

GreenKeeping

Keeping the industry on course

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BLACK ON TRACK

The head greenkeeper of Royal Jersey Golf Club, **Allan Black**, details the grass exchange and bunker renovation programmes he and his team have been working on – just a few months into his new role



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► Greenkeeper profile



As one of the most southern courses in the UK, Royal Jersey has mild winters ensuring it experiences more than 50,000 rounds per year. *GreenKeeping* speaks to head greenkeeper, Allan Black, about maintaining such a popular venue, the course's grass exchange programme, bunker renovation and integrating water management with nutrition conservation

Royal Jersey Golf Club, with views of Mont Orgueil castle and the French coast, has been a major feature in the Channel Islands for 141 years. The club has a rich history – famously under Nazi occupation during World War Two the course was turned into a minefield and the remnants of the German invasion can be seen along the opening hole where two gun emplacements are situated. The island itself has produced a disproportionately high number of leading golfers, including Harry Vardon, Ted Ray, Tony Jacklin and Tommy Horton.

As for the course, at just over 6,100 yards, it's not especially long but accuracy is essential – there are over 60 bunkers and numerous gorse bushes to avoid. The opening four holes follow the shoreline, while the remainder of the course is more inland, although still within viewing distance of the sea.

GreenKeeping caught up with the club's new head greenkeeper, Allan Black, to find out about his work and the venue itself.

GreenKeeping: What was your path to greenkeeping, where did you study and how long have you now been at Royal Jersey GC?

Allan Black: After leaving school aged 17 I went to Elmwood College to study greenkeeping full time. After doing just three months there an apprentice opportunity came up at my home course, Royal Dornoch, which I applied for and was lucky enough to get. I worked there for four years and gained my SVQ level 2 from Elmwood College. My dad was living in Jersey and offered me the chance to move down there and try and get on one of the six golf courses in Jersey but in the mean time I could work with him, labouring for his building firm. After two years of labouring for my dad and sending out numerous CVs to the golf courses in Jersey I finally got an assistant greenkeeper's job working at a small parkland nine-hole par three course called Wheatlands Golf Club. I stayed there for eight years and really enjoyed my time there – it was a complete contrast from working at Royal Dornoch, which was a

championship links course to a parkland course full of trees and only two members of staff with little resources. I then got the opportunity to become assistant greenkeeper at Royal Jersey Golf Club in 2012 and within two years got promoted to deputy head greenkeeper. I held that position until September 1, 2018, when I got the opportunity and honour to become the head greenkeeper at Royal Jersey Golf Club.

GreenKeeping: What is the size of your team and does each member have specific tasks?

Allan Black: We are a team of nine. I have two first assistants: Robert Brown and Dave Boyden. Our greenkeeper mechanic is Ali Watts and three assistant greenkeepers are Ali have specific task as well as day-to-day jobs: John Martins (ecology), David Le Monnier (gardens, front of clubhouse and first tee area) and Scott Jehan (gardens). We also have two trainees: Scott Simpson and John Le Cappelain.

► Greenkeeper profile

GreenKeeping: What would you say are the biggest challenges you currently face and how does this impact on the daily maintenance?

Allan Black: The biggest challenge we face is the amount of play we receive; it is estimated that we get around 50,000 rounds of golf a year and this is mainly members. We are very fortunate to have a healthy membership which still has a waiting list. We have a two-tee start on the course, the first and 10th tees where golf starts at 7:30am and is busy every day even through the winter (Jersey winters are normally mild so golf continues). This means that we need to be on the ball in our planning of jobs to stay in front and out of the way of golfers as much as we can. When we do any aeration or overseeding we will put a temporary pin on the fairway of the hole we are working on so golf can continue.

GreenKeeping: You are running a grass exchange programme across the course, what

is the reason for this, which particular areas are you focussing on, what improvements have you seen, what cultivars are you using and how have the members found the playing surfaces?

Allan Black: The greens are a mix of fescue bent and, of course, poa. We have been working hard for a few years now on decreasing the poa by introducing and creating an environment for the fescue to thrive – we have done this by reducing our organic matter, reducing the nitrogen and water to the greens and improving the soil health of the greens. This has been a long process and we have had some tough times when the poa was looking weak and causing patches on the greens to look yellow and stressed. The membership did notice this and would ask questions, but in general they were understanding of the process and have been very supportive, and the last two years have seen the greens become more consistent through the season so I am hoping the worst is behind us now. We

are starting to see fescue throughout the sward. Even in poa patches we now see the fine leaves of the fescue breaking through, which is a positive sign that we are moving in the right direction.

GreenKeeping: What aeration and top-dressing programmes do you use across the course, when do you undertake this and how far in advance is your programme planned?

Allan Black: Aeration is booked into the club diary for every six weeks throughout the year where we alternate depths. These range from 14 inches to five inches throughout the season – it is mainly a pencil tine getting to where the roots are. This also means that we have minimal disturbance to the surface.

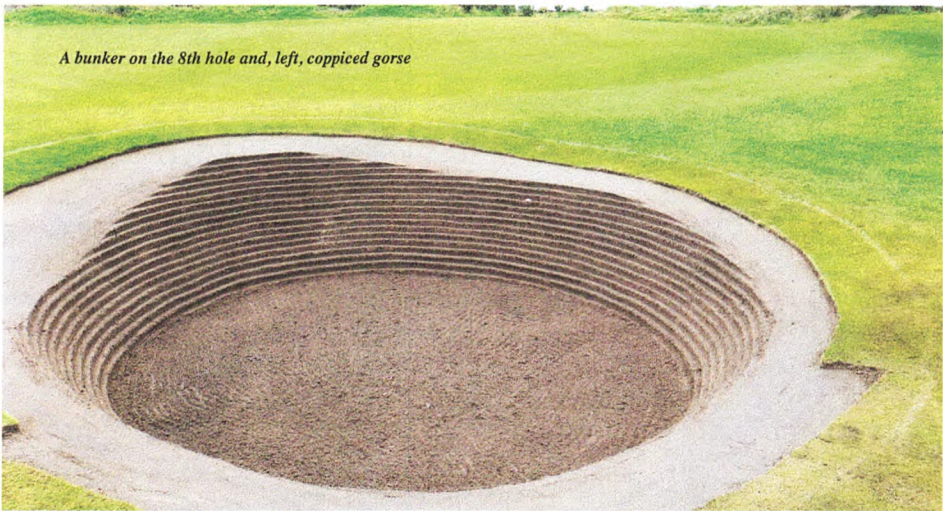
This year I am introducing a programme I call pocket aeration where we will be focusing on just the high traffic areas on the greens and will tine five greens at a time on a Monday morning before play using the Toro ProCore 648 and a pencil tine for minimal disturbance. We also have aeration programmes for the tees, fairways, approaches and high traffic areas around the course. We are lucky to have a ProCore 648, ProCore SR72 and a Charterhouse Verti-Drain. Topdressing is done fortnightly with around 120 tonnes applied to the greens every year. This year for the first time we will be applying topdressing to the tees with the aim of getting 90 tonnes down, this will help improve the surface of the tees and reduce the high organic matter that we have in our tees.

GreenKeeping: What have you implemented across the course to support the ecology, what unique wildlife does the course play host to and how will you continue to build on supporting these moving forward?

Allan Black: The club works closely with Bob Taylor from STRI and also the Department of the Environment – States of Jersey where we have annual course walks and reports.

The biggest ecology areas on site is the gorse around the course. We have a gorse management plan in place where we coppice areas each year to help rejuvenate that area and not allow the gorse to become too leggy and open that it serves no ecological value for





A bunker on the 8th hole and, left, coppiced gorse

wildlife. We also have a lot of green lizards and slow worms to help protect them – we have built four hibernacula around the course. The biggest one we built is under the fourth tee, this was the first one we did, and it got national TV coverage on The One Show. We also came runners up in the STRI Environment Awards.

GreenKeeping: The irrigation system was replaced in 2014. Please can you explain your water source, the design of the new system, who installed it, what efficiencies it now delivers across the course and the results you've experienced?

Allan Black: The new Rain Bird irrigation system was installed by MJ Abbott in 2014 – that was greens, approaches, fairways, carries and rough, while the tees were installed in-house. It replaced an old plastic pipe system that was causing a lot of man hours throughout the year with burst and leaks. The course gets its water supply from four boreholes on site, which pump 24 cubic meters an hour into our holding tank in the compound that holds 180 cubic metres. The new system has improved our water use as we now get the water to where we need it. In the past we had a lot of areas throwing on to other areas, we also had areas that were getting hardly any cover and, in the summer, would burn out. Each head has a decoder which means we can set them off individually and have the system linked to my phone so whilst I am out on the course I can set off heads to areas that need it.

GreenKeeping: You've been running a renovation programme to the bunkers. How many bunkers does the course have, what's the nature of the work, how long do you think the programme will take and what is the feedback from the members so far?

Allan Black: We have 61 bunkers on the course. When I took over one of the things I was looking to improve was the consistency of the bunkers and I set up a five-year programme to get them all revetted so no bunker on the course will be older than five years. This is quite a challenge as we don't have a turf nursery on site and can't source revetted turf on the islands. So, we use turf from tees that are due to have new irrigation fitted or are beginning to look uneven, we then level that tee and lay new turf, which is imported from Tillers Turf. This year we revetted 10 bunkers, four of which we used revetted turf from Tillers Turf and have been impressed with it so far. The feedback from the members has been positive and they are all looking forward to them being open at the start of the season.

GreenKeeping: What are the important aspects of soil health that concern you and how do you tackle these issues within your management programme?

Allan Black: Soil health is important – without it we would struggle to produce the fine turf surfaces we have here at Royal Jersey. Four years ago, the previous course manager, Ben Blampied-Smyth, and me, went to a talk by Elaine Ingram about the soil food web. This really got us thinking about what was going on under the surface. We then took a microscope course taught by one of Elaine's students and learnt how to identify different micro-organisms that were beneficial to the soil. This led us to testing soils after we applied products to see what effect these had on the soil food web.

By doing this we have now found the products that work for us and don't have a negative effect on our soil.



GreenKeeping: What is it about your working relationship with Aquatrols and their distribution channel that you value?

Allan Black: Aquatrols' rep Peter Lacey is someone I have known for a few years and what I like about Peter is he has great knowledge of greenkeeping, soil biology, grasses and Aquatrols' products, and is always keen to help with anything. He was previously a course manager and understands what we are trying to do and is really easy to chat to and is a genuine guy. I choose to purchase my inputs from Peter Holmstrom at AGS who also adds value and knowledge to process. Being on an island it can be difficult to get things on time but AGS has never let us down.

GreenKeeping: How do you integrate your water management and nutrition conservation on the course? Which Aquatrols products do you use and at what rate?

Allan Black: We spray Revolution monthly and tank mix it with Attain. It's applied with 900 litres of water then we add 4mm of irrigation water straight after if there is no rain. This helps get the products into the soil where the Revolution needs to be to be most effective and within a day or two you start to see the consistency across the greens when taking moisture readings. With other surfactants we have used in the past the readings can be all over the place. Revolution really does do what it says on the tin and is a must-have for us.

GreenKeeping: What are the qualities of the Aquatrols' range of products and how do they add value to your role?

Allan Black: As a result of our soil testing it led us to the Aquatrols' products we use. Revolution, one of their wetting agents, is a great product that really helps us in our goal of removing poa from the sward as it draws the moisture away from the surface where the poa roots are and down to the deeper roots of the finer grasses. This product was also used in the 2012 London Olympics where they wanted a wetting agent that was soil friendly. Porthcawl was a product we also used as it showed great results in our soil testing and improved our soil biology and had a positive effect on the fescue every time we applied it. The new product Attain has carried on from where Porthcawl left