



Moving on up

Scott MacCallum visits the golf club of a town synonymous with greenkeeping and meets a man who is relishing the opportunity to make an impact on the course





When Harrogate Golf Club's Head Greenkeeper announced his intention to retire, the club started the process of looking for a successor. They advertised widely and pulled together a strong short list of candidates who were then put through an arduous interview process.

The club was delighted with the final decision, they had appointed a man with vast experience with a vision to take the course forward.

That man was Paul Mitchell, but there was no need for a long induction programme, or introductions to the rest of the staff, as Paul had been a member of the club since 1972 and been Deputy Head Greenkeeper since 1985!

"I was really pleased that the club went through the interview process and that I wasn't just handed the job. It meant that I was able to demonstrate that I was going to move the club forward and that I got it on merit. If I'd said that I was happy just to keep it ticking over I certainly wouldn't have got the job," explained Paul, who was 50 when he took up the post.

"During the interview I high-

lighted some of the issues – woodland management, rye grass on the greens, bunker drainage and a thatch problem and explained what I would do to resolve it. I was also told at the time that the aim was to produce a higher quality golf course, but with a reduced budget and I was to operate with one member of staff fewer than before."

Paul had been attending BIGGA training courses over a number of years and felt ready to take the step up to be Head man.

"It felt less of a daunting prospect than when I became Deputy, because then there were guys on the team much older than me, who had been at the club for a long time, and I had to issue them with orders.

"Over the last four or five years I had had a major input on the projects we were doing, as well as in the day to day running of the course, so it wasn't so much of a jump when I got the job."

The first task Paul and the team tackled after he had been appointed was the bunker drainage.

"As with most clubs there was a complaint about the bunkers, and the fact that they were holding water. We checked them all, and if

new drainage was needed we put that in, as well as some upside down turf because we had a problem with stones coming up through the clay. Some of the members thought we bought sand with the stones already in it," joked Paul.

"We completed four holes in that first month which showed everyone what we were capable of," he said, adding that they also cleared some scrubland at the back of the 16th which opened the view up to the next hole.

"Straight away I heard people commenting on the fact that they could see Green staff working out the course. I've always wanted to finish any job we start, because there is nothing worse than a guy

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Paul Mitchell

BELOW: Team is Keith Emery, Deputy Andrew Preston, Paul and Stuart Robertson. Ken Ward who was ill when the photograph was taken

ABOVE: The 4th green in splendid sunlight
INSET RIGHT: Bunker work and TOP RIGHT: Reshaping the bunker on the 9th with new mounds
FAR RIGHT: reshaping upside down turf on the 17th fairway





greens using pure water. Confident that he was applying at the correct rate, and happy in his own mind with the approach, he sprayed all 18 greens, the extra green which is used in the winter, and the putting green.

“At first I didn’t think anything was going to happen but then it kicked in and it has done a great job and it has got rid of 90% of the rye. I’ll look to do it again next September,” said Paul, who made sure the membership was kept informed of what was going to happen through the Green News which he introduced and the noticeboard.

Paul has also been using Primo Maxx on tees and greens and has been delighted with the results.

“We often have club matches in the evening and the player asked us to double cut as they were not playing until 5pm and the greens were a little slower but the Primo has meant that single cutting has been sufficient, again reducing the amount of hours required.

The organic matter issue had been something Paul had been aware of for some time – he could smell it – and he had hollow tined three times in the space of seven months but, by his own admission, only got rid of 5% of the problem at best.

“Henry had it analysed and found that the problem was in the

who plays on a Saturday morning coming back the following Saturday and not seeing any obvious progress having been made.”

Having made his initial splash Paul and his team of four set about the next phase, which was to improve the greens.

“We’d had a ryegrass problem in the greens for many years, while there was also an organic matter issue,” he explained.

“I did some research on Rescue, reading about it and going on BIG-GA’s Bulletin Boards and decided to do a trial on our 4th, which is just

beside our sheds. That proved successful and following discussions with Simon Watson, of Syngenta; Simon Hardcastle, of Scotts; our agronomist, Henry Bechelet, and another local Course Manager, who’d carried out the same work the year before, we agree that we should go ahead. The feeling was that if we didn’t do it now all we’d achieve is putting it off for another year.”

To aid accuracy Paul borrowed a pedestrian sprayer, worked out that he needed 25 litres for 500 square metres and carried out tests on two



top 40mm. He recommended that we use the Graden, which I'd seen at the STRI's Turf Science Life the previous year with Keith Kensett. I'd also had a short demo of it here. I was very impressed."

Paul had changed the top dressing from a fine grain to a medium and the Graden's ability to insert this straight into the soil profile was another plus.

Prior to hiring the Graden in from Kensett Sport, Paul enrolled half a dozen members – including his brother-in-law – to help with the filling of the hopper.

"The whole process took two days including doing the 3rd green twice as it was particularly soft. It was extremely hard work but fortunately the members know me and were prepared to help. We vertidrain and pencil tined ahead of the Graden pass and it took an hour to do each green and followed up with a core harvester and drag matted each green three times. We put temporary greens in place but within two hours the greens were back in play."

And the work has paid off.

"The members have been saying that they have never seen the greens so good. Ideally we should do them again but that will come down to whether the club can afford it," explained Paul, who is also a three time Club Champion.

The club is currently waiting on a report carried out by architect, Jonathan Gaunt, specifically on bunker redesign, but also with a broader remit of creating a template

for the next five to 10 years.

"I said in the Course Policy Document that we should only carry out alterations to the golf course if we bring in a professional architect. Jonathan was here all day and was very positive about some of the things we've done here. I'm looking forward to reading his document."

Paul has been delighted with the support he has had since taking over as Head man.

"I would like to thank Green Chairman, Neil Ormondroyd, the club Council and the members for their encouragement and positive comments since I became Head Greenkeeper. I'd also express my thanks to the rest of the Green-keeping staff whose efforts I greatly appreciate," said Paul, who added that his daughter, Tori, had helped out by working 15 hours a week in the summer and a day a week during the autumn and winter.

Paul has been a BIGGA member since day one of the Association and has taken full advantage of what the Association has to offer.

"I've attended Management Courses and did the Design course at Harrogate about four years ago while, as I've said, I find the Bulletin Boards a great source of information. I posted about a soil moisture meter recently and got over 1000 views and 15 replies which I thought was really good.

"I also contacted Paul Worster about staff appraisals through the Forum and he very kindly sent me some information. It's very rare that I contribute but I do read it a lot."

While many people travel thousands of miles to attend BTME and the Continue to Learn Programme Paul has it much easier. He lives a 10 minute walk away and can always return to his own bed at night.

"The seminars and workshops are excellent and I enjoy nipping into see some of the free ones. The half hour ones can be very good. I'll take the lads for a curry and meet up with people there. You can learn so much just by sitting in a pub having a few beers."

"It comes at a good time of the year and it's the ideal place for it."

Paul may have had to wait to step up to Head man at Harrogate but he is making sure he makes the most of the opportunity.

ABOVE: The 16th Green with the 5th Tee in the background

BELOW: Deputy Andrew Preston clearing 1st green after The Graden

