

Golf greenkeeping

A need for training and research in 1972

By The Editor

The state of greenkeeping in Britain is out of step with the development of golf. Millions of pounds are being spent on new courses, on machines to maintain them, on prize money, on clubs and balls—a few thousand are spent on research and a few hundred on training greenkeepers. Golf course maintenance risks a decline.

Firstly, from 1946 to 1959, newcomers to greenkeeping were rare. Men who should now be passing on experience are too few and their time is over-burdened because staffs are small. But there is still no other way in which the traditions of good greenkeeper practice can be learnt.

Secondly, this gap coincides with a sharp increase of players and of golf courses. New courses inevitably lag four or five years behind demand. Existing courses, built to older standards, are overplayed and new ones cannot find fully trained men to look after them. The rate of new course construction would represent a need for 25% more head greenkeepers in 10 years time.

Thirdly, many clubs tend to economise on staff hoping that new machinery will redress the balance. There is consequently no time for finesse and many machines actually produce problems which only more machines can help to cure.

Lastly, the job is not always rewarding financially and working conditions are often poor. There is no reason to hope that the attractions of an outdoor life will alone encourage recruitment.

The British and Scottish Golf Greenkeepers Associations have done what they can to improve wages, status and training but their funds come entirely from members' subscriptions and only just cope with their present level of activities. The B.G.G.A. publishes a monthly magazine, arranges lectures in the winter and collaborates in an apprenticeship scheme which has produced 109 trained men since it started five years ago. 35 more are now apprenticed.

This scheme is hampered by lack of educational facilities. Some technical colleges run day release courses but the only specialist training centre is The Sports Turf Research Institute at Bingley founded by the four national golf unions in 1929. The S.T.R.I. is primarily a research and advisory body but manages to run five 5-day courses each year, always over subscribed. A Government grant supplements subscriptions, donations and income from advisory services, but the surplus for research is small. Much present work, for example, concerns new grass strains because this attracts grants. Urgent problems of soil structure and drainage have to wait. A rough calculation suggests that the golf industry's investment in research and training is 0.00065%.

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There are three urgent needs:—

- 1 The encouragement of recruits to greenkeeping.
- 2 More and better education of apprentices.
- 3 More research into the problems of golf course construction and maintenance.

The rational way to satisfy these needs is to build on the framework which exists.

Recruitment

The National Joint Council for Golf Greenkeeper Apprenticeship now lives on its £3 Registration Fees and a number of voluntary workers. The scheme needs a full time paid secretary to promote development, supervise apprenticeships and encourage golf clubs to engage apprentices and improve wages and working conditions.

Training

Apprentices are scattered all over the country often remote from urban centres where technical colleges may not in any case give suitable instruction. Background education is, therefore, absent or elementary. A correspondence course would overcome the difficulties of geography and dearth of suitable instructors. At the same time, the 5-day courses at Bingley should be extended to a month or more and the greenkeepers' magazine should be expanded and enabled to commission technical articles and provide instruction for all grades.

Research

The staff at the S.T.R.I. must be expanded to provide at least two more Research Officers free of advisory duties and concentrating on areas of research now neglected.

The appointments and investments necessary to implement these proposals would cost about £2,000 immediately and £9,000 annually thereafter. Unless those engaged in golf by way of trade are prepared to cover this outlay, we can only look to organisations representing golfers themselves to collect it as part of annual subscriptions. On a comfortable minimum of 500,000 golfers accountable, it represents 2p per head to be earmarked for investment *in the future of the game*.

Postscript

The following is fairly typical of a number of letters I receive:

'Dear Sir,

I am at the moment employed at the Golf Club (in Lancashire) as Assistant Head Greenkeeper. I have been a greenkeeper for 7 years during which time I have been to Bingley for a week and attended a course at Wigan in connection with the National Institute of Groundsmanship. Later this year I passed the 3rd grade exam, which I had prepared for at Wigan. However, this covers a large amount of sports and does not specialise in any single game such as golf.

My position is this. I am conscious of wasting time and learning little or nothing in more practical experience. Please could you, therefore, advise me for I would be very grateful for any encouragement you could give me in regard to my future in green-keeping.

Yours sincerely,
(signed).

P.S. My age is 23.'

It is hardly possible to give this young man much encouragement at present. The proposals outlined above would at least enable him to gain the specialised knowledge he is seeking. Some golf course would be glad of it one day.