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Simon Bell-Tye is the course manager of Skylark Golf & Country Club in Hampshire. *Greenkeeping* finds out about the major bunker refurbishment his team carried out – including why they are impounded and how long renovating all of them will take – plus the extensive tree and pond management that has been carried out

Skylark Golf & Country Club in Hampshire is a picturesque 18-hole parkland course that is meticulously maintained to the very highest standard. In the last 18 months alone it has seen over £1 million invested in it.

Greenkeeping speaks to its course manager, Simon Bell-Tye, to find out more about the venue – as well as his approach to managing it.

Greenkeeping: What was your path to greenkeeping, how did you learn, where did you study and how long have you now been at Skylark Golf & Country Club?

Simon Bell-Tye: I started my career in 1996 at South Winchester Golf Club as a trainee. In 1997, I attended Sparsholt College, gaining my NVQ Level 2 in sports turf management. In the same year I qualified as an assistant. In 1999 I joined Royal Winchester Golf Club as an assistant and spent over four educational

years with the team. In 2004 I joined Macdonald Botley Park as deputy course manager where I gained valuable experience in budget and team management. In 2010, I was promoted to course manager. During 2014 I achieved my NVQ Level 3 in sports turf management and in the same year I joined Skylark Golf & Country Club as the course manager where I remain to date. Between 2003 and 2014 I volunteered to support the greenkeeping team at the BMW

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Championship at Wentworth. I am committed to broadening my experience and skills within greenkeeping and have achieved my chainsaw licence and first aid training.

Greenkeeping: How big is your team, what are their names and how do you maximise the team resources to ensure best maintenance of the course?

Simon Bell-Tye: At Skylark there is a team of five, including myself: Paul Gledhill, deputy course manager; Darren Heskins, greenkeeper / mechanic; Ben 'Dollars' Dollery, assistant greenkeeper; and Matt Jenner, trainee greenkeeper.

I have a dedicated, reliable team who strive to keep the course presented and maintained to a high standard. I like my team to be able to complete all tasks about the golf course which supports their development, motivation and understanding of the whole job. This ensures that when someone is away from work tasks can still be completed.

Greenkeeping: What would you say are the biggest challenges you currently face?

Simon Bell-Tye: Skylark is clay-based which provides challenges across all seasons in producing and maintaining a good and consistently presented course. The weather naturally throws up problems and issues, but the greatest challenge comes in educating the management and club members of the implications these then have on the course and ensuring their expectations are met.

Greenkeeping: What programme are you using for fertilisers and wetting agents across the course?

Simon Bell-Tye: We are trying to move to a more sustainable approach to nutrient inputs. I am aware of the salt content and the natural soil biology. I work closely with Russell Riley of Countrywide who is our technical advisor. The greens' feed programme consists of low salt liquids and carbon-based organics. In March, we apply a 4.0.8 quick release granular feed that promotes growth and aids recovery from the winter months. During May to September we apply monthly folia liquids that consist of straight materials that can be adjusted according to conditions. These contain straight nitrogen, straight potassium, iron and amino acids. Two weeks into this cycle we apply a root drench which consists of organic bio stimulants, wetting agent (Headland Tricure) and minerals. The root drench is applied two weeks after the folia feed to recycle and replenish the nutrient following the folia application.

Greenkeeping: The course has ten ponds, how much of a challenge do these present and what maintenance programme do you run to keep them presentable?

Simon Bell-Tye: With respect to the aquatic environment of the ponds, the golf club has a contract with a company called Spring Aquatics. It is their responsibility to ensure the health and water quality of the ponds through a monthly maintenance programme. In

addition, well oxygenated water is necessary to maintain the viability and sustainability of the ponds meaning it is important to have an inflow and outflow of water.

The main challenge to my team is to maintain the appearance of the ponds and their surrounds. Lilies, orchids and purple and yellow irises grow in the banks which give a nice colour contrast to the golf course. It is important to preserve the natural ecology of the environment whilst carrying out regular maintenance such as strimming the grass. During the winter, any necessary tree and scrub clearance is carried out to conserve the area and enhance the playability of the course.

Greenkeeping: What aeration and top-dressing programmes do you use across the course?

Simon Bell-Tye: On joining the club I found the greens had lacked regular maintenance which resulted in increased organic matter and a tight fibre layer of around 50mm. I implemented an intense aeration practice working on the three-tiered cultural aeration programme. The 0-50mm included verticutting and monthly sarrel rolling prior to spraying wetting agent. From 50 to 150mm, we carried out a monthly solid tine using a 15mm tine with our Toro ProCore 648. From 150 to 300 mm, we carried out a yearly verti-drain in the spring. We also hire in a tractor-mounted Graden and Graden at a depth of 15mm in the first week of September. Since joining I have applied 150 to 180 tonnes of pure sand dressing each year resulting in a less fibrous surface. This has made the greens firmer, faster, visually more appealing and less hydrophobic. The dressing is applied with a Toro 200 ProPass spinner dresser.

Tees are tined and scarified using a 19mm solid tine at a depth of 100mm in the spring and autumn. They are then top-dressed with a 50:50 sand / soil make up and overseeded using Barenbrug Bar Extreme. I find this product has excellent germination, good colour and is hard wearing.

On an annual basis, I have a planning meeting in January with the golf manager to discuss spring and autumn maintenance programmes for the year. The work is planned



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around the requirements of the club diary. Once the maintenance programmes are agreed we are then able to budget for any machinery hire or purchasing of materials as required.

Greenkeeping: You've been working with Ecobunker to undertake a bunker refurbishment programme. Please can you explain the reason for this and what drew you to the PermaEdge bunker system?

Simon Bell-Tye: Soon after joining Skylark I found that the bunkering around the course was noticeably poor in terms of visual appearance and playability. I met with the managing director and we both agreed that addressing the bunkers should be one of the first issues that had to be sorted. As Skylark is not a long course and the length has been fully maximised, the most obvious way to make the course tougher was to install bigger bunkers whilst moving them into more strategic positions.

Being a member of Royal Winchester Golf Club, which has just completed a three-year programme installing Ecobunker, I was able to assess the benefits and practicalities of using this product at Skylark. I liked the appearance of the new bunkers and the fact that they were impounded so no stones or debris can enter them either through the wall of the bunker or from under the base. I spoke in depth with the head greenkeeper, Andy Barbour, about Ecobunker, the installation process and what was involved and felt this was a product that would provide major benefits to the Skylark course and enhance the playability and appearance of it. Richard Allen, director of Ecobunker, brought PermaEdge to us for a trial as we were finding that the grass edges were drying out during periods of little or no rain. The PermaEdge has worked extremely well. It not only provides a good finish but also minimal bunker maintenance.

Greenkeeping: How easy was the PermaEdge bunker system to install, who did the work, what timeframe were you working to, how many bunkers have you completed and what results have you seen?

Simon Bell-Tye: The PermaEdge bunker



system was easy to install and a typical bunker took between four and five hours to complete. I asked my deputy Paul to take on the installing of the edges as he has a good eye for detail. This is an important requirement as the bunkers will be in place for a long time and need to be right as well as aesthetically pleasing. The bunker programme started in September 2015 and 13 bunkers were built during the winter period. In September 2016 the managing director asked that the remaining 15 bunkers be built for the 2017 playing season and the final one was completed in early May this year. The bunkers are now proper hazards and give a great contrast to the course. Darren Holmer at Avoncrop Amenities helped us with a trial of

different sands and we finally selected Headon which comes from a quarry in Devon. This sand was recommended by Darren as it compacts and drains very well. Additionally, there is minimal movement once in the bunker, giving good consistent playability. Many courses in the area are using it.

Greenkeeping: How many more bunkers are on the schedule to be completed, when do you hope to finish the work and would you recommend this bunker system to others?

Simon Bell-Tye: Due to the success of the product we are looking to add a further six to eight bunkers to the course this winter. A further 10 bunkers are planned and will be included into our winter programme for the

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next few winters. It is anticipated the work will be completed by spring 2020.

I would recommend this bunker system to other head greenkeepers because it gives great definition and presentation to the golf course and once installed has minimal maintenance, for example no edging or debris. EcoBunker as a company are extremely professional and enthusiastic. Their technical support has been excellent and they have been on hand to answer any questions or have visited, when required, to review progress.

Greenkeeping: The clubhouse overlooks circa 60 per cent of the course and the presentation looks great. What is it you focus on to ensure that anyone sat in the clubhouse is never disappointed by what they see?

Simon Bell-Tye: Skylark Golf & Country Club, as well as being a golf course, is a wedding venue hosting around 150 ceremonies and receptions annually. The appearance and presentation of the course and surrounding grounds is an essential part of providing a welcoming environment and 'WOW' factor. All the fairways and lawns are striped as this gives good definition and all the borders are edged and kept tidy. Weed and feed is applied in the spring and autumn to give good colour to the grass.

Greenkeeping: What machinery fleet are you currently using?

Simon Bell-Tye: The current machinery fleet we are running at Skylark is Toro. I believe this is the best equipment available not only in cutting quality but also reliability and we have a great relationship with D J Scott who gives us great technical back up. The piece of equipment that has impressed us the most is the 648 ProCore. Being a wet site it has allowed us to aerate the greens all year round with minimal disturbance to the surface and surrounds.

Greenkeeping: You've undertaken a tree management programme and planted a further 850 trees across the course. What needed to be done?

Simon Bell-Tye: To give some of the holes definition, character and to penalise a wayward shot, it was decided to undertake a tree planting programme. This was started in October 2014 and included marking each area out in five metre spacing to allow for tree growth and cutting around them. Barcham Trees advised on what species would grow well on our site and we also looked at existing trees that were native to the area. From this research we selected hornbeam, cherry, willow, magnolia, alder, tiller and maple. The trees varied between two to three metres in height and came in pot sizes between 65 and 100 litres.

Greenkeeping: The club has invested heavily

in drainage. What and where were the problems, what work has been undertaken and what results have you seen?

Simon Bell-Tye: Two areas that were particularly wet during the winter months were holes six and 18 which run parallel to each other, and holes 12 to 16 which sit in a bowl at the bottom of the course. The holes were either closed or played on a shortened temporary hole. Speedcut Contractors were engaged to carry out the drainage works which started in October 2015. In this first phase work was carried out on holes 12 to 16. A grid system was installed with an allowance for any secondary drainage in case there is a requirement for it at a later date. The second phase was started in September 2016 on holes six and 18. Once again a grid system was designed to which secondary drainage can be added if required in the future. The winter of 2016 saw a remarkable difference with all the holes remaining open. This work has proved to be a massive benefit to the club which can now offer year round golf to potential members and society bookings.

Greenkeeping: What height of cut do you use across the course?

Simon Bell-Tye: The greens are mown in the playing season at 3.5mm and cut five to six times a week taking 20 man hours. Tees are cut at 9mm twice a week taking eight man hours. Fairways are cut twice a week at 13mm taking 16 man hours and the semis and surrounds once a week at 30mm taking 16 man hours. Finally the rough is cut at 75mm taking 20 man hours.

Greenkeeping: Communication is the key to success! What do you do to ensure the members, management and your team are kept informed?

Simon Bell-Tye: Each Monday morning I have a 30 minute meeting with the managing director to discuss my plan for the week, any other jobs that may need to be done and updates on any information he may have. Fortnightly, on Wednesday, there is a golf management meeting which includes golf course works, competitions and society bookings. At the start of each month an email

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is sent to the members to update them on the course works carried out in the previous month and to give them any information on what is planned during the rest of the month. I have a meeting with my team each Monday morning where we look at the week's work ahead and discuss any issues we may encounter. I work on the course with my team on a daily basis meaning that I am on hand to discuss and resolve any issues as they arise. I can also motivate them during inclement weather when a big job needs to be finished. From time to time members will stop to have a chat with me when I am out on the course and I find this way of communicating of great benefit. I have also found social media to have had a positive impact as it provides opportunities to present the course to a wider audience other than club members.

Greenkeeping: The pressures on the course manager to deliver a better product are growing year on year and the level of professionalism is rising with this. What do you think are the qualities now needed to meet the requirements and demands of players by someone in your position and how does this help contribute to the business of golf?

Simon Bell-Tye: The pressure intensifies as the club and course do not stand still and the standards that are set need to be bettered year on year. Membership and society rates are raised annually and there is an expectation of

value for money from the product by all users. Owners and committees need more detailed information such as weather and course reports so they can be communicated to members to keep them informed on anything that may affect course performance. A course manager needs to be performing at the top of their game. They need to be dedicated, adaptable, have excellent problem-solving abilities, planning skills, be good communicators and have patience when things don't go to plan. This all helps to contribute to the business as a well managed, motivated greenkeeping team will work hard together to deliver a quality golf course.

Greenkeeping: What currently gives you the greatest satisfaction from your job, how do you feel daily when you are moving around the course looking at what you and the team have achieved and what do you feel are your biggest achievements to date?

Simon Bell-Tye: Seeing the course cut and beautifully presented at the end of the week during the growing season gives me and my team great job satisfaction. It is very satisfying when areas are turfed, trees thinned or planted and bunker renovations are completed as they all bring additional benefits in terms of playability, presentation and plant health once the growing season arrives. I feel very proud of what we have achieved as a great greenkeeping team. Receiving good feedback

and compliments from members and guests makes the job worthwhile. My biggest achievements in my work at Skylark are the complete renovation of all the bunkers and raising the standards of the course in presentation and surface quality.

Greenkeeping: With your experience, what advice would you give to youngsters starting out and wanting to pursue a career in the profession?

Simon Bell-Tye: From a young age, I started playing golf and as my desire to play to the best of ability grew, I developed an interest in understanding how different courses were constructed to challenge the golfer. This interest led me to becoming a greenkeeper and remains the reason that I still enjoy my profession. For youngsters, I would recommend having an interest in golf and being able to recognise how varying conditions and constructions deliver different playing experiences to golfers. In addition, I suggest gaining as much experience as possible, either through work or by volunteering, to broaden your understanding. I have always been an 'early bird' which has proved beneficial in greenkeeping due to the early starts however, there is also a need for flexibility depending on the demands of the season or occasion. Finally, I would advise never to be afraid to ask questions in order to develop knowledge and understanding. There are some elements of the job that cannot be taught in the classroom and only learnt on the course.

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

Simon Bell-Tye: I believe one of the main changes that would benefit the industry is the need for greenkeeping to be recognised as a profession and not a workforce that cuts grass or provides general maintenance. Greenkeeping is a niche profession which can be extremely rewarding and satisfying when working with a management team who understands the role and experience required. It has to be recognised that without a qualified greenkeeping team there is not a great golf course.