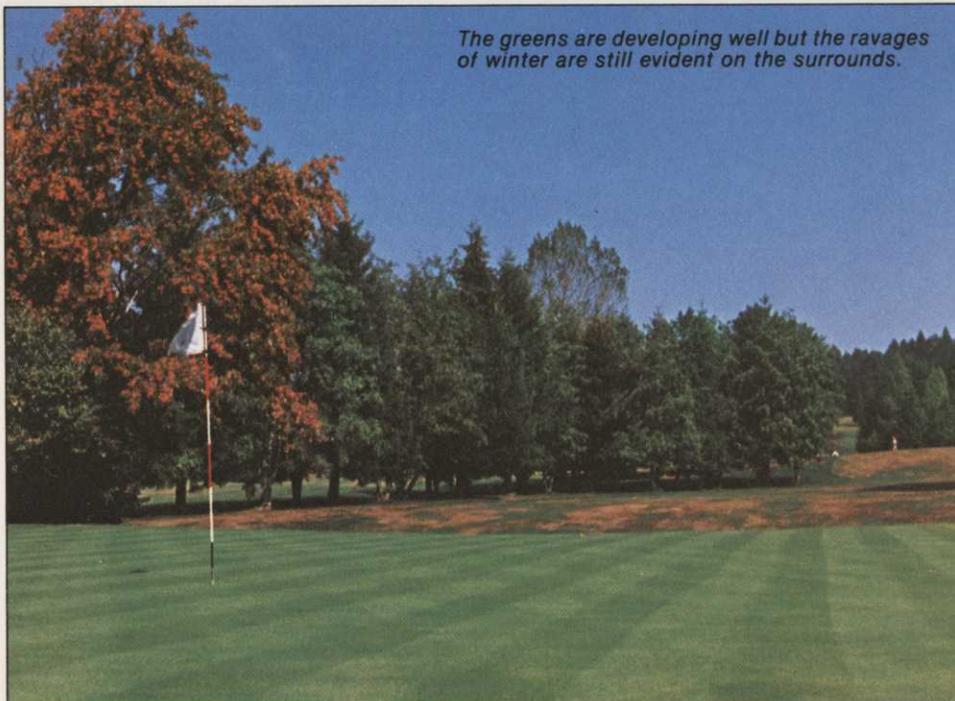


Greenkeeping in Switzerland

The greens are developing well but the ravages of winter are still evident on the surrounds.



I recently read Fred Hawtree's article on Greenkeepers abroad and as one of the emigrants who took the plunge and left England to gain experience in foreign fields it was not only of great interest, but offered advice, others with similar ideas would be foolish to ignore!

Five years ago at the age of twenty-two I was given the chance of work at the Lausanne Golf Club as a Supervisor responsible for the work of ten staff. It was a very demanding position, but after two months I was offered the position of Head Greenkeeper. However for various reasons I turned the job down and returned to England to work at the Moor Allerton Golf Club near Leeds. For the next two years I applied for numerous Head Greenkeeper positions, but at the interview stage the story was always the same - I was too inexperienced and too young for such a responsible job.

Frustration forced me to the conclusion that if I was to make anything of my life, then I had to go abroad again.

To cut a long story short, incredible as it may seem, Lausanne were not satisfied with the Head Greenkeeper at that time and once again I was offered the job. This time I accepted and so began three of the happiest years of my life.

I would like to tell you a little about my work here in Switzerland and a few of the problems I have faced. Some of them, Greenkeepers in England will recognise as similar to their own, but there are others unique to high altitudes and extremes of temperature.

Lausanne Golf Club is sixty-five years old, constructed in 1921, at an altitude of 3,000 feet above sea level. It is an eighteen hole Championship Course covering a total of 160 acres. The Swiss Open Championship has been staged three times, the Swiss Amateur on numerous occasions, the World Amateur once and this year we will host the European Seniors Championship.

The most incredible aspect of working as a Greenkeeper in Switzerland is the climatic extremes. Taking last year as an example, the temperature during the winter months dropped as low as minus 40 degrees centigrade and in a twenty four hour period we had four feet of snow. At the other end of the scale during the months of July through to October, the temperature ranged from 80 to 100 degrees on the Fahrenheit scale and in this period we had only two days when it rained.

British Greenkeeper Ian Tomlinson tells of the three years at Lausanne

By British standards our golfing season is comparatively short, more like the Canadians, April until October or November dependent upon when the snow melts and then begins to fall again.

One of the most important jobs at Lausanne G.C. is applying a long duration fungicide to the greens just before the first snowfall to protect them from snow mould. Mistime this little operation and you will probably be looking for another job!

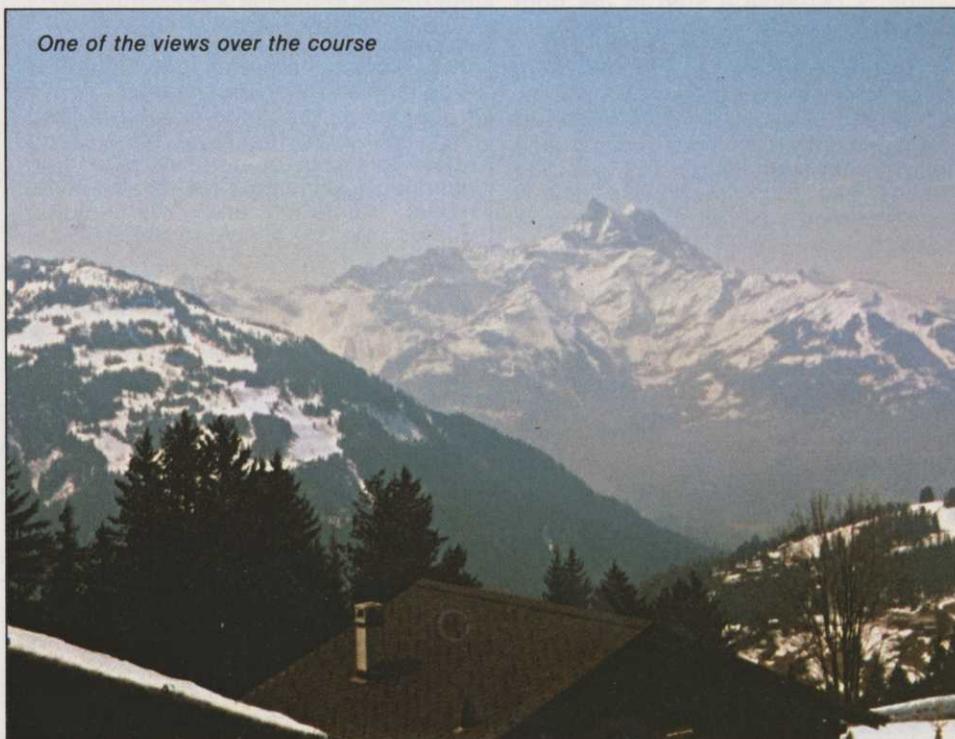
It is normal for the course to be under a covering of snow for three to four months of the year. Around mid-March I dig the greens free of snow and this hardens them off as I prepare for the start of the new season.

Once the snow has melted the real work of maintaining the course begins. Left behind are diseased fairways, uprooted trees, hundreds of broken branches and a mass of other debris left from the winter. The bunkers look as if a squadron of tanks have carried out extensive desert manoeuvres. All this has to be put right in just a few short weeks to be ready for the Summer Competitions.

But what about the greens?

They have been asleep for months under a blanket of snow and we must now attempt to encourage growth to withstand the onslaught of the members and guests, all naturally looking for the perfect putting surface. Someone suggested 'yodelling' helps. It may do but it played hell with my tonsils!

One of the views over the course





Cupressus provide a fine backdrop to the sculptured green



Snow mould damage on the green apron

My main concern on taking over at Lausanne was the soil ph of the greens which registered 8.0. Undesirable grasses were flourishing and the greens suffered badly from disease, though over the past few years regular applications of iron and ammonia has slowly brought down the ph to 7.0, which is certainly a step in the right direction.

The next problem I had to solve with the greens was root growth, in my case a lack of it. Regular aeration as a turf management programme had not been followed for many years. The most the greens had received was a hollow tining once a year, which produced a situation of virtually no root growth at all on some greens and even the best of them showed only about an inch.

As an apprentice at Scarcroft Golf Club in Yorkshire where we were taught the traditional methods of green-keeping by Mr. Jeffery Mawson, we handforked the greens. I tried this method for the last two years at Lausanne, forking to a depth of twelve inches with extremely good results. Although I may not have appreciated it at the time I saw the results of handforking at Scarcroft and how it encouraged deep rooting and this was the only method available. This year we are hoping to purchase a Verti-Drain, which is certainly a relief to me and probably more so to the staff!

Staff was a problem in my first year at the Club. Unfortunately they were a rather unruly bunch, who had been allowed to do almost as they pleased for the four years prior to my taking over. The final straw came on the eve of a major competition, when they downed tools and refused to work. Inevitable staff changes resulted from this incident and my present staff now consists of two Swiss, one Italian, two Portuguese and one qualified Englishman as my Assistant.

Language problems existed at first, but French is the local tongue and after trying to communicate in sign language, semaphore and morse code, sheer frustration and determination forced me to speak an acceptable version of the local Swiss French.

One of the Swiss employees is a full time qualified mechanic and he is absolutely invaluable. We have a fully equipped workshop containing hydraulic worktable, oxy-acetylene equipment, and an electric welding set-up.

With such a short season, you might wonder when alterations and improvements are carried out. Not in the winter, that's for sure. New constructions are done side by side with the general mowing and maintenance right through our season. This produces considerable difficulties when the primary objective is to keep the course in a first class playing condition, but it has to be done even to diverting staff to build new tees during the month of July.

As at home, the golfers will soon let you know when the rough is too long; others will complain about the work rate when tee building and there is always the man who can never understand why the course is being dug up at the very spot his ball hits the fairway. He never appreciates the final result is for his benefit anyway.

Last Autumn we had a complete new watering system installed by Watermation to serve the tees, greens, the surrounds and approached. This replaced a disastrous irrigation scheme installed some five years ago by a quite well-known company at a cost of £100,000.

They attempted to upgrade the previous system dating back some forty years, connecting the P.V.C. piping to the already corroding galvanised metal pipe and turning the system hydraulic. The old pipes could not cope with the pressure and began to leak. Sprinklers remained on and could not be shut off except by shutting down huge areas. On three of the greens one sprinkler head was considered sufficient to supply all the water needed yet others were provided with up to five sprinklers to cover the putting surface. You can see now why I called it a 'disaster'.

The only problem I can foresee for the future concerns the water supply. There are two lakes fed by a mountain stream which dry up in hot weather. We can use the town's water supply to replenish the lakes, but this is a very expensive operation. I would like to find another source of supply, but this is something for the future. It is just a relief to know that this year I should have trouble free watering, drought permitting of course!

The machinery we use at Lausanne is similar to the equipment used in the UK, the usual mowers and turf aerators supplied by such firms as Ransomes, Jacobsens, Toro and Cushman.

I have tried a variety of fungicides and fertilisers obtainable from Swiss distributors, but this year Supaturf will be supplying me with SSD for the greens and the May & Baker Rovral to counteract fungal infection. In addition I am including the Farmura range of products as part of my turf management programme.

Not many people realise the effect of air pollution on nature, but even here in Switzerland a number of our trees are slowly dying as a result of chemicals in the atmosphere. In the last two years thirty trees have died on this course some of which were less than twenty years old. It is a serious matter and who can tell what the outcome will be in another ten years if the problems cannot be solved.

As I said right at the beginning of this article my decision to come at Lausanne has given me three of the happiest years of my life, but it is a very demanding job and a great deal of hard work.

Mr. Hawtree is right when he advises caution before embarking on a new career abroad. It is a momentous decision and one that need careful thought weighing up the advantages against the disadvantages. In my case I felt I had nothing to lose and everything to gain by grasping the nettle. It was a decision I have never regretted.