

The reclamation of indigenous turf

Eddie Park continues his series

NEWS that the STRI is to set up a specialised golf and bowling greens section with the active support of Jim Arthur has cheered all those with the true interests of golf greenkeeping at heart. The fact that Dr Peter Hayes and Jim consider their recommendations are so similar as to render closer collaboration essential is no great surprise to their friends.

Jim is in the direct line of descent from the old Board of Greenkeeping Research and received his post-graduate training at Bingley from R.B. Dawson and R.P. Libbey. Similarly, Peter is a botanist who has specialised in ecology of grasses and now inevitably finds himself reaching the same conclusions as to remedial treatment of damaged golf courses.

With this formidable array of expertise being mustered, there can be no excuse for clubs seeking or adopting less soundly-based advice.

Those who, like me, take an interest in vintage books on golf courses and their maintenance might recognise this extract from a book written by Norman Hackett in 1928. 'Are we in this country on the eve of an almost entire change of opinion and practice in regard to the production and maintenance of the finest turf? One of the advantages of the chemist and the scientist over the theologian is that the former are able to prove or disprove their theories. Within a comparatively short time their fellow scientists are able to confirm their hypothesis; it may be months or years but the truth is finally established.'

In passing, it has to be said that anyone who tracks through the history of greenkeeping will be amazed at the frequency with which matters have been discovered and then apparently discarded and the same old mistakes made again. Perhaps we shouldn't be though. A distinguished physician said to me recently that the extraordinary thing in human life is the way people fail to do the obviously right thing.

However, back to Hackett. He, of course, lived in Bingley and played a

very large part in the establishment of the Board of Greenkeeping Research, of which he was the first secretary. He also played a prominent role in formulating the treatments that helped to pull so many clubs out of the 'agricultural' disasters of liming and fertilising, which so characterised the 1920s. How quickly these things are forgotten!

It is clear from other articles in early editions of the board's journals that Hackett firmly believed that if experiments furnished proof that certain practices were harmful to fine turf, then people would cease to use them. Sadly, things have not worked out like that. There has been a general move, equally evident in farming and gardening, to the belief that, with new technology, man could master nature. The corollary to that belief was that golfers could order up whatever conditions they desired, regardless of ecological facts.

Attitudes

We may now, again, be at a point in history when a corner has been turned—at least in terms of attitudes if not achievements. We would do well to take stock and act wisely to ensure yet another false dawn does not occur.

I am frequently told what a pity it is that no good text book exists on greenkeeping. Perhaps early editions of Dawson and Sutton still have some merit. The last three years of the *Bingley Bulletin* provides up-to-date and sound information. The *Bingley Annual Journal* is, I suppose, symptomatic of the poor support golf has given the STRI. Bags of research on soccer and amenity grasses, but little of practical use to the golf greenkeeper.

We still hear talk of 'alternative theories' and the need to hear 'all sides of the argument' at seminars. A bit of democracy is all very well, but if it is a device to permit salesmen in disguise to extol the virtues of their system, machine or chemical it can go

too far. That is not to say everyone should hold identical views. There must be room for innovation, but we should be very clear that little is really new. Most good practices were discovered by experience nearly a century ago and had been investigated and checked 40 years ago.

Continuity, however, seems to falter in places like golf clubs. People hear of new theories, new chemicals, new machines and with the average golfer's view that course maintenance is really a pretty simple affair, the door is open to the latest gimmick. The salesman is in and although he may know nothing about the basic sciences of the subject, his job is, nevertheless, to sell his product.

There is now a real need for events to follow the course that Hackett was so hopefully predicting 56 years ago—that is for methods of management to be soundly based in plant ecology, as well as soil physics and soil chemistry and for new methods, new machines, new chemicals to be properly investigated by reputable research bodies before they are unleashed on unsuspecting consumers.

I believe the case against target golf in Britain, with resultant problems of Poa Annuua, thatch and cost, has been made in full by Nick Park in his *Golf Monthly* series. I do not propose to repeat the arguments, but rather to work on the assumption that you agree with us that in fescue/bent greens we can have, in this country, the finest golf turf in the world.

Many greenkeepers and club officials have been kind enough to share their experiences with me and it is my present task to present an analysis of the state of the art in the reclamation of fine turf. I meet and hear from many people who are convinced this is the right line to take, but have come up against the difficulties. Many have trodden a lonely path for too long and a sharing of views is always beneficial.

There are some other encouraging

factors, as well as the new alliance between Bingley and Jim Arthur. Most notable has been the splendid effort to get St Andrews back to its old self and we should congratulate Walter Woods and his staff on their success. It takes real courage and determination to produce a course like that. The reward comes not only in praise, but in the knowledge that for the millions watching TV across the world it was a most thrilling spectacle.

After hours of boredom and watching (or, more probably, not watching) some of the events on the PGA European Tour, it was magical. Much the same could be said of the Panasonic European Open at Sunningdale. American commentators rather scathingly, refer to real British golf (the original game!) as 'bump and run.' I would rather play and watch it than 'fly and splosh.'

Research

There is already some activity on the golf ball and equipment front. Thanks to the research department of a British manufacturer, we have been able to try some golf balls of lower weight and compression on fast, firm greens. Subjectively, I found them more enjoyable and easier to play but, no doubt, scientific research will follow.

The R&A is showing real interest in these matters and is to be congratulated for using some of the cash from the Open to promote higher standards in course maintenance. Money has already been allocated for research and training and other projects are being considered. At last, there are club officials considering their priorities in expenditure and moving course maintenance to the top. Thus, we have made an encouraging start to the real necessity of educating golfers and I can report that that will continue—not least in *Greenkeeper*.

So the future may be looking brighter, but we must look harder at the problems of the present. I am inclined to think that there has been too much argument and time wasted over policy setting and not enough on the difficulties of implementing policy, while satisfying golfers at the same time. Much of this will eventually be solved by the provision of adequate finance both to train and reward qualified course managers.

In the meantime, it is important for both clubs and advisors to realise that the present position is far from satisfactory. The annual advisory visit may produce an excellent diagnosis

and treatment plan, but implementation in the face of totally ignorant golfers and committees is too often doomed to failure or only partial success. Examples abound of demands for overwatering and over-feeding, as well as requests for "don't slit this week—we have a medal on Saturday."

Some golfers are now more difficult to fool. There is a great thirst for knowledge about course maintenance and in almost every club there seems to be talk of "getting rid of that meadow grass," etc. But clubs continue to be rather insular institutions and correct information takes time to get around. Committees continue to try to get away with phoney excuses, but increasingly they are being rumbled. The quite appalling conditions on some courses once the wet weather sets in can be so bad I am astonished that anyone wants to play.

It is now some years since I went to a course where, in winter, they played off temporary tees into the rough (the fairways were so wet they couldn't be cut even in October) and from the rough (having teed up again) on to temporary greens. They purchased their first fairway slitter 15 years ago, but it has stood and rusted ever since. Anyone who has to pick up the bits after perhaps many years of this sort of devoted mismanagement deserves all the encouragement he can get.

To return to my theme—you can't fool all the people all the time... I remember looking at a series of annual reports of a club where conversion of grass types to Poa annua both on greens and fairways resulted in an almost annual series of misfortunes. Drought damage, soft wet greens, disease—you name it, they had it. And in 18 out of 21 annual reports, they actually claimed there had been 'exceptional' weather. In England?

Twice this year we have seen Press reports of neighbouring courses staging tournaments where one is closed after showers, but the other stays open and play continues. You do not have to be too clever to guess where the aeration is defective. And not all punters are fooled when a course is described as being in 'marvellous condition' when they can deduce for themselves by the behaviour of ball meeting turf that the real condition is well scarified meadow grass growing on wet thatch.

That word 'condition' is not conducive to keeping my blood pressure down. It seems to me to be the word used for a totally subjective judgement by a man who cannot

recognise what he is seeing! I'm not very happy, either, to be told a course is well manicured. Manicurists belong in beauty salons, not on golf courses. Far too often, through ignorance, a committee will force a greenkeeper to use too great a proportion of his scarce staff work time on unnecessary trimming jobs when he knows the real requirement is for time spent on good husbandry—aeration, hand treatment of problem areas, top dressing, etc. They don't realise such jobs even exist. This obsession with manicuring at the expense of good husbandry is one of the chief barriers erected by clubs to make the reclamation of indigenous turf—luxury turf—impossible.

People often say to me "what do you use to thicken up turf density in reappearing colonies of bent and fescue?" Well, the answer is not to be found in a bag or a hosepipe. It lies in getting the sward into the best possible health—structurally, bacteriologically, pathologically and chemically.

At *Golf Course '84*, we heard a great deal about American methods. Perusal of an American or Canadian greenkeepers' magazine and its adverts is, for me, a frightening business. I appreciate how well they have done in managing to grow 'golf' turfgrass at all in the face of their varying difficult climates and soils. I recognise the value of some of their basic research. Just so long as they do not try to inflict their methods on us as so many are totally irrelevant to our climate.

Golf originated and prospered in the UK precisely because nature had endowed us with perfect turf for the game. In praiseworthy attempts to improve it, we must be careful not to spoil it altogether.

Mistakes

For those faced with undoing the mistakes of the past, a prime difficulty is the mania for what I call 'gradualism', which requires you to say: "let's try to get through this nasty business smoothly—there must be a middle way." We are dealing with nature—a brutal mistress and we are relatively powerless for all our modern technology. Next time you are in a bookshop, take a look at a new book by David Bellamy called *The Queen's Secret Garden*. It is a beautiful book about the 49 acres of Buckingham Palace gardens. In such a place, with such resources of money

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Greenkeeper Training continued

what good course condition is all about, prior to the disastrous two decades of over-watering and over-feeding, nor knowledge of the physics of the game which might make them more eloquent defenders of the old standards of fine, firm, fast, all-weather greens and tight lies, which is what essentially the game is all about. Worse still, they ruin lovely heathland and links courses left in their charge and eventually someone has to come and reverse it all.

Seminars are no alternative to formal training. All too often they merely provide a platform for the propagation of some nonsensical, come-today, gone-tomorrow ideas, leaving their listeners confused. I, for one, am addressing none this year and further hope that we shall see less trade-motivated meetings unless they are unashamedly designed to inform about the products or machines involved and not disguised as education.

Far better for such firms to straightforwardly entertain their customers rather than to pretend to be part of an education scheme.

KENT BRANCH NEWS

An evening meeting was held at Chestfield Golf Club in September, the numbers attending were disappointing, however those absent were the losers.

Dr. Bryn Green from the University of London, who spoke at length on the ecology of golf courses in Kent.

A survey was carried out in 1983, of 20 of the 41 courses in the county. Dr. Green made full use of slides to explain the various management practices relevant to links, downland etc.

It became evident during the evening, that the ideas that Dr. Green put forward were not so different from those of many greenkeepers namely; infertility and working with nature & not against her. Many thanks to Dr. Green for a fascinating lecture.

Our Autumn golf meeting was held on the 4th October, at Canterbury Golf Club. 30 members & guests played a morning medal & afternoon stapleford over a course in fair condition considering the amount of rainfall in the preceding weeks.

Results were as follows:

Morning

1st. Chris Lathem, 63 nett.
2nd. Paul Joiner, 66 nett.
3rd. Dick Knappett, 67 nett.
all from Broome Park.
Scratch. Mike Smith. 75 nett.
Guest. Dave Erica. 70 nett.

Afternoon

1st. George Brown, Broome Park, 34pts.
2nd. Steve Suttle, Sene Valley, 33pts.
3rd. W. Ellis.
Trade. Geogg Yelland. (Rigby Taylor) 39pts.
Guest. P. Summerfield, 36pts.

Thanks go to the Captain, Committee & Staff of Canterbury Golf Club for making our day so enjoyable. Thanks also to the following companies for donating prizes; Ransomes, Paice & Sons, T. Parker & Sons, Rigby Taylor and Patissons.

The spring meeting will be held at Rochester & Cobham Golf Club on the 9th May 1985.

On the 28th November 24 members visited the premises of Lely Imports at St. Neots where we received a guided tour of the warehouse, stores, workshops etc.

After an excellent lunch we boarded the coach for the short trip to Manns to see construction of the impressive TORO 350D. We toured the various departments, seeing each stage from chassis assembly to the finished article (less units which are still built in the U.S.A.).

Many thanks to Graham Dale of Lely and Ted and Dick Kingsland of Kingslands (Sandwich) Ltd. for their hospitality.

Among the events planned for 1985, are a visit to Royal St. Georges to see preparations for the forthcoming Open and Ransomes machinery 'clinic' organised by Paice & Sons.

Watch this space!

P. A. Wisbey Seasons Greetings to all members.

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and men, it is fascinating to see that much of the book is concerned with the variety of weeds to be found. Even at the royal household, man does not even begin to defeat nature!

We, too, cannot beat nature—we must work with it and so, again, we are back to ecology. We intend to replace coarse grass or weed grass with fine grass. That means we intend to shift to a management that provides conditions to suit bents and fescues, not *Poa annua*. Whatever the golfer thinks he would like, he can't get away from that reality.

The middle way, or doing it gradually, probably will not work at all or the timescale would be far too

long. If you can get the worst over in two years, you have a chance. Spin it out maintaining poor conditions for much longer and everyone loses patience. Too many good greenkeepers and their chairmen have departed the scene for good trying that one. It certainly takes time for complete reclamation and a lot of it. Eventually the fine grass comes back. Many panic at that stage by trying to increase turf density too fast. Be patient. One day you suddenly realise that resilience has returned even in dry periods. We then have firm, fast greens. The principles of the past (which are unchanging) have been successfully combined with the

methods and machinery of today.

I will close with a quote from Donald Steel, who is not only a fine architect and expert golfer, but a veteran member of green committees and someone who actually understands greenkeeping. "If golf is not played on firm, fast greens, it is only half a game," he has said.

The restoration of this traditional British turf does not only make for better golf—it is the only way in our climate to produce economically and ecologically viable and manageable golf turf.

Next time, we will look at the reasoning behind the policies that work and how to prepare for action!