

Jewel in the crown

The Bowls England championships bring thousands of spectators into Worthing, and a dedicated team of contractors keep the council greens on shining form.

MIKE BEARDALL reports



THE GREEN TEAM.

Behind contracts manager Andy Collins (front) are, left to right: Chris Vickery, Dave Pharoah, Simon Cross and Brian Whittington

ANDY COLLINS is rightly proud of his team's work on the greens at Worthing for the Bowls England national men's championships in August.

Widely seen as the 'Wimbledon Fortnight' of the bowls world it attracts thousands of people to the south coast town.

"It's the jewel in the crown for us and the council," says Andy (36) who is Worthing contracts manager for Continental Landscapes, the Dutch-based company with endless sportsturf and grounds maintenance contracts all over the UK and throughout Europe.

"The unique working relationship between ourselves and Worthing Council is exceptional," says Andy, who started as a groundsman 15 years ago with a small family landscaping company following a teenage career in the printing industry.

Andy describes himself as a 'career changer'.

"I was not unhappy printing football shirts for Umbro - but I thought there was more to life and I wanted to work outdoors so when a friend told me about the landscaping job I jumped at it."

He worked for three years with the company in West Sussex before landing a job with Continental Landscapes 12 years ago as a groundsman. After six months he was a chargehand and one year later a supervisor before becoming contracts manager in 1999.

"You could say it was a meteoric rise through the ranks," said Andy. "I was just working at the job and enjoying it - I don't think you can get a better job. I love working with the people here."

"It's a year round battle for excellence"

Andy Collins,
Contracts Manager,
Continental Landscapes

Every morning I get to work, often at 6.30am, feeling happy.

"Standing in a seafront garden full of flowers looking out to sea on a June morning just cannot be beaten. Nobody comes into this business to be rich - but it's a dream job for most of us."

Andy and his wife Dawn have a six-month-old daughter, Erin, and they live only a few miles from Andy's office at Beach House Park in Worthing.

THE Bowls England HQ sits neatly in front of Worthing's seaside bowling greens - but it's the council who own the grounds.

And Continental look after all Worthing's parks, gardens and sportsgrounds, with a team of 56 at the peak period in June, July and August, and under 40 the rest of the year.

It's not just turf but hedges, trees, parks, gardens, playgrounds and sportsgrounds - including three high-standard cricket squares and five excellent local authority-standard



squares, with 25-plus football pitches.

But the bowling greens - in action every day during the season between April and October - are the pride of both Worthing and Continental.

There are 10 bowling greens at the main Worthing site and another has become a croquet lawn.

"It's a year round battle for excellence," says Andy. "Because Worthing has a unique climate with no frosts and is often warm we have problems with moss. And dry patch can be a problem, but there are so many treatments available now we keep it in check."

"Aeration is a constant problem because compaction sets in with the amount of use the greens get. During the

autumn and winter we scarify heavily - not too deep, about 5mm with four to six passes. We take as much of the top surface out as possible, then overseed. We will hollow-core this year as well, filling the

holes with 70-30 top-dressing in the autumn."

Worthing has four home clubs who use the greens constantly and anyone can turn up and book a green, even hiring their own bowls.

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Worthing has four home teams who use the greens constantly

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Andy Collins

FACTfile ANDY COLLINS

- Age 36
- Born London
- Married to Dawn with daughter Erin (six months)
- Left school at 17 with GCSEs
- Joined printing firm.
- Age 21 joined landscape company
- Age 24 joined Continental Landscapes as groundsman
- Age 25 became chargehand
- Age 26 supervisor
- Age 27 in 1999 made contracts manager for Worthing area

Strong beliefs:

- Best career possible, even if you don't get rich.
- Rewards are in the results and camaraderie.

On a sunny day, as it was when I visited, the greens were teeming with relaxed players, obviously quite used to the grounds team working on greens not in use.

The irrigation systems were at work in one area where dry patch has been a problem. Eight pop-ups are at intervals around the edges with no centre points and watering this time of year is constant in the run-up to the championships which start on Saturday August 9 and run until Saturday August 23.

"We slow the irrigation up as we approach the championships to get the surfaces fast and true," says Andy. "We are also applying a seaweed solution and building up on nitrogen."

THE dedicated staff of four at Beach House Park are head greenkeeper Dave Pharoah, with 35 years experience as a groundsman and golf greenkeeper, and his assistant Brian Whittington.

They are supported by Chris Vickery and Simon Cross, who look after the park and outlying areas.

"They have masses of experience

“We have to aim for the best possible surface - and that means fast and true”

between them," says Andy, who himself has an NVQ Level Two in sportsturf management from Brinsbury College.

This autumn the team are going to adopt a new grass cultivar during overseeding to try to counteract the poa annua.

"We have been using bent fescue and because of the high amount of poa annua there is a certain amount of loss of colour during a drought," says Andy.

"We are going to change to 100 per cent creeping bent which provides more hardy plants to give good colour. It tolerates close mowing and holds the colour well and is very drought resistant."

Worthing has been host to world championships and the EBA (English Bowls Association) set up its HQ there. They changed their name to Bowls England during the last year.

While the men's championships are held in Worthing, the ladies are holding their national event in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.

"The day-to-day work at Worthing involves constant

aeration, close mowing and disease monitoring," says Andy. "We apply lots of iron for colour and strength in the grass."

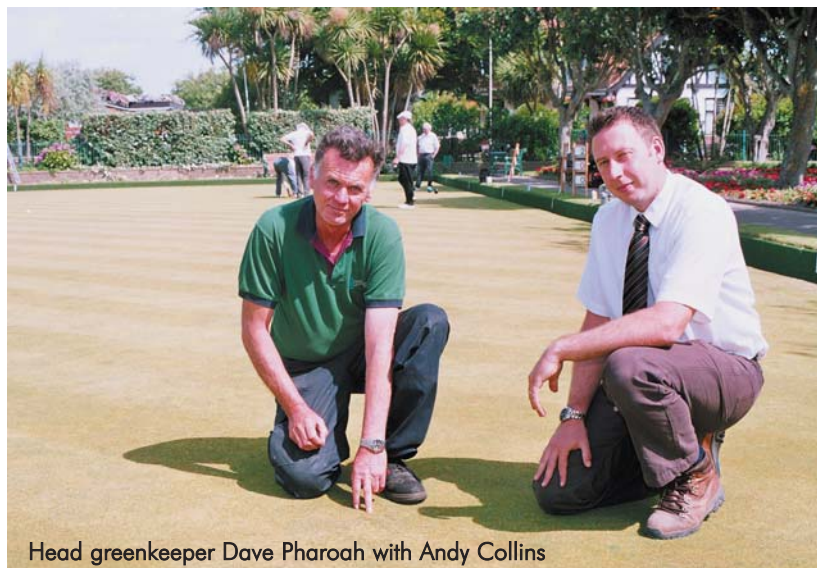
"It is a big push to get to the nationals and we aim for the highest possible standard. There is nothing quite like being approached after the championships to be congratulated on the state of the greens - and that's all down to the dedicated team."

Andy says there is no such thing as a 'typical day' because every day is very different. "I am hardly ever in the office because I am rushing from one site or another or at meetings," he says.

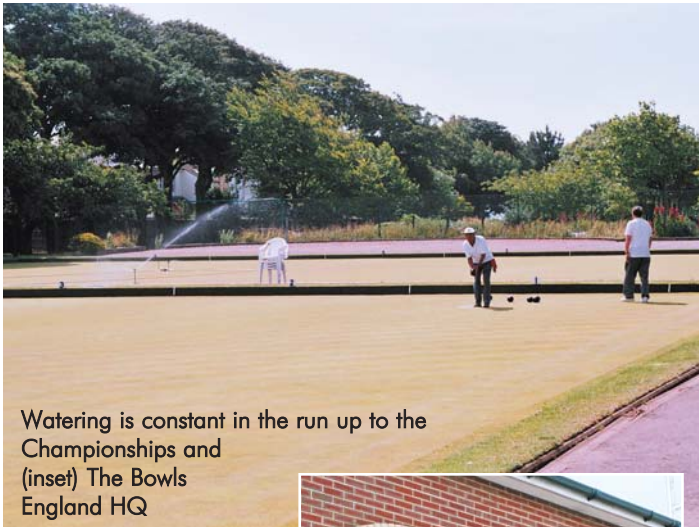
"We have to be flexible and adaptable to deal with the pressures of different times of the year and events."

"Because we are always under scrutiny we have to aim for the best surfaces possible - and that means fast and true."

"We have been talking about verti-draining for a few years now and putting it off - but we know we will have to do it because it will be beneficial in the long-term, even if there is a bit of heave to start with."



Head greenkeeper Dave Pharoah with Andy Collins



Watering is constant in the run up to the Championships and (inset) The Bowls England HQ



THE success of the Worthing bowling green team is down to a close working relationship and Andy is very heavy with praise.

“They are all great chaps,” he says. “It is a real pleasure to work with them and we all get on well.”

The knock-on effect of the bowls championships is the amount of revenue they bring to Worthing.

“Thousands of people are here with lots of people shopping,” says Andy. “You cannot get a hotel room during that fortnight in August.”

DAY IN THE LIFE:

- 6.30am: Andy at the depot for meeting with crews
- 8am: He reaches office at Beach House and checks e-mails and post

- 9am: Checking security reports. Parks and grounds are patrolled by staff at night.
- 10am: Meetings on site or with council officials.
- 1pm: Back to office to look at invoicing and health and safety reports.
- 3pm: Out to see jobs in progress.
- 5pm: Heads for home.

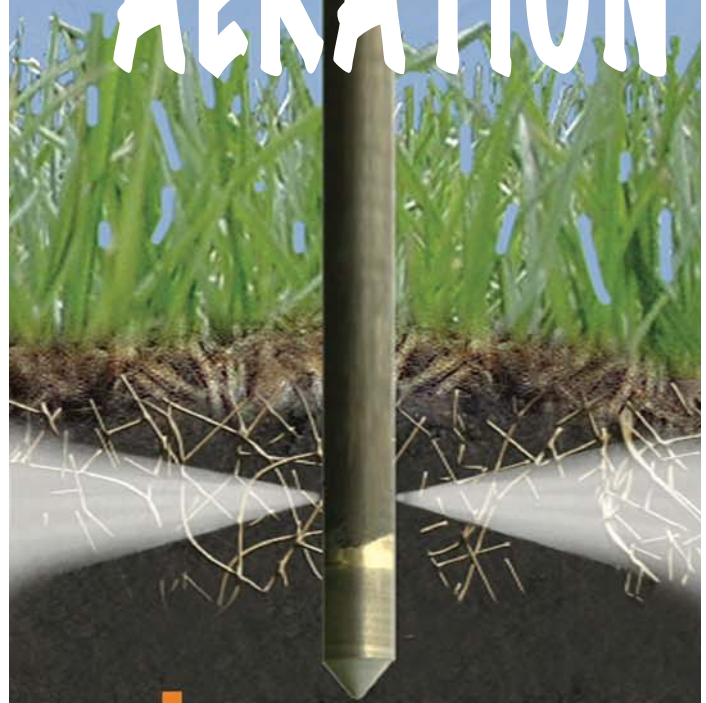
The kit

The greenkeepers have a range of machines at Beach House Park:

- A Farmura Turf Iron (to give a flat finish)
- A Greentek Thatchaway for light scarification
- Four mowers: two Buntons and two Super Certes (from Ransomes)
- Two Sisis scarifiers: the Auto Rotorake and the 600 deep scarifier
- A Pattison spiker for aeration
- A Ryan GA30 ride-on aerator
- A walk-behind Techneat sprayer



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