

From the ashes

Steve Castle spoke to David Jeffrey, Head Greenkeeper at Machrie Bay Golf Club on the Isle of Arran, who recently experienced every greenkeeper's worst nightmare



Just five days into 2013, the two maintenance facilities at Machrie Bay were destroyed by a ferocious fire. David lost almost all of his equipment plus personal effects – including diaries he had kept detailing work on the course during his 13-year tenure at the picturesque course on the island off the west coast of Scotland.

But David, who has just one other member of staff, has kept the nine-hole course open thanks to sheer determination – and the terrific help he's received from a neighbouring club.

I met David for the first time at BTME 2013 – and he visibly winced as he described the worst moment of his working life.

It was 8.45am on the morning of Saturday 5 January when his wife received a frantic phone call from the Club Secretary of Shiskine Golf

Club, around four miles away from his course.

He recalls: "My wife told me the Secretary had seen smoke coming from the direction of our two sheds and they were both gone. The first thing I had to do was inform my employer of the fire, a terrible thing to have to do. I then got in my car and drove to the course which is about six miles from my house.

"When I got there I could see it was just utter devastation, it was absolutely catastrophic. The sheds were in ruins and I realised I'd basically lost 13 years of work. Everything I'd built up over that time and was proud of had all been reduced to rubble.

"I lost almost everything machinery wise. I had two John Deere machines that were away for servicing so luckily they escaped, but everything else went. It's the small things that you fine tune over the years that are the worst things

to lose. For example I'd set up the scarifier so it was almost perfect for the course.

"The intensity of the fire was incredible, it even bent my stimp-meter and pinch bar."

But the biggest blow was the loss of his collection of paper diaries. Since his arrival at the club in October 1999, he painstakingly kept notes of all work completed on the course – no matter how small – along with information on weather conditions. He updated this twice a day meaning he had created a unique record of life at Machrie Bay.

"If someone asked when we had done some particular work on the course I would be able to pinpoint what we had done almost to the hour, and why we'd done it. It was such an important resource, meant a lot to me and that can never be replaced.

"We've had to hire tractors and borrow everything else from my

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David Jeffrey with the Kinloch Cup (fortunately not stored in the shed!) courtesy of Hamish Bannatyne

friend Stewart Fotheringham at Shiskine Golf Club. He has let me use all sorts of equipment from a greens mower to waterproofs.”

Stewart’s assistance is a fine example of how neighbouring golf clubs can really help each other out in difficult times. He’s been at Shiskine for 30 years and said: “David would have helped me out if I was in the same situation, and it’s a really close island community here. I saw the aftermath of the fire and it was just total devastation, but I’m here to help out any way I could.”

“Obviously he needed machines quickly and I was happy to lend him whatever he needed. Pretty much everything went in the fire, so he even needed small things like waterproofs. It’s just been a terrible time for everyone but David will pull through.”

Remarkably Machrie Bay has remained fully open throughout, and this was extremely important as it hosts competitions on an almost weekly basis throughout the year as well as attracting thousands of visitors. David’s entire green staff consists of himself and a young apprentice who was on holiday at the time of the blaze.

Police investigations are ongoing into the fire and it’s being treated as ‘suspicious’. David added: “We’re waiting on the insurance. You have to make an inventory of everything you had for the loss adjuster, and

for weeks I was waking up in the middle of the night remembering something else which I’d lost.

“It’s also going to be a frustrating wait to get the new sheds in place. The council insist we need full planning permission for a new shed which will take eight weeks, then it’s three weeks to get them here.”

David urges greenkeepers who have personal possessions on site to insure them – he was unfortunate in that he was storing items such as his motorbike on site because he was in the process of building a domestic shed at home.

“I have had to come to terms with the fact that certain things will never be replaced – of course, the diaries are the main thing.

“But we have 340 members, and we’re very busy all year round, particularly in summer where we have so many visitors to the island who want to come and play the course. There’s no way people should have to stop enjoying golf here because of what’s happened, and we were determined no rounds would be lost. It’s a beautiful setting, we call it God’s country up here and we weren’t going to let the fire wreck things.”

It’s been a terrible few months for David and the owners of the Course – Dougarie Estate - but he remains hopeful that Machrie Bay will emerge stronger from this calamitous start to the New Year.



IMAGES OF FIRE DAMAGE, courtesy of Dougarie Estate :
 TOP: remains of a tractor
 MIDDLE: two rotary mowers
 LEFT: Remains of a sprayer, rotary mower and fertiliser spreader





IMAGES ON THIS PAGE OF
MACHARIE BAY: The splendid
first 1st green (above) , 1st tee
(far left) and the 8th hole (left)
Courtesy of Hamish Bannatyne