

One man bands

Working as a lone greenkeeper on a nine-hole course can be a tricky yet rewarding business, as Jim Cook found out, after speaking to Chris O'Dowd, of Cambridge Lakes Golf Club, and Miles Skehan, of Ampleforth College Golf Club, in North Yorkshire

The number of bicycles which can usually be seen propped outside Cambridge Lakes' clubhouse give a sound indication of the ethos of the club; everybody is welcome.

From students cycling down for a round before lectures, to groups of children curious to give the game a go, the team at the club, which lies just one-and-a-half miles south of Cambridge city centre, pride themselves on giving all a warm greeting.

Teamwork is the key at this nine-hole, par-three club and although Chris O'Dowd is the sole greenkeeper, he has the backing of sagacious colleagues to help deliver quality throughout the year.

Chris explained his daily routine: "Normally first thing on a morning I come out, clear the dew, repair pitch marks, check the tees and rake the bunkers while cutting the greens. I usually prepare during the

week and on a weekend we have some school children come in and do some work around the course. Then I'm back in Monday morning getting the course ready for the following weekend. We handle around 30,000 rounds a year here and cater for everybody. Anyone can stroll in and play so we try and make it a bit of a challenge but also fairly generous to any standard of golfer."

Cambridge Lakes' greens now contain around 80% fescue and Chris said he, Club Owner, Bob Barnes, and the rest of the team at the club worked hard to bring them up to standard, with minimal use of nitrogen.

"We limit our use of nitrogen on the greens. Our main supplier is Symbio and we work with them to try and improve the soil biology. We've been on it for about a year now and it's going really well.

"It has reduced the number of times we need to cut the greens as well because you don't get the unnatural growth from the nitrogen. It's more sustainable. We use compost tea once a month to help worn areas recover. It smells a bit funky but does the job."

Chris spoke about the advantages of being the sole greenkeeper: "You get a lot more involvement in what goes on. I make a decision based on what I think and because I play golf myself, I know what needs to be done."

Five-handicapper Chris also happens to be the joint holder of the course record, along with the club's pro, James Burton.

A qualified greenkeeper himself, James has been mentoring Chris since he began working on the course and as a team along with Bob, they are a positive example of how a group can work together at a





club to support the greenkeeper out on the course.

Bob and Chris have undertaken mechanical courses to get themselves up to speed in case of a breakdown.

Chris added: "I like fixing things, it's always good fun and I do a bit of everything, which is something else positive about being the solitary greenkeeper; you get to do all kinds of jobs."

This 'Jack-of-all-trades' mentality must be one of the most important traits for a lone greenkeeper of a nine-hole course and one that Miles Skehan, of Ampleforth College Golf Club, shared.

"It was a bit of a shock to the system when I first started because I wasn't trained on the mechanical side of things, but I found that I had to very quickly learn it," he said.

"I've got to plan every week that something is going to go wrong with the machinery.

"If something doesn't go wrong in the week, I'm ahead of the game.

"I try and use the rule that if something is broken, I fix it straight away. I'm also trying to have a backup for every piece of machinery, for example after I got the new greens mower, I kept the old one in good condition as a reserve in case there is a problem."

He emphasised the importance of planning as a lone greenkeeper and said: "I've learnt a lot of skills

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for maintenance, organising and planning.

"It is vital to plan a structured week. I plan absolutely everything and it is all on my mobile phone and computer; I put nothing on paper."

Miles said these organisational, structure and planning skills originated from a spell at Loch Lomond and his education at Myerscough College. He added his previous job, as manager of a large clothing retailer, also helped.

"I have been out of the game for a little while doing business management and I learnt so much there. I feel as though I've brought my business head into the world of golf and I reckon if I hadn't have done that, I couldn't have run this golf course. In terms of researching cheapest prices, materials, suppliers and having the confidence to go to the committee and the manager of the club and say 'this is why we're doing this'."

This planning helps him stay in

control and if there happens to be a problem, he is in a position to deal with it. Miles saw this as being integral to effective lone greenkeeper golf course management.

"I've tried to make every single part of what I do everyday as efficient as I possibly could. It really is the key. One of the major ways I've gone about this is by managing the golf course culturally rather than using large doses of fertilisers and chemicals and excessive amounts of water.

"I've also introduced large areas of conservation, because they're in out of the way places so there's no point in cutting it when it could be perfect for flora and fauna."

While anybody in this situation will have their own methods for getting the job done, Miles was geared toward using every piece of modern technology available to him.

"Everything I do is digital. It saves time and ensures it's recorded. If I see a problem while driving out on the course, I email myself from



TOP LEFT: Ampleforth College
ABOVE AND MAIN ABOVE:
Cambridge Lakes



my phone as a reminder to sort it when I can. I make myself a list of jobs for the week on my PC, so any issues encountered can be added to the calendar and either resolved myself or reported to the appropriate person.

“I have a parts book up in my workshop, but if I’ve broken down out in the middle of the course, I get my phone out, find the part, get the number and get it dealt with.”

He saw prioritising as an essential ingredient of lone greenkeeping.

“I prioritise jobs using a really simple system of A, B and C on a spreadsheet. The only ones I give A to are health and safety issues that have to be done straight away. B is something that needs doing and C is a job to be done if possible.

I love this system, it works for me and that’s the key of finding some-

thing that works and personalising it to your needs.”

Miles has two other people, including his dad, who are on zero contracted hours, but step in to help out when necessary.

“They are both fantastic because they are both flexible. If I have a machine break down and can’t cut a part of the course I can ask them to do it. It works because I am flexible too.

“I can’t work from 6am-2pm every day because if it rains when I’m due to cut, I’ll go home and come back to get a better finish. If we’ve had a really bad week of weather and been unable to do the jobs at the start of the week, I’ll work 12-hour days or whatever is required to catch up. I couldn’t do this job if I wasn’t flexible.”

As well as this support, he has

the support of the members.

“I’m very lucky on this course because there are a lot of passionate, helpful members who are always willing to come and help. They care about the course and just want to get stuck in.”

Miles highlighted the advantages of lone greenkeeping.

“When I’m out there by myself, I know what I can do, I’m not having to manage other people and I can just get on. Because I’m organised and clear in my planning I feel I couldn’t be any more in control than I am now. The one thing that stops me being in control is the weather.

“I feel I’m very much involved in the golf course because I have to check green-fees as well as maintaining it. Because of this, I’m the face of the course and I feel I’m



Ampleforth College



Ampleforth College

trying to sell it every time someone is playing. If I see someone on green-fees, I'm always trying to sell them membership."

Loving the vocation, as with any greenkeeping job, is a prerequisite for lone greenkeeping.

"I love this course passionately and I can't describe how much I enjoy being out there doing my job. It's never going to be a championship 18-hole golf course with our budget, but it is a great little 9-hole course.

"I work harder now than I've ever

worked in my life and that is vital for the course. It wouldn't survive otherwise. I have to be willing to take on responsibility for everything. If something goes wrong and I need to work until 9pm to fix it then I'll be working until 9pm because it's my responsibility.

That's the sacrifice you've got to make in this business. If there is a problem with anything I deal with it straight away otherwise it will cost money in the long-run.

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Miles Skehan, Ampleforth College

own if you don't love the job. At the same time though, you can't achieve everything and I am by myself. There just aren't enough hours in the day. You want to do everything and make it perfect, but it can't always be. You've got to stop somewhere."

This attitude was common to both solitary greenkeepers featured here. What shone above all the organisation, planning, versatility and humour, was their love for the role they had taken on and the clubs they represented.

Whether it was Chris stealing onto the course in the dead of night to water his parched greens, or Miles labouring over a broken fairway cutter late into the evening, both strove toward achieving a standard of golf course maintenance they could be proud of calling their own.



Miles Skehan



Chris O'Dowd