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Is in-house care key to equipment longevity?

In the recent GI survey, you told us you wanted to see machinery in action on BIGGA members' courses. So, we sent James de Haviland to Heythrop Park to discover how they care for their machinery

Although you would not know it from its mature setting and well-established greens and tees, the 7,100 yard golf course at Heythrop Park Resort, near Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire only opened in April 2010.

Part of an estate that covers over 400 acres, the course is maintained with a fleet of Toro mowers. Phil Helmn MG, Estate Manager, was brought in to oversee construction, grow-in and ultimately set up the maintenance structure for the new course.

"Choosing one manufacturer to supply all the mowers was down to more than just securing a good finance deal", he explained. "I wanted to get to know one supplier and supporting dealer well enough

to minimise the number of calls I would have to make when I needed replacement parts or ran into a problem.

"We tried all the key makes and models of mower and settled on Toro because the company offered models that suited our particular needs. This doesn't mean I have ruled out buying from another manufacturer or even that the Toro kit we use is the 'best'. It is just the complete fleet met our needs and we have been extremely pleased with the equipment's dependability and performance in the four years it has been with us."

Of course, a key to reliability is ensuring it's properly maintained, set up and cared for. A critical element is having good in-house workshop facilities and a mechanic

to keep everything in order – which Heythrop have in the shape of Dave Capes. Phil admits this is not something all golf courses could justify but he suggests it makes practical and financial sense.

Toro has honoured the two-year warranty it set out when the mower fleet was purchased, Lely UK having been satisfied that Heythrop could indeed maintain the mowers to a standard that would enable it to meet any warranty claim.

"We purchased additional warranty on all the Toro mowers as it seemed a good idea," Phil says. "As it turned out we had just the odd minor issue. But we wanted to buy peace of mind. As it now stands, the mowers have all completed four years and we hope to keep them for two further years once the HP fees

BELOW: The Toro fleet on delivery in 2009



have been paid off next year.”

Adding that the chances are that the whole fleet will be replaced at the same time, both Phil and Dave suggest the key to continuing to get the best from the mowers is ensuring not just that they are looked after but that their respective workloads are also evened out.

“I keep a close eye on each mower’s hours,” adds Dave. “As an example we run two 5610D fairway mowers. One will be set up to mow the fairways, the other the aprons. As this means one machine will do a lot more hours, I will swap them over to even out the hours over the season.”

All the mowers are given the nicknames of famous golfers - Phil believes operators tend to be more sympathetic to a machine with a name as opposed to just a number.

The current fleet comprises four Toro 1000 pedestrian greens mowers, two Toro 3250 ride on greens mowers, two Toro 3100 sidewinder apron/tees mowers, two 5610 fairway mowers, two Toro 4100 semi rough mowers, four Toro workman MDX utility vehicles, a Toro workman HDX utility vehicle, three Ford tractors, one Charterhouse verti-drainer, Bobcat woodchipper, three Sisis slitters, a Sisis fairway scarifier and a Blec multi seeder.

Stimpmeter and Trueness

All this talk of equipment does not get in the way of delivering what golfers want; consistent greens, defined approaches, manageable roughs and true fairways.

The team have all worked hard to ensure the greens deliver a reliable and consistent playing surface. They adapted an old petrol powered Toro greens mower to carry three GreenTek True-Surface Vibe V rollers to consolidate the greens.

“The greens are both hand and ride-on mown, but we did struggle to come up with consistent green speeds,” says Phil. “Since we have used the greens roller, our stimp-meter values have improved to make the greens a lot faster. The variable degree of vibration delivered by the rolls enables the firming to be altered to suit a specific green.

“The greens are currently running at 11 feet 9 inches. To measure trueness, we simply set up a stimp-meter so a golf ball rolls in the hole, then roll a further ten balls down it. Trueness is simply calculated by how many times the ball drops. We then broadcast the green speed and trueness results on a Powerpoint presentation in the pro shop.”

In-house grinding

At the end of 2012, Dave’s wish to have Bernhard Express Dual cylinder and Anglemaster grinding equipment installed in the workshop was realised, a move he feels will really help in getting the best from the mowers. Towards the end of last season he was forced to turn out mowers with dull cutting units, the rapid growth of the fairways in particular not allowing him the time to send units out for attention by a third party.

“It took me a bit of time to really get to grips with the grinders,” he says. “Now I know what to do for each type of cutting unit and at present I am working out a regrinding cycle for each mower. But I can now sharpen a given mower as soon as it is necessary as opposed to hanging on until I can see a period when it may be in less demand. Sharp blades are obviously critical to a good finish but sharp cylinders and on-cut mowers draw less power. This boosts longevity and economy.”

Is the equipment up to the job?

The list of changes the team at Heythrop would like to see made to its Toro mowers is not a long one. The roughs and fairway models, two rotary Groundsmaster 4100D and two 5140 Reelmaster units, have had net ball guards added to help protect operators when mowing and unable to see a ball being played. A guard option was not offered when the mowers were commissioned.

On the two rotary Groundmaster models, the folding outer section pivots have needed replacing as they get worn in transport. Bigger pivots would help although they are easy to renew.

The Greensmaster 3250 would benefit from offset units - to prevent tyre marks (or ‘tramlining’) when mowing the greens - an easier to access central box and unit for emptying and cleaning. Both these issues are addressed on the current Triflex 3400 models.

The Sidewinder mowers used to mow the tees and aprons were found to scuff when making tight turns. Replacing the turf tyres on one of the two mowers with ribbed semi-smooth alternatives solved the problem. On a service note, the cost of front brake pads for the Workman utility vehicles raised an eyebrow but is countered by other parts, such as wheel bearings, having a very reasonable price tag.



ABOVE: Ribbed tyres have replaced the original turf tyres on one of the Sidewinder mowers. This enables the unit to turn with minimal scuffing when mowing tees



RIGHT: Each mower has its hour, service and repair record listed on this white board. Naming the mowers and applying large decals to their flanks may seem eccentric but it personalises the machines. Operators wash the mowers after use with a high volume hose



BELOW RIGHT: Converting a petrol powered greens mower to operate a triple set of True-Surface variable vibration rate rollers has proved worthwhile, increasing green speed while ensuring they’re consistent

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The 17th century Heythrop House (above) provides an impressive backdrop, the green itself emerging from a tough winter when pictured in mid-April.

The rootzone is made up of 80% sand and 20% fen soil and seeded with a traditional bent and fescue seed mix. Greens are currently running at 90% fescue and 8% bent. A joint overseeding schedule and very labour intensive removal programme is carried out to ensure the remaining 2% rogue grasses that ‘creep in’ over the year don’t stand much of a chance.