

The three magnificent Woburn courses each have their own greenkeeping team and as Scott MacCallum found out the friendly competition keeps them all on their toes

# DIVIDE AND CONQUER

I'd been to Woburn a number of times over the last ten years but hadn't ever appreciated one important fact about the renowned estate of the Marquess of Tavistock. Golf has only been a feature of it for the past 25 years.

Walking around the mature parkland environment you would be forgiven for thinking the Dukes and Duchess courses shared a history with the Sunningdales and Royal Mid Surrey's of this world. But while "historically challenged" no club in the country has done more to catch up its elders and the Woburn CV is scattered with some of the most illustrious names in the world of golf, who have won some of the 35 men's and ladies events played at Woburn - Lee Trevino, Seve Ballesteros, Sandy Lyle, Nick Faldo and Ian Woosnam among the men and Helen Alfredsson, Patty Sheehan, Liselotte Neumann and Karrie Webb among the women. You've got to be good to win at Woburn.

Below: Eddie Bullock, with his three Head Greenkeepers, front, from left, Chris Hunt, Gary Leadbeater and Steve Tompkins



The trick of looking older than one is, much craved by 16 and 17-year-olds with recently acquired tastes for alcohol, has been pulled off again at Woburn on the newly-opened Marquess course. Although still in its nappies in golf course terms the latest addition to the Woburn stable will certainly not look out of place when it joins the big boys next year with the decision to move the Victor Chandler British Masters from the Dukes to the Marquess.

The man charged with running the Woburn operation is Eddie Bullock, who succeeded Alex Hay as Managing Director of Woburn two years ago, and in that time he has put together a greenkeeping set-up designed to ensure quality on each of the three courses.

Each course has its own greenkeeping team working under its own Head Greenkeeper with the healthy rivalry keeping everyone on his toes.

"I'm a great believer in competition provided it is kept under strict control and we have benefited because the condition of all three courses is absolutely fantastic," said Eddie, as we spoke in his office on the Monday before last August's Victor Chandler British Masters - 35th professional event in the club's history.

"We do have regular meetings between the teams and the guys share ideas but at the end of the day they are all wanted to get their own team and their own course in the best condition they can. What has happened as shown me that this is achievable," he explained.

Unlike many clubs where there is a natural pecking order for the courses Woburn's triumvirate, although different don't have an obvious one-two-three.

"My ambition is to get

three tournaments here within a year - one on each of the courses and I think that can be achievable with the standard of courses we have. We know the Marquess will have the Victor Chandler next year, and as in previous years, when it's hosted the Weetabix British Ladies Open, that the Dukes can host ladies events while the Duchess is one of the most underestimated courses in the country and could easily host a seniors event. It is tighter and couldn't cope with the spectator numbers for other events but because it is tight I think the seniors would appreciate the course management skills required," revealed Eddie.

The Marquess is a stunning new course which will soon feature in the lists of the country's finest.

It doesn't look out of place with the other two but it has been built to cope with modern day tournament golf. The greens are 50% larger than the Dukes at 600 square metres and at 7200 yards with a range of tees it can be set up to cope with any eventuality.

As a golf professional and a man steeped in the game Eddie possesses a knowledge of agronomy and greenkeeping which would be beyond most Managing Directors, while during the week of the tournament he was on site at 6am supporting the work of his greenkeeping staff.

He draws on having played all the major courses throughout the British Isles as well as many in Europe and the States.

"You are always on the look out and comparing things and find ideas to tuck away for future use," he explained.

It has also enabled him to provide support when it became necessary for major work to be done on the greens.

"Two years ago we came in for criticism for the condition of our greens and undertook an extensive and aggressive aeration programme with a lot of verticutting. The seasons have changed and snow and frost used to stop us from playing but now the courses are open but members still expect 100% quality which is an impossibility.



"I believe that to make yourself look fit you have to look after your diet, your interiors as well as exteriors, and it is the same with grass. It can only look good on the surface if you have looked after what is underneath. The soil and the vertidrainage and hollow coring regime."

Woburn has recently signed an agreement with Toro to supply machinery and Eddie is pleased with how the arrangement is working out, as is Toro.

"We are delighted to be involved at Woburn. It is a prestigious club and we believe Toro can ensure top quality maintenance standards for all three of its courses," said Pete Mansfield, General Manager Turf Products of Lely UK.

Eddie is also a great supporter of BIGGA, although he does feel that perhaps more could be done to instil an ethic of "attention to detail" in members.

"I do believe that greenkeeping has come on leaps and bounds for anyone wishing to treat it as a career and I'm





delighted to see the pride that people feel from being a member of BIGGA and I support everything the Association does.

With that, and despite a schedule which would have most seeking a premature end to the meeting Eddie took time to drive me around the Marquess course in a buggy.

He was to be rewarded by an excellent tournament with some fabulous golf over the following few days.

**OVERLEAF: FIND OUT HOW EACH OF WOBURN'S COURSES HAS ITS OWN INDIVIDUALITY AND HOW THE THREE HEAD GREENKEEPERS DEAL WITH THE VARYING DEMANDS PLACED UPON THEM...**



Above and top: Two contrasting views of the magnificent 12th on the new Marquess Course





**Steve Tompkins**  
**The Dukes**

Although only 37 Steve has already been involved in over 30 professional events with the recent Victor Chandler British Masters making it three as a Head Greenkeeper.

He was certainly thrown in the deep end with the previous two which came within a month of each other, the Weetabix Ladies Open followed four weeks later by the British Masters.

"To be honest we kept the course pretty much the same between that four week period but by the Sunday of the Masters you could see the stress the greens were under," said Steve, who said that he was pleased that the events had fallen with the ladies' event first.

"The ladies don't like the greens quite so quick but the rest of the course is much the same," said Steve, who revealed that he expected the greens to be about 10.5 for the event later that week.

He gets a buzz from being involved in competitions and having his work seen by the television cameras, the galleries and the players but has seen a difference tackling them from the position of head man.

"You face all the pressures and everyone is gunning for you during the week while in the weeks leading up you have to work out a different work programme to cater for the extra man power that we take from the Duchess and Marquess courses. I have over 20 staff in total so it is a lot more balls to juggle. We also have to take into account two tee starts and working round that."

Steve is a keen advocate of the three Head Greenkeeper system having been Deputy Head of the Dukes Course under the previous regime.

"It can be a bit of a scramble deciding who gets kit sometimes but at the end of the day we work with each other to ensure we don't do the same jobs as the same time," said Steve. The Dukes and the Duchess share machinery while the Marquess has a separate facility and outside of tractors and top dresser has its own stable of machines.

"I believe our new system works better than the traditional Course Manager in overall charge method as it creates healthy rivalry between teams," he added.

Having given up valuable time to speak with me during the busiest week on the year Steve then headed back on to the course to ensure the final touches were being completed on the event which was to be won by Scotland's Gary Orr.



**Gary Leadbeater**  
**The Marquess**

Gary moved from the position of head man on the Duchess course to the Marquess on day one of construction and has enjoyed what he describes as a great learning experience.

"To have an in depth knowledge of what has gone into the ground, how it has been constructed, the depth of root zone, draining, irrigation lines, types of soils is invaluable. If we find a problem now I can often remember something specific which occurred and which we can trace the problem back," he said.

He was also able to put forward his own opinions often on the need for areas to be more maintenance friendly.

"The interest in the project was huge, with many people involved other than just the architect - Ross McMurray of European Golf Design and the constructors, Southern Golf, but if I said something they did take note."

The course was cut out of 42 hectares of dense pure woodland so, with so many majestic mature trees forming part of the design, it has an established feel to it from the very beginning. As well as the routing the remainder of the woodland has been thinned thus encouraging wildlife to return to an area previously excluded to them because of the unmanaged woods.

"It is great to see deer roaming the course early in the mornings."

Unlike the other two courses the Marquess has been built to USGA guidelines and Gary has been on a fast learning curve.

"I've seen dry patch appear within hours and the amount of leaching you get is incredible," said Gary, who is not slow to ask advice of people who have had dealing with USGA guideline constructions.

"It has been an up and down experience for me but there has never been a time when I've regretted taking it on," he revealed.



**Chris Hunt**  
**The Duchess**

The tight tree lined nature of the Duchess course has caused a number of long standing problems for Chris and his team.

"In the past a lot of iron has been used on the greens and our iron count is horrific, we're up at 700 parts per million as opposed to the optimum of between 60-100, and we haven't used iron ore and sulphur based fertilisers for two years now," explained Chris, who took over from Gary as the Duchess' Head Greenkeeper two years ago.

"In the winter we have been running over with the big vertidrain, going down a foot with an inch tine and back filling with Leighton Buzzard sand which helps the drainage. It should help the roots to spread and break down the iron content. The grass plant is a lot healthier now so we can live with the high iron count," explained Chris, who worked in Seattle and California before returning to Woburn.

The wealth of trees around the course also causes shade problems with some greens in the winter not shaking their covering of frost while bare patches under the trees are currently being tackled with blinding areas of three to four inches of soil.

In the past the tree work was carried out on an ad-hoc basis but recently a tree surgeon has been employed to conduct a proper programme.

Chris is also an advocate of the policy of having three separate teams to maintain Woburn's courses.

"It's quite playful between the guys and it's good to have that healthy competition. Greens are the main thing we judge each other on and we might just point out that someone's greens are looking a bit sick one week. Having said that we definitely share ideas and solve problems together."



Clockwise from top: A tremendous tree-lined approach to the 2nd on the new Marquess Course at Woburn

Toro kit plays a major part in the daily routines of all three Greenkeeping teams at Woburn

The new halfway house on the Marquess Course. One live-in 'chef' required!



