

Southern belle

Royal St George's is the most southerly of The Open Championship rota courses and as Scott MacCallum found out a thermal vest is not often a requirement



Royal St George's is by far and away the most southerly-based course on the Open Championship rota and if you'd expected it therefore to experience the hottest, driest weather of all the courses, judging by recent times you'd probably be right.

When it last hosted The Open in 2003 conditions were warm and dry and the course was hard and fast. Six weeks out from this year's Open the same warm, dry conditions exist and, again, hard, fast conditions seem inevitable.

"We've had 21 mm of rain since February and 16 of those came in February itself with only five since March," said Acting Head Greenkeeper, Graham Royden, as we spoke in the team's Mess Room, 58 days ahead of the Championship.

With rough, literally as well as metaphorically, thin on the ground, substantial and consistent rain was needed within the next two weeks to offer any chance of achieving rough 12-18 inches in height.

"That would increase the golfing test and give us definition down the fairways and offer the chance of seeing the tall fescue blowing in the wind. But if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen and the R&A are relaxed at the moment. It looks like we will have hard, fast conditions and the R&A can adjust the pin positions to make the course tougher if need be. The greatest defence we have is the wind and I'm sure it will be a good challenge no matter what," said Graham.

One man who may not be too unhappy if the status quo is maintained is Tiger Woods, whose drive off the 1st tee on the opening day last time round was never seen again... at least not within the five minutes permitted search time!

Graham moved up from Deputy Head Greenkeeper to Acting Head Greenkeeper last October and with his first task being to prepare for an Open Championship the phrase "hitting the ground running" couldn't be any more apt.



MAIN ABOVE: Trying to counter the drought
 INSET ABOVE: St George's uses its namesake flag on their pins
 LEFT: The Maiden's Bunker
 RIGHT: The iconic St George's Starter's Hut

Head Greenkeeper at Royal St George's. Add The Open to the mix and it's just incredible. To be in the same bracket as others who have prepared a course for an Open is a real privilege," said Graham.

"I inherited a good course – the basics are all there and I will keep the continuity that has taken us to where we are going, but I just feel that we could push the bar a little bit higher when it comes to consistency, grass content and textures of the greens."

This goal has been made all the more possible thanks to the work Graham has been doing with the STRI and the new technology now



available, including the Moisture Meter and Firmness Meters.

“It has been a priority for us to keep on top of the moisture levels as consistent as possible, even in these extremely dry conditions. We use the probe and the aim is to keep the moisture in the greens between 15 and 20%. It has been extremely useful and given us an idea as to how different greens react to temperature changes and how much moisture is lost through the course of a day. Some greens dry out quicker than others so the work we have done has brought all the greens in line with each other instead of having one green extremely soft and another extremely hard,” explained Graham, who revealed that only the previous day the readings had shown that the greens were bang on the mark.

The STRI visits once a month to check six test greens while Graham carries out interim testing on a weekly basis himself.

“If they fall below the 15-20 mark we adjust the irrigation accordingly in increments of anything from half a millimetre a time. It means that all our greens and the putting green should be the same. It’s another tool for us to use and this has brought another aspect into greenkeeping which is certainly an interesting one.”

final preparation push began on June 1.

“By then it will have been the final polish. We’ll have the heights of cut down to more or less where we want them and dependant on weather conditions make our final tweaks then.

“We have been working closely with Alistair Beggs, of the STRI, and have been gradually bringing the heights of cut down. Greens will be 3.75 mm by June and we’ll maintain that level until a month before The Open. The aim is to have them running at 10 and a half to 11 feet but we are an exposed site and if it is still dry and windy we won’t want them running at more than 10 and a half as the ball will start oscillating and the last thing we want is a suspension of play.”

Fairway widths were determined some time ago and have changed slightly since 2003 with the 1st, 17th and 18th being widened to counter the complaints of the last Open that the very undulating fairways – they are the most undulating on the Open rota – meant it was difficult to keep the ball on the cut area.

“We thought we would be a little more generous and give the players a bit more room and so they have been widened by five or six yards in places,” said Graham.

Graham was Deputy when the

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Graham Royden



On the construction side 37 bunkers of the 104 bunkers were revetted as part of the last winter programme to add to the 45, which had been done the winter before.

“We had hoped to have everything completed by Christmas but the snow which came early, uncharacteristically for this area, pushed our deadline back until the R&A’s first official visit on February 15.

“The team has been working extremely hard through the winter with long hours and weekend work just to get back on schedule but it has been very easy to motivate the guys with such an important goal to work towards,” he explained.

To protect the course a mat system was introduced at the end of May and with six weeks to go the

last Open was played, and the Open before that when Greg Norman was the Champion he was an Assistant.

Graham’s regular team of 12 will be supplemented by up to a dozen more experienced greenkeepers from the Kent area, together with the 60 strong BIGGA Open Support Team which will prepare and look after the bunkers for the week and generally support the Championship in any way that is asked of it.

“I recently appointed Paul Larsen as my Deputy. He had worked here before but was a Course Manager in Holland and looking to return for family reasons so it’s great to have him back,” explained Graham, who added that the team will be bolstered for the week by two mechanics from John Deere dealer, Godfrey’s;



a couple from John Deere itself, including Howard Storey, and a technician from Hunter Grinders. In all I'll have close to 90 people to call upon."

No-one has more experience of Opens than one member of the staff, Robin Holloway, for whom it will be his fifth Open Championship at Royal St George's.

"His first Open was the 1981 event, won by Bill Rogers, so it is quite an achievement," said Graham.

"The additional support has been wonderful. John Deere and Godfrey's are bringing in six extra hand mowers, tees mowers – we will be hand cutting tees for the first time this time round – four fairway

mowers, two trailers and a hoover collection machine for the range tee. Godfrey's are going to store some of our other machinery to make room."

Royal St George's became the first English course to host The Open when JH Taylor won in 1894 and this year's playing will make it the 14th time the course has played host. Included among its Champions are Harry Vardon (twice); Walter Hagen (twice), Bobby Locke, Bill Rogers, Sandy Lyle and Greg Norman, while the famous Dunlop 65 ball was named in recognition of the stunning second round Henry Cotton shot on his way to winning the 1934 Championship.

One of the most famous holes

is the 4th, which features the giant Maidens bunker, built into a mountainous dune, to the right of the fairway. It's not always in play but when it is it can cause absolute havoc. Enter "Maiden Bunker. Mike Harwood" into YouTube and you'll be given a graphic demonstration of what can happen.

The most significant presentational change this year will be the fact that the fairways will be mown in one direction which will add to the demands on the team.

"For the fairways it has gone from a two man, two machine job to six mowers in a line and we will be cutting from tee to green," revealed Graham, from whom a smile is never far away, no matter the pressures.

In his quieter moments Graham can let his mind wander to around 6pm on Sunday, July 17, when he will be standing in the presentation party as the new Champion is crowned.

"It will be a very proud moment. I've said to the Secretary and the Chairman of Green that I want to be standing there knowing that the team and I have given everything we possibly could in the build up and during the week itself, have had positive feedback and that we have a worthy champion."

Judging by the attention to detail and quality of work that has already been carried out it's a fairly safe bet that Graham and the team will not be left disappointed.



ABOVE: Graham Royden
LEFT: The massive stands are already in place