

# Learning from the past and looking to the future

'It is evident that to meet modern requirements, golf greenkeeping has to be made a profession in itself—that a man has to study to fit himself for it, has to possess some elementary knowledge of chemistry in order to understand the constituents of the food of grasses and some knowledge of botany respecting the different kinds of these grasses and the conditions for their growth.

'It is also essential that he shall be a man of observation and that he shall not be so fastbound in his acquired rules as to be unable to make for himself the deductions needed as he watches the different growth of grasses on different greens and different parts of the same green.

'In fact, if a man is to be a greenkeeper in the best modern sense, it is wise for him that he should apply himself to learning the job, as he would in any other profession, under a skilled teacher—if he be fortunate enough to find one—and, if not, to do the best he can for himself with book learning and attentive study of greens.'

That piece of good common sense was written almost 80 years ago by Horace Hutchinson in *Golf Greens And Greenkeeping*. The lack of training for greenkeepers has been apparent for a long time! Hutchinson's book comprised a series of essays by prominent golf-course architects, such as Colt and Fowler, Beale (then manager of Carters Ltd), who constructed many well-known courses, as well as greenkeepers like Hugh Hamilton, then of St Andrews. Frequently, the information seems



By Eddie Park

contradictory, but I was impressed by the high standards evident in the appreciation of applied botany and geology and soil studies.

Of course, in some ways things were easier then. Play was usually much lighter, although *Nisbet's Golf Year Book Of 1910* (Edited by John L. Low) shows many clubs with well over 400 members. A few had tried fertiliser and water but, in general, golfers still appreciated the merits of the traditional British game and there was little pressure for the target golf of today.

Fowler wrote of Westward Ho: 'The putting greens are now splendid and are the finest examples of the old seaside putting greens unspoilt by overfeeding.'

Indeed, courses tended to be ranked according to whether they demanded a complete armoury of

shots. Low himself said: 'As far as my experience goes, Hoylake is the best test of golf in England. The course seems to me to afford and to demand continual variety of strokes. The running shot, which is called for at the first hole when the wind favours, is at once complemented by the pitch demanded by the second.'

No playing everything with a wedge in those days! You sense, too, that the skill of the old-time greenkeepers was better appreciated. Sound practices and the many good sites with indigenous fine turf combined to give a respected and peaceful, but badly paid, group of men.

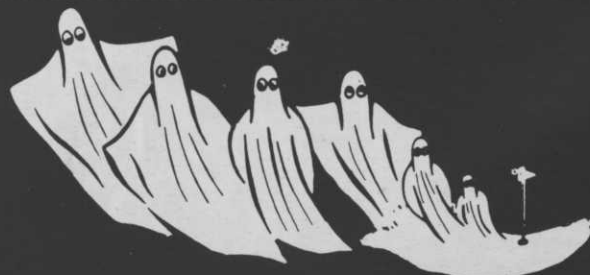
Today, all is sadly different. Much of that turf has been destroyed by faulty use of fertilisers, overwatering and lack of aeration. Golfers now believe they have the choice of a range of options and that they can order up whatever conditions they want, regardless of weather or season. Worst of all, they believe that the production of a golf course is easy and certainly not worth the expense of fully-trained staff.

Greenkeepers are, not surprisingly, frustrated and vaguely demand a higher status. This seems to comprise a mixture of financial and social betterment, together with a belief that their position should entitle their expertise to be recognised and accepted. They are divided with different factions demanding different remedies.

Some younger men want the immediate creation of a profession with colleges providing a complete education. A little research would



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show them that most of the established professions only emerged over long periods and the early pioneers saw little of the benefits. But at least it is a progressive view with a worthwhile long-term aim.

The same cannot be said of those who seem to want to retire into their fortress and pull up the drawbridge. There are some who want, in effect, an association composed solely of established head greenkeepers, which will preserve the status quo forever. This is a recipe for censorship of greenkeeping journals, the imposition on employers of a salary scale they have not negotiated, a firm policy of no consultant agronomists, head greenkeepers dictating policy to the clubs, which, in turn, will have to put up with whatever conditions they choose to give. I believe the majority of greenkeepers have more sense and are more realistic.

I have put down a few ideas, having tried to face the problems head on. So, don't switch off or turn the page because you don't like them all—try to thrash out something better with your colleagues!

Of course, the first task is to educate golfers about golf courses and I think that has begun. If it means saying what they have now is poor, do not flinch from it, but point out that it is almost always the result of unwise pressure on staff.

Let us first deal with the vexed question of who sets policy. I believe that this is not the job of either greenkeeper or green committee—rather, that both should make big contributions towards gathering the facts required before making these decisions. Policies will only stick if all members have at least a say in making them. Anything decided by a committee or individual can be overturned by successors within months.

By all means let everyone make their points, perhaps engage an

agronomist to prepare a report or address the members. But then put them in a general meeting to decide a policy and stick to it for a long period. They will have to decide which type of golf—target or traditional and the costs and consequences of each.

Architecture must go hand-in-hand with this, so changes in bunkering, etc, all come into the reckoning. If all this can be done properly, resulting in a policy document, the greenkeeper should then be protected from much of the pressure from which he suffers at present. What a relief!

The reality is that only the owner, be it club or company, can decide policy. They can, and should, take advice, both from their greenkeeper and their consultant, but they cannot be allowed to duck the responsibility of actually doing the deciding.

### Denigrate

I do not denigrate either greenkeeper or green committee by saying they should not take on this role themselves.

Having got rid of that bogey, let us proceed to consider a structure to cover the whole field of golf greenkeeping.

If we are to claim this is a skilled business, it follows that there is no place for unskilled operatives, which is only another name for cheap labour. The set-up of a highly paid head greenkeeper with a bunch of unskilled and untrained young men should become a thing of the past. Most clubs had a full, fairly skilled workforce up until the last 25 years. The need to attract head greenkeepers with a reasonable salary led to clubs recruiting young men from the bottom of the labour market and then keeping them, without training, on very low wages.

Trainees should be of high quality, carefully selected and then trained fully. The City and Guilds course was not too bad for this purpose when

properly taught by the colleges. It perhaps did not give sufficient emphasis on fundamental science subjects, tended to be repetitious, not always relevant and too spread out.

Within a year, at most, the trainee should be moving into the craftsman grade followed by further grades of skilled craftsman. Remuneration could be geared to these grades.

My impression is that there is not too much need for additional training in practical greenkeeping. Learning the job from senior colleagues is still a very good method. The trade will find it in their own interests to provide some lectures and especially training in machinery workshops.

The main difficulty now at craftsmen level is that, at different clubs, working practices have evolved in different ways and at different standards. We need some standardisation and upgrading to fit in with modern policies.

Now, all the time we have to be thinking (as do other crafts and professions) along two parallel lines. We may be able to make suggestions for future college-based training for craftsmen, but it would be grossly unfair to present staff to fail to produce a scheme that will help them. At craftsman level, my own experience of this standardisation and upgrading is that it is not really so difficult to do.

I believe the greenkeepers' associations could form a board, perhaps with some outside help, to agree working practices and appoint some regional advisors.

Big Brother? Not really. In my profession, I know that any piece of work I carry out can be inspected at random. The fact that greenkeepers themselves would be seeking to enforce high standards and, therefore, protect their clients is a concept common to most professions.

Now we come to the real crunch. It

*Continued on page 34...*

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## SIGGA At The Open

St Andrews was the place and July the month when SIGGA advertised itself in a big way for the first time at an Open Championship. We set up a hospitality tent in the tented village complex at St Andrews and this proved a huge success. Over a thousand names appear in the visitors' book and it was a great pleasure to greet so many club officials, visitors from overseas, agronomists and course architects, friends from the BGGGA and EIGGA (although fewer than we had hoped for), our supporters in the trade and so many of our members.

We feel the object of the exercise—namely, establishing a meeting place for a lot of people involved in the fine turf industry—was achieved.

In addition, groups of greenkeepers from the five sections of SIGGA came to St Andrews by bus and car each day and took over the duties of bunker raking from 1pm until the close of play from Walter Woods' permanent staff. In return, the R&A gave them free admission to the Open and provided them with a luncheon voucher and car park ticket. This was a most generous gesture by the R&A and greatly appreciated by SIGGA.

Our vice-president Walter Woods did a tremendous job for SIGGA in his negotiations with the R&A and his Links Management Committee. Hopefully, we can build on this year's experience and continue to be represented at the Open each year.

I would like to express my thanks to Jimmy Neilson,

president of SIGGA, for the great job he did as the front man who received all the visitors and made them feel most welcome.

I must also say thanks to Dick Duggan of Glencorse, John Crawford of Dunfermline, Elliot Small and all the others who took their turn at the table, making sure that everyone signed the visitors' book. Cecil George, Chris Kennedy, Jimmy Paton of West Kilbride and Alistair Connell organised the bunker raking duties to perfection and ran around all week ensuring that everything possible was done to make 'St Andrews '84' a success.

Finally, well done to all SIGGA members who came to St Andrews. Through their presence and support, we achieved our objective.



## Learning from the past... Continued

was the fact that the Greenkeeper Training Scheme made no provisions whatsoever for the further training of greenkeepers to become head greenkeepers or course managers that condemned it from birth. I don't know of any job in which you can move into a position of management without training.

EIGGA has made a useful start with a management course and, indeed, skills in finance, budgetting, ordering and managing staff are essential. But it is the implementation of policy that is so vital. It is the making of daily judgments regarding the timing, degree and arrangement of mechanical and chemical factors that is so difficult. Golfers and golf clubs have failed totally to recognise these considerable skills. Yet it is this difficulty of implementation, in the context of changing natural conditions and pressures of play, that

has led to such mixed success by different clubs—perhaps even using the same agronomist for advice on setting policy.

We are back to the need for a knowledge of botany, plant ecology and soil science, which enables practical judgment to be soundly based. Once more, we must move on two parallel tracks. Others, more qualified than I, will no doubt draw up a syllabus for college education in the future.

I am more concerned about the present and will come straight out and say that I believe it would not be too difficult to equip the aspiring course manager (or those already in such posts) with enough basic knowledge to make the job both easier and more satisfying. And also to argue successfully with golfers and committees who base their demands on unsound scientific grounds.

During last winter, I spent some time weekly with our own staff discussing these topics and setting some reading in between. I have been encouraged to see that when we now discuss work programmes, their contribution and confidence has improved markedly. This whole subject of basic sciences in relation to greenkeeping is so important I will return to it again.

Many people are now taking more interest in golf-course maintenance. This is the opportunity to ensure that a proper structure for the future is set up, but with due regard for the present. As to status, I think that subject would then seem less important. Skilled men with adequate basic knowledge to back their skills will always receive proper recognition.