

Three of a kind



The team at Dunstanburgh Castle: Dan Wilkin, Stuart Imeson, James Thorpe

A three-man team with an average age of just 20 are in charge of one of the north-east's finest links courses. Steve Castle travelled to Northumberland to speak to them and discover how a young Head Greenkeeper deals with learning the trade as well as answering to a committee and members



If you combine the ages of the three greenkeepers at the proprietary Dunstanburgh Castle links, you still haven't reached the traditional retirement age. Stuart Imeson, 22, is Head Greenkeeper and warmly welcomed me as I arrived on a winter's morning with an icy wind sweeping across the course.

He explained that the land is owned by The National Trust and leased to London-based businessman Dr Peter Gilbert who fell in love with the area when on holiday at a young age.

We began with a tour of the James Braid designed course, which stretches alongside Embleton Bay. A true links, many of the holes offer views of the imposing castle, beaches and there are other quirks such as 'pillboxes' dotted around – small concrete guard posts constructed during the Second World War.

They have around 300 members, who continue to play very regularly throughout the winter as the course is dry thanks to its sand base. Various visiting parties and open days also bring in a hefty chunk of the club's revenue.

A public footpath to the beach slices through the 6th fairway, but this does mean a huge boost for clubhouse takings in the summer as holidaymakers flock to the stunning beaches. With the nearest pub around a mile away, Dunstanburgh's smart bar and restaurant does a roaring trade – and we headed there to discuss Stuart's career.

He was born in the small village of Embleton which sits on a hill overlooking the links, and as a golf-mad youngster became a member aged 12. He secured an assistant greenkeeper position aged 16 under the guidance of Simon Olver, who is now Course Manager at Percy Wood Golf & Country Retreat and BIGGA North East Section Secretary.

Stuart, a fanatical Newcastle United supporter, said: "I started out like most greenkeepers do, raking bunkers and doing a bit of strimming, and generally asking lots of questions and getting to know the course.

"When you're starting out you look at the Head Greenkeeper and think "why's he doing that?" or look in the maintenance facility and think "what does that machine do?" and you get hooked on learning more, it's amazing how much there is to it.

"I did that for two years, Simon was moving on to Percy Wood and

put my name forward to the owner for the Head Greenkeeper position when I was 18."

So what did his friends and family say when he told them he had been appointed Head Greenkeeper, despite being so youthful he had only been allowed to drink (legally!) for a matter of months?

"My parents reacted totally differently. My dad told me to go for it but my mam worried that I was too young. In the end I decided I would regret it if I didn't have a go.

"It was hard to get my head around it all when I first became Head Greenkeeper. When you're 18 you're in party mode. I found myself thinking that I shouldn't really be going out because I'm up early the next day!

"I bet Simon wishes he had a pound for every time I rang him to ask for his advice, and to make sure I was doing the right things. Most of the time I was, but I think when you're young you need that confidence boost – the last thing you want to do is damage the place. He would also pop in to see how I was getting on two or three times a month. I know a couple of other greenkeepers in the area and they helped too."

Stuart admits that meeting Dunstanburgh's committee in a formal situation for the first time as head man was daunting.

"No matter what you say to a committee and even when you know you're right, when they're hearing it from a teenager it can fall on deaf ears. If you're asked a question, you have to completely believe in your answer otherwise they just won't believe you. I wasn't the most confident when I started but I am now. That comes with time, and they start listening to you because when they play they can see you're making a good job of maintaining and improving the course. You then start to get mutual respect.

"Of course you're going to get people who maybe don't like the way you do things, but that's the same whether you're 18 years old or 65."

Man management is another skill which Stuart had to develop quickly. He's supported by his Deputy James Thorpe, who's also 22, and Assistant Greenkeeper Dan Wilkin who has just turned 18, but already has two years' experience at Dunstanburgh.

Stuart added: "We've got the right balance at the present time. The three of us go out together and play football together, but they both take on guidance and advice from me and it's working really well. When



KEY MACHINERY

John Deere 2500a
Toro 3250d
John Deere 3235c
Toro 4500d
John Deere Gator HPX
Kubota La5240 with
La854 Loader
McCormick GM50
Amazon Rough Cutter
and Collector
Terra Spike XP
Multi-Core
Charterhouse Top
Dresser
Charterhouse Speed
Seeder





PROFILE

Name: Stuart Imeson
Role: Head
Greenkeeper
Born: Embleton, 14
June 1991
Handicap: 20
Hobbies: Playing and
watching football, golf,
going out
Favourite Sports Team:
Newcastle United



you have a small team you have to all be on the same wavelength or it just doesn't work."

Deputy James is also enjoying the youthful setup. Not only does Stuart benefit from being a Head Greenkeeper at a young age, James does too. James told me: "With us all being young and learning we are all in it together. We have a great passion for progressing Dunstanburgh even further which I feel we are."

Dan is a hugely enthusiastic character, and is even taking up golf for the first time as he's keen to see a golfer's view of the course.

Dan said: "I think it's really important to actually play the course and it will give me a whole new perspective as a greenkeeper."

Stuart studied his Level 2 at Elmwood College and his Level 3 at Newcastle College. During his Level 3 studies he was entered for the TORO Student of the Year Award in 2012.

"When I was put forward for the Award I was amazed, I'd read about it in the magazines but now I was in it, I couldn't wait to give it a shot." After a couple of interviews he managed to secure a place in the final six.

Stuart told me that the competition was a fantastic boost to his career. "I met people that I still keep in touch with to this day, I think greenkeeping is all about networking. I knew it was a massive achievement for me personally to make the final and it gave my

confidence a further boost.”

So, what challenges and responsibilities are posed by maintaining a course on National Trust land?

“Put simply, the National Trust want to see the course in a natural state, not like a field that’s been constantly mown and cut back. There are certain areas of rough that we’re just not allowed to cut.

“It’s difficult at times but it adds to the character of the course. Obviously golfers come up and ask you why you haven’t cut this or that but again, as long as you explain the reasoning behind what you’re doing, you gain their trust and respect.”

The greens are “generally” pure fescue. Stuart said: “Don’t get me wrong, over the last few wet summers a few things crept in. This might partly have been down to my inexperience and not nipping things in the bud early enough, but you learn from it.

“We’ve only recently got a vertid-rainer, and now we’ve started using that the greens cope with dry patch a lot better.

“We’ve also used the sarel roller a few times to combat the dry patch, pricking the surface to get the water through in places.

“Our tees took a hammering last summer because they were so dry so the next big project is to install an automatic watering system into the tees.”

Stuart is hopeful his career progression will be similar to that of Simon’s. His motto is “never be afraid to try things”, and this was proved by his decision to install three new bunkers on the 11th hole.

He explained: “I’ve been to the last four Opens as a fan along with James, and we really liked the look of three bunkers on one part of the course at Royal Lytham & St Annes.

“We thought something similar would work well here, and touch wood they have! We got permission from the National Trust and built new revetted bunkers, two fairway and one greenside. They were in place three months after I’d seen them at The Open.

“My ultimate goal is to keep improving and make this course the best in the area. We do get compared to nearby courses such as Alnmouth Golf Club and Goswick Links which are at a higher standard than ourselves, but their budgets and teams are bigger than ours. Eventually I’d like to be on par with them.

“We’ve got a good setup here and feedback on the course has been positive so I’m really enjoying my time here and learning so much.”



Simon Olver’s view

I also spoke to Simon during my north east visit. He was in an identical situation to Stuart at Dunstanburgh - becoming Head Greenkeeper aged 20 - and I was keen to hear his views on how an enthusiastic teenage assistant greenkeeper adapts to the responsibilities associated with being in charge.

“90% of the time when Stuart called me for advice, he was right but it’s just a case of building confidence. He’s never afraid to try - you’re better off trying and failing than not trying at all.

“You can tell a young greenkeeper everything but if they don’t have the confidence in their ability to actually try things out they won’t progress.

“He went with what he knew and built on it. I know exactly what he’s been through and the sort of questions he would be asking.

“I also think this type of club is better for a young greenkeeper. With less money and a smaller team, I feel it takes a little bit more effort and makes you a better greenkeeper.

“Stuart’s doing a great job and it’s really satisfying to see the effort that I’ve put into him and his career paying off so well.”

