

# TALKING HEADS

Compiled by Gareth Jones

# 1

**Most memorable moment when hosting The Open?**

THE OPEN CHAMPIONSHIP



**Name:** Billy McLachlan  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 24  
**Club:** Royal Troon Golf Club  
**Staff:** 13 full time & two Seasonal  
**Number of Opens/where:** 4 (Royal Troon, 97 & '04 as Course Manager)

In truth, it would be the picture of the face of my four children when all the equipment was being brought onto the course. We live right on the course, so everything was being literally dropped on the doorstep and they just couldn't believe how much kit there was.



**Name:** Chris Whittle  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 34  
**Club:** Royal Birkdale Golf Club  
**Staff:** Eight  
**Number of Opens:** 3 (Birkdale, Muirfield & Royal Lytham as Deputy)

It has to be Justin Rose's chip at the 18th last time The Open was here in 1998. He was just a 17 year old amateur when he played and matched the lowest amateur score with a 66. I was standing next to his Mum and Dad when he pulled that famous chip off and they went mad.



**Name:** Colin Irvine  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 24  
**Club:** H.C.E.G. Muirfield  
**Staff:** 10  
**Number of Opens/where:** 3 (Muirfield, 1 as Course Manager)

My most memorable and favourite moments when being involved in the Open Championship would have to be standing on the 18th green at the Championship Presentation.



**Name:** George Brown  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 51  
**Club:** The Westin Turnberry Resort  
**Staff:** 35  
**Number of Opens/where:** 2 (Turnberry GC)

In 1986 at the prize giving ceremony Concord flew down the 18th fairway and over the grandstands. In 1994 I was making my way back to my house after The Open dinner. I came across four people playing our pitch & putt course, there was some joviality, chinking of glasses and on approaching them I realised it was Tom Watson and Jack Niklaus arm in arm.



**Name:** John Philp MBE  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 41  
**Club:** Carnoustie Golf Links  
**Staff:** 25  
**Number of Opens/where:** 2 (St Andrews 1984, Carnoustie 1999)

Most people will remember Jean Van De Velde's collapse at the 72nd hole where a 6 would have taken the title, but Paul Lawrie's 4-iron to 6 feet in the final play-off hole was tremendous. His final round 67 was one of the great Open rounds and gave us a Scots' winner on home soil.



**Name:** Neil Metcalf  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 24  
**Club:** Royal St Georges Golf Club  
**Staff:** Nine plus a Mechanic  
**Number of Opens/where:** 2 (Royal St Georges GC)

The biggest highlight from my two Open experiences has to be in 2003 with Tiger Woods holing his bunker shot from the bunker back left of the 7th green. He finished tied fourth that year.



**Name:** Paul Smith  
**Years as a Greenkeeper:** 19  
**Club:** Royal Lytham and St Annes  
**Staff:** 11  
**Number of Opens/where:** 1 (Royal Lytham and St Annes)

My memorable moments are the positive feedback from the press and players and David Duval's humbling speech. Also Mrs Smith informing me that she was expecting after some years of trying, I'm not sure how that could be.

# 2

## Biggest headache - pre and post The Open?

The stand and tent contractors are excellent, but you always worry something bad could happen. The major issue was the increased demand on the course in spring and the summer. Everyone wants to play the Open Course and to watch extra play, with rough being flattened, etc does make you slightly concerned.

We had a long draught from spring to early summer. It only broke two weeks before the start of the competition. The problem it created was that we couldn't get any definition into the course as we had no grass. Luckily the rain came in enough time for us to put that right.

Before the Open it was the weather, with double the average rainfall in both June and July. This made it much more difficult to produce a hard and fast running links course. After the Open it was the dismantling and removal of the infrastructure, which caused a lot of damage due to the wet ground conditions.

Biggest headache both pre and post The Championship has to be entertaining BIGGA members, greenkeepers and friends from all corners of the world until the early hours.

Fortunately there were no major incidents in the build-up to the event. Stand erection and other installations went to plan. The mass exodus that followed the Championship was a headache. It needed careful monitoring and metal detectors were used prior to turf maintenance procedures. Luckily none of the dodgy golf buggy drivers ended up in the Barry Burn.

Before the Open I had no major headaches other than the tent contractor driving a stake straight through an irrigation pipe and flooding the entire area by the range tee.

Before The Open was coping with the uncertainties of the British climate, having experienced an extremely wet winter and plagued by a infestation of cutworm in the rough in spring. Post event was dealing with the aftermath, the restitution of the course and, in particular, the tented village, while balancing the expectations of the membership and maintaining satisfaction.

# 3

## What advice would you give to anyone else hosting an Open Championship?

It's obvious, but enjoy the whole event. You put in so much work for the years before The Open and know that you will have to work equally hard after the event in tidying up. The event itself goes in a flash, so I would say try and enjoy that one week, because before you know it, it's all over.

It sounds simple, but just plan well in advance. Sit down with a piece of paper and plan everything, from set up to maintenance, and decide what and when you will do it all. That way you can avoid any nasty surprises.

Make sure you have enough equipment and staff to cover every eventuality. Also I would say you have to do your best to enjoy the whole experience of an Open Championship.

Dedication, planning and teamwork are essential. Being open minded and flexible are just a few of the necessary requirements when hosting any major tournament.

Don't be overawed. Thorough preparation is vital and can often take a number of years. The key is to fully understand how your course performs in different weather conditions for tournament requirements and address the weaknesses. For an Open especially, ball reaction in the turf is important and similar firmness and resilience should be targeted through fairways, approaches and greens.

The best advice I could give would be to try and relax and enjoy the moments, if possible. If you are outwardly relaxed it can help your staff to relax also, as they must enjoy the special moments of hosting The Open too.

Planning should be exhaustive, maintain a schedule as a guide but remain flexible and be prepared to carry out minor adjustments, as no season remains the same. If there's a problem and you're unsure of the solution be professional and obtain a second opinion. Utilise what professional services you may have available to you so that the best possible solution can be found.

# 4

## Having fulfilled the dream of most greenkeepers of preparing an Open Course what are your new dreams and aims?

To still be at Royal Troon Golf Club and drawing breath for when the next Open Championship is held here, whenever that might be.

It is a wonderful dream to set up for The Open. I guess the new dream is to do as many Opens as possible before I retire. Of course, each time you host one you want to do it better and improve and that's the next challenge.

To continue to improve Muirfield for regular play and in preparation for the next time The Open returns here.

My new dream is to achieve the impossible in having a golf course in perfect condition for 52 weeks of the year.

I am looking forward two years to the buzz of an event like The Open brings. For most of the staff it will be a repeat experience, for others it will be their initiation. We are looking to improve on certain aspects of course maintenance and design. You can't stand still in any business and golf is no different.

The aim now is to maintain and improve the course to the highest standard for the membership year on year.

Looking forward to the next project really and to continue to strive towards the highest, sustainable and achievable standards. At the same time maintaining sound agronomic and environmental stewardship practices is important. Finally, I want to ensure that the Links at Lytham St Annes is preserved for future generations.

# 5

## What worries or nightmares kept you awake in the lead up to The Open Championship?

The worry is the unexpected. You can plan and plan and plan, but it's those unexpected, uncontrollable elements that can cause the biggest concern and problems. Things like vandalism or oil leaks or the weather. In 1997 we had a huge down pour the Thursday before the event and a lot of the practice ground flooded.

It was probably that long draught we had. But once it broke, two weeks before the Championship, we were OK and any looming panic was over. To be honest, nothing really kept me awake at night, I'm normally too tired from a hard day's work to stay wide awake.

None that I can really remember. During the Championship itself you do not have time for sleep, let alone nightmares.

Apart from vandalism or oil leaks, the weather conditions as in 1986. Then we experienced almost gale force winds and horizontal rain. Then the opposite occurred in 1994 when weeks before the Championship we were experiencing drought conditions. Then, five days before the start, we seemed to have constant rain. The Man upstairs always has the last word.

However well you prepare there are always concerns about vandalism, hydraulic oil damage, adverse weather, etc. An added element in 1999 was the new hotel construction immediately behind the 1st tee / 18th green, which was opened with just two months to spare. We were still busy with finishing works around the 1st tee and Starters' Box at the end of May.

I think the worst nightmare for me in the lead up to the Championship was the fear of a major leak from the watering system or a sprinkler going off when you least want it to.

I honestly cannot remember having any. I was only fit for a good night's sleep on retiring home. However, I'm sure it will be different next time. I'll be older, wiser, have greater vision and awareness, attributes that will contribute towards success. I'll know that perfection is difficult if not impossible to achieve.