

Twin Peaks

A man wearing a blue beanie and a black jacket is smiling and looking towards the camera. He has his right hand on his hip. In the background, there is a green golf course with a red flag on a green, a large stone building with a grey roof, and a forested hillside under a clear sky.

Steve Castle travelled to Wales to hear the remarkable story of the Kerry twins and to see the greenkeeping past, present and future of Royal St David's Golf Club





Even on a wet and windswept autumnal morning, the setting for Royal St David's Golf Club in Harlech, north west Wales, was breathtaking. It's a remarkable location – an SSSI within Snowdonia National Park. Harlech Castle loomed high above while Snowdonia itself glowered imposingly from the north.

Roger Kerry has been Head Greenkeeper at the links for over 30 years, and his twin brother John has been Deputy for almost as long. My visit meant I would be able to examine the club's past, present and future because they had already hired Roger's replacement to join the team – Rhys Butler, former Deputy Head Greenkeeper at Aberdovey, a similar links 40 miles along the Welsh coast.

As I negotiated the small level crossing which runs yards from the club's maintenance facility, I was immediately warmly welcomed by the twins, who revealed they will retire on different days! John was born at 9pm on a November evening back in 1948, but Roger delayed his arrival until 3am, also meaning they have different star signs. As well as kinship they have an obvious passion and respect for the industry, plus pride in their decades of work on the course. They are both unassuming, positive characters, and insisted that greenkeeping – and Harlech – is in a far healthier place now than when they began.

Big brother Roger said: "You didn't want to come into greenkeeping in the 1970s. The pay was very poor, there was no education. If you could drive a tractor you were in, that was it."

He joined in 1978, and confessed he faced a real challenge. With little money, an ageing greenkeeping team and soaking wet greens dominated by meadowgrass, the club had temporary greens from 1 November all the way through until a fortnight before Easter. John joined as Deputy in 1980.

Roger continued: "The greens were so boggy even in summer. You would hit a shot onto the 17th green and it would plug in the turf! You had 95% meadowgrass greens with two inches of thatch. The club wouldn't invest. It had a very good name in the forties, but it was living in the past and it wasn't anywhere near the standard anyone wanted – the club, golfers or the greenkeepers. There was no structure, no long-term plan."

One of their first moves was to invite Jim Arthur to the course. With no formal education available, they avidly read his books and articles and knew they had to invite him to Wales – but the club needed convincing his visit was necessary.

Roger said: "The club were concerned that the knowledge Jim would pass on to the team would lead to them demanding higher wages. That was the mentality then. Eventually he came and it was a real eye opener, exactly as

we'd read in his articles. He gave us all sorts of advice and pointers."

John added: "Of course, at that time we didn't have vertidrainers or slitters, so it was a case of hand forking the greens. We gradually got them firmer, so you could play the running game.

"We gradually made progress, ensuring drier and drier surfaces. In drought conditions in the late eighties we decided to let the course 'burn out' for its long-term benefit. Maybe we went over the top occasionally but we were still learning. Sometimes you have to stoop to conquer."

Gradually, golfers started to return with low handicappers enjoying this truly natural links test of golf all year round. In turn, this attracted tournaments. During my visit, the PGA Welsh National Championship was in town, and they've also regularly hosted the Ladies European Tour and the R&A-backed Jacques Leglise Trophy between GB & Ireland's boys' team and their European counterparts (this year won by GB & Ireland.) Naturally, this increased focus and acclaim did present its own challenges.

Roger explained: "We realised a few years ago that the practice ground was too short. Better players with more modern equipment were clearing the ground and landing balls on the 17th fairway. So we moved the 17th fairway further left, making it a tougher hole and extending the practice ground. For

Name: Roger Kerry
Born: Harlech, 23
November 1948
Handicap: 10
Hobbies: Singing,
rugby, golf
Favourite Sports Team:
Harlech Rugby Club

Name: John Kerry
Born: Harlech, 22
November 1948
Handicap: 10
Hobbies: Singing,
rugby, golf
Favourite Sports Team:
Harlech Rugby Club

Name: Rhys Butler
Born: Machynlleth, 31
May 1978
Handicap: 1
Hobbies: Cycling, trail
running, golf
Favourite sports team:
Arsenal

ABOVE: The Team at Harlech:
Rhys Butler, Llion Kerry, Gareth
Evans, Emyr Price, John Kerry,
Roger Kerry. Missing: Owain
Aeron.

MACHINERY LIST

John Deere semi rough
mower
John Deere fairway
mower
Toro 3250 mowers x4
Hardi 300 sprayer
Toro workman x3
Kubota 2410 tractor
Kubota 3250 tractor
Kubota st 30 tractor
Toro flymo x2
Flymo striker x2
Toro pro core 648
Dakota 410 spin
dresser
Amazon flail



The Kerrys are certain of a busy retirement – mostly involving singing and rugby. They even recently recorded a CD – a rousing mixture of English and Welsh choral classics such as ‘Galway Bay’ and ‘Ol’ Man River’. My personal favourite is a stirring cover of ‘Anthem’ from the musical ‘Chess’ which made for the perfect soundtrack as I travelled home. They also perform for residents of nursing homes, and are looking forward to watching more Harlech Rugby Club matches for whom Llion is one of the key players.

the same reason we’ve also moved some of the tees back.”

The Kerrys – and the whole team – are proud to say the greens are now predominantly bent with (roughly) 35% fescue and 5% meadowgrass. Their aeration programme varies – they used to do once a year but aerated three times last year along-side 8mm solid tining, with slitting in October. They oversee around three times a year with two types of fescue.

Roger said: “I feel we’ve taken it to a good level, and after working with Rhys for a few weeks I think he can take it on to another level.”

They’re going to miss it, aren’t they?

They both smiled before John replied: “We are but it’s time to go. The club told us we could carry on if we wanted but it’s decided. After we got them on board with what we were trying to achieve they’ve been very supportive through the years, and that will continue to be the case with Rhys.”

It’s pleasing to note the Kerry name is not disappearing – John’s son Llion is First Assistant Greenkeeper, ensuring a nice historical continuation. He confirmed that the Kerrys have had a harmonious partnership, with any disagreements confined to sarcastic sibling bickering! Also, Assistant Greenkeeper Emyr Price has been at the club even longer than John and Roger as he’s now entering his fortieth year at Harlech.

Ymddeoliad hapus Roger a John.



A ROYAL APPOINTMENT

The man entrusted with filling the Kerrys’ shoes is Rhys Butler. As well as completing his NVQ Level 2 and Level 3 at Northop College, he gained an HNC in Golf Course Management at Elmwood.

This was an online distance learning course which he described as “fantastic - it covered everything I needed to know”. He is on BIGGA’s North Wales Committee (of which Roger Kerry was a founding member) and was awarded an R&A Scholarship during his studies at Elmwood. Aberdovey also twice won an STRI Golf Environment Award under his stewardship.

Rhys joined the team around two months before the Kerrys retired to familiarise himself with the links, and is already beginning to implement his ideas while remaining true to some of their long-term practices. So, why Harlech?

“Agronomically, to inherit a place like this which the Kerrys have put so much work into is probably every greenkeeper’s dream. Considering the hardships they’ve gone through over the years the course is phenomenal. I can’t think of many courses that have managed to change from meadowgrass to the finer grass they have now.

“I played in a Junior Open here when I was about 13 and played in many national championships over the years, so I’ve been aware of this special links for a long time. They hold plenty of tournaments here, and

having worked on BIGGA’s Open Support Team a couple of times I’ve realised that’s what I enjoy the most – preparing the course for a championship and seeing what the elite golfers make of it. The feedback from the golfers is so valuable – and this shapes your thinking ahead of the next tournament.

“It’s now up to me to keep to the same sort of tried and tested methods John and Roger have developed while taking it up a little notch again. It’s not about starting from scratch, it’s building gradually from the excellent work Roger and his team have undertaken. You never stop learning in greenkeeping and that will be true here for me. It really has been a great honour to work alongside two real gentlemen of the greenkeeping industry.”

His first idea was to construct a walkway from the second green to the third tee. It was previously very narrow so it’s been improved – something that’s gone down well with the members.

He added that Castle Stuart is his vision of the ideal modern links – something which is backed by Roger and John. He intends to tweak the bunkers so they have a very rugged, natural appearance – and a big project looming is to remove trees from the sand dunes to reinforce an open, ‘linksy’ feel.

For more, visit the new greenkeeping blog set up by Rhys <http://royalstdavidsgolfinksteam.blogspot.co.uk>