

**No golf course in the world has more right to call itself "Old" than Musselburgh Old Links which is the oldest existing golf course in the world. As Scott MacCallum found out, like many humans of a certain age, it is having a facelift.**

**T**here are many old golf courses in the world. A great many at clubs which have enjoyed successful centenary years where stops are pulled out, pro-ams held and commemorative pullovers produced. A very rare few have had 200th anniversary celebrations but Musselburgh Links can top them all as it has the distinction of being the oldest existing golf course in the world.

To the casual observer there would be nothing to differentiate Musselburgh from many other of Scotland's links courses, except for the fact that it is ringed by a racecourse, but closer examination reveals a piece of golfing land with a history to trump anywhere else in the world and a group of people whose devotion to the well being and advancement of Musselburgh links is unstinting.

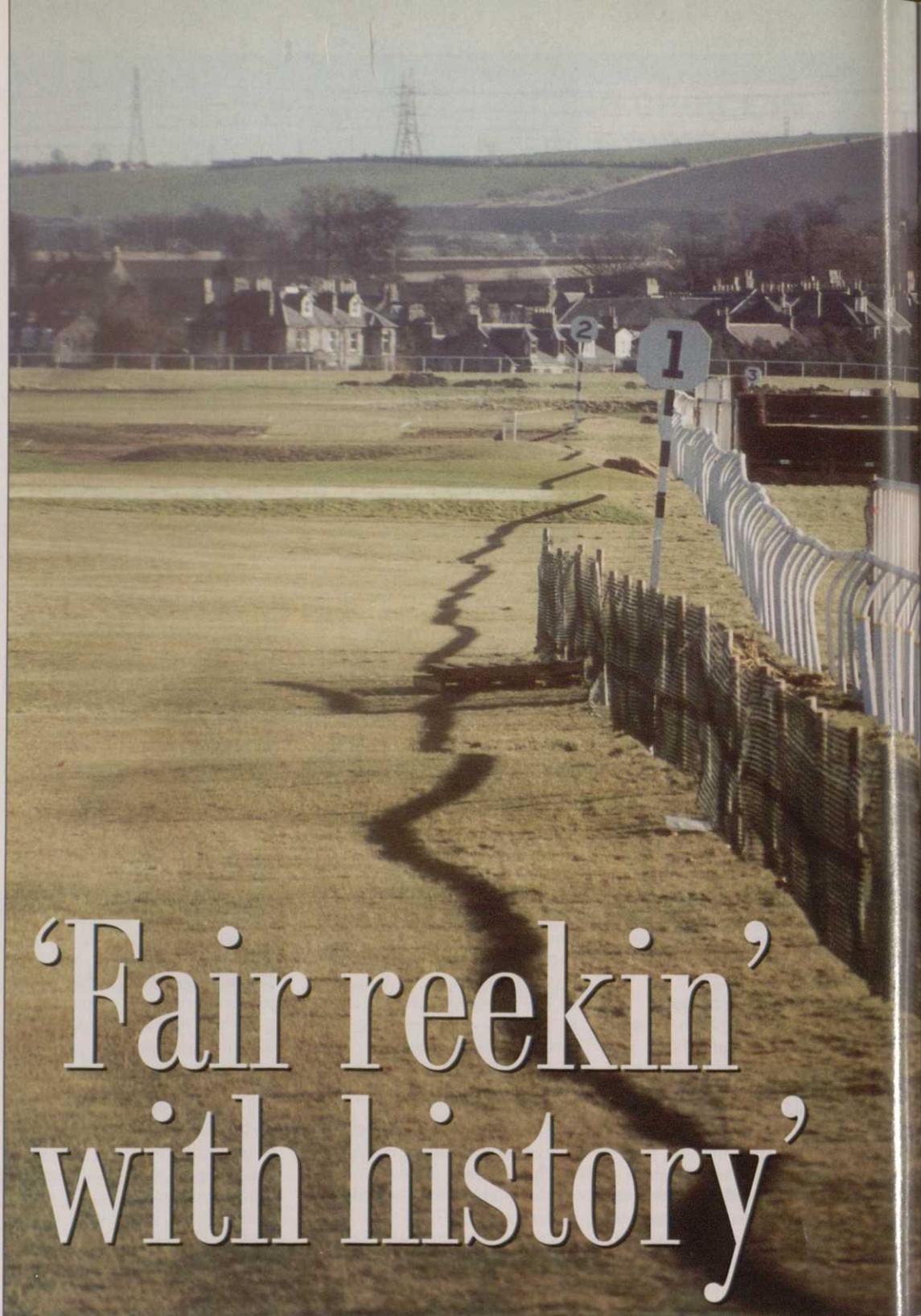
Among them are Alistair Patterson, Head Greenkeeper, and Jim Frame, a long standing member of Old Musselburgh and a man who has done much to make the local authority aware of the need to invest in the restoration and preservation of the course.

As befits a part of the country which has such a relationship with the history of the game you shouldn't be surprised by anyone or anything you meet and the first person I bumped into during my visit was Archie Baird, who informed me that he was married to the great grand daughter of Willie Park, the first Open Champion and himself a Musselburgh man. Archie, who is curator of the Golf Museum in Gullane, also showed me the gold watch chain, finished by a gold miniature golf ball, which was passed down to Archie from the great man and which proudly adorns his jacket.

He was visiting the course as he knew construction work was being carried out and was hoping that some old gutties might be dug up.

Yes, you did read correctly, there is construction work being carried out on the oldest golf course in the world... but don't worry.

Making alterations to such a rare piece of history would, you would think, be akin to adding Dormer windows to the Great Pyramid of Gizza, rewriting the ending to Hamlet to make it a little less tragic or replacing the



# 'Fair reekin' with history'

clock tower of Big Ben with a digital face. At Musselburgh, though, the work has become necessary due to work on the racecourse and it is an ideal opportunity to make some changes and improvements to the course. And a very good job Alistair Patterson and the local council are making of them.

Speaking in the Musselburgh Old Golf Club, which was the original home of the Royal Burgess Golf Club now based in Edinburgh and regarded as arguably the oldest golf club in the world, Alistair and Jim talk with pride about the course.

"It is recorded in the minutes of Royal Musselburgh Golf Club that it was the first course to have holes properly cut out and one of the original hole cutters can be seen at the Royal Musselburgh Clubhouse," explained Alistair, who has worked on the course with his apprentice for the last 18 months.

Another first was the universal adoption of the rule "playing the ball as it lies" after it had been first in use at Musselburgh, while the first ever women's golf competition was held at Musselburgh on New Year's Day, 1811 when a creel and skull was competed for

by the fish wives of the community. The first caddies were based in Musselburgh.

"If this was in America it would be hallowed ground, an institution where your grandfather would have to put your name down to join. The Americans treasure golf history and when they come here they absolutely drool. We take far too much for granted," said Jim.

Like many things where the past is clouded over by the mists of time it is difficult to pin an exact date on when golf was first played on Musselburgh Links but the earliest record of golf being

played on the links was 1567 when Mary Queen of Scots was accused of playing golf a few days before her surrender. Now you can be pretty sure she wasn't the first person to play there so you can certainly knock a few years off that figure.

Perhaps Musselburgh's heydays were when it was home to the Honourable Company of Edinburgh Golfers – which now resides at Muirfield – and the Royal Burgess when the gentry, including Lords and judges would arrive in Musselburgh by train from the city and then race to get to the tee first. Failure to build up a sufficient head of steam could result in a three hour wait to tee off.

"It was quite a fair old canter from where the old railway station was to the course and apparently there were some unbelievable sights," said Jim.

But that was then. What is Musselburgh like now?

Well, as I said at the beginning the links is shared with Musselburgh race course, which was established in 1816 and for much of the time since then it has been the race course which has held sway when any difficult decisions have been taken.

Some of the rails are taken down to assist the golf when there isn't a race meeting – there are around 20 a year – but if you concentrate on the individual holes and forget about the race course you will see some wonderfully pure golfing land.

The greens are small and the tees are low – the height of a greenkeepers boot – as the traditional way was for the golfer to see all the undulations from ground level. It also kept costs down.

It is Musselburgh's undulations and subtle slopes and borrows, however, which make any golfer not spoon fed on target golf and dart board greens drool.

Until recently the layout of the 9 hole course hadn't changed drastically from the time that James Braid had put his mark on Mother Nature's original course but the development of the jump and hurdles track on the race-course saw the demise of what was regarded as Musselburgh's best hole – a humdinger of 510 yards down the right hand side of the course.



Long standing member Jim Frame, left and Alistair Patterson, Head Greenkeeper

It would be fair to say that the golf course had been neglected over a period of years before Alistair's arrival.

"The maintenance was done by gardeners and they cut out a hole and mowed an area around it once a week," explained Jim.

"The race course influence predominated within the council at that time but now the golfing interests have blossomed and people have become aware of just what they have here. It is something which is unique and deserves loving care, kindness and all the work that can be done on it. That took a bit of work and hard persuasion but eventually we convinced them of the treasure they had," said Jim who, during the walk of the course, uttered the immortal phrase that the place was "fair reekin' with history".

The money which became available totalled around £100,000 and came from the European Sports Development Fund, Lothian and Edinburgh Enterprise and the sports budget of the local council.

The new work which includes a completely new closing hole, new tees, alterations to the shape of greens and numerous new bunkers, has been carried out with aim of preserving the "feel" of the place.

"Nothing that has been done or will be done on the course will in

any way affect the ambiance of the place and the charm of this old fashioned links golf course," said Alistair.

"Even the new bunkering which has been put in is pot bunkering and we are going back to the old fescues, which are using around them and this will be left to grow wild and be as natural as possible."

Alistair and his apprentice are employed by Groundcare, the company which won the contract under Compulsory Competitive Tendering, and it is fellow Groundcare employees who can be called upon, usually in evenings, to assist with some of the construction and maintenance work.



Mrs Forman's famous watering hole

"When I first came here last April I was turfing bunkers and tees and the Groundcare team was coming in after the men had finished their work in the parks and gardens on overtime to help raking soil and pegging out tees. Some of these are 420 square yards and we needed help to get them done," recalled Alistair.

"The construction work began in May and during the dry summer as soon as the turf went down it had to be hand watered. I prefer the old system because I reckon with hand watering you can put the water where you want it. During the summer we had to keep the sprinkler on late and pop out at 10 o'clock to see if it was still there!"

The new dog leg 9th hole which replaces the drivable – for the bigger hitters – par 4 was conceived following a site visit by a local professional who confirmed the thinking of many of the locals who had visualised the same hole for themselves but been too modest to voice it publicly.

The new hole is into the prevailing wind and boasts seven or eight new bunkers, a cluster of which are around the landing area.

"We felt that the current 9th was a soft finishing hole and we felt there should be a good test to finish off the round," explained Jim.

"We have tried to preserve all the subtle little contours on the fairways and we are delighted that the council has asked for the views of the club at every stage and a great many of our ideas have been taken on board.

One of the most famous parts of the golf course is the 4th hole known as "Mrs Forman's". At the far end of the course, Mrs Forman's is a pub at the back of the 4th green which boasted, until for some inexplicable reason it was stopped, a special "golfers' window" which made Mrs Forman's the most famous watering hole in golf.

The construction work is due to be completed in April and it will be a couple of seasons before the big differences are noticed.

"The fairways were ver-tidraind and top dressed for the first time ever last year. In the next few seasons we're going to get the golden rough back and the bluebells are coming though

## 'Firm but fair is how we want the greens'

and we'll start seeing the skylarks again," said Alistair with almost poetic zeal.

He is adamant about the type of playing conditions he wants to create.

"Firm but fair is how we want the greens and the same with the fairways.

"I'm trying to make all the greens uniform. If I were to shave them I'd have a lot of trouble in the winter so I'll keep a little cover on them but I reckon you can get fast green greens."

Alistair, whose father was Head Greenkeeper at among others Luffness, is revelling in his chance to create something special at Musselburgh.

"I just live across the road from the golf course and I know the history of the course. I feel I can play a part in that history and if I do it well it's going to benefit the golfers as well as myself and we're going to get a lovely links course back. It's more of a hobby than a job for me.



Jim Frame knew he would embarrass his Head Greenkeeper when he said, "he's a gem and we're very fortunate to have him. He's got a real feel for the place and he's put in a tremendous

amount of work."

It is perhaps a little optimistic to think that the latest renovation work will stand for another 420 years but it has certainly improved the course.

Alistair Patterson with one of the features of the old course: the greens are small and the tees are the height of a greenkeeper's boot - as the traditional way was for the golfer to see all undulations from ground level.



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