

# COURSES IN PLAY III

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**W**HAT some greenkeepers have to put up with!

There were only two of us there. The final of the Championship, ding-dong between two men playing between them some quite outstandingly fine golf, had passed on with its large and excited crowd down one line of holes; and was due to play back in a few minutes on to the green in front of us. The moment was peaceful: the air clear as crystal, the view magnificent, from the top of the great hill, down over the river and distant sandhills to the sea.

My companion was oblivious to it. All he was interested in was the green. Unconcernedly he strolled on to it, examining the sward, head to the ground, intently, with a professional eye for texture. Then, finding what he wanted, he settled himself contentedly and began to chew bits out of it!

Reassuring himself that this was what he was after, he munched away enthusiastically, shifting his stance from moment to moment as he spotted another succulent-looking patch. Behind his chin he left a series of nasty serrated patches, with the grass shorn off, the root disturbed and dragged up a bit, and bare soil showing between them.

It was enough to give any greenkeeper apoplexy!

Yet there was nothing whatsoever any greenkeeper could have done about it

—beyond a transitory *Shoo!*—because my companion, the sheep, had complete freedom of the greens, established by tradition, precedent, usage and commoners' rights. He, and large numbers of his fellows, wander free all over the great hill of Southerndown. There is no way of keeping them off the greens; and however closely mown they are, the sheep keep on nibbling them—attracted perhaps by some juicier flavour in the maintained turf, compared to the downland pasture all around them. Maybe the greens make a sort of permanent appetiser to the general main meal.

I was sorry that in the rush of reporting the final of the Welsh Championship through successive editions of a newspaper, I was unable to find the Head Greenkeeper and ask him how he coped with the problem. But how well he does it was amply proved that day by the fact that the winner of the 36-hole final, Iestyn Tucker, went out in 31 strokes that morning—5 under par—and was round in 67, while his opponent, John Povall, managed to do much the same thing in the afternoon—he was six under fours for ten holes and cut Tucker's lunch-time lead of 8 holes to only 2. This is certainly the only time I have ever seen a man cover ten holes in level fours, and lose six of them.

## Unpaid Assistants

This is not the place to expand upon the golf. But the quality, indeed the brilliance, of the scoring did seem to me to show how basically true a man can keep his greens, even with the unwelcome efforts of several hundred sheep as unpaid assistant greenkeepers.

On the fairways, of course, the sheep may be a help. A generous scattering of dung seems to help maintain the fine springy turf; and there showed remarkably little cumulative wear and tear round the course from divot holes—one of the perpetual troubles of courses nowadays where the majority of players with modern heavy and sharp-edged irons seem to hack up their shots to the green from much the same area of fairway. Southerndown showed little sign of these sort of "maximum-digging-

density" patches: so maybe the sheep pay some sort of green fee.

Southerndown, running over the shoulder of a huge hill above the sea in South Wales, not far from Bridgend, is another of those examples of the classic, simple, downland course, making its holes out of the lie of the land as the makers of the course found it, and leaving the natural hazards of the terrain to make its challenge. There is some wonderfully disastrous gorse all over it, short and tightgrowing like a—well, I suppose there's nothing quite like a tightgrowing gorse bush! It looks as if the sheep nibble the young shoots of it; trimming each bush to a sort of solid furzy block. Certainly, Southerndown makes a magnificent setting for golf; and one of the most inspiring of courses.

### Model Course

After the Welsh Championship, I went on holiday to South Devon (and if anyone going that way wants a route which avoids the now notorious "West-Country Bottlenecks" I can recommend them to write to the A.A., as we did). There we found a course which makes a splendid model for everything which family holiday golf ought to be—Thurlestone. This sort of golf needs three qualities:—

1. Everyone can get round quickly and easily, no matter what standard their golf has reached (I almost wrote "no matter how bad they are").

2. That it should make the best possible use of its land, with the minimum of climbing up and down hill, and the maximum enjoyment of any sea or other views available.

3. That it should still be a good enough test of golf to give the better player something worth while to aim at, in the way of challenge and in the testament of his score for the round.

Thurlestone meets all three of these admirably. The outward holes skirt the edge of the cliffs nearly all the way, with an almost continuous gaining of height hole by hole, but with only one hole which you could call anything of a drag, and that not a long one. You reach the crest of the coastal hill at the 11th fairway, with four of the outward

holes offering you a temporary rest from the gentle climb.

From the peak at the 11th the view is magnificent. In one direction you look back to Thurlestone, with Thurle Stone standing in the bay out at sea, and the course and cliff tops spread out before you. In most conditions you can just see the Eddystone Lighthouse, about 20 miles away to sea. On the other side you look down into the splendid estuary of the Avon, which runs down from Dartmoor, and its great sand beach below you; and then over beyond, Burgh Island, with its tractor-borne bus plying to and fro over the sandbank which connects it to the shore. Inland, it's all hill and farmland.

The holes are so laid out that the strong player can score well: in the 60s, even, if he's putting well; but only if his long irons, judgment of distance, and allowance for the effects of slope, are good. It is certainly not a course without challenge and meat for skill. At the same time, the fairways are so open, grassy and untroubled, and the hazarding so mild to the really bad shot, that the most incompetent hacker can finish the round full of cheer, and complete with the ration of balls he started with.

### Fun All the Way

This sort of combination of challenge to the ambitious and benevolence to the modest is often almost indefinable in its exact character; and it is so at Thurlestone. But the fact remains: here is a course to play for fun all the way, yet upon which no man can feel he is wasting his time. For women and children, it's perhaps even more perfectly adapted; since both can stretch their ambitions to the utmost, and still never feel unduly belaboured by fortune for trying a bit more than they can manage!

It could be that, with golf growing in popularity as it is, and the main unsatisfied demand being that from beginners and public-course golfers, we could do with a lot more courses of the Thurlestone type dotted around our coasts and hills, wherever the land might allow it.