

The Importance Of The Green

By Jimmy Kidd, estates manager at Gleneagles

GOLF may be said to be a game literally of immemorial antiquity. There is evidence that early in the 15th century it was so popular that legislators found it necessary to fulminate repeated statutes against it, principally because it was interfering with the more important accomplishments of archery, thus tending to impair the military efficiency of the people.

Centuries later, the game was denounced by the Scottish piety who decried the pastime 'gowf' as infringing on the sabbath and hindering, this time, the 'good fight against the devil.'

Against all odds, the game continued to thrive and expand its popularity into the middle of the 18th century, at which time the gentry of the land often laid down the gauntlet over dinner. Challenge matches of all forms – 'fourballs on the green' or 'the least number of strokes from the town hall to the steeple' – proved that, at the time, the green was the least important part of any game of golf. It was the bet and the pre and post game dinners, where challenges were laid down and scores settled, that were all important.

But, by the middle of the 19th century, the game was revelling in its popularity and new societies with a clubroom and a green close by were being formed at a furious pace on top-quality land.

While local authorities wanted to provide golf for all the people at the cheapest possible rate, commercial enterprise viewed the game's popularity with an eye to profit. They set out to provide accommodation in the very best hotels with first-class golf courses offering varying degrees of difficulty for all, to the delight of the top-class golfer to the veritable first timer wishing to record his first game of golf on a classic course.

Professional golfers and architects were in great demand. The very best of prospective golfing territory was

bought up and transformed into all manner of golf holes with the architects' marks of identification still in existence today.

A golfing annual of 1901-02 lists some 1,400 clubs out of 2,695 in the world to be in the UK and all with membership lists, secretaries, annual subscriptions and professionals of golf, often doubly employed as 'keeper of the greens.'

The green was, by now, becoming the most important part of the game. Societies had recognised that a permanently employed keeper of the greens was a necessary part of any club's expenditure.

To this end, some very good golfers were taken from their clubs to maintain others. Old Tom Morris went to St Andrews from Prestwick in the 1860s for the handsome sum of £50, cheap at the price when you look at the work done by the revered gentleman, not only on the famous links, but as an architect in his own right on many more.

Knowledge

The best keepers of the greens then and today had to have an attendant knowledge of what was required in the best interests of the game. Courses were stretching as the membership lists increased and the quality of the equipment improved. The bound ball was harder, firmer, flew further and iron clubs became much more the order of the day.

None of these improvements did the courses a lot of good. In fact, the iron club probably created the bunkers in the drop areas of many links courses. Constant erosion of the broken surface by increased traffic round holes and teeing up within six club lengths of the previous hole did nothing for the drainage qualities of the 'green.' Teeing areas had to be introduced, greens had to be

sanded to improve drainage and fairways patched with seed and soil to preserve the links.

The beginning of the 20th century was a time of great debate – on the values of fertilisers for grass growth promotion, from seaweed to soot, bone meal to dried blood or both. The 'greens' were debated in the clubroom then, as today, the length and breadth of the country.

This debate is alive and well in the dying years of the 20th century, just as are the ideas and ideals of today's greenkeepers who manage some of our very best golf courses, recognised the world over for the quality of the architecture and protection of the natural experience of a game of golf in the UK.

Our courses are not overly manicured, but managed in harmony with nature, allowed to dry out at times to preserve the natural species of grasses indigenous to the area, drained to take the water off the top few inches as quickly as possible, allowing the soil to dry out and heat up quickly, especially in the spring as this is the essence of early growth.

Courses are fertilised little and often today, with similar organic nitrogen sources as our mentors at the beginning of the century, providing consistent steady growth. Automatic irrigation systems act as an insurance against the house/green being burnt down, with watering used merely to keep the plant alive.

The aim today, as in the past, is the provision of lean hungry grasses able to withstand the uncertainties of our climate – grasses working for the keeper of the greens instead of him working for them.

The maintenance of our golf courses has reached the age of high sophistication, with all manner of high work rate machinery for a multitude of operations to cope with and provide for golf's continued popularity the world over.