

# Greenkeeping

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## COMMON'S PEOPLE

**Steve Brocklehurst**, head greenkeeper at Harpenden Common Golf Club, details what it is like for him and his brother to work – for 35 years – on a golf course situated in a conservation area



### COURSE RENOVATION

Laurence Pithie explains why January and February are two crucial months to prepare for the new golfing season

### HEIGHT OF CUT

A top agronomist and a professional golfer offer differing views on cutting to a height of 2mm

# Time to prepare

**January and February are crucial months for golf clubs to carry out turfing repairs, drainage work, bunker renovation and tee re-levelling, states agronomic expert Laurence Pithie**

**A**lthough the key aspect for winter golf is playability and the emphasis should always focus on providing firm, dry surfaces whenever possible, this time of year can also be beneficial for renovation and project work. After a full playing season, it is inevitable that some areas become worn, damaged or do not function as well as they should. Examples of this type of scenario can be uneven tees, erosion to bunkers, drainage issues, poor access or even just general worn turf on key traffic routes. Whatever the challenge, winter is the optimum time for this type of work. Golfers are also more likely to be 'understanding' if areas need to be temporarily closed for play. Better to sacrifice playing conditions in the dead of winter than during the main playing and competitive season, one may add.

It is generally accepted in the UK that the season starts on the first of April. By then BST has begun, the sun is shining, hopefully, and a certain golf tournament is broadcast direct to our television screens. That said, the course should be fully in play and that includes any newly renovated bunkers, tees and so on. Therefore with a defined deadline in place, any work carried out on the course needs to have matured and be ready for play by this date. Turfing work generally takes about six weeks at this time of year before being deemed playable, perhaps slightly longer if it is a teeing surface. Much will depend upon individual circumstances and the choice of turf used. Tees therefore really need to be completed by the start of February if they are to be playable for the new season. Bunker banks may be completed two weeks later but there is often the added challenge of steep slopes and moisture retention when a cold and dry spring can play havoc with such work. It is not uncommon for turf to be watered in March to stop shrinkage so this has to be borne in mind.



*Renovated fairway bunkers at South Essex Golf Club and, inset, prior to the work*

The start of the year is traditionally drier than in November and December and as such, ground conditions are often more suitable for construction projects and for transporting materials. All projects or major renovations need to be planned well in advance with work detail, cost and timing approved by the club. Communication is also essential and it is a worthwhile exercise to update work via a newsletter with photos taken before, during and after, to highlight progress. Members like to be informed and after all it is 'their' course so ensure that this aspect is not forgotten.

So, what are typical projects or renovations that are completed during winter? Turfing repairs are almost certain to be required in some areas and the general rule of thumb is to complete all such work by the end of January in order to give the turf maximum time to settle down. These areas are often walkways, path ends, tee bankings and bunker edges. Like painting, preparation is the

key and this includes thoroughly cultivating, ameliorating and levelling the given area prior to laying turf. The addition of a base compound fertiliser will encourage good rooting and there will be a need to cordon off the repaired areas for protection. Soil and turf are the key components for this type of work and a light roll followed by a sand / compost mix dressing will give the final touch.

Any drainage work required will generally be either on small 'localised' areas or part of a major requirement. The latter will involve a main contractor but it is the small wet or troublesome areas that would form part of an 'in-house' project. Ideally this work is best carried out in season but for many it will be completed in winter. Most small drainage requirements are carried out via a wizz wheel or chain trencher attachment which is fitted to a standard 45hp compact tractor. These, if not part of the club's inventory, can usually be hired from a reputable plant hire company. Short length laterals cut to around 600 to 750

## ► course renovation

mm depth can be quickly inserted and spoil removed. A suitable outlet, namely a main drain or ditch is fundamental for removing excess water and in most cases, this can usually be found nearby. If not, then either a lengthy drain line is required or perhaps a deep sump hole dug, but only if the underlying soil is of a permeable nature. A suitable fall of a minimum 1:100 is required before inserting a perforated drainage pipe and then backfilled with clean shingle before being topped up with sharp sand. Bridging ratios need to be established before deciding on whether or not a 50mm layer of blinding grit is required. It is best to consult with a drainage contractor or advisor if in doubt as to the compatibility of selected products.

Renovating bunkers is probably the most common type of project that course manager's undertake. Bunkers have varying 'shelf lives' with the revetted turf or pot hole style bunkers being the least sustainable in terms of longevity. For most courses, bunkers will consist of either a sand or turf face or even a combination of both. Sleeper wall and heather-faced bunkers are also present in the UK but generally limited to older and more traditional-style courses. Bunker faces pointing in a southerly direction are more prone to erosion, especially if heavily used and being close to a green. Here, it may be necessary to re-turf the face on a six to eight-year cycle. Whatever the reason, the objectives are largely the same, namely the bunker must have good drainage and not be constructed in such a manner that the sand cannot be held on the face. It must be fair to the golfer and not present a maintenance headache. Sand slopes must not be overly steep or high unless being lined but that presents other challenges and really is best to avoid where possible. Where the bunker face is to be re-turfed, then a key requirement is to remove all excess sand build-up which can be significant and then replace with a good quality soil that is not drought prone. Once complete, the turf should be 'pegged' down to avoid slippage. Where drainage is the issue, then the sand should be removed, drain lines exposed and then cleaned out if present. If no drainage is present then one needs to be installed and a suitable outlet located.



Tee re-levelling or additions / extensions are the next most common project undertaken. If the former is required, then

this can be a relatively simple task of stripping the existing turf, cultivating and regrading the surface, perhaps with the addition of more root zone before replacing the existing turf or adding a newer more wear-tolerant mixture. Re-siting sprinkler heads may also be undertaken at this time, especially if they are of a centre row configuration which is both inefficient and wasteful in terms of water coverage. Where new or additional teeing space is required then a variety of aspects need to be taken into consideration. These may include the proximity of trees, slope, access, safety, material required and playability of the hole. For most it will require bringing in additional material, inserting both drainage and irrigation, adding root zone and then turfing both teeing surface and banks. In some instances, a retaining wall or sleeper edge with steps may be required to give the desired finish.

As winter draws to a close and thoughts are directed more to the new season, the final course preparations are likely to centre on accessories, furniture and perhaps shelters. Tee markers, flag pins, hazard markers, ball washers and bins all need to be repainted, treated or even replaced before the start of the season. Wet winter days are the ideal time for this work whereby most items can be brought into the workshop for their annual prep.

Some pre-season work around the clubhouse and entrance drive may also be required in order to create that 'warm welcome' when members and guests arrive. Those aspects mentioned above are by no means all that is required. Preparing for the new season will also involve servicing and repairing of equipment, priming and testing the irrigation system, topping up bunkers, paths, ordering materials as well as carrying out the agronomic or basic turfgrass requirements for producing good playing surfaces.

Late winter, early spring can be very rewarding and it is the work carried out at this time of year that can provide the foundations for a successful season.

*Laurence Pithie was Europe's first-ever 'Master Greenkeeper'. He now works at Turf Master One, [www.turfmasterone.co.uk](http://www.turfmasterone.co.uk)*



*The new, raised and enlarged 17th tee at The Yale Golf Club. Above: Tee markers ready for the new season at Stapleford Abbots Golf Club*