

# Course Feature

## BACK WHERE IT BELONGS

Royal Liverpool Golf Club, or Hoylake as it is more familiarly known, will host the 2006 Open Championship a return to the rota which rewards a great deal of hard work by the club and the local authority. Scott MacCallum found out more from Links Manager, Derek Green.



Tuesday, December 2nd, 2002, was a very significant date in the history of the Royal Liverpool Golf Club at Hoylake. It was then, at a packed press conference in the clubhouse, at which delighted members outnumbered press by around 20 to one that the R&A announced that the 2006 Open Championship would be played on the historic links a mere 39 years since Roberto de Vincenzo had become the last of the club's 10 Open Champions.



Derek Green and his close friend Bill Lawson

The delight which greeted the announcement was genuinely heartfelt and not, merely from the club members, as the press were delighted to be returning to a club which boasts a history others could only dream of as well as a friendliness which marked the place out as special.

It was, however, not wholly unexpected as a programme of both on and off course improvements had been underway for quite some time and the R&A had placed Hoylake back on its Open Championship rota about 18 months earlier. However, the final confirmation was a triumph for the club and the local authority, who had invested much in the campaign for The Open's return to this particular corner of the north west.

One of those with most to be pleased about was Links Manager, Derek Green, one of the most respected men in the greenkeeping industry and the person who bore the responsibility for the successful implementation of much of the on-course improvements.

But what was it that saw the club fall off The Open rota in the first place? After all Royal Liverpool had been responsible for the

launch of the Amateur Championship in 1885 and had its name engraved on a very particular piece of golfing history when Bobby Jones won our Open Championship there on the way to his Grand Slam in 1930.

Well, there were two key elements which conspired against Hoylake as The Open Championship grew in size over the last 30 years. One was the lack of land to cope with a modern day Championship - the club could provide a practice ground or a tented village but not both. And the second concerned the layout of the course and, in particular, certain areas which had suffered with the development of the game both in terms of distances hit from the tee and size of the galleries now attracted to Open Championships.

To look at the implications and potential solutions to these problems the club started a Championship committee who, as well as The Open Championship, looked at other potential events the club might lure to the Wirral.

One thing that came to light very early on, and indeed, was one



The Hoylake Team

of the principle reasons the course had dropped off the rota was the lack of sufficient land upon which to host the event.

Part of that problem was solved when an adjacent plot of land was purchased by the club while another assisted when the feelers were put out to about the possibility of using Hoylake Municipal Golf Course as the practice ground.

"The real problem with this potential solution was that the course is across a main road and a railway line from us," explained Derek.

However, and this is where the local authority can take a huge amount of credit for what has subsequently transpired, no problem would seem to have been insurmountable.

"It became obvious that that the Municipal authority and the transport department were prepared to close the railway line between Hoylake and West Kirby for the week of the Championship which was great," revealed Derek.

Donald Steel was then brought in to upgrade the Municipal's 14th green and 15th fairway to suit the high standards expected and Head Greenkeeper, Nick Bower, can enjoy a course alteration carried out by one of the world's top architects and lick his lips at the prospect of seeing Tiger, Ernie et al visiting his course for one week in July, 2006.

With the off course issues being addressed the club turned its attention to the grand old course itself.

"It became obvious that certain things were a real problem and Donald Steel spent time evaluating the situation," recalled Derek, as we spoke several months before the much anticipated announcement.

"Donald looked at bunker positions taking on board the fact that the ball is now hit a lot further, the size of tees which were very, very small but the real issues were the 17th green; the 3rd hole which was a short par-5 and the 18th which was not a very good finishing hole with an undemanding green at the end of it," he explained.

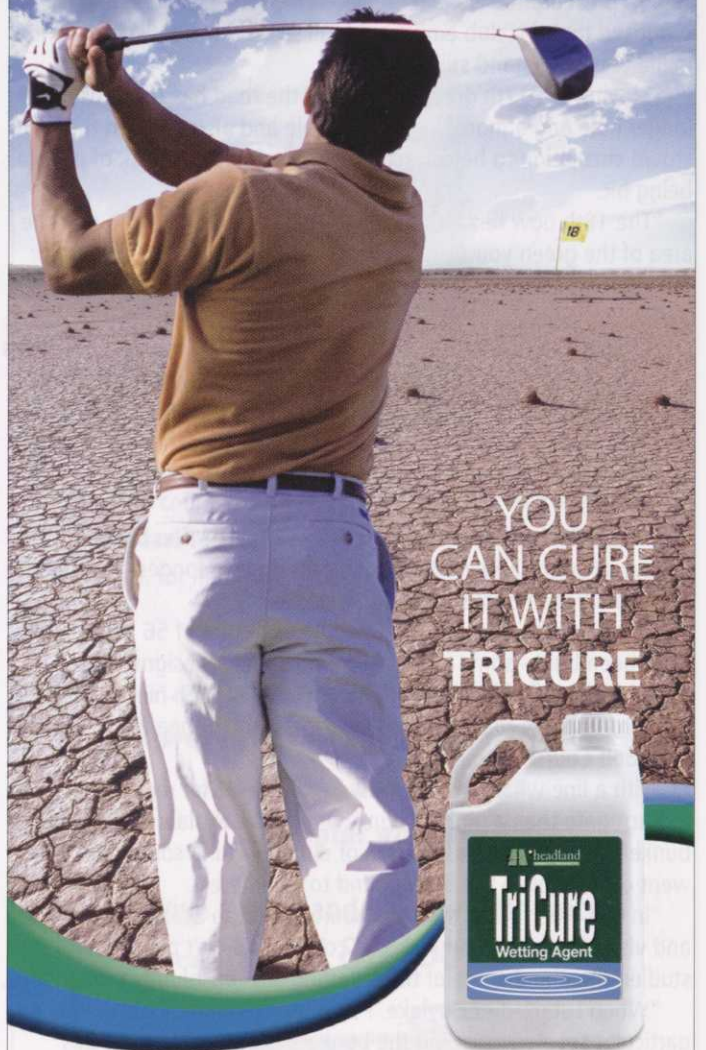
The 17th green was at the side of the Stanley Road which was causing real health and safety issues.

"It was a very good hole when there was little traffic going down the Stanley Road and people didn't park their cars along it but it did genuinely become very dangerous and the club was looking at it irrespective of whether we were getting The Open or not.

"The 3rd hole would have been fine if we could have played it from right back in the corner of the course but that would have eliminated any gallery movement around the 2nd," said Derek.

Donald Steel came up with the alternative design which alleviated the congestion problems on the 3rd and improved the 17th and 18th giving the course a finish to be proud of.

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# Course Feature

"It says a lot for the open minded nature of the club, and the superb presentation Donald Steel made on the changes he proposed that the club embraced it all so readily but like anything in life you can't stand still.

"Moving the 17th green away from the road has given us a longer hole and a more demanding hole and also allowed the crowd circulation to be correct. It also eliminated the risk of people being hit.

"The 18th now has a much tougher green. You have to pick the area of the green you want to land on, rather than just aiming for the whole green. As a result it is much easier to defend," said Derek.

Hoylelake had always been known for its tough finishing five holes - known as the Finningley Five but those holes now consist of two par-5s of around 560 yards, followed by three par-4s of 475, 470 and 460 yards. Anyone finishing in par figures for those five holes in the heat of an Open Sunday afternoon will be deserving of the glory.

The course has never lacked length and when The Open is played, at over 7200 yards it will be the second longest course on the Championship rota behind Carnoustie.

As well as the work on the three holes a total of 56 new bunkers have been built - some totally new and some redesigned.

Indeed Derek's bunker revetment work has seen him conducting masterclasses on the subject at Harrogate and appearing in BIGGA's own Golf Course Preparation video.

With a line which would undoubtedly be better received in a bar at Harrogate than a nightclub in Liverpool he explained: "Revetted bunkers have been a fascination of mine for quite some time." He went on to explain the background to his interest.

"In fact when I was still at Woburn I went to Scotland for a week and visited all the Championship courses. I didn't play, I just studied them and some of the revetting was absolutely tremendous.

"When I started at Hoylelake, I suppose fortunately, there was no particular set style of doing the bunkers so we developed this

system of tapering the edges of the bunkers in and getting it to flow so, instead of being a pure hazard, we tried to make them aesthetically blend into the area," said Derek, who talks on all greenkeeping issues with such an enthusiasm and sensible matter-of-factness that makes him a joy to listen to.

But bunkers are definitely one of his specialist subjects.

"We build them to 10 to 15 degrees and while some might consider that to be a bit to generous our members don't. After years thinking about them my conclusion is thus. If you play The Belfry and go into a lake you've lost your ball. If you play St Pierre and get behind one of the the 300 year old oak trees you play out sideways. So the weakness of a bunker is that the decision is left to the golfer who has to play it, whereas the lake or the tree make the decision for you. You have the choice and the people who moan are the people who take the wrong choice. They will always try to go out forward although there is no rule which says you have to and what happens is that when they've played three shots they then go out sideways," said Derek.

The Midlander has also worked hard on improving the quality of the sward over the past 17 years.

"When I arrived we had a very, very high phosphate level in the greens and on some we had between 80 and 90% annual meadow grass. Basically without overseeding we set to work top dressing with fen soil and local sand. Once we were happy with the mix we retained it and still use the 80-20 today. We've built up about two inches on top of the green and the phosphate level is very low and we have an average of 80% bent grass."

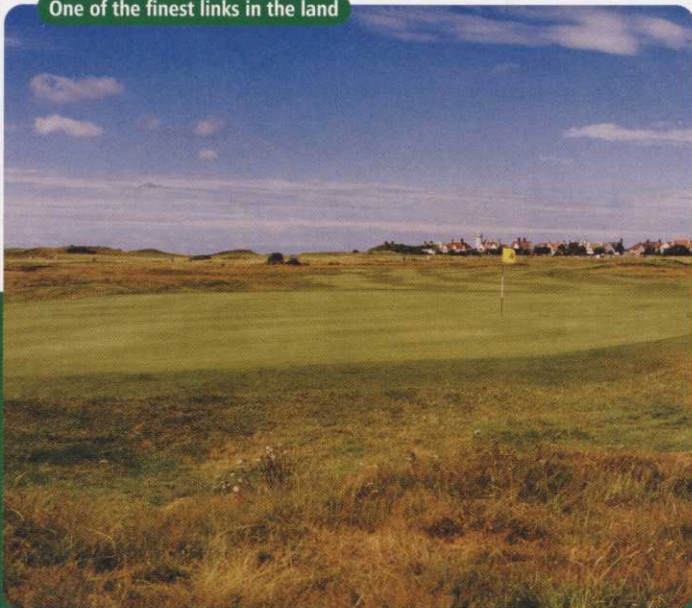
He does admit that since reaching the 80% mark progress has slowed somewhat.

"In an ideal world it would be lovely to remove the lot but I don't think I'll live long enough to see it."

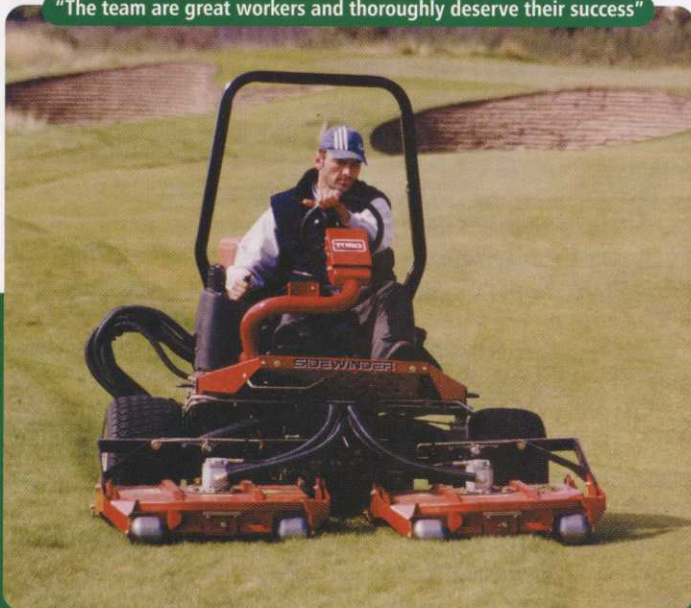
They have also been working on the removal of some of the green surrounds.

"We have been doing this because of the high rye grass contamination we have found."

One of the finest links in the land



"The team are great workers and thoroughly deserve their success"





Another project they started doing last year which has proved successful came with the help of North West Turf who grew a special mix of sheeps fescue and creeping red fescue for the club.

"We replaced about an acre and a half of rough which had become contaminated with rye grass and creeping soft grass and the results have been very good indeed."

A keen Aston Villa fan, Derek uses a footballing analogy to paint a picture of where he feels Hoylake is at the moment.

"We are a good First Division team who very occasionally have a very good cup run and do well against the Premiership teams. I'd say that was when we hosted the Curtis Cup and the Amateur Championship, but after that we go back to being a First Division team.

"Getting The Open back has put us in a position where we have got to be a Premiership team again but we have got to be one which is in the top three or four and this is where we've got to remain.

"To that end we have to bring the financial structure up to meet the needs and already we have increased our staff to 10 and now have first class maintenance facilities."

With more than three and a half years until its Open Derek is already excited about the prospect.

"I hope it will be the pinnacle of my career. I can't think of anything greater but what I will be especially happy for the club itself because it didn't deserve to be off the rota in the first place. Also for my staff because I have always been lucky with the staff that I've worked with. The Liverpool sense of humour is great but they are also great workers and they thoroughly deserve the success that it is going to bring because they are the guys who have been out there in the driving wind and rain when in normal years we would have found some work inside. Over the years Jim Arthur and David Stansfield's contributions to the development of the links should never be underestimated and my good friend, Bill Lawson, Heswell retired, who has always been at hand to talk over any problems.

But above all I'll be delighted most for the Green Chairman, Brian Gourley. Hopefully I will see the Open through with him before we both retire. That would come together quite nicely."

That it would, and you can't think that it will have happened to a more deserving person and a more deserving club.

*Photographs taken by Alan C. Birch, Golf Design Consultancy*

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