

Out·On·The·Course

Tyrrells Wood

John Campbell meets the man in charge—Bert Watson

SURREY boasts some of the finest golf courses in the south and Tyrrells Wood near Leatherhead ranks among the best of them. It is laid out on the rolling terrain of the North Downs with majestic tree-lined fairways adding to the character, strategy and beauty of the golfing landscape. The architectural style of bunkering and contoured slopes around built-up greens bear many hallmarks of the original course designer—James Braid.

The fine old red brick clubhouse occupies a commanding position and can be viewed from various parts of the course through the trees. In the early days, many well-known people were members of the club. Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere were often met at the end of their round by a chauffeured Rolls or a groom with horses. Professional Eddie Ward gave lessons to the racing driver Malcolm Campbell. Before the war, when the clubhouse had dormy accommodation, Rex Harrison and his first wife Lilli Palmer stopped there.

One man who has trodden the paths of the famous and learned to appreciate the attraction and challenge of maintaining the course over the past 27 years is course manager Bert Watson. His long spell



Bert Watson in his temporary office.

of service is ample testimony to the dedication and loyal esteem he has for the club. Bert and his charming wife Lesley have a daughter Dawn, 18, and son James, 10, who has already decided he is going to follow in his father's footsteps.

Although Bert worked for a short period in a garage after leaving school, he recalled: "I always wanted to work on a golf course and when I was offered a job at Tyrrells Wood, I jumped at it." His mentor and boss then was Andrew Corstorphine, formerly head greenkeeper to the

Royal & Ancient Golf Club, St Andrews. "I learned a lot from Andrew, who was very knowledgeable in all aspects of greenkeeping and taught me much about selective weedkillers when they first came into vogue."

Bert Watson is a genial chap and a first-class greenkeeper who likes to keep his course in good shape seven days a week. He runs the course himself with three men. "We are all long-service employees—Ian Huggett has 25 years, Keith Harris and Jack Street have both been with me for over 12 years. Staff relations are excellent—it's a matter of give and take and I'm proud of the fact that we are always top of the league in the wages scale.

"The club takes a genuine interest in the welfare of all staff. We have an excellent pension scheme and bonus arrangements that are appreciated by everyone."

The course seems to cope extremely well with all kinds of weather and even after a heavy snowfall at the time of my visit, conditions were reasonably dry underfoot.

The surfaces of the above average size greens had a nice firm resilience and there was little sogginess, even after the high precipitation of January. Bert remarked that the chalky nature of the soil and regular aeration made for good drainage. "I'm a great advocate of slit tining to keep the turf in good condition all year round," he said.

The natural springy turf of the Downs makes ideal fairways—the ball sits up well, inspiring golfers' confidence, and the generous width of fairways allows ample leeway for error. Bert, like many other greenkeepers, finds that uphill fairways tend to be more prone to divot marks in critical areas. On the 17th fairway alone they repaired over 4,000 divot holes recently.

With the advantage of an abundance of trees, many of the holes are secluded, a feature golfers



The putting surface falls away at the rear of the 7th.

Continued on page 12...



Large sand traps involve lots of work to keep them trim and tidy...

appreciate. The disadvantages of trees are coping with leaves and other debris in the autumn. "We have a Sisis Litamisa for dealing with large areas of leaves and it does a good job," Bert said, "but I would like to see a machine combining the job of sweeping up leaves and pulverising them at the same time. This would speed up the composting process and make leaves easier and less time consuming to deal with."

Manufacturers please note!

As we were walking through the rough I spotted several snares set to catch rabbits. "They're mine," Bert pointed out. "If I don't keep them down, they can be troublesome and I'm partial to a bit of rabbit pie now and again!"

The rabbits invade from surrounding estates, where control measures are lax or non-existent. A few years ago, the rabbit population was decimated by myxomatosis, but now they are on the increase again. Rabbits are unwelcome on golf courses, where their burrowing and scraping activities do not endear them to greenkeepers or golfers.

Tyrrells Wood has over 70 sand traps, which entail a lot of work during the playing season. Grooming sand is always expensive in terms of time, labour and money. "I would like to see a standard type of sand recommended for all golf courses. It would be easier to order, could be used for bunkers and top dressing and much fairer to golfers, who would be acclimatised to its texture and consistency for playing recovery shots," he explained.

With today's ever-increasing play adding to the compaction rate, Bert believes that the latest ranges of aeration equipment have been a big

boon to greenkeeping. He maintains that triplex greensmowers are a necessity nowadays to get the work done ahead of play, but still prefers to see the finished effect of a good handmower on the putting surface. "I like to cut my greens just under 3/16in. This produces the kind of pace my members like for putting," he said.

Bert has never found it necessary to bring in a consultant to help him deal with problems. He is the kind of man with the ability and expertise borne of long experience to run his course smoothly and successfully to the satisfaction of his membership.

He admits there is a need for more education among young greenkeepers in the theory and science of turf culture to cope with the many situations that arise, but added, "there is no substitute for experience and having the confidence in your ability to make decisions and handle the complexities of dealing with staff,

club officials and the day-to-day running of the course.

"My long term objective for the course is to strive constantly to improve the facilities, achieve more economical maintenance and make a round of golf more enjoyable and interesting for all. This may mean altering bunkers, enlarging or making new tees, planting trees, reshaping fairway contours and a host of other jobs approved by the committee.

"I like to listen to constructive comments from my members. Sometimes they come up with good ideas," he said.

"I look forward to the winter. It is a welcome change of pace after the busy hustle and bustle of the growing season. Greenkeepers don't have time to hibernate, although some golfers might think they do.

"On the contrary, there are always a lot of jobs to be done that can't be tackled at any other time of the year. There is always drainage work, overhauling machinery and satisfyingly creative construction work, which allows the inexperienced to learn and gives the experienced man an opportunity to demonstrate his skills and ability in the art of landscaping for golf.

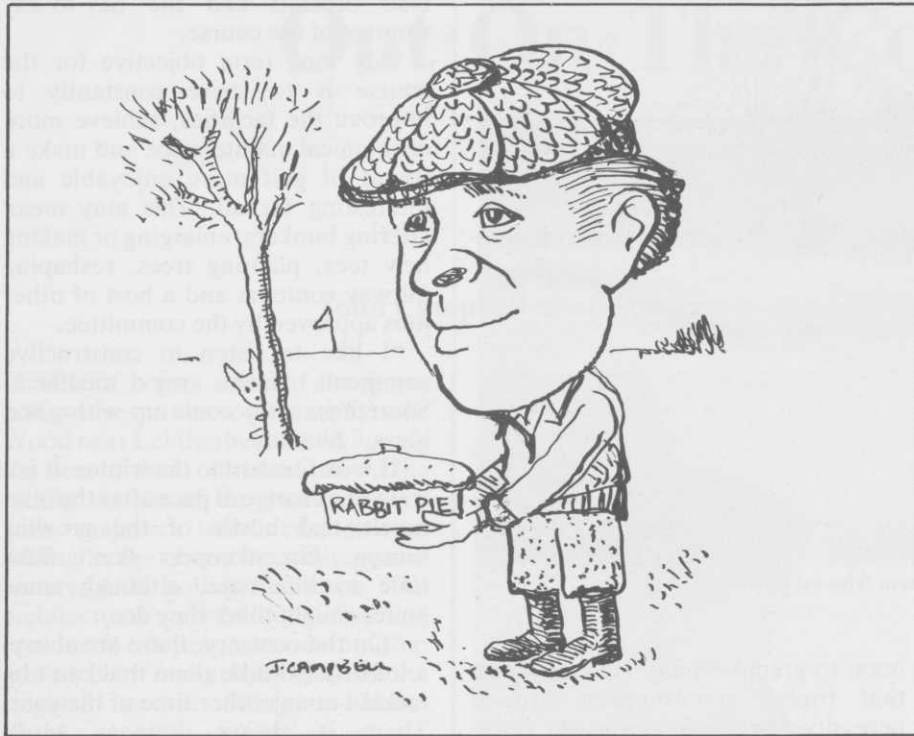
"We have a lot of trees at Tyrrells Wood and they often involve quite a lot of work in the autumn and winter. To keep trees in good shape, they may have to be pruned. When done properly, pruning can improve the health, beauty and function of a tree.

"It is also an important safety factor. All dead branches have to be removed, since a slight wind can bring them down with the risk of damaging property or causing injury. Low branches along pathways may need

Continued on page 14...



Empty drinks cans, filled with cement and painted, make useful tee markers.



removing, particularly if they are broken or have jagged ends.”

Greenkeepers who have to deal with tree-lined courses realise that maintenance of and around trees should dictate the choice of species. Autumn leaves are an annual irritation to golfers and a source of extra work to the greenkeeping staff.

Small twigs that break easily and litter the turf are common to some trees such as birch and beech. Leaves can cover a great deal of the playing area and make it rather difficult to spot golf balls. Trees should never be taken for granted—they must have proper consideration, just like turf, with individual characteristics and specified life spans.

“Some golf societies can cause a lot

of havoc and extra work on a golf course,” Bert said. “Often, they have little respect for the facilities and even less for the rules and etiquette of the game. They neglect to repair pitchmarks on greens, never smooth over footmarks in bunkers and leave a trail of empty drink cans behind them.

“Every greenkeeper should carry a pocket tape recorder. I am never without one and find it indispensable for making quick notes on the course as I travel around. Keeping accurate records and a diary of daily operations, weather conditions, etc, can be a great help when attending green committee meetings.

“Extracts from your diary can be used to form the basis of a regular report to keep the committee

informed on all aspects of the work programme or can be included in a club newsletter. Efficient business methods create a favourable impression and can help justify additional expenditure when the time comes for new equipment or the replacement of old machinery.”

Although Bert has been in greenkeeping a long time and declares that we can learn a lot from the past, he has a refreshingly modern outlook and strong views about many aspects of his profession.

“We have got to do much more for the education and training of young greenkeepers,” Bert said. “Our jobs are becoming more complex, equipment more sophisticated and the responsibilities more demanding. I think we have a long way to go with the provision of proper educational facilities for young men who want a good training in all aspects of golf course management.

“EIGGA has started the ball rolling, but a lot remains to be done for the men of the future. They deserve our united support and we should help them—now!”

Dinner-Dance Date

The Surrey branch annual dinner and dance will be held at The Drift Golf and Country Club, East Horsley on Saturday, April 28 (7.30pm for 8). Tickets cost £8.50 and are available from Kenny MacNiven, 5 Warren Farm Cottages, Warren Farm Lane, Guildford Road, Effingham, Surrey or Bert Watson, 27 Oakridge, Dorking, Surrey RH4 2NY (Tel: Dorking 881646).



Looking towards the 13th and 15th greens.



Bert points out the ten large bunkers on 18.