

And now Verderers?

Patrick Smartt

A Head Greenkeeper is a man of the soil. There is, in the term for a working farmer, 'mud on his boots'.

He knows the grass, on his fairways and its reactions to the vagaries of our climate. The same applies to his greens. He has an affinity with his course, though he would probably reject, gruffly, any such high falutin' idea. Nevertheless he regards it as *his* course. He is unlikely to lend an ear to suggestions offered by someone coming from a links – if he is inland. Or from someone belonging to a course several hundred feet higher, or lower than his own.

His programme for the day is dictated by the weather. A fact not always recognised by committees. Years ago, when a secretary, a Green Committee chairman asked me my plan for the week, I said that I should meet the Head Greenkeeper (with whom I worked hand in glove) at 8.50 each morning, as usual. As with the farmer, the day's work depends entirely on whether it is wet or dry.

In this era of 'progress', mechanisation may have taken some of the mud off his boots. At least one of his staff must be a mechanic, unless contractors are employed. That is a mistake. The firm, thinking of 'man hours', rush the job.

Reverting to 'mud on the boots', they say that tournament professionals can assess the pace of a green, by the feel through their shoes when walking on it. This I believe to be true, for I have experienced it. Not, let it be known, through any prowess as a golfer, but because as a secretary I used to inspect a certain number of greens every day.

That was before the club laid on water. A hilly course, the lowest

greens were 500 feet above sea level, the highest close to 700, and exposed to buffeting winds from all points of the compass. The underfoot feel of the sheltered putting surfaces was like treading on a pile carpet after a thin mat.

Away from greens, the present fashion appears to be to dispense with rough, and use trees instead. I am not one to favour the elimination of luck (raising the game to the bloomless heights of chess, as Bernard Darwin put it). But I do feel that trees are too big a gamble. Golfers grouse a lot about the kicks and lies you get from the 'umps and 'ollows on links. Surely the chances of a kind ricochet off a tree are slim indeed?

Solitary trees, here and there, add to the scenery. One, judiciously placed, can dictate the strategy of a hole. It is there for all to see, and avoid. Years of playing over bush-lined fairways in Africa have left their mark. There is no more disheartening sight than that of a ball curving deep into a wood. You are not faced with the matter of circumnavigating one trunk and its branches. Surrounded by trees, a way through, under or over, has to be found. There are times when there is not even the escape route of chipping out sideways.

There is the story of a fine amateur playing Pine Valley. It was not his day off the tee. Finally his caddie remarked: 'You don't have to watch them. You listen for them.'

Tree-lined holes even evoke a touch of claustrophobia. Which is why you will see world-class players driving with light spoons or the No. 1 iron – the most difficult club in the bag. In hickory days, unaccountably I formed a friendship with one.

If woodland leads to defensive golf by the expert, what then is the most important golfer, the club member – 'parent' or 'artisan' – to do? Defensive play seldom got anyone anywhere. Which does not mean that a

sensible 'appreciation of the situation' comes amiss. Between the expert and the handicap player, the appreciation will differ, perhaps the most important thing in golf.

Greenkeepers and their staff are hard to come by these days. Apart from the normal mowing the Greenkeeper of today has to be something of a chemist, in the mixing, or dilution, of the chemical dressings, now a must. He has, possibly to be a garage hand. The way things are going, it looks as if to his accomplishments must be added a verderer (forester). Trees, whatever the townsman may think, have to be watched.

The whole set up is steadily approaching that of an Area H.Q. in the army. G.O.C. the secretary. G.S.O. the Head Greenkeeper. Assuming that the latter is not a garage hand,

and that the club cannot afford a squad of R.E.M.E. attached to the club, there will be G.S.O.Q. (times change), in charge of 'Transport'. Then there is the question of the trees. If the Head Greenkeeper has to assume the responsibilities of verderer, one can only suggest that he recruit Macbeth, or whoever moved Birnam Wood.

I can never see troops, branches tucked into the netting over their 'battle bowlers', without becoming moved by mirth. Anyone seriously believing the countryside is moving towards him, either loses his stripes or resigns his Commission.

There is the story of two elderly golfers shouting: 'Fore' at two newly planted saplings. I do so hope that it is true. The good ones so seldom are.

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