

**A long time has passed since the last Carnoustie Open but John Philp and his team will present a modern, and formidable challenge for this month's Championship. Scott MacCallum paid them a visit...**



Photo: David J Whyte

## *Many happy returns*

Think back to 1975... even for those of us who were alive at the time it seems like an absolute age ago. Harold Wilson was Prime Minister and no-one, outside of her closest friends, had even heard of Margaret Thatcher. We'd not long since had the three day week and endured many an evening huddled around candles. Cars had sensible names like Morris Minor and Ford Anglia, not Xantia or Ka.

It was 24 long years ago - almost a quarter of a century - and marks the last time The Open Championship was played at Carnoustie. To those who know Carnoustie's revered reputation - the toughest course in the country and one where only the finest golfers in the world can win - it seems almost unbelievable that there should be such a long wait between Carnoustie Opens.

However behind the bland statistics that highlight the time lapse is a story as interesting as any which unfolded during any of the five Opens that have been hosted by the Angus town.



# Many happy returns

It wouldn't overstate the matter to say that Carnoustie, and the trials and tribulations which went into winning back The Open, would have made an ideal subject for a fly on the wall documentary over the last 20 years or so and credit for the fact that The Open does make a triumphant return later this month is down to many. Tragically, however the one person who did more than anyone else to bring the Championship back to Carnoustie will not be there to see it.

Jock Calder was Chairman of the Carnoustie Links Management Committee and a man whose personality was stamped all over the Angus town's efforts to win back golf's premier Championship. Jock died two years ago, thankfully after it had been confirmed that the last Open Champion of the millennium would join an elite roll of honour that contains the names Tommy Armour, Henry Cotton, Ben Hogan, Gary Player and Tom Watson.

"I'm looking forward to it, without a doubt, but the only sad thing which will never go away for me is the fact that Jock Calder will not be here to see it...The man who brought The Open back to Carnoustie," said Golf Links Superintendent, John Philp.

Below: John Philp with some of his team



"Without him I don't think we would be where we are. He guaranteed the investment that I've enjoyed and benefited from and allowed me to do what we've done though staff levels, equipment, materials and course alterations."

It was Jock Calder who had brought John to Carnoustie in 1985.

"I was Walter Woods' Deputy at St Andrews but saw this a big challenge, just the sort of thing that I enjoy, because you can take something forward and see it develop and mature."

It is a challenge he embraced with real relish and the effort and attention he has poured in the Championship course and the two other links, the Burnside and the Buddon over the last 14 years is quite remarkable.

"My remit, as put to me by Jock Calder, was to get the course back to a championship standard and to bring the other two up to a similar standard as well. I was asked to produce a five year programme...and there is still a five year programme in place," explained John.

It would be fair to say that Carnoustie had suffered from a lack of investment and that the conditioning of the course had suffered as a result but other problems were also stacked against an Open's return, including the poor access to the links and the lack of a quality hotel. That omission was finally corrected in May with the opening of a stunning 85 bedroom hotel overlooking the 18th green which will undoubtedly soon become an established landmark in the world of golf.

"When I arrived I had 11 men to cover the three courses and the degeneration had gone on over a good number of years," he said.

"The first thing to establish was the corrective programme to restore the indigenous grasses and the heather, which had receded badly because of liming and the use of 20-10-10 compound fertiliser.

"Fairways and greens were very much poa dominated although some natural fescues and bents had managed to survive."



There were also patches of Rye grass which John reckoned had been introduced many years before based on the logical thinking at the time that a grass which offered good germination, operated well under drought stress conditions, was tough and recovered well from damage was well worth using.

"You often go up fairways and see tufts of the little blighters probably caused by divot filling years ago."

His first step was to introduce a root zone environment which encouraged the fine grasses to compete.

"We had to get the aeration going so we hired a vertidrain as there was nothing in the sheds other than an





original Sisis Hydromain and a barrel spiker. I took the little barrel onto the 4th green within a week of starting and the turf rolled up like a carpet. I knew it was weak but not quite that weak."

They undertook a huge programme of overseeding - for some years he has been using Barenbrug seed - on the back of the aeration work and returfing on the fairways and a 17 acre turf nursery was introduced. This was all aided by the staged introduction of a fairways, greens and tees Watermation irrigation system that was installed.

"It was a great saviour for all the seeding and patch working we did

especially in the late 80s. Without it we wouldn't have enjoyed the same success rate."

It was the success of the seeding which brought about the introduction of Carnoustie's famous astroturf mats.

"We got a brilliant strike rate in '89 and I thought that we really needed some protection over the winter so as not to lose the benefits. We apply seaweed sprays to aid seed establishment. We also change the route of play in the winter to help the walk off areas but I felt the fairways would benefit further from nobody hacking into them all winter."

John favoured the mats, five by nine

inches in size and anchored by a tee, which had first been used at Scotsraig Golf Club about 20 years earlier but the other options put forward to the Committee were lifting off the fairways and playing from the rough, teeing it up on the fairways or just carrying on as usual.

"I said it would only be for the November to the March, Jock backed me to the hilt and it was carried. When the 1st of April arrived and everyone saw pristine fairways with no divots they were delighted and come the next year they said 'We'll be continuing with the mats no doubt John,' without me having to say anything.

"It wasn't intended to be a continuation every winter but it's happened ever since and this year we had an extra month and the mats were in use until May 1st," adding that mats don't repair dead ground they just play a part in fairway recovery."

Alongside the corrective programme John had also proposed to the committee that he felt that no matter how good the turf quality became the course would still have a shortfall because there were elements that required attention.

"There were internal design elements which I felt were lacking for modern Opens to test today's top players and there were lots of areas



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Above: A fine example of one of Carnoustie's revetted bunkers

where the course's potential had not been nearly realised," he explained.

Donald Steel was called in around '87, looked at the proposals John had suggested, rubber stamped them and added a few more.

"I looked at the design of holes and how the players attack it. Professional golfers are much more capable now. Mentally they have improved, they are physically much more powerful, they have got better equipment and what they can reduce a golf course to is quite amazing."

To highlight the point John talked about the famous Hogan's Alley - on Carnoustie's par-5 6th. Much of Carnoustie's mystique can be credited to Ben Hogan who only played in one Open, at Carnoustie in 1953. He lowered his score in each of the four rounds, closing with a superb 68, and each time on the final day he played the notorious 6th he ignored the safe line and played his tee shot between the bunkers and the out-of-bounds to the left of the fairway.

"Nowadays top players take these bunkers out of the equation by blasting straight over them so the R&A asked if we could put in a new bunker behind the existing ones to preserve the challenge of the hole," said John, who wrote to Jack Nicklaus prior to playing host to the Scottish Open in '95 and '96 for his thoughts on the power of today's players and their affect on our championship courses.

John has also looked at the players'

lay-up areas in a bid to encourage them to take a wood.

"Top players have very good at course management and their number one criteria from the tee is to find the fairway even if it means adding several clubs to their approach shot.

"On certain holes we've tried to entice the player into taking wood because the lay-up area is fraught with danger as well."

John is also making the players think around the greens.

"We've rebuilt five greens on the Championship course and, other than the 18th where the committee wanted the original contours retained, we've brought in more subtle contouring."

This has allowed a variety of recovery shot requirements to be introduced.

"Some raised greens are cut short all the way round so if you run through the green the ball keeps going and you're left with a tricky chip, especially to a tight pin placement. On another green you run off into a fluffy fescue semi rough about two inches long.

"If offers up a variety of challenges. Why should it be consistent? Why should there be a set width of semi rough? We've sculpted it differently on specific holes.

"For example the 4th is a dogleg left and, if the fairways are hard during The Open a player could quite easily run out of fairway and lose his ball, but he wouldn't have hit a particularly bad shot. So we'll give him a bit of leeway

there and have a little more semi rough, rather than thick stuff so he is prevented from being overly punished," said John, who as an ex-greenkeeper/professional has the golf game to play the shots himself and see where these types of situations are likely to arise.

The Carnoustie team - there is now a to 28 including a workshop staff of four and four apprentices - do all the construction work in-house and work on a policy of rebuilding 30-40 of the 115 Championship course bunkers a year, although in preparation for The Open this winter they rebuilt 80.

"I've got to hand it to my staff. The target was to set a standard for the new millennium and they really have produced the goods. It would be very difficult to better what they've achieved here," said John.

"We have recontoured the land to many bunker lead in areas to create a gathering effect and in the bunkers themselves have a 30 degree slope to the face and a small lip at the back, of about two rows of revetments high, which stops people having to clamber out and eroding the sides."

It is another example of the care and attention to detail that pervades everything John Philp and his team accomplish at Carnoustie and it would be a safe bet that thanks to all the work carried out both on and off the course that has been carried out the next Open to be staged at the course will not be in the year 2023.