

Scott MacCallum meets Colin Irvine, the man charged with ensuring Muirfield is at its best for The Open later this month

FIELD OF DREAMS



Above: Colin Irvine

This year The Open Championship sees the golfing elite descend on the East Lothian town of Gullane. There can be few, if any, towns in the world so totally immersed in the game of golf. Everywhere you look there are superb golf holes, with tees and greens coming right up to the edge of the main road, and golfers of all ages and nationalities concentrating on their own games, totally oblivious to the passing traffic and shoppers.

It is the perfect illustration of golf as part of the community but it is on one of the world's most prestigious golf clubs that the 156 players will be focussing come the week of July 15.

Home to The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers, widely recognised as being the oldest golf club in the world with records

recognising its existence going back to 1744, Muirfield is also regarded as one of the finest golf courses anywhere in the world.

The entrance to Muirfield is east of the village's three other wonderful courses Gullane No 1, No 2 and No 3 courses, and the magnificent iron gates at the end of a long driveway are a clue to the exalted position the club holds.

When they do they will discover a links which is widely regarded as one of the fairest to be found anywhere – all the trouble is visible from the tee which doesn't necessarily mean you will avoid it! – and 18 holes which have propelled the club to the top of the British rankings – as carried out by Golf World magazine.

A regular on the Open rota, Muirfield has a list of Champions that reads like a Who's Who of golf as it demonstrates an unfailing ability to identify and crown the best players in the world.

Previous winners have included Harry Vardon, James Braid (twice), Walter Hagen, Henry Cotton, Gary Player, Jack Nicklaus, Lee Trevino, Tom Watson and Nick Faldo, the winner of the last two Muirfield Opens. Each would have a claim on being the best player in the world at the time of his victory while perhaps the greatest of them all, Nicklaus, named his own club in Ohio after the course. It



may be a good form guide to know that the winner of the Amateur Championship when it was played at Muirfield in 1998 was Sergio Garcia.

The man who carries the responsibility for ensuring that the quality of the Muirfield layout is matched by the condition of the course is 37 year-old Course Manager, Colin Irvine.

While a traditional club in so many ways it is perhaps surprising that Muirfield has a Course Manager and not a Head Greenkeeper, and the more modern approach is extended still further.

"We don't have a Green Committee at Muirfield. I meet with the Secretary, Group Captain John Prideaux, three days a week to discuss the job and any queries we may have and I attend five committee meetings a year. Then I report on the work we are currently undertaking or about to do, machinery purchases, staffing etc and then answer any



Below: Colin with his team



Photography: Brian Morgan; 0141 2216236

questions the committee members may have," explained Colin.

Having praised the modern approach adopted by the club with its structure Muirfield's traditional philosophy, when it comes to the management of the links themselves, is equally laudable.

This can be seen in the club's approach to irrigation. While most clubs install a greens and tees system if they are not in a position to install a wall-to-wall system, Muirfield has a system which starts at the front of the tees and finishes at the start of the greens.

"We are the only club I know which has this approach but the club don't want artificial irrigation on the greens. The reasons we installed the fairway system, after the drought in '95, was as an insurance against another drought and because of the large areas that needed to be hand watered. Also under the old system when the villagers of Gullane woke

in the morning the water pressure available to the club would drop off.

"In '95 we went six weeks without a drop of rain but the greens and tees didn't prove a problem at all. The boys would go out and hand hose them and we'd give them a drink on a Friday so we wouldn't have to irrigate over the weekend. It didn't seem to have had any bad effects on the greens.

"It is easy to sit here with this mouse and just turn on the system if we haven't had any rain in a little while, but if you've got to haul a hose out and take guys off other jobs just to water a green quite often you err on the 'Might rain tomorrow' mentality. In the last two years I think we've only irrigated the greens five times."

It is an approach which has reaped dividends as Colin and his team haven't sprayed a fungicide for seven years.

"In the last couple of years we've had some wet summers and people

have said to me that the course hasn't been looking as linksy but while we can add water we can't take it away."

A fly on the Muirfield wall would see a lot of top dressing, very little fertiliser and a lot of aeration during the winter months.

"We don't aerate at all in the summer so that the surfaces are as smooth as possible for the members," said Colin, who explained that the two high points of the year are the Club's two medals – the spring in May and the autumn in October.

"October is a busy month as we also give the course over to a charity day that month and it means that we never do any verti draining until November, while most clubs are well into their winter programmes."

Colin has been head man at Muirfield since 1994 and but for a two year gap – during which time he was Course Manager of a course in Dusseldorf, Germany – he has been

at the club since he was a 16 year old apprentice in 1981.

"I used to do a bit of caddying in the summer holidays and the old Head Greenkeeper, Dave Kirkaldy, used to do the Caddie Master's job to give him a day off on a Thursday. He asked me if I fancied a job on the greens in the summer. I said I wouldn't mind and he told me to come down the following day and he'd give me a go at cutting a green," recalled Colin.

"The next day I went out with one of the greenkeepers. He cut a couple of lines on the 8th green then I had a shot. That was the sort of interview you had in those days," laughed Colin.

It was supposed to be a summer job but at the end of the holidays Colin was asked if he'd like to stay on and he jumped at the chance.

He missed the 1980 Muirfield Open but was an assistant when Nick Faldo won his first Open in '87 and

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Right: The 13th - Tom Watson's favourite par-3

Below: The distinctive bunker which graces the 18th hole

Deputy - to Chris Whittle, who is now at Royal Birkdale - when Faldo repeated the feat in '92.

Shortly after that Open he left to take up the position of Course Manager at the Dusseldorfer Golf Club.

"I enjoyed my time in Germany and it taught me a great deal. It was an inland course and I had to take on

board the different way of managing the course, the different laws that were in place, how different people would do things, as well as, of course, learn the language."

When Colin learned that Chris Whittle was moving back to his home area to become Head Greenkeeper at Royal Birkdale the lure of his own home patch was just too strong and

he applied for the job.

He is quick to admit that it was his experiences while working abroad which created the opportunity to return to Muirfield two years later.

"I don't think I would have got this job if I hadn't gone off and done the job somewhere else first. We have moved on from the traditional way of the job going to the longest serv-

ing greenkeeper when the Head Greenkeeper retired."

The arrival of The Open this July hasn't caused Colin and his team to make many alterations to their normal regime.

"People do say that you could probably have an Open here any year so we don't really need to make many changes to the way we do things when The Open comes along."

There are two holes which have been lengthened for the Championship, the par-3 4th and 13th holes, the latter being hailed by Tom Watson as the best par-3 in world golf while the bunker renovation has been carried out over the last couple of years.

"We do them on a two year cycle. We looked at those which the pros wouldn't see so much and did them last year and the ones where they are more likely to find, particularly on the par-3s, we did them this year.

"We don't want them to look too brand new or surgical looking when we reface them and the members can play them throughout the winter. I think people would feel cheated if they had to lift balls out of bunkers in the run up to an Open. Having said that, there is nothing worse than finishing a bunker then someone coming along and taking a big divot out of the face, but it's a golf course and we prepare it for golfers. It's the same with divoting fairways, someone is going to come along and take a divot. We are here to prepare a golf course for golfers."

One element which has seen a





change from normal years is the treatment of the rough, which has not been cut as much as usual. One of the unique elements of Muirfield is the walk offs from the tee, a small strip of cut grass, often over 100 yards long, through rough to enable golfers to walk to the start of the fairway.

"Some of the older members struggle to make the carry, particularly into the wind, or top a shot and it can be tough for them when the rough is left to grow.

"You have to think long term when planning to cut the rough. People said to me three weeks ago that you could hit the ball anywhere in the rough and still get out of it. They won't be saying that now. When you get the rain and the heat how fast it grows so the same people will be saying in a few weeks time that it needs to be cut."

But other than that the course will not change much from its norm, a point illustrated when Colin points to an old aerial photograph pinned to his office wall.

"A picture taken now would be very similar to this one," he said.

Over the last few years he has visited the Open venue and compared it to his own course at the same time of year.

"You do work different management programmes in the lead up to Open time to select the best but you've got to remember we have a different climate to other Open venues.

"Last year we were a lot greener than Lytham which was amazingly



dry. When I got back over the border on the Saturday you could see even that the road verges were still green and that we were probably a little behind Lytham," he said, before revealing that they had 29 mil of rain in May and that in the first two weeks of June they have had a staggering 54 mil.

He expects the greens to be more than quick enough for the Championship.

"I can get them to run at 10 feet for no special occasion and I have been asked for 11.5."

He revealed that when Sergio Garcia won the Amateur in '98 they had been cutting morning and night but were asked just to cut in the morning as they were getting too fast.

In addition to all the on-course

work, Colin has been placed in charge of all the ancillary work as well.

"Some clubs designate a member to look after these sorts of things but with me being the Course Manager and knowing the course best they decided that I should take on the role of keeping an eye on everything and you do want to protect your course as best you can."

To assist in this they have marked all the sensitive areas which include water pipes and drains and told contractors not to go near those areas.

A genuinely laid back character Colin is looking forward to the week and, with six weeks to go, is happy to boast that he hasn't suffered any sleepless nights worrying about it.

"Yes, you know the eyes of the world are on you and that it's your

course and good or bad it's going to come on you in the end so there is pressure but if you are confident in what you are doing on your course you should be fine. It is also reassuring to know that I have such a fine team behind me. They have done a superb job in the preparations for the Championship and I know that will be the same during the week itself," said Colin.

"The weather is the only thing you have no control over but it would be nice to see an Open with the sun blazing, a fiery burnt up course and the wind blowing. That would be my ideal."

He's right but whatever weather is served up during the third week of July you know that Muirfield itself will be the star.