

An aerial photograph of the Turnberry Golf Course in Scotland. The image shows a white lighthouse on a grassy cliff overlooking a rocky coastline. The sea is a deep blue, and the surrounding landscape is a mix of green hills and rocky outcrops. The lighthouse is a prominent white structure with a dark top, situated on a small island or headland. The water is calm, reflecting the sky. The overall scene is serene and scenic, capturing the natural beauty of the location.

# What a way *to bow out*

George Brown will end his illustrious greenkeeping career after this year's Open. As Scott MacCallum discovered, he couldn't choose a better way to retire

PHOTOGRAPH: The spectacular surroundings of Turnberry Golf Course, viewed from above  
© Leisurecorp







**There are few more iconic venues in golf than Turnberry. There is the magnificent, and unique, hotel - white with the red roof; the famous links; the white lighthouse, and Ailsa Craig, the giant curling stone-producing rock which stands guard nine miles off the coast but which often looks much closer.**

When they all come into view at the same time you know you are in for a special golfing experience and even more so this month when Turnberry hosts its fourth Open Championship.

Each time The Open has been held in this particular corner of Ayrshire it has been memorable. The Dual in the Sun –, the 1977 classic shootout involving Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus, tops most lists as the best Open ever; while Greg Norman in 1986 and Nick Price in 1994

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George Brown

emerged victorious in two excellent Championships. Expectations are therefore high for 2009.

For one man it will be a particularly poignant occasion as Courses and Estates Manager, George Brown, will have prepared the Ailsa Course for his third Open and the final time, before handing over the day-to-day running of the Greenkeeping team and taking an ambassadorial/consultancy role at the club.

“I’m really looking forward to this year’s Open. In ’86 we were really thrown into the deep end. I’d only taken over the November before, following the death of the then Head Greenkeeper, Russell Brown, and we had an exceptionally young crew without a lot of greenkeeping experience,” explained George, as we sat in the bar of the Turnberry Clubhouse, while, in another room, Open Champion Padraig Harrington was giving interviews to media as part of his sponsorship obligations during a Wilson corporate day.

“In ’94 it was easier as we had the experience of ’86 behind us, and I’ve been lucky that I retained, and I’ll still retain, much of that crew now.

“Between myself and my three Head Greenkeepers, Martin Lothian, Jimmy Johnstone and Tom Cuthill, we’ve got over 100 years of experience at Turnberry while our Mechanic, Jim Campbell, has also been here for more than 20 years. Many of our assistants also have a lot of experience.

“So we’ve all been down this road before. We all know what is expected and they all know what my standards are. Last year I thought Royal Birkdale was in great nick and the year before Carnoustie was absolutely fabulous, so the noose is getting tighter and the bar is getting higher. It’s nice to have experience to draw on to meet those challenges.”

George, who received BIGGA’s Lifetime Achievement Award at Harrogate this January, will have worked for a different Turnberry hotel owner at each of his three Opens and he is delighted that the current owner, Leisurecorp, places so much importance on the golf courses.

Evidence of this is the fact that the Ailsa Course closed to all play in October of last year and has only been open for the odd day occasionally since March.

“It is extremely rare for this to happen and rather nice. We knew we

had a large renovation programme to undertake and we also delayed a few projects because we knew this was coming. It gave us a free hand to get on without golf balls flying at us and all the related health and safety issues.”

The team have certainly made full use of this time and the hard work has resulted in some spectacular results over the non-golf period and the previous year.

All the bunkers have been renovated and revetted while 21 more have been added since previous Turnberry Opens.

“We’ve got 85 now which is well below the likes of Carnoustie and Lytham, but I think they are in the right place. The game is changing and the players would just murder the course if we hadn’t put in a few extra bunkers and tees to challenge them. We don’t want to trick it up or make it unplayable, but it has got to host an Open with the best players in the world and offer them a stiff challenge, otherwise they wouldn’t appreciate it.”

The break for play has allowed the team to carry out some intensive work that wouldn’t have been possible with golfers playing the course.

“Being closed enabled us to carry out aeration and vertidrainage of all the fairways and rough, not just once but three times throughout the winter, as well as working on the compacted areas – walkways, pathways and semi,” said George,



The War Memorial Monument  
© Eric Hepworth



Bunker at the 2nd Fairway: Ailsa  
© Eric Hepworth

who highlighted the cause as the problems of powered trolleys with wide wheels, heavy batteries and big bags, as well as new waterproofs which enable golfers to go out rain or shine.

“I’ve got a powered trolley myself and go out regardless of the weather and the number of rounds, coupled with the extra footfall of caddies we have here just adds to the compaction.”

This year has seen the Turnberry team return to a greenkeeping practice not seen for many years and George for one is delighted to see it.

“We’ve been taking seaweed from the beach and mixing it with our compost and that’s something we used to do but labour costs, and the quality of the ready done mix





**The white lighthouse at dusk**  
© Eric Hepworth  
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**MAIN ABOVE:** The white lighthouse at Turnberry sits on the edge of the course, by the sea, overlooking Ailsa Craig, the giant curling stone-producing rock. © Leisurecorp

**LEFT:** Bunker on the Ailsa course  
© Leisurecorp





meant we stopped doing it. Now with transport and fuel costs going up it is back to being more economical again to take it off the beach and do it ourselves. It's got to be better to use natural local materials."

While never being complacent six weeks out George was confident that everything that could be in place before July 16 had been done.

"We are in the lovely position where we are nitpicking. There is nothing major to be done," he explained.

While work has been on-going on the Ailsa Course a huge multi-million pound refurbishment has been carried out on the hotel and it too has been closed since last October and re-opens in July as Turnberry, A Luxury Collection Resort, Scotland, following completion of the first phase of the renovations in readiness for The Open Championship. It has resulted in a new supply of staff for the golf course.

"With the hotel closed some of the staff came down to give us a helping hand and liked the work so much they asked for a transfer to the greenkeeping team, including three ladies who had worked for housekeeping but who are now with us on a full time basis. We probably had around 25 people at different times and they became extra hands for us doing labouring work, stacking turf or working on the hotel grounds."

The additional staff are just an example of the investment that Leisurecorp has put into Turnberry at a time when most golf clubs are experiencing the opposite.

"We've only ever hand mowed greens at Turnberry for VIP Tournaments, and I had told my bosses that we didn't have the resources to do it, but now that's all changed and we have purchased a fleet of additional machinery well as increasing staffing levels.

## **"Between myself and my three Head Greenkeepers, we've got over 100 years of experience at Turnberry"**

George Brown

We've gone from 34 to 50 full time staff for the three courses and the Hotel grounds," said George.

"Never had that before, and it happens just when you're leaving," he laughed.

Perhaps the most dramatic change to the golf course for this year's Open is the 16th hole, which is now a superb dogleg.

I realised by looking at the stats from previous Opens and major tournaments that the four weakest holes from a scoring perspective were the par-3s 4th and 11th and the 16th and 17th and you don't really want two of your easiest holes to be so close to the end of a round.





**COURSE FEATURE**

**LEFT:** 16th Tee at Ailsa.  
**MAIN LEFT:** 17th Tee heading out towards the village  
**MAIN BELOW:** 16th green, connected by the viaduct.  
**INSET BELOW:** 3rd Tee, divided by the path.  
 © Eric Hepworth  
[www.hepworthgolfphotography.com](http://www.hepworthgolfphotography.com)



“We’d never been able to do much with the par-5 17th - at which Eduardo Romero, incredibly, hit a drive and a sandwedge during the Seniors’ Open two years ago - because the 16th fairway prevented us from pushing the tee back, but we had to do something.

One of our greenkeepers, Gary Bryden, happened to say that it was a pity we couldn’t move the fairway a bit, and that planted the seed.

“I wrote down a list of half a dozen positives and presented them to my boss, and the R&A. They were delighted with the idea so the R&A’s architect, Martin Ebert, came in and Ely Bros carried out the construction work and we did the turfing in-house. 16th fairway moved over to become a dogleg and so the 17th tee was moved back 80 yards.

“The 16th is now one hell of a hole now while the 17th is also more of a par-5,” he said.

Another hole where George’s input has left a mark is the 10th the Championship tee has been moved on to a little rocky outcrop forcing the a drive over the coastline hopefully to the sanctuary of the fairway.

“I’d been wanting to build the tee out there for years and finally I got the go ahead to do it.”

George, who is 70, had earmarked this Open for his retirement some time ago and his successor, Euan Grant.

Euan has previous Open experience having been Head Greenkeeper of The Old Course, St Andrews, in 2005, has been shadowing him for the last few months, doing a good job and taking the pressure of George.

However he is keen to play down the feelings he expects to have when lined up at the prize giving and the new Champion holds the Claret Jug aloft.

“I’m not going to finish up after the final put on Sunday. There is lots of work to do after The Open when the grandstands and the marquees come down and you’ve got to keep an eye on some contractors as they’re not quite so fussy during the dismantling stage.”

“It is a lovely way to bow out though. To have been in the business all these years and then have the Lifetime Achievement Award and the Open Championship in the same year is a massive bonus. To have just one of them is something you’d dream about,” said George.

“I won’t be under Euan’s feet that’s for sure. I’ll play more golf and pop in for a cup of tea with the boys now and then.”

But you can be sure that there will be no prouder man – including the new Champion himself – standing in the Presentation Party on that July Sunday evening.



**GEORGE BROWN**

Ambassador of Turnberry Ailsa Golf Course

Courses and Estates Manager since November 1985

Received BIGGA’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2009