

# Course Feature

## In at the Deep End

Scott MacCallum meets Craig Gilholm, a man who likes to hit the ground running.



It's natural for people starting a new job to ease themselves in. Take some time to get to know your new colleagues; learn where the coffee machine is; who to turn to if the printer is chewing up your work and what to do with yourself at lunchtimes. After a little while, you can then start to display all the reasons why you were chosen for the job in the first place - bright ideas, problem solving, volunteering for tasks etc.

Spare a thought then for Craig Gilholm. Craig started his new Links Manager's job, a year ago and, as you all know, the first year in such a position is very much a learning process. Not only does all the usual "new job" stuff apply, but you've got to learn how your new course reacts to whatever weather and playing conditions are thrown at it at each and every time of the year.

Except that in Craig's case, all through that first year, in the back of his mind has been a date. That date is Thursday, July 20th when the world's best golfers tee it up for the first round of The Open Championship. Craig, you see, is the new Links Manager of The Royal Liverpool Golf Club - better known as Hoylake - having succeeded the late, well loved, and even more respected, Derek Green.

Talking with Craig, however, you would never believe such a huge Championship is just around the corner as he is blessed with a similar phlegmatic character to that of his previous boss, Colin Irvine, at Muirfield.

That laid back approach, coupled with an in-built confidence that he possesses all the skills necessary to handle whatever is thrown at him, are a real blessing for the 33 year-old, who has been brought up immersed in all the finest traditions of links greenkeeping.

"In all honesty until very recently I hadn't even given The Open a thought. It will take care of itself when it comes around," said Craig, as we sat in his room at the rear of the maintenance facility.

"That might seem silly, but this being my first Open in charge I haven't experienced any of the worries which might come along. R&A Chief Executive, Peter Dawson, and Championship Chairman, Martin Kippax, visited recently and asked me what I thought the course was going to be like and I just said 'fine' as I didn't see a problem."

By way of an explanation for such a calm approach Craig points to his 16 years at Muirfield, the last eight as Deputy.

"All I'm trying to do is keep everyone in the club happy and do what I've been taught at Muirfield - present the course the way Muirfield is presented



week in, week out. I know greenkeepers will all say that they present their courses to a high standard within reason, but at Muirfield, where admittedly it was easier because of the limited play, we had to produce a course out of the top drawer every single week.

"So really, I've not thought about The Open and I've certainly not panicked every morning about jobs which need doing. Not yet anyway."

The opportunity for Craig to face his first Open Championship as Links Manager, began when he spotted the advert for the post in the March 2005 issue of Greenkeeper International.

"My thoughts were that I'd have to apply as I was ready for a step up. I did think though, that with The Open coming up a lot of the big guns in greenkeeping would be in for it so I thought I had no chance of the job but that, coming from Muirfield, I expected at least to get an interview. I had Open experience but there are probably 40 or 50 guys in Britain who also have Open experience."

Sure enough the call to interview came with Alistair Beggs, of the STRI, a Hoylake member, on the panel and the man charged with asking the technical questions.

"I felt everything went well, thinking that, as a second in command, I'd done all I could, and left it at that but then they called back and said they wanted me for a second interview. It was getting serious now I thought."

Craig was accompanied by his wife and family on both occasions, to give them a chance to get to know the area but he still felt that he would be the outsider of probably three or four guys.

"But after the second interview they called back and said the job was mine. It took me about two minutes to accept!"

Hoylake had been synonymous with the work of Derek Green, who had been Links Manager for over 20 years and whose ambition had been to bring The Open back to a course which hadn't played host since 1967. It was therefore a sweet occasion when, on the strength of much of the revamping work he had carried out on the course, five years ago the 2006 date





was given to the club, and a bitter one when illness overcame and eventually took him early last year.

"I never met Derek, nor did I know of him, but having seen the job he's done here he must have been a hell of a greenkeeper. I read about the work he had done in a Greenkeeper International article done when The Open was announced and from that and what I've heard about the golf course, there has been a transformation and it is a real credit to him that he got The Open."

That said, Craig will always do things his way, based on the skills and knowledge he picked up from that other magnificent Open venue on the east coast of Scotland.

"I think we all do things differently whether it be the way we turf, or the way we build bunkers. For example, I cut round the tops of fairway bunkers a lot closer and make the landing areas bigger whereas before they were semi rough. I've tried to do other things differently as well including hand cutting the tees for wear purposes although you've got to be prepared to adapt if we're too busy. We're also hand cutting greens, and will be right up until The Open, but that's purely for hydraulic leak purposes. I'd love to go out and triple cut the greens every day at the moment but we have got a lot of work to do so it's not possible," said Craig, who also has a new North Staffs Irrigation system installed over the last five years at his disposal.

One of the practices he has been more than delighted to see that Derek had brought in, was the maintenance hours that are in place on Mondays and Fridays and which give a bit of breathing space on a course which is much busier than his old place of work.

That is one of the principle differences between Muirfield and Hoylake and it has been a steep learning curve for the new Head man.

"Every month so far has been the first full month I've experienced - first May, first full June, first winter etc and I think I've learned more in the 10-11 months I've been here than in the last 10 years at Muirfield," said Craig, who started off as a YTS at Harburn GC, in West Calder, where he was a junior member playing to around 10.

"Things happen here that don't happen at Muirfield. We never got Fusarium at Muirfield - perhaps twice in 16 years - because we had high fescue content greens. We never treated for Red Thread and never used fungicides and I think Colin (Irvine) would still say that. We never used things like worm suppressants and all are used here for presentation purposes," said Craig, who was taken on at Muirfield by Chris Whittle, now Head man at Royal Birkdale.

"I found it really strange that he was calling me for advice for a change."

On the subject of sustainability Craig, comes from the pragmatic school and believes that Derek was of the same opinion.

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"We've got Bent but quite a bit of Annual Meadow Grass as well. We're on the west side of the country and do get quite a bit of rain so we live with it. To me sustainability is having greens 12 months of the year regardless of what's in them, while at the same time we are trying to add more Fescue into the greens. We overseeded last year for the first time and did it again recently with fescue bent.

"The club wants to push forward with sustainability but they have a sustainable golf course anyway. There is no one day of the year when it's closed apart from snow and that is unusual for this area and England in general."

Much of that is down to the remarkable draining capability of the course.

"We are on pretty much pure sand. We have three or four inches on sandy soil and then pure sand forever. People might think that their course drains well but this place is something else. We had three or four hours of rain recently and I went out straight afterwards and the greens were absolutely rock hard solid."

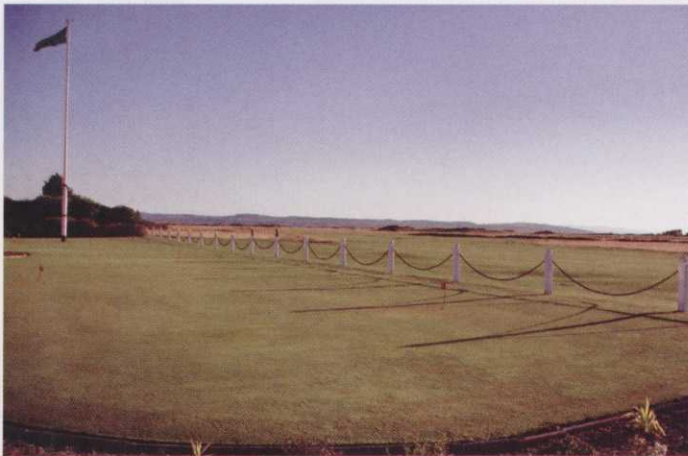
The course the 156 top players will face later this month, will be markedly different from the one Robert de Vicenzo mastered to become the only Argentinean Open Champion in 1967 with three new greens and a changed order of holes.

Donald Steel was brought in to make alterations to the course for playability and health and safety reasons with some of the holes - particularly the 17th - too close to a main road while that new 17th will play as the Championship's opening hole - the new 18th the 2nd and the Championship's 3rd will be the regular members' 1st.

"It is a very progressive club and never reluctant to make changes if they feel they are going to improve things. Once The Open has been and gone they will look at how the course played and decide what they should







do next. They might say let's dig up another three greens," he laughed.

"Birkdale is the same, they are more than happy to make changes but it doesn't happen in the same way at the old established courses in Scotland, other than to make them longer."

Asked about what he is most worried, Craig is the same as most other head men on the eve of a big event.

"I want to make sure that my greens are true because I've inherited greens which are different to those I've been brought up on and I'm not sure yet how they work 12 months of the year. At the end of the day you can have a worn bit on your fairway but if no-one lands on it no-one will know, while you can have thick rough, thin rough, patchy rough but what you will get criticised for is your greens, regardless of what the competition is.

"I'm not worried about vandalism, although the course is in a built up area, as it is out of my hands and we'll cope with that that brings if it happens."

Having arrived at Hoylake a year before The Open Championship, Craig is well aware of the mountain of work that had already been done by his 10 man team.

"Derek's illness was extremely traumatic for the team but credit to the boys, they have been working flat out for five, 10 years in total waiting for this day to come. Derek was of the view that they did reconstruction work as an in-house team, whereas I like to bring in contractors, so they really have put in a power of work and deserve a lot of credit for that."

As for the new kid on the block, he is taking it all in his stride and looking forward to the biggest week of his life.

"It will be the pinnacle of my career but really, getting this job, and the chance to be the head man at a top links course, was the pinnacle of my career."

*Photographs courtesy of Alan Birch*