



“The reality was stark – the club could not afford to hire both a course manager and a general manager”



with a brief telephone conversation with the Head Greenkeeper Paul Hopkins, who has over 25 years of experience.

“We discuss work past and present having previously agreed a monthly plan. I generally tour the course every two weeks although I try to squeeze in the odd game of golf with a member or board director to measure course playability. This works well at Ashburnham since much of the work is routine.

“After checking any messages, the real work begins - dealing with any club issues, banking, tee sheet bookings...and much more! Key member concerns tend to be depth

of sand in the bunkers, length of rough, greens speed and the weather.

“It is also worth noting that since very few members have low handicaps, the course is set up more for their enjoyment as opposed to ‘tournament’ condition. However, Ashburnham is a true links course with an emphasis on firm, smooth turf that encourages the ‘running’ game.”

The Course: Past and Present

Huw continued: “When I first started in 2007, we ran the course with six staff including myself.



Now we're running with five, which includes an apprentice greenkeeper. We have reduced our operational costs by £10k without having any real negative impact on the course. A detailed review of all expenditure was carried out including wages, overtime and materials purchased and highlighted areas where justified savings could take place.

"All equipment is now owned outright after a five year lease deal ended in 2012. We are due to replace much of the fleet in 2015, giving the club two years free of any leasing costs.

"Since 2007, only two machines have been purchased but we have sufficient equipment to maintain an 18 hole links course.

"All main equipment servicing and repairs are carried out by an external contractor, but on-site which has proved to be more cost effective as opposed to being sent to a dealer.

"Our irrigation system consists of class 'C' PVC pipe in 6 metre lengths which is coming to the end of its useful life and will need to be replaced in the future.

"In terms of maintenance, it is true that I now have a different view being a club manager as to what and when key cultural practices take place.

"The main difference now is that there is no disturbance to the putting surfaces between early March and mid-October.

"We do not hollow core, only deep tine out of season and spike or sarel roll during the summer. Top dressing is limited to the older methods of heavier applications at either end of the season, followed by over-seeding with straight fescue.

"Mowing height remains at 3mm during the summer with regular 'ironing' of the greens. Nutrient input is very low and hasn't really changed in six years, using monthly applications of Farmura Porthcawl and Revolution wetting agent.

"Although this works well on the natural links course here at Ashburnham, it may not be as appropriate on shaded or 'heavier' inland courses."

Huw is confident these changes have had no negative effects on course performance. The work has been limited to 'off-season', and since his feeding program is minimal and typical of many links, he can make this change without negatively impacting the course.

Summary

Huw concluded: "Since becoming a club manager, my priorities are different. Being 'sustainable' is more about profit and loss and less about growing fescues and controlling organic matter content. When you are a club manager, you have a different perspective than when managing the golf course.

"It's all about impact on the business. For us that means minimal

disturbance to the playing surfaces during the main season.

"My main challenges are no longer chafer grubs and badger damage but membership numbers, revenue and cash flow."

Finally, I asked Huw about any advice he had to others who may wish to follow his lead.

"Being flexible, helpful in accommodating golfers' needs, looking forward not back, being open minded and enthusiastic are all attributes that spring to mind.

"Learn new skills by enrolling on business management courses. Both the GCMA and CMAE run management courses to help prepare for club management. If I can do it, anyone can."

about the author



Laurence Pithie MG

With 42 years in the golf industry, Laurence has used his experience and knowledge to produce a number of recent 'case study' articles.

Laurence is grateful to Huw Morgan and Ashburnham GC for their help and input in producing this article.





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From Belarus with love

When David MacIndoe was made redundant from his Course Manager role he became a Lawn & Sportsground Consultant – and one of his first challenges was a role as grow-in consultant for Belarus’s first ever golf course. It’s a nation where temperatures can drop to minus 20 with snow cover for a third of the year – and here he tells GI how he battled language barriers, snow mold and missing home



April 28

After securing a visa I've started work on a three month grow-in the quite lovely city of Minsk.

I checked out the course with Maris Gullans, owner of Modo Golf, who have built many courses in Eastern Europe, along with Head Greenkeeper Andrey and our interpreter.

It's good to get an immediate feel for what appears to be a first-class project and golf course.

Heather, pine and silver birch trees dominate the site, a real heathland piece of land that in time and with good management could be as good as the best heathland courses that we take for granted in the UK.

The back nine is under construction, but the front nine which was constructed last year and sown towards the latter part of the year look like a desert. I've got a feeling this is not going to be straightforward...

The greens sown with Jacklin bent grass did not survive the winter - how could they after having snow cover for 119 days? 30 days under snow can mean problems, 60 days under snow means you have to accept plant loss, after 90 days expect the worst. So 119 days with a one-week thaw in the middle of January means desiccation to 90% of plant cover.

Tees, fairways and roughs sown with a bent/fescue mix survived better, grass cover is around 70%

although some areas are thin, weak and stressed but at least I have something to work with. Snow mold scars cover all areas of the course, but it's now actually lovely and sunny with temperatures of 20 to 25 degrees.

Day two features full overseeding of the front nine greens to be followed by the front nine tees. The fairways need tender loving care in the shape of plenty of irrigation and a quick application of the only fertiliser available - an agricultural balanced with a lovely prill of approximately 3mm. Great on fairways not quite so good on greens - but my first rule is be adaptable and get on with it. So the first hectic week has ended with greens and tees on the front nine all reseeded and fertilised.



May 13

My second week has been another marathon of 12 hour days, but very enjoyable and with temperatures now approaching 30 degrees, work on the irrigation system is the main focus. It's quite a major system with extremely deep wells and three big Grundfos pumps. On the nine seeded holes, nine hole academy course and driving range they have constantly been putting out 800 cubic metres a day - I hope they can cope when 18 holes are up and running.

May 27

I saw my second snake on the course - black with yellow mark-

ings. I didn't hang around to take a photo! The hot weather resulted in thunderstorms so it has taken a lot of pressure off the constant irrigation.

We are now cutting all the front nine greens and tees and will cut all the fairways on the front nine this week too.

The 17th and 18th greens which we sowed on May 3 received their first cut today at 8mm, another leap forward, and the 10th, 11th and 12th have now all been sown and grass is starting to appear.

May 30

I have secured a second visa until the end of June - via an interesting overnight train journey where

I shared an open carriage with three ladies! I'd like to say to my wife Sharon that it was all totally innocent and they even shared some food with me...

It's good to be back at the course - things are settling down well. We've established a better routine and I feel much more in control.

We now have 14 holes seeded and are cutting holes 1 to 13 plus the 18th hole and the 17th green.

We have received a consignment of 1.2 tonnes of green grade fertiliser - florinid 16-28-5 with iron and magnesium - not my first choice but hey, any port in a storm!

The greens have responded well compared to the agricultural products used previously so, for all you cynics out there, it really does pay to



use the best products...sometimes!

The last remaining holes have also been seeded. The construction crew are now concentrating on washout area so they remain very busy especially after a storm brought six inches of rain in 12 hours (although there is no official rain gauge, just a bottle of coke with the top cut off).

June 14

The whole golf course is now seeded and is all mine to grow-in, happy days!

There's much excitement as the John Deere fleet of new machinery started to arrive. I believe my good friend Howard Storey, Product Marketing Manager for JD Europe and Middle East, put in a considerable amount of effort to break new ground for JD in this part of the world.

So construction is finished but of course there are still difficulties in the world of growing turf! The constructors are now driving all over the young grass to clean out, prepare and sand all 80 bunkers.

This is sadly typical in the life of a greenkeeper - we nurture and spoil the young grass and try to present it at the highest levels but as we are all too well aware, nothing ever goes as smoothly as it should.

June 24

We're now cutting all eighteen greens. The snow mold scars have been eradicated and the reseeded greens are all performing well.

As one problem is fixed, however, more arrive - this time in the shape of the construction crew and nature itself.

Temperatures have soared into the middle 30s alongside humidity of 90% resulting in some dampening off and Rhiztonia brown spot showing on several of the greens, particularly the newer back nine. Getting chemicals is a problem here. I asked that they be stocked in my first week on the course but I'm still waiting. It could be an interesting week ahead!

Only the fairways of 14 to 17 are still waiting to grow enough for cutting and then the whole course will progress as one entity.

The Club have approached me to continue to advise them on a full time basis for the rest of the season and to prepare the course for the opening, expected in late August. They would also like me to help the Head Greenkeeper train and develop the new staff. I'm considering my options.

I like the people who are all friendly and helpful - although the language is very difficult - I like the

“I know most greenkeepers will understand the ethos of my course, my baby! However I miss my family and friends and Belarus is difficult to get to”

terrain and the character of the course and it would be great to see it reach its full potential.

I know most greenkeepers will understand the ethos of my course, my baby! However I miss my family and friends and Belarus is a difficult place to get to.

July 10

The course is now progressing well, but not without a few expected and unexpected disasters!

I expected washouts, disease and a few minor problems, but I didn't expect the pump house to be hit by lightning, destroying the phase box and 24 decoders.

A new box was found in Sweden and will be sent to us immediately. Fantastic - until we realised it was being sent by boat - and we're 1000km from the sea!

Have you ever tried irrigating 700 plus heads by hand in 15 hours of 30C of heat?

It's been a tough time. but as we

Keep an eye on an upcoming edition of GI as David updates us on the latest from Belarus...



near the end of my contract there's a great deal of satisfaction that despite major setbacks with irrigation, fertiliser, delays and washouts galore we are in a position to hand over the golf course from Modo and their partners GTP services and myself.

July 10

I've decided to continue as full-time advisor consultant, trainer, cook and bottle washer till the end of the season.

Sorry to all you guys who were seeking my experience - I am out of circulation till November!

Now I have to assemble a brand new greenkeeping team - no point in advertising for experienced greenkeepers in a country with zero golf courses! So it is back to the wall time once again.

July 16

Started training three new staff this morning. No time to waste as the contractor finishes in four days. So no raking bunkers, flymowing, divoting as normal for new staff - they're straight in at the deep end cutting greens!

What fun we had, me with no Russian and them with no English - isn't sign language a wonderful tool? We started at 9.25am and had all 18 greens cut by 5pm. I did have some minor problems getting the Health and Safety message across before cutting could begin.

But that evening I sent three very tired but (I think) satisfied budding course maintenance crew home happy that they had conquered and mastered that wild animal known as the greens mower!

Tees and greens surrounds quickly followed and in less than a week they are becoming quite proficient. Next task will be fairways and roughs and flymowing, but will leave that for the moment.

July 24

I am out of here! Contract with Modo Golf finished - I'm reasonably happy with how the grow-in has progressed although some of the last seeded fairways have suffered with the heavy rain showers and once again, the Modo Golf team are repairing severe washouts.

I am flying into London to meet my family. I think it is true absence does makes the heart fonder, I'm looking forward to seeing them all.

I officially start with MGC on 1 August to get the course in top condition for opening on 1 September.



David (left) with architect Paul Thomas, interpreter Gilep and Head Greenkeeper Andrey

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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 400m²", 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.