

A three-man team with an average age of just 20 are in charge of one of the north-east's finest links courses. Steve Castle travelled to Northumberland to speak to them and discover how a young Head Greenkeeper deals with learning the trade as well as answering to a committee and members



If you combine the ages of the three greenkeepers at the proprietary Dunstanburgh Castle links, you still haven't reached the traditional retirement age. Stuart Imeson, 22, is Head Greenkeeper and warmly welcomed me as I arrived on a winter's morning with an icy wind sweeping across the course.

He explained that the land is owned by The National Trust and leased to London-based businessman Dr Peter Gilbert who fell in love with the area when on holiday at a young age.

We began with a tour of the James Braid designed course, which stretches alongside Embleton Bay. A true links, many of the holes offer views of the imposing castle, beaches and there are other quirks such as 'pillboxes' dotted around – small concrete guard posts constructed during the Second World War.

They have around 300 members, who continue to play very regularly throughout the winter as the course is dry thanks to its sand base. Various visiting parties and open days also bring in a hefty chunk of the club's revenue.

A public footpath to the beach slices through the 6th fairway, but this does mean a huge boost for clubhouse takings in the summer as holidaymakers flock to the stunning beaches. With the nearest pub around a mile away, Dunstanburgh's smart bar and restaurant does a roaring trade – and we headed there to discuss Stuart's career.

He was born in the small village of Embleton which sits on a hill overlooking the links, and as a golf-mad youngster became a member aged 12. He secured an assistant greenkeeper position aged 16 under the guidance of Simon Olver, who is now Course Manager at Percy Wood Golf & Country Retreat and BIGGA North East Section Secretary.

Stuart, a fanatical Newcastle United supporter, said: "I started out like most greenkeepers do, raking bunkers and doing a bit of strimming, and generally asking lots of questions and getting to know the course.

"When you're starting out you look at the Head Greenkeeper and think "why's he doing that?" or look in the maintenance facility and think "what does that machine do?" and you get hooked on learning more, it's amazing how much there is to it.

"I did that for two years, Simon was moving on to Percy Wood and

put my name forward to the owner for the Head Greenkeeper position when I was 18."

So what did his friends and family say when he told them he had been appointed Head Greenkeeper, despite being so youthful he had only been allowed to drink (legally!) for a matter of months?

"My parents reacted totally differently. My dad told me to go for it but my mam worried that I was too young. In the end I decided I would regret it if I didn't have a go.

"It was hard to get my head around it all when I first became Head Greenkeeper. When you're 18 you're in party mode. I found myself thinking that I shouldn't really be going out because I'm up early the next day!

"I bet Simon wishes he had a pound for every time I rang him to ask for his advice, and to make sure I was doing the right things. Most of the time I was, but I think when you're young you need that confidence boost – the last thing you want to do is damage the place. He would also pop in to see how I was getting on two or three times a month. I know a couple of other greenkeepers in the area and they helped too."

Stuart admits that meeting Dunstanburgh's committee in a formal situation for the first time as head man was daunting.

"No matter what you say to a committee and even when you know you're right, when they're hearing it from a teenager it can fall on deaf ears. If you're asked a question, you have to completely believe in your answer otherwise they just won't believe you. I wasn't the most confident when I started but I am now. That comes with time, and they start listening to you because when they play they can see you're making a good job of maintaining and improving the course. You then start to get mutual respect.

"Of course you're going to get people who maybe don't like the way you do things, but that's the same whether you're 18 years old or 65."

Man management is another skill which Stuart had to develop quickly. He's supported by his Deputy James Thorpe, who's also 22, and Assistant Greenkeeper Dan Wilkin who has just turned 18, but already has two years' experience at Dunstanburgh.

Stuart added: "We've got the right balance at the present time. The three of us go out together and play football together, but they both take on guidance and advice from me and it's working really well. When



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McCormick GM50
Amazon Rough Cutter
and Collector
Terra Spike XP
Multi-Core
Charterhouse Top
Dresser
Charterhouse Speed
Seeder





PROFILE
Name: Stuart Imeson
Role: Head
Greenkeeper
Born: Embleton, 14
June 1991
Handicap: 20
Hobbies: Playing and
watching football, golf,
going out
Favourite Sports Team:
Newcastle United



you have a small team you have to all be on the same wavelength or it just doesn't work."

Deputy James is also enjoying the youthful setup. Not only does Stuart benefit from being a Head Greenkeeper at a young age, James does too. James told me: "With us all being young and learning we are all in it together. We have a great passion for progressing Dunstanburgh even further which I feel we are."

Dan is a hugely enthusiastic character, and is even taking up golf for the first time as he's keen to see a golfer's view of the course.

Dan said: "I think it's really important to actually play the course and it will give me a whole new perspective as a greenkeeper."

Stuart studied his Level 2 at Elmwood College and his Level 3 at Newcastle College. During his Level 3 studies he was entered for the TORO Student of the Year Award in 2012.

"When I was put forward for the Award I was amazed, I'd read about it in the magazines but now I was in it, I couldn't wait to give it a shot." After a couple of interviews he managed to secure a place in the final six.

Stuart told me that the competition was a fantastic boost to his career. "I met people that I still keep in touch with to this day, I think greenkeeping is all about networking. I knew it was a massive achievement for me personally to make the final and it gave my

confidence a further boost.”

So, what challenges and responsibilities are posed by maintaining a course on National Trust land?

“Put simply, the National Trust want to see the course in a natural state, not like a field that’s been constantly mown and cut back. There are certain areas of rough that we’re just not allowed to cut.

“It’s difficult at times but it adds to the character of the course. Obviously golfers come up and ask you why you haven’t cut this or that but again, as long as you explain the reasoning behind what you’re doing, you gain their trust and respect.”

The greens are “generally” pure fescue. Stuart said: “Don’t get me wrong, over the last few wet summers a few things crept in. This might partly have been down to my inexperience and not nipping things in the bud early enough, but you learn from it.

“We’ve only recently got a vertid-rainer, and now we’ve started using that the greens cope with dry patch a lot better.

“We’ve also used the sarel roller a few times to combat the dry patch, pricking the surface to get the water through in places.

“Our tees took a hammering last summer because they were so dry so the next big project is to install an automatic watering system into the tees.”

Stuart is hopeful his career progression will be similar to that of Simon’s. His motto is “never be afraid to try things”, and this was proved by his decision to install three new bunkers on the 11th hole.

He explained: “I’ve been to the last four Opens as a fan along with James, and we really liked the look of three bunkers on one part of the course at Royal Lytham & St Annes.

“We thought something similar would work well here, and touch wood they have! We got permission from the National Trust and built new revetted bunkers, two fairway and one greenside. They were in place three months after I’d seen them at The Open.

“My ultimate goal is to keep improving and make this course the best in the area. We do get compared to nearby courses such as Alnmouth Golf Club and Goswick Links which are at a higher standard than ourselves, but their budgets and teams are bigger than ours. Eventually I’d like to be on par with them.

“We’ve got a good setup here and feedback on the course has been positive so I’m really enjoying my time here and learning so much.”



Simon Olver’s view

I also spoke to Simon during my north east visit. He was in an identical situation to Stuart at Dunstanburgh - becoming Head Greenkeeper aged 20 - and I was keen to hear his views on how an enthusiastic teenage assistant greenkeeper adapts to the responsibilities associated with being in charge.

“90% of the time when Stuart called me for advice, he was right but it’s just a case of building confidence. He’s never afraid to try - you’re better off trying and failing than not trying at all.

“You can tell a young greenkeeper everything but if they don’t have the confidence in their ability to actually try things out they won’t progress.

“He went with what he knew and built on it. I know exactly what he’s been through and the sort of questions he would be asking.

“I also think this type of club is better for a young greenkeeper. With less money and a smaller team, I feel it takes a little bit more effort and makes you a better greenkeeper.

“Stuart’s doing a great job and it’s really satisfying to see the effort that I’ve put into him and his career paying off so well.”



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The firing online

Joanne Moseley, Professional Support Lawyer from Irwin Mitchell solicitors, gives crucial legal advice on how you can avoid social media mistakes that can get you into hot water

The rise of Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn has been little short of phenomenal – but there are many potential pitfalls and serious consequences for misuse. This is particularly relevant for greenkeepers who often use smartphones on their courses.

Smartphone technology makes it easy to post or respond to comments in hardly more time than it takes the user to formulate their thoughts.

There have been countless examples of individuals using social media to post embarrassing pictures (of themselves and others),

make inflammatory remarks, or to moan about their boss, job or customers. The problem of course is that unlike sounding off to your mates down the pub, posting comments via social media creates a permanent record and once something has been sent, the writer has no control over who else sees it.

Employees are entitled to a private life and to hold opinions that their employers may not agree with. However, that does not necessarily mean that you have an absolute right to say what you like and if you overstep the mark, you are likely to be disciplined and could even be sacked.

To make sure that one wrong tweet or Facebook posting does not cost you your job, follow these simple steps:

1 Find out whether your company has a social media policy

Now is the time to dig out the paperwork you received when you started your job - and read it. If your employer has a social media policy it might be incorporated into your employee handbook, or issued as a standalone policy, or referenced in the company's disciplinary policy. If you can't find these documents, ask your boss where to find them.

Images: ©iStock.com

If your employer has a policy which spells out what its staff can and cannot say about the business it can discipline, and in serious cases dismiss staff, for posting negative comments or images about its business.

It will often also restrict what you can say about its customers or clients, or about your colleagues in the organisation.

The policy will usually also contain a list of online behaviour considered to be so serious, any breach will constitute gross misconduct. It is important that you understand these, because if you commit gross misconduct, your employer will have the right to dismiss you without notice.

Even if your employer does not have a specific policy, it can still discipline you if what you have posted has caused damage to its reputation or brand. This might occur if a number of clients complain about what you have written.

2 Don't assume that what you post outside of work is ok

Clearly when you are at work, you are expected to concentrate on doing your job, not keeping up with your friends on Facebook or complaining online about your job. However, that does not mean that you are free to say whatever you want to in your own time, even if you are using your own phone or tablet.

Any restrictions contained in your employer's social media policy are likely to apply to what you say, not when you say it, or whose equipment you use to say it. For example, you are likely to be disciplined for circulating pictures of the dirty kitchen in your golf club or joking about how badly one of the members has behaved, even if you do this while you are out of the country on holiday.

If you want to be able to post or tweet frivolous comments with your friends, don't list your job or identify your employer in your public profile or reference it in any of your posts. Keep work and your social life and interests completely separate.

3 Assume that everything you say online will be made public

This is a good habit to get into. Before pressing 'send', ask yourself whether you would be happy for your parents, boss or partner to read your post. If the answer is no, or probably not, don't send it.

This applies even if you have locked down your privacy settings or are contributing to a closed forum. Social media providers

often redesign their sites and this can result in your profile becoming public by default. Plus, even if your settings are marked as private, there is little you can do to stop your comments being forwarded on and seen by others.

You may also want to think twice before inviting colleagues or your boss to become friends online as it is easy to forget that you have done so and post comments that they may find offensive or inappropriate.

Imagine the horror of the worker who posted "OMG I hate my job" and made reference to her boss being a pervert. She received a prompt online response from her boss, reminding her that she had added him as a friend and that she should not bother to come into work again.

Even if your manager is not included as a recipient to the post, they might still find out about it. Some policies actually require their staff to notify a manager if they see something that could pose a reputational risk to the business. You may therefore find that the colleague you trust has sent a screenshot or forwarded your message to your boss.

4 Don't stir up controversy or bad mouth your employer, its clients, or other members of staff

Everyone has bad days, but it is very unwise to vent online and post negative comments about your job. Even if your boss decides not to take disciplinary action against you, it

is the sort of information they are likely to remember when you apply for promotion or ask for a pay rise.

You will be expected to comply with your workplace diversity or equal opportunity policies which aim to protect workers from discrimination, harassment and bullying.

If you spread workplace gossip, or circulate discriminatory jokes amongst your colleagues, you may cause offence, even if that was not your intention.

Similarly, if you make personal remarks about a colleague you may also be accused of cyber bullying and/or discrimination.

Your employer has a duty to investigate these types of allegations and to take action to ensure that the behaviour stops - which may include demoting or moving you.

Plus, you may become personally liable for unlawful discrimination and may have to pay substantial compensation to the co-worker you have upset.

5 Don't use social media to raise workplace disputes

If you have a genuine grievance, raise it formally in accordance with your employer's policy otherwise you may find that you are disciplined for breaching company policy.

If you follow these simple guidelines and exercise good judgment, you should not go far wrong and can still enjoy all the many benefits of engaging with social networks.

about the author



Jo is a qualified solicitor and has worked as a senior dedicated employment professional support lawyer for several national and international law firms.

She provides guidance on complex areas of law, helps to deliver the team's national seminar programme and liaises with key client relationship partners to deliver client focused alerts, training and updates.





Greenkeeping by numbers

Joe Buckley, First Assistant Greenkeeper at Queenwood Golf Club, discusses GDD, phenology and how science can help turf managers even during record breaking wet winters

Years of research and the development of technology has resulted in modern day greenkeeping relying more and more on science and numbers. Some see this as a negative, suggesting that the true art of greenkeeping is being forgotten and that the modern day head man needs to be more of a scientist than a greenkeeper.

While this is true to a certain extent, I don't see it as a bad thing. The many facts and figures that can

be found help us in doing our jobs and achieving the expectations that seem to be raised year after year.

Specific targets should be established when planning maintenance and renovations with clear objectives put in place and communicated to golfers and committee members well in advance. Online research and developments in modern day techniques now provide us with various data and methods of testing which help in the planning of the aforementioned renovations.

I have always been a firm believer in the saying 'what gets measured, gets managed' and having statistics at hand not only gives a base to work from and track progress, it gives peace of mind that what you are doing is right. It also helps when confronted by the pro, greens chairman or a member having a bad round of golf because you have something tangible to present them with. Being able to add facts and statistics to a response when criticised about conditions makes for a more compelling and believ-



able argument than a descriptive analysis on the subject.

Various studies detail the desired levels of organic matter for different styles of greens and the drop off in water infiltration if thatch levels move outside of this sweet spot. Research shows that a sand/soil based green has an infiltration rate of 90mm/hr when organic matter content at 0-40mm is around 5%.

When thatch levels increase to 8% at the same depth the infiltration rate drops off drastically to just 20mm/ha, highlighting the

importance of getting renovations right. Loss On Ignition (LOI) testing is now used to measure organic matter content accurately giving these percentages at various different depths down the profile.

This is a far more accurate way to measure thatch content rather than using a ruler which can vary greatly depending on whether the sample is wet or dry.

It is recommended that a green currently in the target zone of 5-7% organic matter should aim to impact 15-20% total surface



A sand injection system

area every year through thatch removal processes. Research into various thatch removal practices now provides us with a guide as to which affect different percentages of surface area.

An increasingly popular technique in recent years involves carrying out two processes during the same maintenance window.

The rationale here is that the greens are already being disturbed, machinery is already out of the shed and, while the recovery time isn't drastically increased, the amount

of thatch which can be removed at one time is.

Choosing the right topdressing cannot be achieved accurately without first knowing the properties of your soil profile. Soil sample testing will detail particle size distribution and it is vital that anything incorporated into the existing profile is of a similar composition. Again the importance of selecting the correct topdressing is essential as the effects of not doing so can lead to irreversible problems.

Once a suitable topdressing has been selected, a desired volume for the year should be established dependent on individual course specifics and objectives.

This number can then be targeted and individual applications can be scheduled and communicated. Light frequent applications of as little as 0.5kg/m² are preferable where possible to encourage quicker incorporation into the profile and reduce disruption.

Another key aspect of spring renovations is the feed that usually follows the aerification and topdressing process.

There are various factors involved in deciding the total amount of N-P-K required for a certain area of the golf course, but soil and tissue testing can help greatly, highlighting any potential shortfalls that could inhibit successful growth and giving a base number to work from.

These tests can be pivotal when planning a successful nutritional programme and, while these tests do cost money, their value can far exceed the initial outlay and in most cases save money and a lot of headaches in the long run.

A further area which can be used to help plan and predict various aspects of greenkeeping is phenology.

Phenology is the study of periodic biological happenings in relation to three main climatic conditions: sunlight, temperature and precipitation, from which both plants and animals take their cue.

An aspect of phenology is the Growing Degree Day (GDD) model which has been developed and is now something that is becoming more and more prevalent in predicting and planning various different aspects of greenkeeping. GDD are a measure of heat accumulation used to predict plant and animal development rates such as the date that an insect will hatch or a plant will bloom.

GDD are calculated by adding the daily maximum and daily minimum temperatures, dividing



by 2 and then subtracting a base temperature (usually 10 °C). As an equation: **GDD = ((max temp + min temp) / 2) - base temp.**

For example, if the max temperature was 25C and the minimum 9C, the equation would be:

$$\text{GDD} = ((25 + 9) / 2) - 10. \text{GDD} = 7$$

The GDD units are a running accumulation throughout the year and can be used to accurately measure what stage of the growing

season it is rather than relying on the increasingly varied calendar days.

This can be extremely helpful in planning timely pesticide applications or determining spray intervals for foliar applications ensuring the best possible results. Whilst there is some research into this model, GDD can vary from site to site so field testing is advised to get the best results.

With the abnormally wet winter we've had, where high winds and rainfall have been record breaking, not everything can be done by the book.

Whilst science should play a major role in the planning and decision process, it is also important not to get lost in numbers. The old saying 'you can't teach experience' is particularly true and skills such as good judgement and a well-trained eye are equally as important as any figures and come from years of practicing the art.

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