



“We do not have a one mower, one person policy. We can all operate all items of equipment and we all know how to look after and repair that equipment. Of course there will be occasions when we have an issue that requires outside help, but we have local hydraulics specialists we can call upon if we have pump, hose or motor issues and TH Whites, our

322 greens mowers and I was impressed by their performance. But I am not ready to make the change yet. This is not down to the electric mowers but more that we are used to hydraulic mowers.

If adopting electric drive for the cutting units I would want to have in-depth training to ensure the mowers were operated cor-

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Jacobsen dealer, offer superb technical back-up and parts support.”

Adding that he and the team also do cylinder and bottom blade grinding in-house, it is clear that Steve is the right person to adopt a ‘replace as needed’ equipment regime. But does that also mean he is unlikely to embrace modern developments such as hybrid and full electric mowing equipment?

“I keep a close eye on mower developments. We have had a demonstration of Jacobsen Eclipse

rectly. Hydraulic units will allow the mower to work with cutting units that are starting to get blunt. Electric mowers detect the extra power draw and will start to behave differently. Operators need to know why.”

If this suggests Steve is stuck in his ways that would be wrong too. Hand mowing of the greens was abandoned a few years ago, the ride-on G-Plex III mowers now do all the greens mowing with a Tru-Turf ‘turf iron’ following as required to



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deliver a smooth finish. When hand mowing, Steve did cut at 2.5mm to deliver fast greens in summer but now cuts at 3mm and still delivers a consistent 11 on the Stimpmeter that can be increased to 12 and a half feet if needed.

"If there was one item of kit that I would not be without it is the turf iron," says Steve. "Our greens are 55 to 60% Poa and have to put up with 45,000 rounds a year. The size of the greens and heavy trafficking, plus our location, mean we will never be able to have a heavy ryegrass and fescue mix on our greens, so a true surface is the key to consistent and reliable speeds. I believe we can only achieve a true surface by using a dedicated tool to roll the greens."

Similarly, Steve does not see the need to overseed the greens, the self-seeding nature of the dominant Poa varieties and relatively long cut of the greens helping to ensure they remain in good fettle; they have not seen fresh seed in six years. Overseeding is carried out but it restricted to walk-off and high traffic areas.

"I think there is room for different approaches to course management

in the UK," says Steve. "We adopt a sustainable approach at Burghill Valley because it works as opposed to us seeing it as a requirement. We look after our machinery and use it in the best way to deliver what we want.

We use water, fungicides and fertiliser in a thoughtful way as it just makes sense. We are not trying to force grass varieties that do not thrive locally to grow on the course and this means we can manage the greens accordingly."

This approach could be described as traditional. But as Steve points out, some of the ideas practiced by his grandfather, with whom he worked back in the mid-90s, such as sweeping the greens and fairways, are now coming back into fashion. Regular sweeping has long been practiced at Burghill.

"We prepare for winter by raising the fairway mowing heights and rolling rather than cutting the greens to keep them smooth," he says. "We treat the greens with respect and do the same with our equipment. My aim is to ensure the course plays well and that we keep the members are happy. That is what counts."

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A Royal course where nature is king

A scenic view of a golf course with rolling green hills, a winding path, and a large bush in the foreground under a blue sky.

Neville Johnson travels to Lancashire to discover how Chris Whittle, Course Manager at Royal Birkdale, deals with the unique conservation challenges posed by the area





“As far as rare and treasured plants are concerned, Chris has a sensitivity map showing where these are to be found and creates ‘no go areas’ which are roped off in big tournaments to make sure they are fully protected”

Royal Birkdale’s special charm is that there are countless parts of the 95ha site close to the Lancashire coast where it doesn’t seem like a golf course at all, so natural are the surroundings. It is dune land par excellence.

Towards the sea are frontal dunes, constantly moved and reshaped by the weather. On the course itself are dozens and dozens of fixed – or grey – dunes covered by natural marram grasses that sway in the wind. This has to be an inspiring backdrop for any golfer.

Many in the world of golf regard it as the ultimate links course, challenging yet fair to all those who play it, and perfect for spectator vantage points. It is firmly one of the elite UK courses chosen regularly to host the Open Championship. Nine have been held here since it first staged the event in 1954.

A lot of trust is required to keep Royal Birkdale close to the top of the Open course ‘leaderboard’, and Chris Whittle, Birkdale’s Course Manager for 19 years, is understandably proud that that the eyes of the world are so often on his course.

What pleases him so much, as well as looking after such a challenging test of golfing skill, is the

trust placed in him to conserve its wonderful natural heritage. He gets enormous job satisfaction – as do the nine full-time staff in the club’s maintenance department – in two quite contrasting ways.

Royal Birkdale is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Less than 25 per cent of the course area is what Chris describes as managed grass. Much of the rest is precious environmentally, both in terms of wildlife and plant life, and looking after it comes within the course care remit every bit as much as the greens, tees and fairways.

The site is renowned for sand lizards, great crested newts and natterjack toads and it’s important to maintain an environment that allows them to thrive. Southern and northern marsh orchids, petalwort, Baltic Rush and varieties of Helleborine are among the rare plants on the course. Chris and his team are as much custodians of nature as they are professional greenkeepers.

“It’s a privilege to have such a wonderful golf course in such natural surroundings,” says Chris, who is by instinct a conservationist. “As a links we have all of nature’s advantages and disadvantages. It’s important to preserve the balance and that’s quite a challenge.”

Conservation is most definitely a serious business at Royal Birkdale. Chris and other club representatives meet at least a couple of times each year with other coastal landowners and tenants in the region – National Trust properties, council amenities and other golf courses – to exchange information on conservation matters, including formal records of wildlife and plant life numbers and movements.

This collaborative exercise helps to identify trends and make decisions about any action that might be necessary.

The club also works closely with Natural England, the Environment Agency and the British Trust for Nature Conservation Volunteers to see that nature rightly remains a priority across the site.

No two holes on the Royal Birkdale course are alike in terms of the surrounding landscape. Looking left and right you will see quite different flora, but what’s adjacent to the managed areas is there because it is native to the land.

As far as rare and treasured plants are concerned, Chris has a sensitivity map showing where these are to be found and creates ‘no go areas’ which are roped off in big tournaments to make sure they are fully protected.



INSET TOP: Dog Rose
INSET ABOVE: Marsh Orchid



There has been a big effort over the years to increase the emphasis on the managed areas of the course back to natural fine grasses – fescues, and bents in particular. There is still some meadow grass, but Chris says they are winning the battle. Reseeding and round the year management encouraging the wanted grasses is gradually tipping the scales in his favour.

“The way you cut, the way you irrigate, the way you feed and top-dress: they all contribute to this,” says Chris.

“We are a natural golf course and we resist introducing anything that shouldn’t be there. Fescues should naturally be the dominant grass because of the dry sandy conditions, but your grass will always reflect what nature throws at it, so a wet summer may change things and bring in coarser grasses quite naturally. You have to go with that to a certain extent.”

Chris says it is essential to define the holes on a course like Birkdale and it is the roughs that do this magnificently here. Generally he leaves the rough to its own devices.

“Nature put that grass there because it should be there, and that’s how we see it,” he says. “We might do an occasional bit of trimming or scarifying if a particular

area becomes too difficult, but otherwise we leave well alone. We don’t cut the rough at all. We just mow the semi-rough next to the fairways and we might widen this from five to 10 metres to suit a particular tournament need.”

There’s no getting away from it, Royal Birkdale is quite an awkward course to look after and machinery is all-important. Chris’s equipment policy is quite specific, and always has been.

He buys each item of equipment on its merits to do a particular job for him – there’s no compromise.

He trusts his judgement and it’s served him well, both here at Birkdale and before that at Muirfield where for six years he was also Course Manager, presiding over the 1992 Open.

He also trusts his greenkeepers to give the right judgement on each individual piece of equipment. Out on the course and back at the maintenance department it is John Deere machines that dominate, supplied and supported by local dealer Turner Groundscare of Tarvin, near Chester, and that’s because Chris trusts them to do the right job on the course.

All of the triplex mowers at Royal Birkdale are now John Deere 2500E electric hybrids and Chris is a big

fan of them. These machines are central to the mowing programme at Birkdale and are used for all tees and aprons work, and alternately with John Deere 220 Series walk-behind mowers on the greens.

Chris believes that it is the quality of cut on the greens, tees and aprons that helps to define each hole so emphatically.

“I want machines that don’t let me down. Mine don’t, and the peace of mind I get from this is priceless,” says Chris.

“The worry in the back of your mind that you always had using a triplex on greens and tees was that the hydraulics might leak,” he says.

“Using the 2500 E-Cut mowers means that’s all in the past. It was one of the main reasons for buying them, and I liked the way John Deere responded to the perpetual concern we course managers had about leakages by coming up with the hybrid design.

“I think we actually bought one of the first ones in the UK, and there’s no chance we’d ever go back now.

“I’ve never worked on anything but links courses. I wouldn’t be happy at a parkland, however good it was, and I count myself very lucky to be in charge of Royal Birkdale.”

Q&A

Robert Jack, Area Sales Manager from Dennis Mowers, answers questions on setting up your mower and explains the basics



Professional mower performance depends on the correct set-up and adjustment procedures. Although there are design variations in cutting units, most require the same basic procedures.

Accurate height of cut tools including a setting bar and proper instructions are essential for setting up a cutting unit. As a leading British manufacturer of innovative professional grounds maintenance equipment, Dennis helps greenkeepers from around the world to create their ultimate natural turf surface.

Why is a sharp, clean cut so important?

Playability and presentation. A well-maintained course stands out. Cutting or tearing with a blunt cylinder will result in bruising the grass leaf. This will lead to the tip where the tear has taken place turning white - not a pretty sight. Disease can attack this area causing further problems and cost to remedy the situation.

Why is this poor cut happening?

Either a poorly set mower or wear in the cylinder or bottom blade...or cylinder bearing failure. All of these will need attention.

Why is height of cut important?

Setting the height of cut is critical for a number of reasons,

particularly on the greens. If the grass is too long then the accuracy and the speed of the ball is affected.

How do I set height of cut?

Setting the height of cut is generally done using a height setting bar. This is usually supplied by the manufacturer or can be obtained from your dealer. The bar should be long enough to go under both front and rear rollers. There is a threaded bolt with a locking nut that goes through the setting bar. The desired mowing height is measured from the top of the bar to the underside of the bolt head.

On a pedestrian mower the bar is placed under the two rollers with the mower tipped back. The underside of the bolt head is placed on the top of the bottom blade. The mowing height is adjusted by raising and lowering the front roller as the rear roller is fixed. When the front roller rests on the top of the setting bar the roller can be locked in position. Both sides must be set to be certain of the same height of cut across the full working width. If this is not the case then a step in the cut will be obvious for all to see.

Why do greenkeepers use cassette system cylinder mowers?

It is very much down to the individual greenkeeper's preference whether they use a dedicated cylinder mower or a cassette system. Cassette systems offer flexibility and a single

power unit solution for many daily maintenance tasks such as scarifying, verticutting and brushing. Additional cassettes can be purchased to enhance the system and also cassette machines reduce the maintenance costs because there is only one engine and drive system to service. The system also takes up less space in the club's maintenance facility which can often be an issue.

Does the amount of blades on a cylinder affect the quality of cut?

Generally speaking the more blades in the cylinder, the finer the cut will be. Other factors need to be considered such as the diameter of the cylinder and the speed of rotation. When selecting a cylinder, frequency of mowing must be a major factor as the more blades you have in a cylinder the less grass is taken off on each cut.

Can I fit a new bottom blade myself?

In order to achieve a good quality of cut, firstly the cylinder will need to be sharp. This can only be realistically achieved with the use of a cylinder grinder. The bottom blade must be a mirror image of the cylinder. If it isn't then you will not be able to set the cylinder on cut properly or it will not stay on cut for long. The chances are the two surfaces will have to be set too tightly to achieve a cut which would result in excessive wear.



For further information or a no obligation demonstration, please contact Dennis 01332 824 777 or visit www.dennisuk.com. For more news, reviews and insightful views, you can follow Dennis on Twitter @DennisMowers and like the company's Facebook page - www.facebook.com/DennisMowersUK. You can also view the latest Dennis videos by visiting www.youtube.com/DennisMowers.



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Sprayer test to pinpoint accurate application

A national sprayer testing scheme is set to be introduced across the amenity and landscape sectors within the next three years. Whilst the testing process will impose a further cost on the industry, the benefit of more accurate application through a well-maintained sprayer and avoiding further problems will more than recoup the charge, believes Syngenta Application Specialist, Tom Robinson.

When the Agricultural Engineers Association instigated the Sprayer Test Scheme for farm sprayers in 1997, a quarter of the sprayers tested failed during the first two-year round of inspections. Of those, a third (33%) failed with worn sprayer nozzles, which made accurate application impossible to maintain.

“New nozzles are capable of delivering very high levels of accuracy, but they are a wearing part like any other piece of machinery,” according to Tom. “They do need to be replaced when worn, to maintain the desired high levels of accuracy and consistency.”

“Furthermore, changing the nozzles now enables operators to take advantage of the latest developments in nozzle technology for turf applications, he added.

A new set of Syngenta XC Turf Nozzles cost less than 15% of the value of a typical fungicide and fertiliser tank mix, so the expense would be quickly recouped from more accurate application alone – along with other significant improvements in application technique and reduced spray drift to achieve enhanced results.

“We are frequently asked how

often a set of nozzles should be changed – but the answer depends largely on how much they are used and what is applied. If they were only used for fungicides and growth regulators across a golf course, for example, the nozzles would last an age; but some fertilisers and particularly trace elements can be far more abrasive and lead to high levels of wear if applied regularly.”

Syngenta best advice is to regularly check the consistency of nozzle output across the full spray boom, using a measuring cylinder to collect and record the output from each individual nozzle for 30 seconds; work out the average and if any nozzle deviates from this figure by more than 5%, the whole set is unacceptably worn and all the nozzles should be replaced.

Nozzles that are working consistently can easily be calibrated to