

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Students attending a phase three greenkeeping supervisors' course at Plumpton Agricultural College, East Sussex wanted to know more about the role of a golf course consultant, so they wrote to the top man—Jim Arthur...

What qualifications are needed for the job of golf course consultant?

During the inaugural EIGGA conference at Brighton in 1983, Dr Peter Hayes, director of the STRI, and I stated categorically that the term could be applied only to those advisors holding a degree in natural science or an equivalent qualification.

What is the nature of your profession?

In no way should an agronomist or golf course consultant attempt to act as a surrogate head greenkeeper. His function is quite different—namely, to advise a long-term programme, which must be agreed by the man who has to put it into effect. His functions are to diagnose basic problems and causes, measure progress, advise on new techniques and machinery and ensure 'the trade' complies with sound greenkeeping principles.

In this connection, the poor design work and bad equipment of a number of pop-up irrigation firms have been improved through the British Turf Irrigation Association, which was set up with my enthusiasm and co-operation, partly to discipline the industry and eliminate inefficient operators and partly to specify minimum standards, complying with good management standards laid down by qualified agronomists.

Equally, the gross over-use of complete NPK fertilisers, pushed for commercial reasons by some companies, has, to a large extent, been discredited by the action, over many years, of agronomists.

What it boils down to is that the advisor sees far more courses, far more of often the same problems and far more new machinery and techniques than it is possible for the average greenkeeper to—however interested he may be.

But no one can know a course better than its head greenkeeper and he has the more difficult task as he has to implement the agreed programme within the restraints imposed by available men, machines and money and in the light of variable

and unpredictable weather conditions. The weather always has the last word.

The advisor can also be of great assistance to the head greenkeeper in that he—unfair though it is—may have more influence with green committees and management in securing better equipment, better housing and, dare one say so, better remuneration.

Success is essentially a matter of team work, with no one part of the team—management, greenkeeper or advisor—more important than the other.

Do you use any 'external' information or is it all 'self information'?

I presume you mean do agronomists seek second opinions or the services of outside specialists. I certainly do in such specialist (and time-consuming) aspects as drainage, irrigation and soil analysis. This does not mean that I delegate the whole job and, indeed, I define the terms of reference on which I require the expert opinion.

Equally, it does not mean that I do not know anything about these aspects and, indeed, I can claim to know a great deal more about pop-ups, as one example, than the firms installing them as I have been concerned with such irrigation for a great deal longer—some 16 years in fact.

Increasingly sophisticated equipment, including computerised control systems, makes this more and more a job for the specialist, but I still lay down the rules and give guidance on basic layouts, as well as operation of the irrigation system.

I do my own mycological work as this is my speciality and I know from experience what to deduce from what I see under the microscope. If you see a few fusarium spores, it does not mean that the turf is suffering from fusarium patch disease.

Do you have regular places to visit?

The pattern of advisory work varies considerably but certainly so far as

the STRI's advisors and I are concerned, part of our work consists of regular repeat visits—especially when a remedial programme is being carried out over a period of years. Equally, a number of golf clubs will opt for occasional visits to check that they are still on the right lines or to deal with specific problems.

Needless to say, no advisor should ever receive retainers or considerations of any kind from any trade firm or, indeed, from any other body to influence their advice. An advisor's loyalty should be solely to his client—to see that his client's interests are paramount. But the reverse does not apply! When a client wants advice, he generally wants a specific recommendation, not some vague and totally disinterested comments or attitude to good and bad alike. A client pays for advice and cannot benefit unless he receives specific proposals.

Needless to say, he is not bound to follow that advice, but it should be given without fear or favour. I am sometimes accused of being prejudiced in favour of certain machines, systems or products and I fully accept that I am. Nevertheless, prejudice, i.e. pre-judgement, is my judgement based on years of experience, for which the client pays, knowing that it is not commercially influenced.

Another aspect of my advisory work is guiding the setting up of courses for major championships, especially where the greenkeeper may not have had this experience before and, more so, to ensure a consistent standard of presentation. I do this in my capacity as consultant agronomist to the Championship Committee of the Royal and Ancient, work which I will still be doing for several years!

Are set fees involved?

Scale fees are charged by the STRI and myself—now, incidentally, the same. In other words, there is no question of charging what the market might bear—everyone pays the

same, though concessionary reductions may be made to some clubs.

Are you available for talks and lectures?

In the past, I have spent many, many hours of my time, given freely without even travelling expenses, addressing greenkeepers at lectures, seminars and courses. At times, attendances have been ludicrously low. My reward is often to be accused of self-advertisement, or to be attacked by greenkeepers who do not agree with what I have preached consistently for nearly 40 years.

I am abused in the greenkeeping press by prima donna head greenkeepers (many of whom I have been instrumental in placing in well-paid posts), who want no help from advisors and go round saying it is an admission of inefficiency if a club calls in someone like myself.

Therefore, I have decided to give no more talks for a year, especially as so many trade seminars tend to use people like myself to draw a crowd and then blatantly use the occasion for sales promotion and not education.

I am, however, a member of the Greenkeeper Training Committee and hopefully we will soon see a better training scheme than the old City & Guilds one, where the syllabus is so biased and misleading and based on horticulture or agriculture that it has to be 'interpreted' by the lecturers if it is to be of any use whatever.

Could you give an example of a problem area you have encountered

and the remedies you have given to restore first-class conditions?

There are many hundreds of courses throughout Britain and Europe that, prior to my advice, were disgraced by lush, thatchy, annual meadow grass meadows and now have excellent, fine, wiry, *Agrostis/Festuca* turf.

All the championship courses and hundreds of others in good order are maintained on the same basic management system that I have advised since joining the Research Station at Bingley just after the war. These are, in simplified terms, intensive deep aeration; minimal (nitrogen-only) fertiliser; controlled and limited irrigation; frequent (daily), but not too close, mowing; regular (weekly) verti-cutting; sensible, preventative treatment against weeds, pests, worms and disease with the accent on prevention rather than cure and regular 'compost' (never sand only) top-dressing, which today has to be mid-seasonal not in winter.

There simply is not space to describe in detail how and where this advice has worked, though I suppose better known examples are Turnberry for the 1977 Open, restored in just over two seasons from total dereliction to being widely acknowledged as superb links conditions, despite widespread criticism of its selection by the R & A at the time; Sunningdale, which suffered from waterlogged greens in the driest summer on record (1976), with six inches of stinking boggy thatch, but which, to within the space of two years, had meadow grass free greens and, latterly, Lindrick, restored to 60 per cent fine fescue greens and superb heathland

fairways inside three years after agricultural devastation.

There are, of course, hundreds of other less publicised results, but I must stress that I take no credit for these improvements. The head greenkeeper has done the work and my only credit comes from pointing him in the right direction, as well as getting the management to back him up.

I have never claimed to have invented the principles of sound greenkeeping, which have hardly altered basically (though very much in detail in response to changing pressures) since greenkeeping began. Neither do I claim any monopoly in giving sound advice and the STRI's special golf advisory service is now giving basically the same advice as myself.

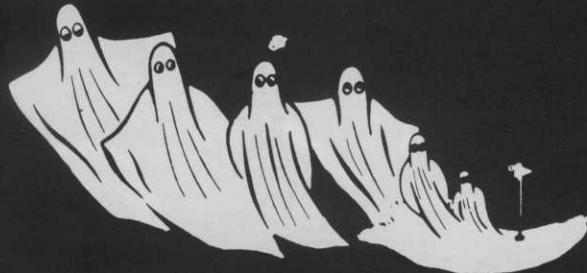
Hopefully, we may see better agreement between the practical man on the ground at all levels and the advisor. Equally, it is to be hoped that some of the mad theories being promulgated, so far as you can judge merely for the sake of being different, will soon disappear as they fail to give results.

However, greenkeeping improvement, nationally and internationally, depends upon one basic factor and that is better education. There are no quick cures, just good, old-fashioned, sound, commonsense greenkeeping methods, now advised by all but a small minority of golf course advisors.

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