

Scott MacCallum speaks to Jimmy MacDonald about his life, loves and his MBE...

PAST

As Jimmy MacDonald MBE looks both forward to his retirement and back on his career, from the comfort of his favourite armchair, he can do so with justifiable pride and satisfaction.

Few, if any, men have packed as much into their careers as Jimmy, until a few weeks ago Head Greenkeeper at Royal Lytham and St Annes Golf Club, and the retirement he is now settling into couldn't be any more well deserved.

Take a look at the list of events Jimmy and his hard working team presided over and you'll agree not only must he have gathered a fund of knowledge on tournament preparation he is also in need of a rest!

Four Open Championships - five if you count one as Deputy - a Ryder Cup; a Curtis Cup; four British Senior Opens; a Women's British Open and both British Amateur Championships ladies and gents... not to mention any number of other events, each one of which would be the highlight of most club's history.

Indeed, it was the fact that Lytham was a recognised venue for so many R&A and Tour events that drew Jimmy back to the club in 1973 after spending three years as head man at Fomby.

"While Fomby is a beautiful course, and still my favourite next to Lytham, what really got me was that I'd been at Lytham in the 60s when we had several big events including The Open and, believe me, it was like a drug. The draw of The Open coming up in '74 was so strong I had to go back," explained Jimmy.

Having prepared the course for Open Champions, Gary Player ('74), Seve Ballesteros ('79 and '88) and Tom Lehman ('96), not to mention being Deputy for Tony Jacklin's famous victory in '69, Jimmy is well placed to trace the progression of the Championship over the years.

"In '69 the club organised the tented village and pegged it and the car parking out. We also found local plumbers to do the pipe work and install toilets," he recalled.

"In '74 the R&A were organising and had someone to oversee it all...although there was still a lot of local labour involved. Then, in '79, there was a formal plan and joiners, electricians and plumbers came down from Scotland and there was an engineer to oversee everything. Nowadays it is enormous, a big, big difference to when we started," said Jimmy.

As you would have expected he has also seen many changes out on the golf course as well.

"Now we cut fairways every day but in '69 we probably cut them on the first day and cut them for the last. Then someone had a lot of grass one year because of the weather and decided that they couldn't leave it and we got the message back that fairways were being cut every day so we followed suit," he gave as an example of the change.

Jimmy singles out the '74 Open for special mention because it was his first but he freely admits to having enjoyed them all.

"That surprises some people who think it must be a nightmare but it isn't. One of the greatest thrills you can have, and you can ask other greenkeepers who have had Opens, is the very first morning.

"You work for two years getting everything ready, working through the winter to build bunkers and tees and rope off crucial areas where you're going to need rough. Then, on the first morning, you've changed the holes, the greens are cut, the fairways are cut and you're back in the workshops. You hear the first big cheer and you know the first players are on the 1st tee. That's when it starts

rolling and you get a rush of adrenalin. It's a bit special and there is nothing like it."

In fact, he admits that he also got that same feeling twice in 1988. Once at the start of the week and again after the resumption of play on the Sunday after rain had brought play to a halt on the Saturday and The Open experienced its first, and only,

Monday finish.

"If I were to have one greenkeeping highlight it would be the '88 Open and getting it back on the road after the flooding. In the end we made more friends than enemies and the 65 by Seve on the Monday in his duel with Nick Price made it one of the great finishes. What could have been a disaster turned out to be wonderful day's golf."

Lytham's Ryder Cup, in 1977, was the final match in which the United States faced a team comprising just British and Irish players while it was the last match played over a links course.

"That was quite stressful because we'd had The Open in '74, the English Amateur in '75 the Curtis Cup in '76 then had to repair fairways which had been very badly damaged by the drought of '75-'76," he explained.

"I knew I wasn't going to get it at its best because of the drought but it turned out to be a nice event. The greens were excellent - cut by triplex and not hand mower - the fairways were respectable and we didn't get any criticism," said Jimmy, who still possesses a flag signed by the players of both sides.

Remarkably for someone who has enjoyed such a full greenkeeping life it was not his first career.

"I was teaching ceramics at Preston College and was doing five half days and five evenings. It meant I had two and a half spare days and as I enjoyed golf and the timings fitted in nicely I began working on the golf course."

REFLECTIONS

Despite all his undoubted successes down the years Jimmy feels that his final season at Lytham has seen the course at its best.

"Now the weather can obviously play a part but I feel I've always adopted old fashioned sound greenkeeping principles. I think Jim Arthur is a brilliant man - before his time. People criticise him but he was a friend of mine and I learned a lot from him - all sound principles that have been proved over the years and I've left the course in the state it is by not doing anything fancy."

Looking at the greenkeeping profession as a whole Jimmy expresses himself to be happy with its progression although he does pass on a cautionary note.

"The profession is now promoting some nice fat salaries and while I'm not decrying that I know of some students who have come out of college with an HND and achieved salaries of around £35,000 in their fourth year...and they can't wheel a barrow," exclaimed Jimmy, who added that at Lytham all of his apprentices did a full year on the course first before going to college.

"You know then that at least they can jump in a tractor and drive it and they know how to use a spade.

"From my lecturing days I know that once you break down the holidays you are only at college for 28-29 weeks a year and the time spent on each subject is not the equivalent of a six month apprenticeship. It worries me that people are not prepared to put the miles on the clock before looking for the highly paid jobs."

He has worked for many years with Myerscough College students and he has known Martyn Jones for many years.

"Martyn and I have many healthy debates and we get on very well. There

isn't as much difference in our approaches to greenkeeping as people think."

Having selected the '88 Open as his greenkeeping highlight there can be no doubting that being presented with his MBE by the Queen at Buckingham Palace in 1997 was another occasion he treasures.

"I didn't really want to go but having done so I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was brilliant."

His distinguished service and retirement was also recognised by the golf club with a vast array of gifts and life membership of the golf club.

"I was invited to the Council Dinner and informed that they had decided to make me a member while I was given letters from among others Seve, Gary Player, Nick Faldo and Sir Michael Bonallack congratulating me on my retirement."

He hands over to one of his old boys, Paul Smith, who has returned from Barrow in Furness Golf Club to take over a couple of years in advance of Lytham's next Open Championship.

"Paul was one of my apprentices, as was Chris Whittle at Birkdale, so I've got two head men out of the eight Open venues, while I've also got three of those on the 30 senior qualifying courses. Walter (Woods) is the same. He's got Eddie Adams, at St Andrews, and John Philp at Carnoustie."

Jimmy speaks with pride about this greenkeeping legacy and spending time in his company shows how he could have inspired so many people to such lofty heights.

Enjoy your retirement, Jimmy. And may it be a long one.

Jimmy at home - his MBE certificate on the wall behind

