



My Belgian Summer

Steve Hiron, Deputy Head Greenkeeper at Kirtlington Golf Club, recently decided to broaden his horizons and headed to work at a Championship golf course in Belgium – here's his story

Ever since getting into greenkeeping 15 years ago I've always wondered what it would be like to work on a golf course abroad. Since becoming Deputy Head Greenkeeper at Kirtlington five years ago I thought this was unlikely unless I moved permanently to another country.

But when I heard that courses in Europe are always looking for British greenkeepers to work on their courses during the summer months, I asked my club if there was any way of being able to experience this as I knew it would enhance my CV and career.

After thinking this through and finding cover for me they allowed me to do it, so I set up a meeting with Tony Martin from Golf Recruit – the main company who advertise such jobs on the BIGGA website and in Greenkeeper International. I met Tony at BTME 2013, he explained what would happen and answered everything I needed to know. I sent my CV to Tony which he then

circulated to various golf clubs. We then kept in contact until an offer was made from Golf de Pierpoint in Belgium which had an 18 hole championship course and also a small 9 hole course. After researching the course I discovered that it held tournaments including the European Seniors Tour event, so I decided this would be a great place to work and gain experience. I was to start in May. When the time came to head over there I felt nervous, but excited at the same time.

Getting there was so easy, it was a couple of hours drive down to Dover, two hours on the ferry and then another two hours drive through France in to Belgium. I arrived on a Sunday afternoon and was warmly welcomed by Gary Nisbet the General Manager, he showed me to my room which again was sorted out by Golf Recruit. I unpacked and settled in before Gary gave me a detailed tour of the course, clubhouse and hotel. I then got an early night ready to start work the following day.

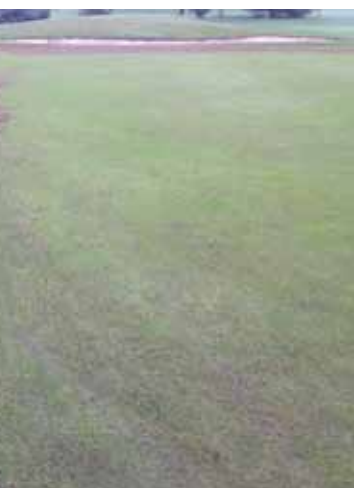
Day one involved meeting the team. Golf de Pierpoint have three full time staff plus one seasonal worker and a Course Manager who looked after three other courses in the area. I was shown around the course by the Head Greenkeeper Pascal and also cut some greens. I then cut greens for the remainder of the week to help me get used to the order of their cutting routines. In my first week a representative from Golf Recruit also came out to see me to check everything was going well. As for the language, a couple of the greenkeepers only spoke French but generally it wasn't a problem as the Course Manager, Pascal and his assistant all spoke English.

The Course Manager would usually call Pascal most mornings and discuss the day's plans, we were then given our jobs for the day. Their summer hours were 6am till 3.30pm. The main difference for me was that at the end of the day, they always ensured their machines were spotless and greased for the next days' use, spending much



Golf Recruit brings together industry specialists from the world of golf and professional business best practice, to deliver the highest level of recruitment services to the golf industry.

For more details, and how to apply to work abroad yourself, contact Tony Martin on 0208 2496062 or email tony.martin@golfrecruit.com



longer on this than I'm used to.

As my time at the club continued I was involved in all sorts of tasks around the 27 holes including their greens maintenance, which involved hollow tining and top dressing. Their machines are pretty similar consisting of a mixture of Toro, John Deere and Ransomes Jacobsen so it didn't take long to get used to them.

The club hosted a couple of big competitions during my time there so I got to see the differences between their general daily set up of the course and tournament set up which was great, this gave me a few new ideas to take back with me to my course. I noticed a lot of similarities between their approach and ours at Kirtlington, and also how they dealt with the conditions. The climate seemed very similar to ours.

They did suffer from some Fusarium on the greens, and sprayed a contact fungicide as soon as they spotted it. They appeared to have no other problems with disease—for example they didn't suffer from red thread due to their regular nitrogen fertiliser programme. They had a lot more meadowgrass and bent grasses on the greens and surrounding areas than I'm used to.

After work I usually just relaxed or played a bit of golf - on Wednes-

days I took part in the manager's nine hole competition, a great way to meet some of the members. The club had a lovely friendly vibe about it all round. At weekends I took the time to go and see Brussels and the site of the Battle of Waterloo. I also visited Bruges and Antwerp, two beautiful cities. These trips allowed me to compare French and Flemish cultures which was extremely interesting.

I also spent a lot of time at weekends with Gary and his family during my summer in Belgium. I can't thank them enough for looking after me - their barbecues were the best! I made a lot of good friends and still keep in contact with them all now. It truly was an amazing work, cultural and life experience which I will never forget. I would encourage any greenkeeper at any stage of their career to look into doing something similar if at all possible.

I would particularly like to thank Tony Martin (Golf Recruit), Gary Nisbet (General Manager Golf de Pierpont), Brett Moggridge (Head Greenkeeper at Kirtlington) and Pam Smith (General Manager at Kirtlington) for making it all happen. If anyone wants to know anything else from my experience please feel free to email me at Hirons07@hotmail.co.uk

