

AN OLD MEMBER LOOKS BACK

by S. C. DENNIS

At the moment I am in hospital with dermatitis contracted it seems over the years using the chemical products of my trade.

I therefore have time to reminisce over the past 50 years in greenkeeping. Things have certainly changed, since January 1919 when I started.

I was 14 and had just left school. My father died young leaving my mother to support two children. My grandparents brought us up under very trying conditions so I had to get out and earn the biggest shilling. That meant taking the first job going. Three months and two jobs later I went into greenkeeping, in those days as much a deadend job as the others.

Our main tasks were brush and roll, cutting with none of the present-day machinery—Shanks and Green's mowers with solid brass bearings clanking over the turf. It was hard work to cut four greens a day. And it was a hard day too. Weekdays 7.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m., Saturdays 7.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. Sunday mornings two hours. Our fairways were cut by horse and machine, about one fairway a day. Sometimes the horses were working up to 8 o'clock on a Saturday evening.

The main dressing for the greens was compost, which to this day is by far the best. For worming we used copper sulphate which did not kill; we had to work like hell to brush them up before they had a chance to return to the soil. The great break-through came between 1924 and 1930, tractors, fertilisers, mowers for worming. Many other things including gang mowers, almost forgot, up-to-date hand machines, running on ball bearings, what a relief after the graft of the years before! Even this was twice as hard as things are today.

Most machines where I worked were sent to the local ironmongers for repair. They were often returned no better than

they left. They seemed to have been sharpened with a file.

Round about this time Ransomes were starting their repair service, which was to become the best thing ever from the greenkeepers point of view.

We were about to have a properly repaired machine, something we could work with; this was the start of, to my mind, the greatest advance in greenkeeping up to then.

The first tractor was the Metro on the old Ford chassis, Pattissons converted it; the drive was fixed, large rear wheels, with a big cog on the inner rim; these driven by nobles races from the driving shaft. If the engine stopped so did the tractors. It was immovable. We had many ways of starting jacking up with the jack wheel, or releasing the brake from the ratchet a little so that the clutch was released as well—both made starting much easier. Brake and clutch were all in one, two gears forward and reverse only.

It was this last way of starting these tractors that caused many accidents. One to my knowledge proved fatal in 1932. The late Ted Dunn's son had not long taken over Worcester Park Course; he had started the engine and as the tractor moved forward it knocked him down and the back wheels with long spikes passed over him.

I first joined the B.G.G.A. in 1926. The late Mr Catchpole of Ransomes came to Sonning where I was an assistant. His first words were "Do you belong to the B.G.G.A.?" I said "No". "Very well, then you do now, I will pay your first sub."

About 1930 the Research Station had just started and what was the Acid Theory was being advocated. Tom Mason was much in favour of this treatment. I, on the other hand, was not

(contd. on p. 6)

(contd. from p. 4)

so much in favour; we had our little heated fors and againsts, but we always parted the best of friends. In 1929 I had just taken over Sonning at the age of 24 which in those days was very unusual. Unlike today, you were never considered for a head job with less than five years' experience. Tom Mason was Head Greenkeeper at Hendon for as long as I can remember; he was a few years older than me, but I tried to keep up with him. We often sat and compared our experiences but compost was always the basis of good turf. Greenkeepers before the last war had plenty of time to experiment. We just saw that things were done. I, myself, had a staff of eight, each man saw that the tools he used were looked after and put away clean. A large amount of unemployment kept staff with one club for years, unless they took over a course elsewhere. I myself trained three such men.

Our Annual Tournaments were great fun and often a hundred or more would attend. So many piling into a train carriage with their assortment of clubs and baggage was a sight to be seen.

After the first morning's practice and the afternoon annual meeting we would hold the auction in the evening; there always seemed to be a lot of money around for this event then; not so today; it's a long time since this auction has taken place.

The weather in our play as well as our work has played some funny tricks. I recall to mind our visit to the Research Station in 1930 in a practice round at Hawkworth near Bingley. I was playing with the late Ted Berry, his handicap was plus 1, a great golfer, the rain fell in bucketfuls half way round the course. We were both soaked to the skin. Getting to the 18th green his ball lay in a deep bunker guarding the green, in at least 2½ ft of water. His remark was, "Stan, I can't get any wetter; here goes, straight in to get this ball".

The competition proper followed the next day with seniors marking for juniors, either in the morning or afternoon, changing over next day. I once played with Ted Dunn—he off 7, me off

4. We finished in 75, he 75 on the first day and I led the field by two shots.

Next day I was going well until the 11th a hole about 260 yards with a stone wall running close to the green. Here I met trouble; going for the green I put nine balls out of bounds. I took the last ball out of the bag, put it on the green, and holed the putt for an 11. Out of bounds was fortunately distance only there.

During the war I was discharged from the Army, in April 1941. I did not go back to Sonning at once but to Calcot, on the other side of Reading. It had been run by one of my former assistants who was still in the Army. I recall a long list of old friends—Ted Dunn, Arthur Tydeman, Fred Ney, Alf Honby, Charlie Saunders, Bill Smithers, Dave Ness, Mac Maclean, Charlie Fry, Tom Bridges and the Mason brothers to name just a few. After the war the Association had to be reorganised. There was very little money in the kitty but Sir Emsley Carr of the *News of the World* gave us 100 guineas to put us on our feet. Our founder, the late F. G. Hawtree, worked hard in every way to help all members of the B.G.G.A., and the greenkeepers of the twenties and thirties have done much to help the young ones into their positions today. Now they have opportunity to make real progress in wages and conditions and knowledge.

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