

# Hogg: Warts and all

**The course manager at St Annes Old Links Golf Club in Lancashire, Stuart Hogg MG, is making a name for himself as one of the leading greenkeepers in the country. Here he talks in detail about his career path, the techniques he uses that works for him and his team, and the work he has carried out at his famous course in the last decade**

St Annes Old Links in Lancashire, founded in 1901, has been voted number 59 in *Golf World's* 'Top 100 Golf Courses in England' and 83 in *National Club Golfer's* 'Britain's Best 100 Courses under £100'. Its signature 9th hole was voted by *Golf World* as the 'Top 9th Hole in Great Britain and Ireland'. The great Bobby Jones is quoted as saying "it's difficult to see how you could improve on this".

It hosted final qualifying for the Open in July 2012 and next year hosts the English Women's Open Amateur Strokeplay Championship.

Looking after this historic course is course manager, Stuart Hogg MG, who is making a name for himself as one of the top greenkeepers in Britain today. *Greenkeeping* caught up with him to find out what work goes into such a top golf venue.

**Greenkeeping:** How were you introduced to greenkeeping?

**Stuart Hogg:** I came into greenkeeping by accident really! My dad had an apprentice working for him through a training provider on the YTS scheme and by chance asked them if there was any outdoor jobs going for me! An interview was arranged at West Kilbride GC and I started the following Monday on £29.50 per week! I always wanted to work outside and I really got into the enjoyment of every day being different. I was taken on for three years with college on a day release basis going to Ayr Tech where I was runner up greenkeeper of the year in my second and third years which was very pleasing. I was kept on at West Kilbride after my apprenticeship but I wanted to 'climb the ladder' and got offered the first assistant's job up in Fortrose & Rosemarkie GC on the Black Isle near



From left to right: Chris Morris, Stuart Hogg MG, Shane Donald, David Feeney, Bob Bould, Greg Wellings and James Kirkham

Inverness. I learnt a lot up there and was lucky enough to be given the chance to become their course manager three years later when my boss left to take up another position abroad. I stayed there for another nine years before moving to St Annes Old Links 10 years ago in 2004.

**Greenkeeping:** Who is in your current team?

**Stuart Hogg:** I have six full time and two part time seasonal staff under me. I also have a couple of past junior members that collect the range balls along with employing four junior bunker rakers for the weekend bunker shift. Greg Wellings is my deputy (three years service), Bob Bould is mechanic / greenkeeper (43 years), David Feeney, senior greenkeeper, (four years), Chris Morris, greenkeeper (five years), Shane Donald, labourer / greenkeeper (18 months) and James Kirkham, apprentice (two months).

My staff are all trained to do most tasks

except the major mechanical side of it which I leave to Bob. He is also amazing at shaping mounds with a back actor which saves us a tremendous time in the winter months!

**Greenkeeping:** What were your initial observations and visions for the course in 2004 and how were you able to move forward with them?

**Stuart Hogg:** My first impression was that the course was tired and not how I had thought it should be for a championship course. The machinery was tired as well which didn't help and therefore I put a plan in place for the first six months which meant being 'cruel to be kind' in a sort of way with hollow coring greens, verti-cutting, top-dressing ... just basic greenkeeping really but being the new guy I had my honeymoon period which I had to take full advantage of! I also brought in demo machinery, coming for a longer period than they maybe normally do, but this

allowed the members see what the modern machines could do. The staff worked hard and the place started to lift. The fact that the members started to see a difference and complement the staff made my job far easier on the motivation side! It was also the first time the club had the European Tour Qualifying School here and so again this helped everyone move in the right direction. The European Tour then stayed for another three years.

**Greenkeeping:** You now hold a recognised tournament most years. How do you feel about this and what additional pressure does it put on you and the team?

**Stuart Hogg:** Holding the final qualifying for the Open in 2012 has been the highlight for me so far, not in terms of course preparation but just the massive buzz you get from the attention to detail The R&A put into this tournament. We had to have in the region of 90 marshals, roped off areas and pathways created to make sure the tournament went



Claret Jug at final qualifying in July 2012

smoothly. As for the pressures of setting up the course I think it's fair to say that every course manager sets his maintenance programme around their biggest competition of the year and we are no different. I believe that we should aim to keep the course in championship condition throughout the

playing season and it means that we only have to tweak the course for any major event.

**Greenkeeping:** Can you please explain what seed cultivars you are using across the course?

**Stuart Hogg:** We are mainly bent / poa on the greens with very small pockets of fescues around. I have always felt that we needed to work with what we had in the first few years and also felt the budget was best spent on the whole course rather than on the one area, in saying that my maintenance programme is to make sure we stress the poa out to its limits allowing any finer grasses to dominate. Again this year has been great for this process and we are in a position financially to do two passes of pure bent through September when we are sure the moisture levels will remain here for germination after a core with 8mm tines to remove / dilute any thatch build up.

Tees are divotted twice a week and fairways weekly during the playing season with a fescue bent mix. This helps maintain these areas as I



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think it's important that the members and visitors don't land the old divots in the fairways as well as playability in the winter months.

Our practice range tee of 3,500m<sup>2</sup> is sown out with a pure dwarf rye mix to sustain the wear and tear it receives but also gives me the recovery, as this area has been a huge success with the members since I created it in 2006/07 from our winter bunker renovation programme.

It also enhances our chances of retaining major tournaments as this along with car parking seems to be a major consideration of their criteria to hold these championships. My buying policy is always to buy the best seed that my budget allows for the area we need to use it in.

**Greenkeeping:** The course has a typically sandy native soil, is pretty dry generally with average rainfall of 763mm per annum. What's your current irrigation set up?

**Stuart Hogg:** We have a Rainbird system in place, with the greens, tees and aprons but have recently added ourselves additional sprinklers on most of the walkways and some heavy traffic areas on parts of our fairways. We apply a wetting agent programme to the whole course, currently using the Aquatrols range from Revolution on the greens and aprons to Dispatch on the fairways and 50/90 on the tees' and greens' surrounds. My policy is to keep the grass alive, not green; our average usage is 3,400m<sup>3</sup> per annum for all water used on the site. Like everywhere budgets are tight and with us being on mains water it's something that I am very cautious of, making sure we use effectively. We do hand water when required and have also put in extra sprinklers to cover areas that over the years I have seen dry out due to the prevailing wind which has made a difference, along with being able to use the MI (Mobile Interface) tool from Rainbird.

This allows me to make a decision on mainly the walkways in the morning as I go around the course. Due to the pipe sizes and tank capacity we don't have enough capacity to water everything through the night so this makes it easier to apply as and when needed first thing in the morning.



*Top-dressing after coring last autumn*

**Greenkeeping:** What fertiliser programme are you running?

**Stuart Hogg:** I tend to start off with a granular applying around 25kg/N per hectare early on, although this is weather dependent at this time of the year and if dry I will apply a liquid feed of sulphate ammonia, potassium and iron. This allows me to get going with my top-dressing programme which gives me the start I need to create smooth surfaces at the beginning of the season. During the playing season I will spray around 30kg/N using liquid ammonia sulphate at the rate of 4-6kg/N and this year I have seen it become more of a six-week window rather than the four weeks as in previous years. I will also add a turf tonic to these applications. If the weather is favourable for any disease then I will add some potassium to try and help harden things up, mainly April / May and September time. I feel the liquid applications are important for us due to the amount of play we get and therefore I can get it on and the plant can utilise it quickly. Also I am trying not to get any significant flushes of growth but to use this to help absorb my top-dressing programme. I also feel this gives more control when planning for tournaments as I know that when the plant is at its leanest to maintain green speeds throughout the day with very little growth.

**Greenkeeping:** When and how often are you top-dressing?

**Stuart Hogg:** We top-dress as regularly as we can but we really only have the budget for the greens and maybe some odd areas around

the course. I aim to have about 60 to 90 tonnes on my greens (1.1 hectares) during February and March, and then apply another 30 or 60 tonnes through the playing season. If needed as we did last year, we will core and then fill the holes to the top with top-dressing to dilute any thatch build up, and within these last 12 months we have applied just under 200 tonnes.

**Greenkeeping:** Can you outline your aeration programme?

**Stuart Hogg:** My aim is to aerate the whole course early November by verti-draining with various sizes of tines but usually 12mm on greens and aprons and 25mm on fairways, walkways and semi-roughs. Following on from that, I will aim to open the greens up again straight after our Christmas holidays as we are that busy it is very hard to get a tee time on here due to the members and visitors taking advantage of the dry nature of the course. I will aim to solid tine at various depths with 8mm tines ranging from 75mm to 250mm every eight weeks. Dependent on the season's weather, I will decide if and when we will core the greens in late September or October with 8mm / 12mm or like last year I went with 16mm tines. This was the first time I had used this size but due to the rainfall of 2012/13 we had some thatch build up like most other courses, however we got a very clean core out and succeeded in filling the holes up with 80 tonnes of top-dressing over a four-day period. This has paid off as we remained open throughout this past mild wet winter with no

flooding on the playing surfaces. Currently the aim this year is core with 8mm tines before starting the overseeding programme.

**Greenkeeping:** What is your policy regarding the ecology of the course?

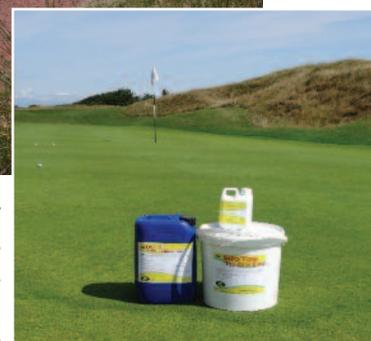
**Stuart Hogg:** I have tried to make sure we keep as much wildlife flora and fauna on and around the course as possible. We have stopped using a lot of the old tractor paths and, along with plantations of strategically placed gorse, we have now created link corridors. Our waste from construction is kept on site to help create other developments (the waste from renovating over 100 bunkers was made into a practice tee). We put as many grass clippings from the mowers and any other green waste into skips which are taken to be recycled.

**Greenkeeping:** The ninth green is the one people always want to play and as such it has previously suffered from compactation and poor root zone. XL Pro Bio has been responsible for a turn around of this situation. Can you explain how you came into contact with Clive Pearson and how you went about addressing the issues with the ninth?

**Stuart Hogg:** Clive asked for five minutes of my time and over an hour later was still talking about his products and what they could do for me! I asked him to have a look at the 9th walk off on the green as this is our signature hole and being 46 yards long and 15 yards at its widest point surrounded by dunes and pot bunkers, everyone wants to play it! However it really only has one way on and off and so compaction and grass sward have been two main issues for me. He suggested that I try some BioLift and BioTop along with my normal programme of aeration, fertilisation and so on, and over the summer the results really impressed me, we were able to core without the turf lifting as much, allowing me to apply some more BioTop to this area too before brushing in my dressing.

Last September we lifted a further area of the green which had suffered previously from flooding and root break through the sand splash of a popular bunker. We lifted the green, installed a vertical drain in to a stone filled chamber to accommodate any more flash flooding and removed the sand splash layer.

The 9th green and clubhouse. Inset: XL Pro Bio



We then applied some more BioTop before laying the turf back down and although the weather was in our favour I didn't expect to see the root growth that we had, it was enough to hold the re-laid turf in place to run our normal verti-drain programme over it in November.

This has only improved the turf on this area and is currently coping very well in our current summer conditions without the usual need of hand watering, extra feeding and so on. I also applied BioTop to the rest of my greens when we cored in the last week of September and was impressed with the ease it could be applied and broke up before being dragged into the core holes with our top-dressing.

**Greenkeeping:** You are now working with Clive and XL Pro Bio for a second year. Have you seen a significant reduction in disease? Overall, what in particular has impressed you with the XL Pro Bio range?

**Stuart Hogg:** After last years' experience on the 9th green, and the application of BioTop to the greens in general, I set a programme of BioLift at 20Lts/Ha and one litre BioStim applied monthly to run through the winter months as I don't really bother about any fusarium (our main disease problem here) to give the product as much chance as possible.

We never got any massive problems through that was a mild winter and therefore I have gone on a full programme applying the rates along with a full application of BioTop planned for application when I core in September prior to overseeding the greens. I have not needed to apply a fungicide to our greens since using this product, although I have had some fusarium activity around early May this year – an application of potassium and iron knocked it back. I have also seen my fertiliser applications to the greens extend another week or so this year so far which can only be a good thing! To be honest I was impressed with Clive as a person, his knowledge and that he didn't try to do the hard sell and so I have been the one going back to him asking the questions! The range he has just seems to suit me in what I am trying to achieve here in giving the best course possible to the members and visitors alike using as many cultural and environmental friendly methods as I can.

**Greenkeeping:** You suffered a few drainage issues at the back end of 2012 and like many courses were faced with flooding. What did

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A daily task, autumn 2012



you and the team to remedy this?

**Stuart Hogg:** Being a links course that, in my previous eight years, never really suffered any drainage problems, it really hit us hard. We could at least clear the flooding every day until mid-October allowing the club to make as much revenue as possible. In October we opened up the manholes and this is when it became apparent they were not working to capacity, if at all! I originally thought it was one main pipe (the other main outlet was fine) which had been broken and fixed over the years so we started here but it just went on and on! Whenever we got to what we thought was the end of a run we would see another issue. These ranged from different pipe sizes, pipes stuck inside other pipes, no depth to the drain, man holes on the fairways. So by the end of the first week I evaluated and planned where things should be in regards to new manholes that could remain visible to allow us to pump water into them if needed, check and clean them regularly and also inspect flow capacity during the winter months. The result

was that we laid over 1.4km of pipe work in-house that winter 2012/13. This wet mild winter has proved that the work we did has paid dividends and the compliments and acknowledgements from members at our AGM has made it a very satisfying for everyone concerned.

**Greenkeeping:** What recent renovation have you undertaken across the course and what have you got planned for the coming year?

**Stuart Hogg:** After the first 18 months here I knew the championship status was questionable because of our current bunkering, length of course and mounding, so I felt we needed to put a development plan in place. However the club council didn't want a 'greens committee plan' so we commissioned Donald Steel to come up and give us a summary report of where we could go. After my presentation with Donald Steel, the members were full of approval. The work commenced the next day with the major mounding removal work to be done in 2008.

This plan was completed in 2010 but I felt it was appropriate to keep moving forward albeit slower and again the members were fully supportive of a new continued development plan in 2010 and trusted me to deliver, which I feel honoured about because it is their golf course after all.

In between the 2010 development plan was the Open qualifying in 2012 and so things were missed for this, but last year we continued to develop our par three 13th hole, re-contouring the surround rough mounding into a more 'humps and hollow' surround, not only to give it a more linksy feel but to help speed up play so golfers aren't looking for their golf balls 10 yards off the side of the green. This year we will do something similar to our 12th green surround but this is more to hide the golfers walking off the 16th tee as well as giving a bit of feature to the left of the 12th green.

**Greenkeeping:** How do you communicate with the members?

**Stuart Hogg:** I have done three presentations to the members here over my 10 years at the club and am sproud to say that I have had over 100 at each one. This shows to me that they care about the course and want to come and listen to what I have to say. I write a report that goes on the members' boards / website so they can keep up to date with things. We also write a short piece for the professional's newsletter every week on what's happening around the course and a picture or two always says a 1,000 words! I think Facebook and Twitter have helped us communicate with golfers too, although I prefer Twitter myself (follow @stannesgreens).

**Greenkeeping:** You were part of a group responsible for driving the creation of a video of the course using a drone, which enables viewers to 'virtually' walk the course before deciding to visit. How did this come about?

**Stuart Hogg:** It was at a prize giving. Myself, Daniel the club's professional and Peter, a club member, started talking about how we could market the club in a different way. Peter said his son had built a drone and was videoing his extreme sports. He also said he hadn't seen this on any other websites or golf courses except for when they do flyovers at major championships. At this point I commented how I felt I could use it to keep a history of the course at that particular point, produce plans for developments and record changes which will always now be available in years to come. So this has now been done and we have a video of each hole on the website for golfers to look at. With my last presentation I was able to take a still picture from the video rather than a course planner to show exactly where and why the changes would take place, which was very well received.

**Greenkeeping:** Looking back on your career to date, what are the things you are most proud of?

**Stuart Hogg:** Personally I think gaining my 'Master Greenkeeper' status has to be the high of my professional development, although every award I receive is still a very proud moment. I have worked at a few Open Championships with BIGGA on the support

*The 9th green. In the distance: Blackpool Tower*



team but the last couple of times have been helping out with the greenstaff at Royal Birkdale and Royal Lytham & St Annes and I have to say that is a fantastic honour and experience! The buzz you get from that is phenomenal and I believe if you don't get that buzz then you're in the wrong job. I think that buzz feeling was the best when we had the Open qualifying in 2012 with all the preparation outside the course work and then delivering it on the day, nothing can beat that other than holding the Open Championship yourself!

**Greenkeeping:** What advice would you give to youngsters starting out in greenkeeping?

**Stuart Hogg:** Always look, learn and listen and never stop doing that!

**Greenkeeping:** You've got a tight team who work well together. What would you put this down to?

**Stuart Hogg:** I gained a lot of experience under my two previous course managers and feel that I have developed into what I liked about their management. I would like to think that I am a fair person and will lead from the

front. I will always willingly rake bunkers in the worst of weathers or go and dig out a messy hole to get the job done.

I feel if your staff knows you will do this then it's not unreasonable for you to expect them to do it! I do however like to make sure their development keeps improving and always try and get them away on courses relevant to their level and also to attend BTME to keep up to date with the new equipment, but also to network over a beer. That is important because we really such a tight community really.

**Greenkeeping:** What changes do you think need to be made to benefit the industry sector and profession of the greenkeeper?

**Stuart Hogg:** BIGGA and the GTC have made massive in-roads to how we are professionally thought about nowadays, but there is still a lot of room for improvement. Both the lack of funding to meet the golfers' expectations, and the lack of their understanding of what we have to deal with, can be very stressful and disheartening. Therefore if we could help change that, then I feel it would be better for everyone involved.