



# GOLF ON A HUGE SCALE

*Scott MacCallum visits Woburn where new Course Manager John Clarke has a big job on his hands.*

**Pay a visit to Woburn Golf Club in Bedfordshire and you will immediately be struck by the sheer scale of the operation. As one of the country's leading golf venues, it is centrally located within a unique historical setting of the Woburn Estate; home to the Dukes of Bedford for over 300 years.**

For a start there are three superb championship courses, each with their own individual characteristics. The Duke's, the Duchess' and the Marquess' have hosted prestigious European Tour, Seniors' and Ladies tournaments, as well as an array of top amateur events.

Woburn has witnessed some great golfing moments. Among those who have triumphed at

Woburn are some of the greatest names in golf:- Graham Marsh, Greg Norman, Lee Trevino, Sandy Lyle, Nick Faldo, Seve Ballesteros, Ian Woosnam, Justin Rose, Helen Alfredsson, Patty Sheehan, Liselotte Neumann, Catrin Nilsmark, Laura Davies and Karrie Webb who all have their name on the honours board. In addition, Ryder Cup hero, Ian Poulter, is the Club's Touring Professional.

It's a roll call that would be the envy of many and is all the more remarkable when you consider that the first of the courses, the Duke's, did not open until 1976 and the Marquess' in 2000. The courses are all stunningly beautiful and Woburn Assistant, Michael Cunningham, made the most of that when he won the BIGGA Golf Photography Competition with an excellent picture of the Duke's course last year.

Recently appointed Course Manager John Clarke, joined Woburn in March and was well aware of the scale of task he was taking on. However, it was the annual staff verses members match which really brought home the size of the Woburn Golf Club operation.

"I'd been used to these matches at previous clubs being eight or even twelve on each team, but at Woburn it's 44 a side, course closure with a shotgun start. It's one of the biggest matches of the year," said John, as we sat in Woburn's Morning Room, an excellent restaurant just beside the Club Reception.

The size of the greenkeeping operation would send shivers down the spine of many. John has 38 people who report to him, including Course Attendants, Gardeners, Irrigation Technicians,





Mechanics and three full teams each led by a Head Greenkeeper, and Deputy. Together they look after nearly 700 acres of prime Bedfordshire estate.

“I have maintenance bases, two miles apart and work between the two,” John explained.

“However learning the location of holes proved more difficult,” he joked.

‘If someone said they’d meet me on the 4th of the Duchess’, I’d really have to think about the best way to get there. I felt like a homing pigeon, getting around by following landmarks!’

John learned he’d got the Woburn job just around the time of the Harrogate Week earlier this year and his feet have barely touched the floor since he started work. He took the precaution of warning his friends and family before he started

that they wouldn’t be seeing much of him until winter and brings considerable expertise to Woburn. After attending Myerscough College, he attended Ohio State University and worked as an intern at Winged Foot Golf Club.

“I latterly spent nine years at Marriott Hanbury Manor, the last four as Golf & Estate Manager, and I also looked after the Director of Golf activity for six months so the role at Woburn was a fabulous opportunity,” said John.

“I needed a multiple course venue for my next step and the logistical challenges that this brings, both elements that I really enjoy about the job.”

John took time to chat with each of the Head Greenkeepers and walk their course with them before he took over officially, so had an

opportunity to discuss working practices and agree on maintenance approach and greenkeeping philosophies.

Top of that list was a vigorous aeration programme.

“Almost as soon as I started we scheduled two days of closure on each course in August for aeration,” said John.

“We are well aware of the needs of the business and the August aeration programme was thought through and planned with military precision. However, the greenkeeping team worked hard to ensure that disruption is kept to a minimum and the processes are seen as a positive situation!

“In August, with the school holidays, there isn’t the same level of member rounds or corporate





business and we've got high soil temperatures and great recovery rates. We closed the Marquess' for two days and had total recovery within five days, while members could play the Duke's or the Duchess," continued John.

"When they came back to the Marquess' the following Monday the work was barely apparent, but we'd cored thousands of holes and dressed over 60 tonnes of sand into the greens. We did the same with the other two courses and the hard work has certainly paid off," he added.

"With the right levels of communication we have provided our members with the information necessary to understand our operations and gain an expectation level we can meet and exceed," John explained.

"This means we can make August aeration an annual event, scheduled in the members' fixture list. The courses will benefit greatly and the fact that there are three courses means golfer disruption is kept to a minimum," revealed John, who also added that the work had been done while August experienced six inches of rain!

Another of John's early decisions was to call in agronomist, Robert Laycock who brought in some genuine agronomic back-up.

"He'd been at Woburn about 15 years before and had some very good baseline data from then. We agreed some issues that needed to be tackled quickly, including the aeration and hollow coring and he produced a detailed report including species mix, rooting depths etc which was extremely

useful when discussing maintenance needs with the Golf Club Management."

John has always been extremely strong on communication and his team are always on hand to answer questions.

"We provide regular updates through the club newsletter and we have large plasma screens in the golf shop and reception on which we detail the work we are doing on that particular day together with the reasons why.

We also talk with the membership at every opportunity while we brief Starters, Marshals, Receptionists and everyone in the Pro Shop via e-mail every morning to ensure that we get accurate information out to the members," said John.





Some of the Greenkeeping Team



Course Manager, John Clarke

The Travis Perkins plc Senior Masters was held at the Duke's Course in August. While each of the courses has its own dedicated team, the Duke's had additional resources from the other courses from two weeks before the tournament, which was won by Gordon J Brand.

"We had a team of 28 preparing the Duke's and then in the afternoon they'd go off and prepare their own courses. It was a huge logistical operation but a real buzz for the team," said John, who gets out and involved wherever possible – always respecting the need to be even handed with his time over the three courses.

John is currently busy planning for the year ahead with a focus on a rolling machinery replacement programme. "Within the first three

or four weeks we were reforecasting our spend for the year and producing a 10 year rolling machinery replacement programme. It's only a forecast, but there are certain vehicles which we've used more than expected and have also performed better than expected so with that information to hand I can change our plans."

"We have a huge stock and lots of machines which do one job and we are in the process of trying to reduce the number of machines we carry on our asset register and replace them with machines which will do a variety of jobs.

This includes a rough mower which will also collect leaves for example or rather than have a sweeper, a hoover and a rough mower use something which will cover more than one base."

John is keen to develop the skills and expertise of his Head Greenkeepers and is already exposing them to budgeting. "I've got very good Head Greenkeepers and Deputies on each course and I want to ensure they have technical back-up and business knowledge to succeed."

Gary Leadbetter runs the Marquess' Course; Simon Trotter, the Duke's, and Steve Tompkins the Duchess' but John has been impressed by the entire staff who have shown a desire for hard work and to learn during his six months with the club. It is this hard work with a mix of innovation and sound traditional greenkeeping that John is positive will be key in contributing to the future of Woburn golf club.