

THIRTY-EIGHT YEARS LATER

Steve Donnachie will be familiar to many readers as one of the great characters of northern Scottish greenkeeping. Recently retired from Deeside Golf Club, he tells his story...

I was home after six years army service and looking for a job. It was on April 7 1947 that I began my new career and, looking back in 1985, it seems like yesterday.

The head greenkeeper at Banchory Golf Club was George Leighton, a dedicated man. In fact, after preparing the course for big events, 'Dod' was reluctant to let ANYONE play on it! Someone was required to scythe the bunkers in those days so, having used this now obsolete tool on the farm at home in Ayrshire before the war, I got the job. Part of the course had been ploughed up for the war effort and our first job was to thresh corn, clear the two fairways and sow seed.

Our main tractor unit was an old Morris car for pulling the three-gang iron-wheeled cutters, with an attachment for fitting a cart. I had a hand push mower for the greens and a Talisman push mower for the tees and approaches. These machines, although slow, did a good job.

We used mainly sulphate of ammonia with sulphate of iron in the spring and mid-summer, with a good earthy top-dressing. Of course, soon after the war, fertiliser was hard to come by. Daisies were left to grow, then cut short with the units set low.

Bunkers were scythed three times during the season, rough about four times with a reaper (Albion). With no weedkillers, clover on the greens was bled with the scythe set low. My father-in-law was a blacksmith, which was very handy.

To get rid of moss, we used water from a gasometer. This controlled the moss, but never rid our inland river-side course of it. The first motor mower we acquired was

a Jehu made by Shanks of Arbroath, a firm that has now closed down. The first Overgreen came to us via Ransomes and Bill Beveridge – alas, no longer with us. A great fellow, Bill. We in the north still think a lot of him and miss him.

It was about this time, 1951, that selective weedkillers started. We took a lot of persuading to use them, but they proved a boon. In 1959, I moved to Deeside Golf Club as head greenkeeper. We had progressed from foot-tining to the Auto Turfman. It was at Deeside that I really discovered the duties of a head greenkeeper – ditcher, drainer, mechanic, forester, soil scientist, landscaper. You name it, we greenkeepers are it!

Now we moved on to the age of hydraulics – Haan, Toro, Jacobsen. Gone were the eight hours hand-cutting, three times per week. This was now reduced to two and a half hours every day. The next step was irrigation. Pop-ups were regarded as the finest thing since sliced bread, but be wary of having them at your fingertips.

We now have machines of every type and for every type of work – aggregators, irrigators, slitters, hollow-tiners, dethatchers and tractors, everything to make life easy. But when I was pushing the old hand Pennsylvania in 1947, there was no water, no fertiliser, less worry and,

Continued overleaf...



PHOTO: ABERDEEN JOURNALS



Steve Donnachie received a gift of Edinburgh crystal from SIGGA president Jimmy Neilson. Steve's wife Jean was presented with a necklace by members of Deeside Golf Club, who also gave Steve a cheque in recognition of his service over the years. In particular, Steve thanks Mr and Mrs A Leek and the club secretary Mr I Hamilton for their thoughtfulness.

to my mind, a better type of green. Greens? They were more often brown, but firm and fiery and good areas to putt on.

There is also now a big difference in the free clothing, protective boots, wellingtons, gloves, overtime, payments to attend college, forty-hour week and a host of other prerequisites, which are all a good thing and quite a contrast to a pair of moleskin trousers, fifty-four hour week, no overtime and one week's holiday yearly. It was then considered your duty to see that the course was always fit for play, no matter when it was prepared or how long it took.

Now, I have left all this behind. On June 6, I retired and having kept a day diary for about forty years, it is great to look back at the weather, duties and oddities. For instance, Deeside Golf Club has been fully closed for play 626 days over a twenty-six year period. The members will want a rebate! I have planted about 15,000 trees on the course. Salmon have been found in the sand traps and left there after the floods have gone. Moles have let me know when a flood is due - heaps appear on top of the high grass banks.

I could go on for pages about all the ways and means a greenkeeper has of obtaining local knowledge of his course. The amount of strange stories would fill a book, but a few here would not go amiss. Like the member who kept lifting his divots and throwing them into the adjacent wood. He was rather upset when told that if all members did the same, the fairway would be in the wood within a week. Or the member walking off the green wondering why the following players were shouting fore, only to be told he had the flagstick in his golf bag! One notable greenkeeper who was asked to sweep the snow from his greens told the convener, "Nature brung it an' nature can tak it awa."

I wonder what the old notables of my early days would think of conditions now. Gibb, Munro, Pirie, Willie Richie, Gordon, Patterson - these were the cream in my book. Hard men in all aspects of life, but great chaps. The aforementioned were booked into an hotel by the then secretary. On enquiring the whereabouts of the bar, they were told to go out the front door, turn right and walk a hundred yards along the street. They had been booked into a temperance hotel!

Those days are gone, but to any young man joining SIGGA I say you are entering a great career. Enjoy it!



It must be the retirement season. Last month, Greenkeeper reported that Scott Walker had retired from Gleneagles after 37 years. Scott is seen with Gleneagles estates manager Jimmy Kidd, Scott's wife Nan and general manager Peter Lederer.

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