

# Hidden depths

BY PATRICK SMARTT

ONE OR two instances that came my way when secretary to a club in the south of England, have led me to wonder how many of us know what lies below the ground we play over, and ravaged by divots.

It is possible, I would not put it higher than that, the average member knows, or cares whether the sub-soil is clay, chalk, or sandy as on a links. It has to be granted that those who play on South Down courses would know they were on chalk. From the modern tendency for lush fairways, the links might cause doubt.

On park courses, what we amateurs deem ordinary soil differs, and requires different treatment at different clubs.

There are but two people in a club who know these things—all depending, to verge on the scientific, on the pH of ground. In lay terms, that is the acid or alkali concentration in the soil. This can be measured by an indicator.

The couple are the Head Greenkeeper, and a secretary who (a) has a knowledge of the subject, (b) is permitted by the committee to run the course in conjunction with the Head man. The latter has generally graduated from the green staff. He has grown up in constant touch with the course; he can **feel** it in his bones. A good secretary can help.

The Green embraces the entire playing area, which is why the plural, Greens, is wrong. Club members are elected to the Green Committee. They come from all walks of life. Those who have well kept lawns, promptly assume they are experts. Never comparing the number of people who walk over their lawns, with those in **spiked** shoes who trample a golf putting green every day. The farmer and the agriculturist considers he understands earth and growing

from it. He does. A golf course is a different problem. For that matter, would you expect a greenkeeper to prepare a Test cricket wicket and vice versa?

Perhaps the most frustrating is a clay base. Frustrating because clay has a habit of shifting its ground, and so altering the paths of underground streams. Here, I can claim experience. There was one hole, on a high course seldom affected by heavy rain, which ran downhill from the tee. It became, in racing terms, heavy to deep.

A course born before the turn of the century, there were no drainage maps. Those splendid men on the green-staff set about it in the customary method. Lifting sections of the turf, and rodding the spaces in between. Time and again the rod came up against an immovable object. It was herring-bone pattern, leading into the main channels. All had been laid a few inches under the surface. We lifted over 3,000 pipes, mostly askew of the line. Two reasons are presented. A wartime bomb struck close to that fairway, the ground shock-waves sufficient to jerk the pipes out of position. There is today a memorial to the Canadians, camped there, who perished on that day.

The second reason is, that in those days of horse-drawn machinery, the depth at which the drains were set was insufficient to withstand the weight of the tractors of modern times. A quantity of those pipes had to be replaced. Although there were maps of the course from its early days, none showed the draining system. One of the older members of the De Le Warr Artisan club, came to our rescue by pointing out where the original 1st green had been. It was now overgrown, but we dug and unearthed sufficient pipes to fulfil our needs.

[Turn to Page 13]

## [Hidden Depths from Page 11]

We never did discover the source of a stream that ran diagonally across that fairway, but one of the staff found a golf ball some four inches below the surface. It had bramble markings—that is 'pimples', for the benefit of latter-day golfers. Obviously very old, and therefore interesting. What was left of the paint was grey, and the name, in a circular form, indecipherable. I have a smooth gutta, and a moulded one of that ilk. The ball is beside me, as I write, and reference to a book: "A HISTORY OF GOLF IN BRITAIN." Plates that follow page 81, (for those interested) leave me in no doubt it is a Haskell. The first rubber-cored ball. It was imported from America in small numbers, and contributed largely to Sandy Herd's winning of the Open in 1902.

A further example of our lack of knowledge of conditions underground, came to light when a green looked unhappy. In this, it will be observed only by those close to nature. Again we had to excavate, in the hope of finding the cause. Turf after turf was laid aside, until the surface was bare. This, in the early autumn because it was essential to replace the slices of turf, and let them knit before the frosts.

Finally, after going deeper we surprised a stream. The green was sloped downhill towards the player. There was no drainage, and the water ran too fast to favour the top-soil and the growth of fine grass to putt over. Some years before, when I first saw that green there was nothing wrong with it. Another instance of the clay changing a water course.

Further afield, there is a course on which a Roman road traverses one of the fairways. So far as I know, the club has been spared from archeologists, but one wonders what other historical gems may lie below.

The most unexpected of all, is that beneath the 18th hole of a famous

Sussex links was stored the supply, and pipes leading from it, of the oil supplied to the invading armies when they crossed the channel on D. day. The name "Pluto." will revive memories to many.

It can be argued that if a golfer plays a round, with his mind on such extraneous matters, his concentration will be poor. That may, however, ease matters for the Head Greenkeeper and the secretary. They will not be bombarded with complaints about a dandelion on the 11th, badly cut holes, and rough too long—all traceable as excuses for a poor round.

### Postscript

Within two days of completing this piece I learned of one of the green staff, searching for drains under the fairway of one of two holes built about sixteen years ago, when the course was altered. This course of my home club is on clay. After a long search, and no drains, he struck rock, not clay! Which goes to show, one never knows.

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