



A QUIET OPEN ... PLEASE!

Scott MacCallum travelled to Southport to meet Chris Whittle, a man preparing an Open course for the third time



If an Open Championship were measured by the drama produced on the 72nd hole, Carnoustie would be up there at the very top. Not only did last year's Open produce a stupendous finish with Pádraig Harrington and Sergio Garcia both contriving to make a pig's ear of Carnoustie's fabled 18th before the Irishman got his hands on the Claret Jug, but Jean Van de Velde has gone down in history for what happened to him back in 1999.

However, Royal Birkdale can also hold its hand up for what it produced in 1998 and, unlike Carnoustie, the memorable moments came in the shape of triumphs not disasters.

Three instances on that final afternoon stand out, all occurring before Mark O'Meara was crowned Champion. First off, O'Meara's great friend and protégé, Tiger Woods, at the time still without an Open to his name, holed a huge putt on the final green to give him a glimmer of a chance of winning the title. Then, Justin Rose, at the time a callow youth playing like a man possessed, chipped

in for a birdie from long rough well short of the green. It was his final shot as an amateur player and propelled him to a heady 4th place in the Championship. Then, under intense pressure, and with one foot in sand and the other out, overnight leader, Brian Watts, needing a par to make a play-off with O'Meara, played a bunker shot that had he gone on to win would have entered the annals of golfing history as one of the greatest bunkers shots ever played.

Great memories and it secured Royal Birkdale's place as one of the most exciting venues on the rota and one of the best courses in the country.

"I was standing by the 18th green in line with Justin Rose's chip and I remember it well as his parents were in the crowd close to me when it happened," said Course Manager, Chris Whittle, as we reminisced about that last Royal Birkdale Open.

When it comes to Opens Chris is one of the most experienced men in the business. This month's Open will be the second for which he has prepared Royal Birkdale but he was also Course Manager



at Muirfield when Nick Faldo won The Open in 1992 making him unique, among modern day greenkeepers at least, in being in charge of two different Open venues.

So does the experience gathered from twice preparing an Open venue make life easier for the third occasion?

“No, not particularly,” he laughed, after giving the question some thought.

“I suppose it must help a little bit because there is nothing unexpected. You know what’s coming and you just have to deal with it.”

With that in mind he is well placed to chart the progress experienced by the oldest championship in the world over the years.

“The whole infrastructure has become much more professional in recent years and the planning starts much earlier. For example, we started alterations aimed at The Open three and a half years ago and we have been having meetings directly related to The Open for the last 18 months,” explained Chris, as sat in his office in his maintenance facility hidden behind mounding half way down the 1st hole.

“They have already upgraded much of the permanent underground services and even at this stage they are talking about tarring the road from the 5th round to the 7th just to keep dust down for players and spectators.”

Security has increased markedly since 1998 with everyone who will be inside the ropes requiring photographic id.

In addition to his own team of 10, and the BIGGA Greenkeeping Support Team, Chris brings in another 15 volunteers to carry out preparation work.

“A lot of local greenkeepers help. Stuart Hogg, from St Annes Old Links, Peter McVicar from Hesketh and a couple of his lads; one of Craig’s Gilholm lads from Hoylake, while we also have a couple from Ipswich, where my Deputy, Paul (Laurence), used to work. My son, Jamie, who works at West Lancs, is also coming over to help. In addition I have a couple of our own artisans. I either know them or they have come recommended,” said Chris.

One thing is for sure, they will be kept busy.

“I’ll be getting them to cut greens for me but obviously cutting round bunker banks requires local knowledge for safety reasons and my team will do that,” said Chris, who will be providing some of the volunteers with hand mowers for a couple of weeks before The Open so they can familiarise themselves with them on their own courses before heading to Birkdale.

He is also installing a portacabin so that his team members can grab 40 winks when they get a chance, or sleep overnight if they’d rather be close to the job.

“It’s going in just at the back of our sheds and will just give the guys somewhere to crash when and if they feel the need,” said Chris.

Cutting is one of the issues where Chris has seen a change from his previous Opens.

“The R&A want one directional cutting of fairways and tees, with all clippings boxed off, which

immediately increases the length of time required to cut the course, In addition play now starts at 6.30am rather than 7am the last time The Open was here.”

“Instead of using two fairway mowers we’ll be using five and have them all go down one side of the fairway, come back up a spectator route and mow the other side of the fairway. It will be a little more complicated on tees as there is less room to play with.”

Greens will be mown at 3.2 mil twice in the morning and once again in the evening with tees and surrounds at 6.4 mil daily, fairways will be maintained at 10 mil with semi-rough at 30 mil.

Chris will also be making full use of the BIGGA Support team, which will be preparing bunkers as well as offering general assistance in the mornings and divoting in the evening, in addition to walking with each of the matches during play. The team is also available to assist with any other work, including squeegeeing, if the weather turns nasty.

Changes to the course see amends of varying degrees to 16 of the holes the most dramatic of which was the lengthening of the 17th with the addition of a new, tiered, green.

Other amends include 20 new bunkers being added and 14 removed, six new Championship tees, some mounding around greens and fairways extended.

“About three and a half years ago the club felt that some changes may be beneficial and asked



the R&A if they were in favour and they were keen for us to look into it. We didn't think there was anything wrong with the layout we just want to make sure that the course was up to the task of coping with modern equipment and that bunkers were in the correct place etc."

The club invited architects to submit ideas and Martin Hawtree, who has a long association with the club, was chosen.

"He submitted a presentation for the members and the R&A to vote on and this was approved unanimously without any amends or alterations to the plan," explained Chris.

Sol Golf were then appointed to undertake the work on the recommendation of Martin who said that they had been doing some great work in Ireland among other places.

"Fortunately they came in with a good quote and were available to do the work."

Work began in the winter of 2005 with the green work, which would take the longest time to settle in, being carried out first. Then it was the bunkering. At this stage the Birkdale's home team became involved in the construction.

"To give continuity on the style of the bunkers Sol Golf dug us the holes in the ground and we built and revetted them from there. We also built the new 6th and 10th tees," explained Chris.

The work was finished last winter and there has since been a considerable amount of hand watering and top dressing to ensure the new turf knitted in as well as possible.

"The members seem very happy with the changes, and are delighted to get the contractors off the course and to be playing a full course again.

"I reckon the changes will make the course one or two shots tougher for the members but during The Open the players are now so good at managing their games they can avoid hazards and the scores they shoot will be very much down to the weather and how much wind we have," said Chris.

Indeed any strengthening of the armoury need only be minimal if the scores from recent Opens are studied.

Only Carnoustie in '99 with 290 and Royal St George's in 2003 with 283 have higher winning

scores in recent times than Royal Birkdale's 280 in '98.

Looking forward to the event itself Chris has one wish, other than decent weather in the run-up.

"I want all the talk to be about the golf and the course to be well received. You want to remember the good shots that won the Championship, and that's how it should be. I'd love to be standing on the 18th green beside the new Champion feeling that we've had a quiet week with no hassle for us. I don't think it will happen though," smiled Chris - the smile of a man who has been there before.

Photographs by Alan C Birch, courtesy of Royal Birkdale Golf Club

