

By Royal appointment



The 143rd Open Championship at Royal Liverpool Golf Club will be Craig Gilholm's second as Links Manager. He told Steve Castle about how he almost left greenkeeping at one point in his career, his 16 years at Muirfield and his thoughts ahead of July's showpiece event, plus his battle with a spot of troublesome moss...



Craig Gilholm has the tidiest office I've ever seen. It's a converted spare bedroom in his bungalow nestled alongside the maintenance facility at Royal Liverpool Golf Club in Hoylake, a seaside town on the Wirral.

In a couple of months' time, the Open Championship and the circus that surrounds it arrive at the course, which was designed by Harry Colt.

He has a tough act to follow. Last July The Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers put on a superb show for the worldwide TV audience complete with stunning weather. But it turns out that Craig is extremely familiar with Muirfield as he spent most of his career at the legendary East Lothian links.

Prior to that, as a golf-obsessed youngster he became a member at Harburn Golf Club in West Lothian before he was a teenager. At 16, he dreamed of becoming a professional golfer but being a few shots shy of the standard required, he accepted a greenkeeping apprenticeship at Harburn combined with studying at Oatridge Agricultural College. He was keen to rejoin his mother's side of the family back in East Lothian, so secured a seasonal position at Muirfield in 1989. Coincidentally, his son Josh has just acquired exactly the same position at the same course.

Craig said: "I started at Muirfield under Chris Whittle who's now at Royal Birkdale. I worked my way up through the ranks, also working on the mechanical side and then became Deputy under Colin Irvine.

"After a few years, the day comes

when you think, 'I need to move on, do my own thing'. A couple of Head Greenkeeper jobs came up and I got nowhere – I didn't even get an interview. I did then turn one role down, then I had some more interviews but with no joy. I started to wonder what I was doing wrong, although I think some things in life are partly down to luck and mine seemed to be out at that time.

"I even considered a change of career as I'd done a bit of landscaping. But watching Colin with the presentation party at the 2002 Open Championship convinced me to stick at it. I love The Open, I've watched it every single year since 1985, and the prospect of being in charge of one of the Open venues was incredible."

2005 proved to be a sad year at Royal Liverpool as the hugely respected then Head Greenkeeper Derek Green died. He was such a part of the fabric of the links that his funeral cortege completed a circuit of the course before he was laid to rest.

Then came the job of finding Derek's successor.

He recalled: "I saw the job advertised, and after coming here for the interview I knew it was the sort of role I was prepared to relocate my young family for. I started in June 2005.

"It's amazing how your brain comes back to life when you get your first Course Manager position – you realise that the education you had 20 years ago is still in there somewhere! When you're Deputy you know that ultimately, everything comes down to the head guy and maybe you get set in your ways.

But when you're the head guy, you walk round the course buzzing with all manner of ideas. You ask questions and challenge things."

Craig admitted that he had to keep most of his more ambitious plans in check initially, knowing The Open was just over a year away.

"During my first six weeks here there was no rain whatsoever, and I began to understand some of the challenges, particularly as the irrigation system was too old and needed replacing.

"The main issue that Derek had been tackling was the area from the tee to the start of the fairway. It was worn out. So he came up with the excellent strategy of putting paths in to reduce the wear and tear.

"The thing I didn't like about the paths was their ash composition. They tended to throw up dust and this was exacerbated in 2006 because it was so dry.

"So I decided to take things in a different direction, probably because of the time I spent at Muirfield where all paths are grass. I wanted a more natural look with meadowgrass, ryegrass and fescue paths, properly irrigated, with traffic flowing round.

"I knew I would have egg on my face if it didn't work. But it has worked and aesthetically it's fantastic. Of course, we wouldn't be where we are now with the paths if it hadn't been for the hard work Derek and the team had put in before I arrived.

"I was really proud to see how fabulous the course looked on TV when we held the British Women's Open in 2012. It was very wet that summer as everyone knows, but



PROFILE

Name: Craig Gilholm
Role: Links Manager
Born: Aberlady, East Lothian, 23 May 1972
Handicap: 6
Favourite Sports
Team: Glasgow Rangers



Craig (left) with Deputy Paul Gardner



the condition was still spot on. I knew that if I could match that condition for The Open I would be made up, and that remains my aim.”

Recently, the ten-strong team led by Craig and his Deputy Paul Gardner (who has been with the club since leaving school 28 years ago) have concentrated on the paths, lengthened a few Championship tees slightly, and altered the definition and size of some of the bunkers.

At last year’s Championships, Craig discussed expectations for the 2014 Open with agronomist Stuart Ormondroyd.

Craig explained: “Some of the readings on the Clegg at Muirfield were 130. I’d been getting 110. I asked him what our target should be. “He said we should be aiming for 115-125, moisture levels of 10-12%, and green speeds of ten and a half.

“Every Friday during summer season we double cut and roll the greens and that gives us a great guide for what the green speed and firmness should be.

“This year we’ve changed to a slightly finer topdressing sand, previously we used 80:20 Fendress. The pure fine sand was deemed more appropriate to achieve the firmness required for the Championship. We’ve applied five dressings so far this year.

“Basically, my attitude here is

that Rome wasn’t built in a day. I want to turn the greens from a bent meadowgrass to a fescue bent for a more traditional surface, but that’s not going to happen overnight. Yorkshire Fog and moss are asking for a stake in the low traffic areas of the greens but we’re fighting hard against them, they won’t give up!”

This leads to an animated discussion about the current bane of Craig’s life - silver moss, which despite the team’s best efforts has caused issues as discussed.

“It could be there because of our low nitrogen input, because we’re quite sandy, because the greens are large...in the summer you can’t see the moss on the greens, but I know it’s there because there’s a very slight difference in the softness in different areas of the green.

“There’s no thatch, just moss. It drives you mad! I use the same levels of Nitrogen as Colin at Muirfield but while they’re on top of it I’ve not quite cracked it yet. I’ve thrown everything at it. I’ve scarified, verticut, I topdress, hollow core, put Mogeton on it – everything I’ve learnt in my training on a links course to control moss. But greenkeeping’s constantly a learning process.”

Craig ensures he always walks the course at least once a week to get a feel for how it’s progressing and spot any potential issues.

He added: “I walk down the middle, the way I would like to play

it – although in reality I’m lucky to play four holes like that! I put myself in the shoes of a visiting golfer or member so I’ve constantly got a feel for how the course is progressing.

“Inevitably, a management role comes with some paperwork but I try and keep that to a minimum. I like working and being on the course, watching the guys at work and keeping them on their toes, I’m very much a working greenkeeper.

“Five years ago I said that by the time the 2014 Open came around, I would almost have my vision in place and we are nearly there. A couple of wet summers followed by a couple of dry summers can scupper your plans, as anybody knows, but I’m reasonably happy. I don’t think any greenkeeper is ever 100% happy!”

What advice would he give an aspiring young greenkeeper?

“Respect your boss, and all the guys you work with – be a team player. There are too many people in all walks of life who don’t work hard enough. When I take someone on here, I’m not looking for a superstar. I’m looking for a decent, respectful greenkeeper who wants to learn.”

With that, after a hugely enjoyable and engrossing chat, Craig heads back on to the links. Here’s to a successful tournament, and a well-deserved ovation for Craig and his team during the presentations on 20 July.

As well as the BIGGA Open Support Team, who are excitedly preparing to head to Hoylake, around 30 other greenkeepers from across the UK and the world will assist Craig and his team. They are sourced from local courses, the other Open venues, several from Canada and Sweden as well as four R&A scholars.