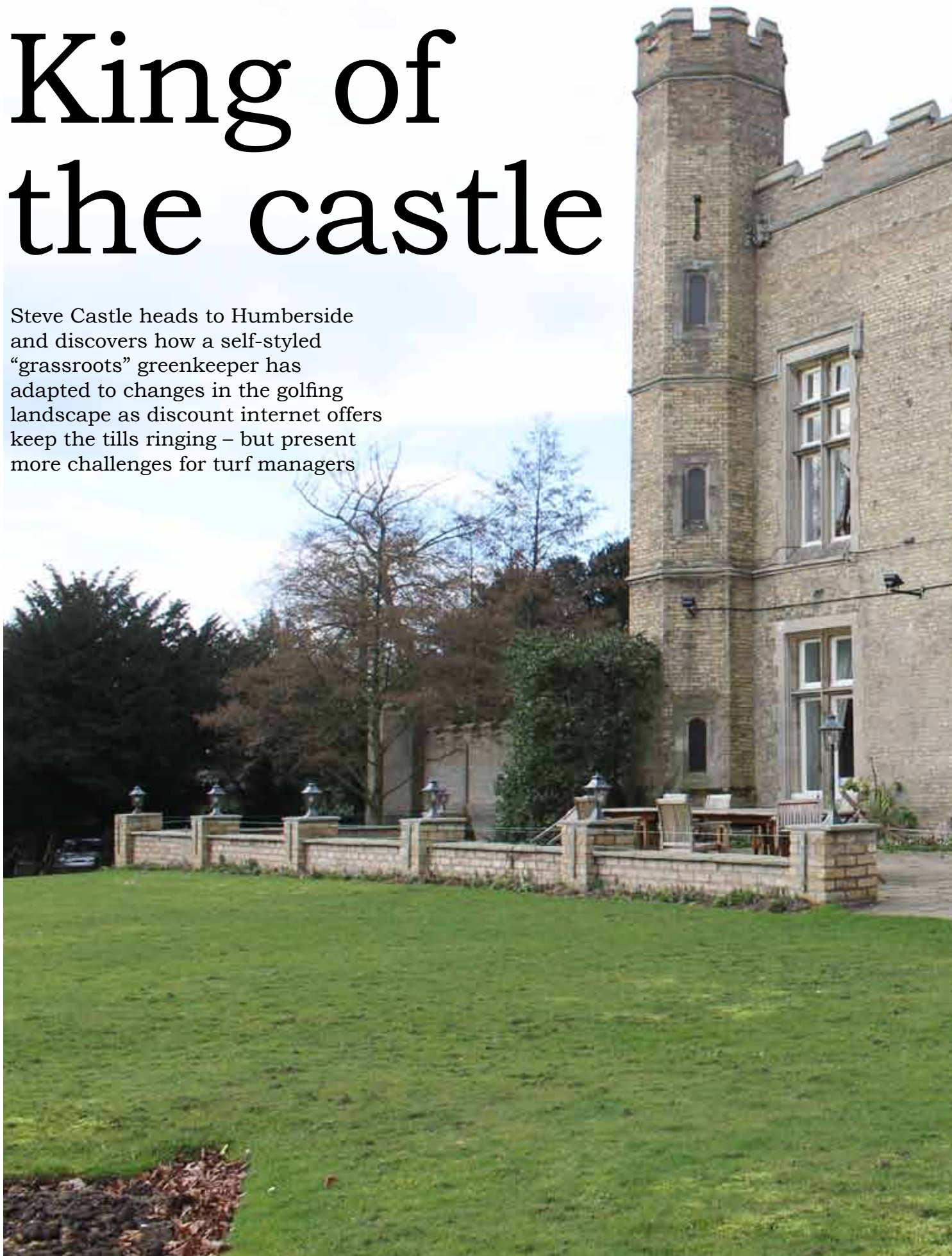


King of the castle

Steve Castle heads to Humberside and discovers how a self-styled “grassroots” greenkeeper has adapted to changes in the golfing landscape as discount internet offers keep the tills ringing – but present more challenges for turf managers



**PROFILE**

Name: Les Nelson LCGI
Role: Head Greenkeeper
Born: 22 April 1949
Handicap: 19
Hobbies: Looking after grandchildren, playing golf
Favourite Sports Team: Selby Town FC

It's fair to say that, unlike many of the courses I visit, golf is just one of the attractions at Cave Castle rather than the primary concern. The complex is in the small market town of South Cave around 15 miles from Hull, and boasts a striking hotel with 70 bedrooms. It hosts weddings and conferences plus an on-site health club – but there's also an 18-hole parkland golf course to maintain.

When Head Greenkeeper Les Nelson joined Cave Castle in 1996, the club did not own a single buggy. Now they have 23, and the main reason behind this is the key to the facility's hugely increased popularity. In the last decade or so they started offering golf breaks, and the upturn in business has largely been due to 'word of mouth' recommendations as well as the introduction of a website.

Les explained: "The phrase 'golf break' can mean a huge group or just two people and we offer a selection of special offers and tailored packages. We really look after the golf breaks, they're met personally when they arrive and receive a gift. They must account for a large percentage of our income now, and two staff are employed to deal with enquiries and the organisation of the breaks from start to finish. The online traffic has been fantastic for us and it's amazing how much it's transformed the finances here over the last few years."

But how do the club's members (around 300 of them) react to this?

"We give the members the first two hours' tee times then the golf breaks usually tee off around 10am. At times, the course is so busy it's absolutely ridiculous. Members go out and play as soon as it's light – we've had members teeing off for a medal at 5am in the summer. They pick their cards up the night before then play the next morning.

"We do have a good size team – six including myself – to deal with this. The visitors are actually easier to work around than members because they have specific tee times and we know exactly how many of them are playing. Sometimes it's so busy you intend to cut all the fairways and only get nine done – so we do the other nine first thing the next day."

It's obvious that this must have created serious challenges for the team, and has hugely shaped their strategy – particularly regarding their attitude to the rough.

Les explained: "We're so busy we don't have time for people to be searching for golf balls. You tend to find that visitors will accept losing a ball out of bounds or in one of our ponds, but they won't accept losing a ball in the rough. So, we cut all the rough at an inch and a half and over time the new trees we recently planted will replace the rough as a hazard. Golf is a business and we need to get people round the course.

"I'm a grassroots greenkeeper at a grassroots course. I used to work at Boothferry Golf Club, a local municipal, and the course was in poor condition when I joined. When I came here it was exactly the same, in fact members were walking out and joining other clubs.

"Slowly but surely we've pulled it round, and the success of the golf breaks shows this. When I came here I said to the greenkeeping team 'my aim is that something improves every week'. It didn't matter how small it was. The plan was to put right what we already had before launching into new projects."

The course is partly on a sandbase and partly on clay, with limestone close to the surface. The greens are 50/50 meadowgrass and fescue. The team have thrown themselves into a series of projects – from tree planting to define several fairways to constructing paths to ensure the increasing number of buggy users were able to negotiate the course safely, and with minimum damage to the turf. What sort of budget has Les had to work with?

"We don't have a budget as such. I don't get every piece of machinery I ask for, but I get a straight answer – yes or no, and if it's no I get a list of reasons why in five minutes. There is no greens committee so it's just me, the owner Mel Hogarth and his son Steve who discuss things.

"That also means that decisions about the course – such as whether we close or not during a spell of bad weather – rest solely with me and I feel that's how it should be. If we have to ban buggies, even in the middle of summer which we've had to do over the last few years with these wet summers we've had, it's my call. The absence of buggies may mean a golf break does not wish to come but we always try and accommodate them at some other time. It's all for the benefit of the course.

"If we have a group of 20 coming on a golf break, and one of them needs to use a buggy, we can make the odd exception. But this does make it a bit of a tough juggling act because if the members see a visitor

KEY MACHINERY

- 2 John Deere Fairway Mowers
- 2 Toro Mowers (1 Sidewinder)
- 2 John Deere Zero Turns
- 2 John Deere Greens Mowers
- Toro Spiker
- 2 John Deere Tractors
- 1 Sprayer
- 1 John Deere Gator

out on a buggy, they wonder why they can't have a buggy!

"Of course, the other way of looking at it is that's quite a big responsibility to have on your shoulders. But whatever I decide I've been backed to the hilt.

"For example, we don't have temporaries because I've never liked them. So we put two holes on each green in winter. We put one on the front of the green, maybe just a foot on, and one at the back. So when it's frosty we use the one that's only a foot on."

Les learned his trade at Oakdale Golf Club under Oakdale's former Head Greenkeeper Walter Heeles. Les showed me his 'Trainee's Log Book' – basically the 1978 version of CPD! It recorded in step by step fashion how he was schooled in everything from using tractors to pest control with Walter's signature alongside each module when it had been completed.

He went on to take his Level 2 and Level 3 in Sportsturf in the eighties, obtained his Level 4 in the nineties, and is now preparing to retire. So, what's changed during his time in greenkeeping?

"There's definitely more pressure. Golfers are more demanding and play all year round. I think a major reason for that is the quality of clothing. You can buy good quality, waterproof winter gear now which you couldn't years ago.

"On the other side of the coin, it's easier to provide quality surfaces all year round now because machinery has improved so much. For example, the old trail gang mowers were horrible machines compared to modern day machinery.

"There is still a lot to do here, and hopefully someone new can take the course on to the next level and fulfil its potential. I'll miss greenkeeping, but I'm ready for retirement!"

ABOVE RIGHT: One of the new paths created for the increased use of buggies

BELOW: the 1978 version of CPD!

