



A Cautionary New Year Fable

...by Fred Hawtree

I have spoken to you before of Britain's favourite clay course - that adhesive track known as Sludgecombe-on-Ouse. But that was primarily to record the fate of one of its earliest head-greenkeepers. You will remember, as a faithful reader of these priceless pages, that the man in question was Charlie Lee who developed a serious grass addiction and disappeared, believed drowned in the Ouse, only to surface 25 years later in China, where he was experimenting with acupuncture. Although still hooked on the stuff, he was having some success with the application of the sharp ends of bamboo shoots in the right places.

There has been a steady turnover of superintendents since those early days as, one by one, they have slunk off, their spirits crushed by the Ouse silt. Some, indeed, were laid to rest in this self-same material but most were unable to obtain any rest until they had reached sand, gravel, or anything with a particle size in excess of 0.25mm.

Only one man ever mastered the deeply churned wastes between tees and greens (Not to mention those between greens and tees). But his reign was even briefer than most because 'Sludgers', as the locals call it, got to him in another way. I will tell you about it while the story is still fresh in my mind so that the little details which I vividly remember may help to convince you that I am not making it up.

Of recent years I have only gone down to Sludgecombe for a few weeks at a time and, being older and perhaps wiser, I generally stay in the club-house and catch up with the gossip. There seldom seems to be any shortage... My family always took its summer holidays down there and so I know nearly all the names which crop up even if the people they belong to come from the next generation.

That fact alone would endear the place to me but there is an even stronger tie because Sludgecombe is where I learned to play golf and was first allowed on to a course. Whatever happens to a man later in life, no matter how many more testing, more beautiful or more exotic layouts he explores, the place where he

first hit a long iron right on the sweet spot and straight to the heart of the green will always occupy a special corner in his affections. I can still see in my mind's eye the dazzling white expanse of Daisies across the fairways, the Toadrush in the brown summer greens, the tattered seed-heads of Rye-grass on the tees. I can still feel the thrill of finding a deeply plugged golf ball at the bottom of a hole wrongly attributed to a burrowing animal. It is sad to think that the young golfers of today will never experience these pleasures.

But by the time of which I speak, tests demonstrated that at least 80% of the playing area consisted of grass, though of widely varied strains. Sludgers has never been too fussy about which ones. So it was generally agreed that the course had greatly improved in the forty years since the Second World War in spite of the fact that the number of greenkeepers it had destroyed in the process now totalled 27.

I think I may be partly to blame for what followed because I happened to mention casually to the Captain that this seemed to be a turn-over rather in excess of the average. I did not pick a good moment because he had only just been elected and was therefore unduly sensitive to any suggestion that reform might be called for. Moreover No. 27 had only just departed and the Chairman of The Green Committee was already interviewing applicants for the vacancy. The Captain acted swiftly. 'The Chairman', he ordained, 'would

appoint the youngest applicant... someone who would make Sludgecombe his life's work from the very start and not be all the time looking over his shoulder at other openings'.

'So be it, Captain!' said the Chairman followed by something else under his breath which I did not quite catch.

That is how young Andrew Wytchett came south from Scotland like so many before him. He arrived in the Autumn, not the most promising time, and set about showing his new employers that they had made the right decision. He had acquired all the traditional skills but, being an observant lad, he knew what was going on in the rest of the world of greenkeeping and not only tackled the drainage problems, of which there was no shortage, but also introduced new mowing regimes with which he hoped to bring out some of the moribund design features at holes otherwise lacking interest, that is to say all of them.

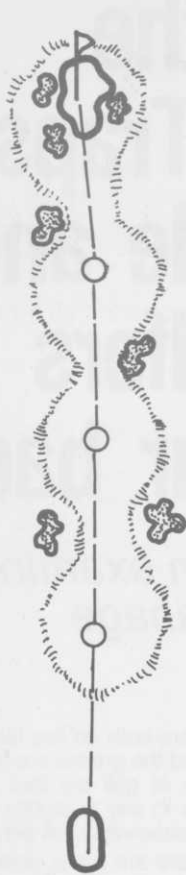
The Sludgecombe members had never seen anything like this and entered into the spirit of the thing with enthusiasm. Unfortunately, some of them entered rather too far, to be specific, the President, the Captain, the Chairman of the Green Committee, and the Hon. Secretary. We can also assume that the Professional had his say.

After dealing with the usual problems, curable at that time of the year, like 'Too much sand in the bunkers', 'Not enough sand in the bunkers', 'Mud in the sand in the bunkers', Andrew concentrated on his drains during the winter and really made great strides. The Ouse fortunately was relatively low for the time of year and there were none of the usual February floods. The Captain was able to relate how his one simple policy decision had transformed the course; the Chairman was able to say that all that had been lacking before was a firm direction of the ground staff from the top; the Hon. Secretary was able to say that it was lucky he had put Andrew at the top of the short list. The President was not able to say anything because

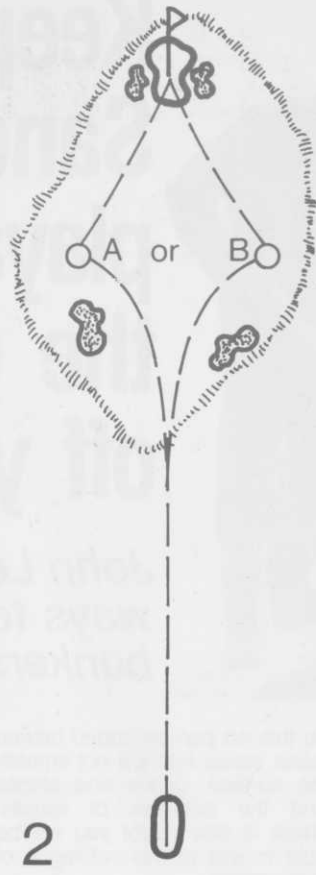
he was golfing in Majorca for the winter and was not due back till April. It was in fact the most peaceful winter that Sludgecombe members could recall. Nobody fell off the verandah at the Prize Presentation, no lady members behaved in a scandalous fashion at the Annual Dance, subscriptions all arrived punctually during January, and the flag had only to be flown at half mast twice, ten less than the average. Having established this favourable atmosphere, Andrew moved to his next programme. He started to sculpt the fairways.

Up to this point, chiefly because it was cold out on the course in the winter, he had been left pretty much to his own devices. But now the club officials felt able to get out and give him the benefit of their advice. Even the President returned from the South to seek out, like a large House-martin, his last year's nest, though not for the same reasons, and was to be seen happily engaged in conversation with the red-haired custodian of his course.

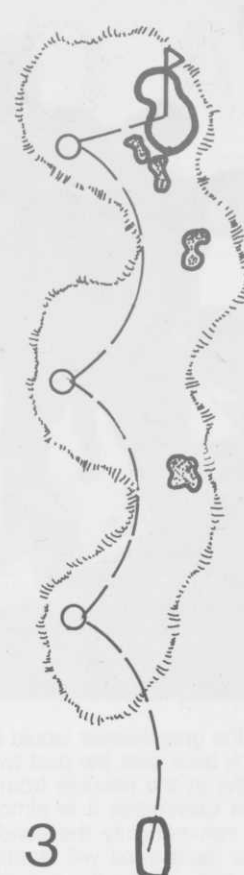
Growth was late in starting that Spring and it was not till the famous Sludgecombe flush arrived, when members swear they can actually see their ball rising on growing grass as they address it, that it began to become clear that something unusual and possibly untoward was going on. Personally I put it down to Andrew's youth and his natural desire to satisfy the senior officials of the club. I blame them for interfering or indeed imposing their own ideas on to their protégé. At all events, by the end of June, the club was in an uproar. The Professional's golf ball sales had trebled, rounds were lasting six hours and were often not completed at all due to lack of ammunition. When I arrived in July, I was just in time to record the situation before the flail mowers arrived. These sketches show roughly what I found. There were five different patterns in the new fairway shapes which I found all over the course and I was puzzled by the wide variety. Then the light dawned.



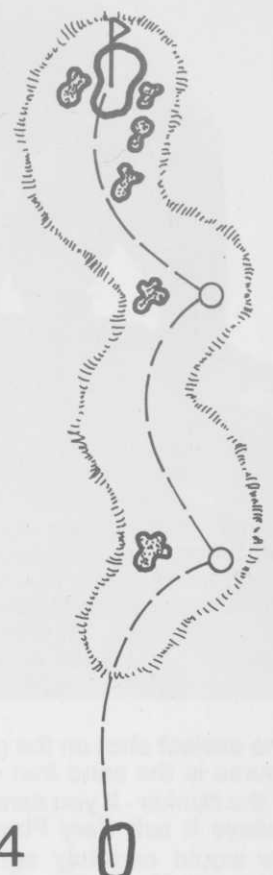
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The President hits the ball about 140 yards and is always straight down the middle. He must have been working on Andrew at the Type I holes. The Captain is long but wild. He was naturally responsible for Type II. The Chairman has always tended to produce a quick hook when under pressure. Or so he says. Actually he produces it all the time. Obviously Type III. The Hon. Secretary shapes a wily game based on the banana, and clearly adaptable to Type IV. That only left the Pro. and it was easy to see where he had put in his oar.

Unfortunately, while all the members at Sludgers regularly produced shots admirably designed to fit these patterns, they could not be sure of producing them at the appropriate hole. All Hell broke loose.

The President called the Extraordinary General Meeting for August in the hope that most people would be away on holiday but the Country Members were there in force and the Rules clearly gave them a vote however you tried to twist them. And they were as vociferous as anyone, especially as their unusual participation in the Club's domestic affairs promised at least one evening's relief from the stroll along the promenade after dinner. It was clear that heads had to roll if there was to be any hope of appeasing this assembly.

Preparing for the meeting, the President had not got much leeway. His wife's younger sister's daughter was married to the Captain. That ruled him out. The Chairman of the Green Committee was Headmaster of the school attended by the son of the President's elder daughter and exams, were coming up. A whole career could be blighted by one false step. The Hon. Secretary was a sort of cousin due to an indiscretion about which the family did not talk too much. All might be revealed if he had to go. And the Pro. had a contract. The choice therefore lay between the President and Andrew. What would you have done, chums?

FEATURE 1

Postscript

In wishing you a Happy New Year, I hope it will not take much of the *fest* out of the festive season if I inform you that **This Column** will be taking a Sabbatical during 1988 and you will therefore have to try and live without the monthly tips from the top which I hope have been some comfort to you in your arduous task. If this loss leaves a big hole in your life which nothing else can fill, then I am sorry. But I rather doubt that it will, I salute you.

1. The President's Hole

Short off the tee, 2 irons straight down the middle. Holes out in five, but has a shot for a net par.

2. The Captain's Hole

Long but wild. A hook or slice will still give him a chance for a 'birdie'.

3. The Chairman's Hole

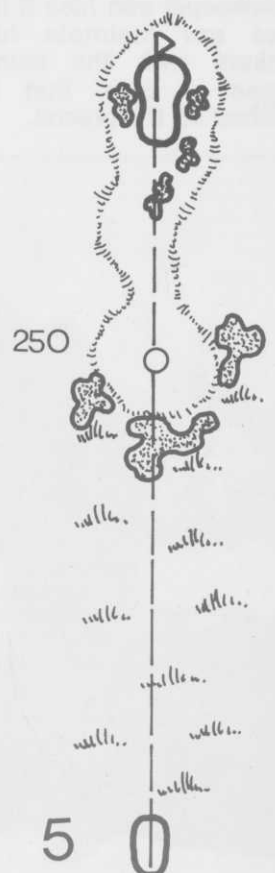
Three quick hooks and a pitch to the flag and another par is marked on the card.

4. The Secretary's Hole

He calls it a 'controlled fade', others, out of earshot say it was modelled on the 'banana slice'.

5. The Pro's Hole

230 yards to make the cut grass, while lesser mortals hack about in the undergrowth, knowing he has extracted another "fiver".



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