale is laid out between the hills while Muirfield just rolls over the ground generally. They are different but both great golf courses. In maintenance terms, Muirfield had very little rainfall and when I was there there wasn't an irrigation system as such so most of the summer was spent pulling hose pipes



round. It was predominately fescue and the greens were no problem at all. The big bonus was that it wasn't overplayed, especially in the non growing season so you got maximum benefit from your work. Really it was so easy you could leave it alone and it could look after itself. Whereas Birkdale doesn't look after itself. It goes the opposite way and it is a very busy golf course."

The Open itself will see Chris

utilising some of the club's artisan golfers as well some students.

"My brother, Geoff, who's now Head Greenkeeper at St Annes Old Links is coming over for the week and the other local Head Greenkeepers have offered their services. I'm also delighted that the BIGGA Open Support Team will be here because you just couldn't manage without them."

It will undoubtedly be an exciting week, played out over a wonderful golf course where each hole is as superb as the one before and the one which follows but you can fully appreciate Chris when he says he hopes for a low key week.

"I will just be happy to have a quiet Open where all the headlines are made by golf rather than the golf course. If no-one makes a comment about Birkdale all week, then, that'll be fine by me."

"I won't relax until I see the course go through a tournament successfully and it will wipe out the memory of the last Open which damaged Birkdale's reputation."



The Royal Birkdale team