

Rising to the Challenge

Rosie Freeman discusses why stormy seas and torrential rain and winds are no match for the determination of Head Greenkeeper Alick Mackay at Furness Golf Club

As golf club locations go, Furness Golf Club's on the Furness Peninsula on the Cumbrian coast is nothing if not dramatic. And difficult – especially when it comes to grass-growing conditions.

The Walney Island course in Barrow-in-Furness – thought to be the sixth oldest golf club in England – is perched on an exposed tip that sees its west-side thrashed by the Irish Sea and subject as a whole to some of the heaviest rainfall and winds in the country.

So it goes without saying that Head Greenkeeper, Alick Mackay, has a difficult job on his hands producing and maintaining grass cover on this, the most demanding of locations.

Having joined the club five years

ago – when fairways 11 and 12 were almost bare and there was talk of tearing some areas up for returfing – the course's transformation is testament to his perseverance and teamwork with experts at the STRI and Barenbrug.

“This is a very difficult course subject to extreme conditions, We're not a true links course, but we are rugged seaside course and we also get a heck of a lot of rain here. In 2007 we had over 30 inches of rain and last year over 48 inches. So we're at the beck and call of the weather – it dictates everything,” said Alick

He had been consulting with the STRI's Henry Bechelet on a bi-annual basis since 2004. But it was when the pair combined their strengths and expertise with that

of Jayne Leyland, of Barenbrug, in 2007 that proved the turning point.

“We have an STRI visit twice a year. In the past, we've tried different mixtures and had other seed companies involved, but to no avail. The problems got so bad three years ago there was talk of returfing, but myself and the Chairman of Green, Gordon Walker, were adamant we were sticking with seed. That's when we decided to involve Jayne.”

Furness Golf Club is a difficult site and environment – it's subject to relentless rainfall, wind and salt-spray and it was after a lot of grass cover was lost down one particularly sandy end of the course that they turned to Jayne.

“Alick wanted to reseed to get better cover, but we needed to bring



Head Greenkeeper,
Alick Mackay



nised this and so if a mixture isn't working we re-jig it to suit."

In addition, a solution has also been found for Furness' wind-burnt fairways in the form of a fescue mixture containing that delivers superior sward density with excellent drought tolerance, salt tolerance and recovery. A perennial ryegrass mixture has also helped improve Furness' fairways in heavily trafficked areas.

A Tall Fescue has also been used to keep cover on some mounds and problem areas around the course.

Alick is clearly delighted with the improvements to the course. "It's been a lot of hard work – I've been here five years and it's taken all that time to get it right. Including myself, we're only a staff of three maintaining 18 holes and, together with Jayne and Henry's input, we can all be really proud of what we've achieved here."

But the hard work doesn't stop here. Alick continues to work with Jayne on a species exchange trial on a practice green, something that will in the future help him – as well as his fellow greenkeepers trying to achieve grass cover in similarly adverse weather conditions.

Alick's willingness to try new mixtures and cultivars has, in fact, been key to the success of this project.

"Some people sit on the fence and just use traditional mixtures, but it's important to try new things to see what will suit different conditions and climates," he argues. "Personally, I'd like to use just fescues and bents throughout the course, but some of the mixtures have other species in and so this just goes to show that you can't always have what you want.

"You have to look at the alternatives available. The mixtures have been a success and we've now got full grass cover. You have to be open-minded."



Head Greenkeeper, Alick Mackay in the distance

in a specialist who knew about the different grass types and how they would perform in this environment after seeing them perform in trials.

Alick invited Jayne to offer advice on seeding solutions for the more environmentally challenging parts of the golf course. We really appreciated her input," said Henry.

Soil tests conducted when Alick first joined Furness confirmed that fescue and bent grasses were in general best suited to the course's sand and clay soil.

However, the introduction of unique, site-specific species would also prove essential in order to cope with some of the extreme environmental stresses identified throughout the golf course.

"The clay tends to dry out in the summer and the ferocity of the wind

on the sandier parts of the course also makes for difficult conditions," Alick explained.

"There's barely a calm day here! We're also without irrigation on the tees, which is a factor. But the mixtures Jayne came up with have been a success and we now have full coverage."

A prime example of finding a mixture to suit Furness' extreme conditions is the use of a low-input drought- and salt-tolerant BAR 40 on a very exposed, problem tee.

"This particular tee, the 8th tee, is battered by wind, rain and salt-spray – it's very exposed," says Alick.

"Our greens range from being wet to being very dry hence using the different mixtures.

"The weather really does dictate everything for us. Jayne has recog-

For further information on the particular mixes used please contact Jayne Layland at barenbrug.co.uk