

# Royal Birkdale undergoes major changes in prep for British Open

By TREVOR LEDGER

**S**OUTHPORT, Lancashire, England — Confronted with greens below the standards required of an international golf venue, and at the same time faced with hosting this year's British Open, July 12-19, Royal Birkdale Golf Club has completed a major reconstruction of its putting surfaces.

Royal Birkdale, one of the world's premier links courses, has been reconstructing and partially redesigning every green on the course.

Royal Birkdale has been plagued with slow early-season grass growth and greens with schizophrenic qualities, sometimes dry and diseased, yet soft, spongy and slow at other times. The previous head greenkeeper, Tom O'Brien, practiced myriad procedures to remedy the problem — Verti-draining, solid and hollow tining, slitting, chisel tining, mole ploughing and top dressing.

After the Open at the club in 1991, the problem was addressed. A six-man committee was formed to review past practices, obtain advice, submit recommendations and research estimated costs for improvement.

It turned to such experts as the U.S. Golf Association, Dr. Martin Hawtree of Hawtree Ltd., the Sports Turf Research Institute and O'Brien. The unanimous opinion was that the problem lay in the greens' root zone.

From 2 to 6 inches deep, the soil was anaerobic, dense, contained too fine a particle size, had a plastic consistency and was too rich in humus.

The fine grass roots were unable to penetrate this layer. Thatch formed and this resulted in the shallow-rooted grasses dominating the fescues and bentgrasses.

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1998 British Open venue Royal Birkdale has undergone five years of renovation.

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mended that the worst greens — 1, 2, 10, 15 and 17 — should be re-turfed onto a better root-zone base. The committee approved the project.

On Sept. 7, 1992, JD Greasley Ltd. began lifting the turf, removing the problem layer, replacing it with a soil/sand mix as designated by STRI and then re-laying the original turf. This avoided rejection of new turf, a distinct possibility especially in such a salty environment as found in dunes land.

The behaviour of the new greens was also a major consideration. They had been so soft that golfers walking over them left footprints.

It was imperative that the new root zone avoid high organic content and was sandy enough to enable free-draining greens, which would be in keeping with Birkdale's heritage.

With the greens being rebuilt, Dr. Martin Hawtree was hired as the third generation of Hawtrees to work on Royal Birkdale.

He had three aims in his designs: raise some greens to aid drainage, give more contour variation and interest, and marry the putting surfaces harmoniously and intricately with the surrounds.

Thus, the 17th green, once a single-tiered surface, is now double-tiered to the tune of about 75cm height variation and has a new pot bunker at the back right.

Although the work was scheduled for completion on Oct. 26, 1992, a mere seven weeks after it began, that did not happen.

A special general meeting was held in December 1992, and it was unanimously agreed to reconstruct the remaining 13 greens using the same team. Throughout the fall of 1993 the remaining greens underwent the same process as the first five and the practice putting green was moved.

Players who go too long on the approach to the 18th will find a new fate awaiting them as Ken Moodie of

Hawtree Ltd. explained: "There are some significant new hollows on the back of the green which will make a trip back much trickier than before."

Again, time was of the essence, but fair weather and good teamwork aided the job and it was only 17 weeks in the making. It was time for the "icing on the cake."

"Since then we have constructed new championship tees on holes 7 and 17, and repositioned and remodeled the left-hand drive bunkers on hole 15," Moodie said. "The bunker at the front right of green 6 has now been remodeled ... into two pot bunkers."

Having laid the greens, it was essential that they be brought on and the fine grass encouraged to re-establish its supremacy over the invading *poa annua*.

A significant program of hollow tining was a major part of that work. Having overseen the initial regeneration, O'Brien retired after many years service and passed the greenkeeper's baton to Chris Whittle in November 1994. Whittle was no stranger to high-class turf, having previously been at Muirfield.

Indeed, 1998 is not his first British Open. He had prepared Muirfield for the 1992 tournament. For Whittle, the primary task was to continue the work that had been started. He was happy with the good foundation from which to work, thanks to the radical decisions taken by the green committee in 1991.

What does he think about the millions of viewers casting their eyes over the fruits of his daily labor?

"I try not to think about it," he said. "You can't sit back and worry. You just have to get on with the work. I'm looking forward to it."

The firm and fast putting surfaces that golfers expect at Royal Birkdale will be unveiled to the world in July.

## K-State pioneering

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PGA Tour Properties President Vernon Kelly said in a press release.

Ground-breaking ceremonies will be held at 11 a.m. June 12 on the 1,200-acre site, three or four miles from the football stadium, on the northwest corner of town.

Brauer, who will design the course alongside builder Wildcat Golf Inc. of Wichita, selected the property from four available. The course will meander through several valleys, and a few of the holes will have trees, he said, but "the predominant character is konza prairie."

"We are going to disturb as little of the prairie as possible," he said.

The layout will stretch from 5,000 yards on a special set of "senior tees" to 7,500 yards for collegiate tournaments.

Because of the type of play expected, Brauer said he "pushed the envelope" for fairways. "The standard corridor is 300 to 350 yards," he said. "We're at 400 feet here."

Therefore, future residential development will not impact the course, he said.

The par-3 course was included in the project, keeping in mind The First Tee program to attract youths and minorities to the game of golf.

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