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 postgraduate 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 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 Annua, 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 splish.'

Research

There is already some activity on the golf ball and equipment front. Thanks to the research department of a British manufactuer, 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 phony excuses, but increasingly they are being numbled. 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 is 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 in a bag or a hosepipe. It lies in the 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,
The reclamation of indigenous turf—continued...

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 explain the various management practices relevant to links, downland etc.

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.

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!