

# Burghill thinking bang up to date

James de Haviland finds a blend of traditional and contemporary thinking at Burghill Valley Golf Club

**Burghill Valley Golf Club, just outside Hereford, was initially opened as a nine-hole course in 1990 and upgraded to 18 holes in 1992. At 6,255 yards, the par 71 parkland course has evolved admirably, as proved by a 700 plus membership and a full car park midweek.**

Steve Lloyd joined Burghill Valley as assistant greenkeeper in 1997. When the club's Head Greenkeeper emigrated a couple of years later, Steve was promoted to the vacant position – aged just 20. He now heads a team of five and from even a brief look at the course you can tell he is a stickler for detail, with a player's eye for golf.

"We have 20 greens that cover a total of 0.8ha, on average each one covering around 400m<sup>2</sup>", he says. "Where other courses have greens that are perhaps double the size, the challenge here is to hit the greens to get a fair, true and level putt as the reward for a good shot. The course provides accessible play for Junior members, of which

we have 70, whilst still offering a challenge for both our Senior and visiting players."

It does not take long to establish that Steve is a keen golfer as are all the members of the greenkeeping team, trophies on his office windowsill and a set of well-used clubs proving the point. He suggests it is this keenness for the game that has helped evolve how the course is developed and maintained.

"The club is privately owned but it remains very much a member's club," he adds. Our owner now prefers to buy equipment outright and to renew individual items as required. This suits me as my hands are not tied to having to use just one make of mowers and related equipment."

So when the existing fleet of Jacobsen mowers passed its five-year birthday last year, Steve was in the position to approach the course owner with a plan that saw the mowers' cutting units completely refurbished, with just one mower, a well-used Jacobsen AR250 semi-

roughs unit, being replaced by a new Jacobsen AR522.

"The remaining Jacobsen mower tractor units were all in good order so I decided to invest in the cutting units," adds Steve. "The G-Plex III greens mowers deliver the quality of cut we demand, so I saw no need to renew them. This will put us in a better position to invest in other equipment. A new sprayer to replace our 15-year-old Hardi is on our shopping list. I would also like to have our own deep aeration unit. If we had a new fleet of mowers, I would not be able to think so much about other kit."

Those who feel that a team running supposedly 'old' equipment are at the mercy of reliability issues will find Steve responding that they look after the kit they use. The entire team have the mechanical skills to carry out both repairs and maintenance. This ensures they have faith in the dependability of their existing mowers as they all use them and have a hand in caring for them.



“We do not have a one mower, one person policy. We can all operate all items of equipment and we all know how to look after and repair that equipment. Of course there will be occasions when we have an issue that requires outside help, but we have local hydraulics specialists we can call upon if we have pump, hose or motor issues and TH Whites, our

322 greens mowers and I was impressed by their performance. But I am not ready to make the change yet. This is not down to the electric mowers but more that we are used to hydraulic mowers.

If adopting electric drive for the cutting units I would want to have in-depth training to ensure the mowers were operated cor-

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Jacobsen dealer, offer superb technical back-up and parts support.”

Adding that he and the team also do cylinder and bottom blade grinding in-house, it is clear that Steve is the right person to adopt a ‘replace as needed’ equipment regime. But does that also mean he is unlikely to embrace modern developments such as hybrid and full electric mowing equipment?

“I keep a close eye on mower developments. We have had a demonstration of Jacobsen Eclipse

rectly. Hydraulic units will allow the mower to work with cutting units that are starting to get blunt. Electric mowers detect the extra power draw and will start to behave differently. Operators need to know why.”

If this suggests Steve is stuck in his ways that would be wrong too. Hand mowing of the greens was abandoned a few years ago, the ride-on G-Plex III mowers now do all the greens mowing with a Tru-Turf ‘turf iron’ following as required to



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deliver a smooth finish. When hand mowing, Steve did cut at 2.5mm to deliver fast greens in summer but now cuts at 3mm and still delivers a consistent 11 on the Stimpmeter that can be increased to 12 and a half feet if needed.

“If there was one item of kit that I would not be without it is the turf iron,” says Steve. “Our greens are 55 to 60% Poa and have to put up with 45,000 rounds a year. The size of the greens and heavy trafficking, plus our location, mean we will never be able to have a heavy ryegrass and fescue mix on our greens, so a true surface is the key to consistent and reliable speeds. I believe we can only achieve a true surface by using a dedicated tool to roll the greens.”

Similarly, Steve does not see the need to overseed the greens, the self-seeding nature of the dominant Poa varieties and relatively long cut of the greens helping to ensure they remain in good fettle; they have not seen fresh seed in six years. Overseeding is carried out but it restricted to walk-off and high traffic areas.

“I think there is room for different approaches to course management

in the UK,” says Steve. “We adopt a sustainable approach at Burghill Valley because it works as opposed to us seeing it as a requirement. We look after our machinery and use it in the best way to deliver what we want.

We use water, fungicides and fertiliser in a thoughtful way as it just makes sense. We are not trying to force grass varieties that do not thrive locally to grow on the course and this means we can manage the greens accordingly.”

This approach could be described as traditional. But as Steve points out, some of the ideas practiced by his grandfather, with whom he worked back in the mid-90s, such as sweeping the greens and fairways, are now coming back into fashion. Regular sweeping has long been practiced at Burghill.

“We prepare for winter by raising the fairway mowing heights and rolling rather than cutting the greens to keep them smooth,” he says. “We treat the greens with respect and do the same with our equipment. My aim is to ensure the course plays well and that we keep the members are happy. That is what counts.”

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