

## TURF MAIN FEATURE

**MIKE BEARDALL** meets Chris Kennedy, the man in charge of courses at Wentworth Golf and Country Club, home to three televised majors every year and headquarters of the European Tour

**C**HRIS KENNEDY has been in golf greenkeeping all his working life - starting, aged 16, at the club his golf-playing father had first introduced him to, Cowglen near Glasgow, at the age of 11.

Now as director and course manager at Wentworth Golf and Country Club in Surrey - home to three major televised events every year and headquarters of the European Tour - he has a team of 47 under his supervision.

And at the age of 60, when most people are slowing down, Chris is still in early every morning talking to three head greenkeepers of three courses and making decisions for the club on playing conditions.

"It's a way of life," says Chris. "We are just constantly striving for perfection and to meet the demands of the players."

"I don't think you can beat this for a career and would recommend it to any youngster. After all, you are not putting your life on the line, and you are working outdoors in some lovely surroundings."

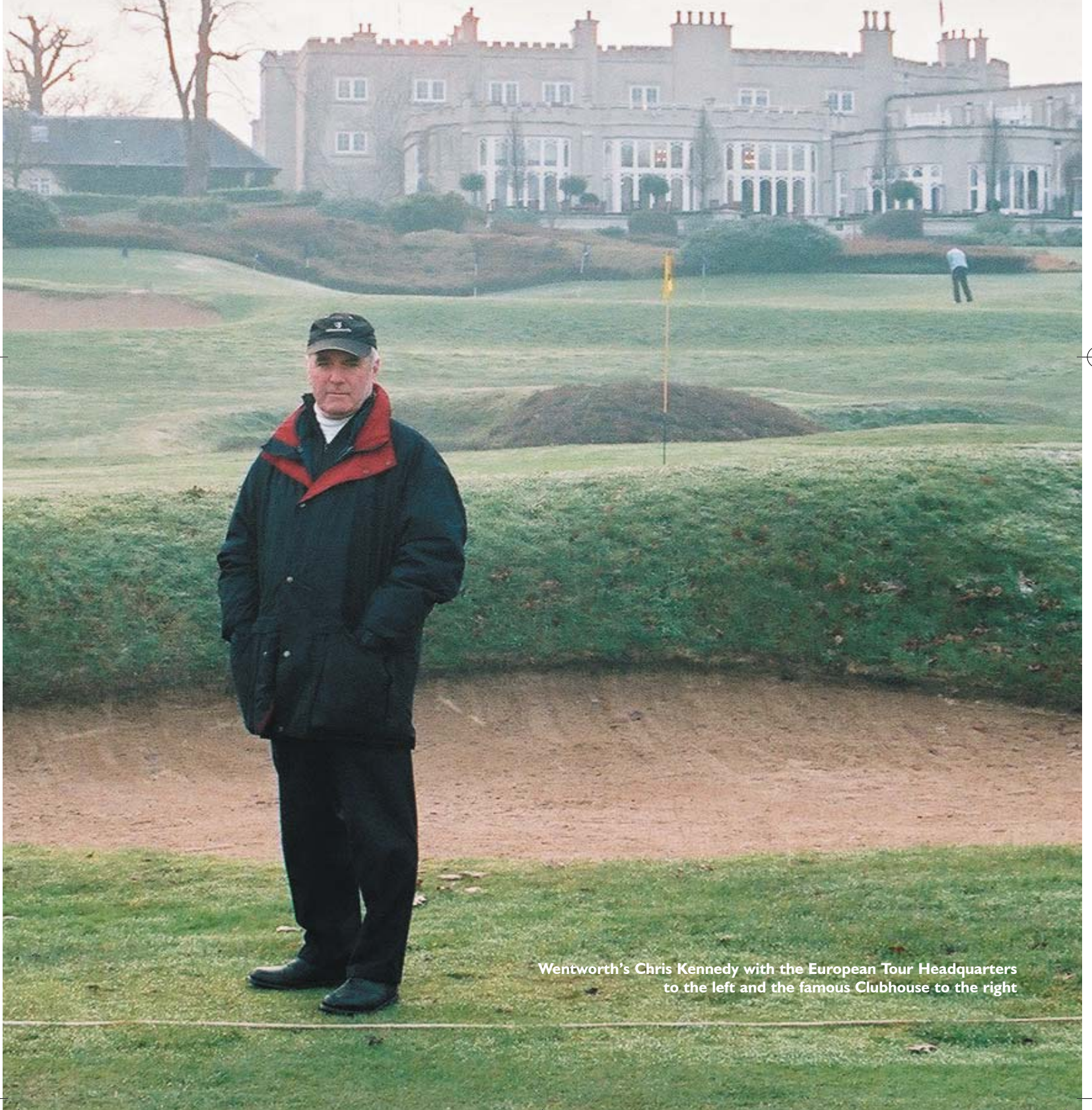
**CHRIS** knows all about greenkeeping at the very highest levels of golf. He has been at Wentworth since 1990, having been headhunted from Haggs Castle near Glasgow where he had overseen the Scottish Open

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# Demanding **BUSINESS**



Wentworth's Chris Kennedy with the European Tour Headquarters to the left and the famous Clubhouse to the right



Chris Kennedy on the re-laid 18th Green on the West Course

and the PGA championships.

He had joined Haggis Castle, aged 23, as head greenkeeper - later becoming course manager on the retirement of the legendary Tommy Wemyss. Twenty years later came the call from Surrey.

In those days Wentworth was undergoing major development with the East Course (1924) and the West Course (1926) well established but the Edinburgh Course was due to open that year.

When Chris arrived the course was well under construction with the seeding done but not the bunkering.

Designed by Gary Player and John Jacobs, this was to be the home for the Senior Masters Tournaments held each August.

The West Course is home to the BMW PGA Championships and the World Matchplay

Championships, while the East Course is for the Professional Ladies Championships and amateur events. There is also a nine-hole Executive Course.

On the day we met, a week before Christmas, the first

## “There is so much more to greenkeeping now than in the past”

**Chris Kennedy, Director & Course Manager,  
Wentworth Golf & Country Club**

real frost of the year had settled in and didn't lift at all.

“There will be no mowing today with frost on the ground,” said Chris. “We've got bunkers and greens under construction and in the winter months we get all the tidying-up jobs done.”

“Wentworth may be famous for golf but this is not just a golf club but a country club centre which is very family-orientated.”

With 2,600 members and a total of 240 staff (including the greenkeepers and gardeners) the whole operation includes a banqueting hall, main restaurant, two bars, tennis and health clubs, a crèche, a dance studio, a full-spec gym and indoor and outdoor swimming pools plus a beauty spa.

The golf courses take up 880 acres and include woodland, which comes under Chris' umbrella. But the entire Wentworth estate is 1,100 acres, the rest being made up of private homes that are so well hidden among rides and trees that they can be easily missed while walking the courses.

Chris is responsible for all the outdoor facilities at Wentworth, including the 14 tennis courts, grass and artificial, the three 18-hole courses

and the nine-hole course used for practice during championships and by club members the rest of the year.

To Chris golf is a business first and a passion second. He started out playing golf with his father and got the bug early on.

“Things have changed since those days,” says Chris. “Golf clubs have had to move with the times because the days when dad could disappear for a whole day playing golf have gone.”

“Now mum works as hard as dad to bring the money in and demands equal leisure time, so golf clubs have to attract families.”

“It's either that or dad has to play golf in the morning and go home to look after the kids in the afternoon.”

THE business of golf is what Chris is all about. He knows Wentworth like the back of his hand and understands the playing conditions better than anyone.

“There is so much more to greenkeeping now than in the past,” says Chris. “Youngsters coming in have to realise that this is a demanding business - and it will get more so as we have to meet the demands of players at every level.”

Chris has had to meet plen-



A view of the West Course

ty of challenges during his career but none more visible than the three televised events each year at Wentworth - the PGA Masters, the Senior Masters and the World Matchplay Championships.

He has a highly-trained staff with three head greenkeepers - Graham Matheson on the West Course, Kevin McGrath on the East Course and Scott McMurray on the Edinburgh.

And his past staff includes such talent as Jim McKenzie, director of golf courses at Celtic Manor, and Phil Chiverton, course manager at The Grove.

They both have been his deputies at Wentworth, as have head greenkeepers now at Coombe Hill, West Hill, Burgh Hill and Sunningdale.

"This is a great training ground," says Chris. "Two or three years here as deputies and then off to pastures new as head greenkeepers."

"This is a nice industry to be in and there are lots of opportunities for youngsters with ambition."

Chris says it is the one profession that new technology can never replace, despite computerised irrigation systems and the latest machinery on the course.

"I still walk the courses every day," he says.

"Computers can do some of the working out but eyes see problems."

"Discussing problems with the staff comes up with solutions. No computer will ever



New bunkers by the 18th green on the East Course

be able to do that."

Chris has a daughter, Suzanne, who is married into the industry - and is a very good golfer as well. She is married to Craig Aitken, son of Richard Aitken, managing director of Aitkens Sportsturf with bases in Glasgow and York.

Craig is in the Glasgow office and his brother, Richard junior, is in the York office. "Suzanne is an excellent golfer," says Chris. "It must run in the family."

WHAT is a typical working day for Chris? Is there such a thing?

"It depends on the time of year," he says. "From April I am in the office by seven. A little later in the winter because it is dark until eight."

"I consult with the three course managers and we discuss the course conditions, particularly if it has been very wet as it has been over the past few weeks."

"By seven thirty I have notified the club about course conditions and which courses can have buggies on, that sort of thing. We have to have decisions made early because members are phoning up asking for reports."

Wentworth has 40 shotgun starts a year, with celebrity days, pro-ams, corporates and members days. From April work starts on preparing for the majors.

Ernie Els has been working with the club as touring club pro since 2004 and advised on increasing the number of bunkers on the West Course by more than 30 bringing the number to over 100, continuing the work started by Gary Player and Bernard Gallacher - the former club pro who was Ryder Cup player and captain.

At the moment staff at Wentworth are busy reconstructing old greens with new foundations on the West Course. Between 2005-6 they

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Chris Kennedy with Graham Matheson, Head Greenkeeper of the West Course, on the 2nd green

## Chris Kennedy FactFile

- Born 60 years ago near Glasgow.
- Father played golf at Cowglen Golf Club and introduced him to the game.
- Age 16 joined the club as trainee greenkeeper.
- Later joined Haggs Castle Golf Club near Glasgow and became head greenkeeper, overseeing the Scottish Open and PGA Championships.
- Was president of the Scottish and International Golf Greenkeepers Association before BIGGA was formed.
- Became BIGGA administrator for Scottish Region.
- In 1990 headhunted to join Wentworth Golf and Country Club, Surrey.
- Oversaw completion of Edinburgh course.
- Has seen expansion of West Course by 350 yards.
- Oversees three televised majors a year - the BMW PGA Championship, the HSBC World Matchplay Championship and the Senior Masters Tournament.
- Daughter Suzanne is married to Craig Aitken of Aitken Sportsturf in Glasgow.
- Believes young greenkeepers should realise golf is a business and that they must meet demands of players.



“We must maintain the highest standards to keep our clients happy”

constructed 37 bunkers on the course and 11 new tees. The course has been extended by 350 yards (from 7,000).

The greens being reconstructed, because of sinkage,

are the 18th and the second and the turf has been stripped, the foundations lifted and built in line with USGA specifications.

The original turf is then

re-laid onto a rootzone of 17/42 from Rufford - 80 per cent sand and 20 peat and soil.

Each green has taken three weeks to rebuild, with eight staff to a green and using their own equipment - 360 JCBS and 2CXs shovel and dumper diggers. They also use Kubota and Massey Ferguson tractors on the course.

All the surrounding bunkers have been recontoured and it has been a major job. “This sort of work takes up a lot of time,” says Chris, “but the results are worth it.”

All the day-to-day equipment at Wentworth is Toro - from the computerised irrigation system with pop-ups on every green to the pedestrian and ride-on mowers.

Preparation for the majors starts in April with a continuous round of hollowcoring, verticutting, spraying and fertilising.

Chris says that the wetter warmer winters have been causing more problems with turf disease. “I think that this is going to be a problem in the future and we have less chemicals we can use,” he says. “Likewise for worm casts we have nothing we can use these days.”

Health and safety is a major factor. “We have never had so many regulations in place and we are continually doing risk

assessments,” says Chris. “It is a full-time job for someone on the staff who looks after the whole club operation.”

THE winter months are busy for the greenkeepers. As well as the three courses they have 200 acres of trees to manage, looking after all the trees up to nine inches in width and handing over the bigger ones to an arborist company.

“We keep the course looking good all year round,” says Chris. “The main object of this operation is never to close a course. There is such great demand for constant play that we strive to maintain the highest standards.

“We give the players what they want and that is what it is all about. Giving them value for money. When membership fees run into four figures you cannot afford to close a course - especially in these days when there are so many pay-and-play clubs.

“There is more choice for golfers and that puts pressure on greenkeepers. We must maintain the highest standards to keep our clients happy.

“Young greenkeepers coming into the business must realise that this is a business first and that means they have to have the best qualifications and experience to meet the demands of the future.”



Chris Kennedy by one of the new bunkers near the 18th green on the East Course

# Wentworth FactFile

- Wentworth Club is best known for its associations with professional golf, but the original clubhouse was once home to the Duke of Wellington's brother-in-law in the early 1800s.
- It has three eighteen hole courses: the famous H.S.Colt-designed West Course from 1926, the earlier East Course also designed by Colt in 1924, and the more recent Edinburgh Course (1990) designed by Gary Player and John Jacobs - plus a nine hole par-3 Executive Course.



- The headquarters of the PGA European Tour are located at the club, and each year it hosts the Tour's BMW PGA Championship and HSBC World Matchplay Championship and the Senior Masters Tournament. It was the venue of the 1953 Ryder Cup.
- The club is surrounded by and entwined with the Wentworth Estate, one of the most expensive private estates in Surrey, which was built at the same time, where many top golfers and other celebrities have homes.
- One of them is Ernie Els, who became the club's "world touring professional" in 2005. Over the winter of 2005-06 Els, who is developing a golf course design practice, made alterations to the West Course, lengthening it by 350 yards and adding 37 bunkers.
- Wentworth also boasts a Tennis and Health Club consisting of a gymnasium, dance studio, health spa, ozone swimming pool and jacuzzi, crèche facilities, changing rooms, and a bar.
- In 2004 the club was purchased by fashion industry entrepreneur Richard Caring for £130 million.



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