

JACK LOOKS BACK!

Greenkeeper correspondent John Campbell spoke to Jack McMillan (Sunningdale) about the 'old days.'

WE often discuss the wisdom and methods of an older generation of Scottish greenkeepers - long experience of turf upkeep certainly taught them a lot. Those that I knew were very shrewd characters - overuse of fertiliser was something they studiously avoided.

They knew what it was like to push a 16 inch Certes mower over a green during vigorous growing conditions and for that reason they cunningly kept the use of turf stimulants to a minimum.

There are not too many greenkeepers around nowadays who know what it is like to physically shove a hand mower over six or nine greens three times a week. Keeping your machine properly set was an art that you had to become familiar with to do a good job. The secret was to keep the cylinder reels razor sharp so they would spin freely.

I recall some of my early days as a young assistant greenkeeper at East Renfrewshire Golf Club, where there were many open ditches. It was difficult to mow close to the edges with gangmowers, so the fringes of water hazards were kept tidy with a little Pennsylvania side-wheel mower. Steep bunker slopes and banks around tees were laboriously mowed this way.

It demanded sheer brute strength in your legs and arms to propel the machine through soft, heavy growth. The art of scything was something that every greenkeeper learned to keep down long grass in awkward corners of the course.

One of my jobs was to mow along the edges of what seemed miles of ditches with a side-wheel mower. It was a struggle to keep it delicately balanced on one wheel as you pushed the machine along the slippery edge. It was all very hard work, calling for a certain amount of

finesse and dexterity to skilfully avoid landing up with your mower in a deep ditch.

We mowed the greens twice weekly with a 16 inch hand mower. When there was a lot of growth, we used to cut them three times a week. Mowing six greens was considered a morning's work. In the afternoon, my job was to hand sieve and mix a barrow load of seed and soil for the repair of divot marks on fairways. We usually concentrated on the landing zones and tees were also done at the same time. We were expected to wheel the loaded barrow from the sheds to where the work was to be done.

The only powered mowers were two 18 inch Atcos - one with a kick start, the other a crank handle. It was my job to cut aprons and green surrounds with one of these machines every week. The tees were cut with the other machine - each of these tasks was usually considered a good day's work for a man.

We had no earthmoving

equipment for construction jobs and I can remember building a cut and fill tee at the 11th hole where it was all pick, shovel and wheelbarrow work. It involved digging into the face of a hill and using the spoil to build up a new tee.

Our methods were simple and the materials used were what was available to us on site. We built a number of tees and greens by these primitive methods and I'm pleased to say that they are among the best on the course, well able to cope with an ever-increasing amount of wear and tear.

Tractor-mounted equipment for excavating was unknown - drainage systems from main leaders down to laterals were all dug out by spade and shovel. Thousands of yards of field tiles were laboriously transported from the sheds in wheelbarrows to avoid tracking up the course with tractor and trailer wheels.

We always took vainglorious pride in proclaiming that golf was cheap in Scotland. Consequently, course budgets



Jack's family 'team' is headed by wife Rita.

were always fairly meagre, putting strict limits on the amount of cash we could spend on course upkeep. It was not until the 1960s with an increasing interest in the game created by the media and TV, that we found more money becoming available to allow a greater investment in staff, machinery and equipment.

Higher subscriptions, increased membership, more golf society play and one-armed-bandits all contributed to the growing affluence of many clubs and they found more money to spend on the course than before.

Coinciding with all this, we began to see the introduction of expensive, highly sophisticated labour-saving machinery. Those who for years had been accustomed to running courses on a shoestring, suddenly found themselves being swept along by the relentless tide of automation. Clubs were beginning to realise they had to spend on plant and machinery to maintain their courses at a higher standard and also to cope with all the problems created by the ever-increasing amount of play.

Looking back on my early career in greenkeeping, it was accepted that most of the work required a certain amount of sweat and toil. Manual labour was more plentiful and jobs were filled by convenience without particular regard for qualifications beyond the need for physical stamina.

Our knowledge was acquired by observation, asking questions, listening and gleaning what information we could from older and more experienced men. Job improvement evolved largely through ingenuity and the need for less laborious methods - there was little opportunity for educational improvement.

I am pleased that modern sophisticated machinery has taken so much of the drudgery and backache out of the work and has helped us to accomplish many jobs more efficiently and economically. The future is bright for young men now coming into the business. The job is more challenging and the rewards commensurate with the responsibility of running a first-class golf course. ●

PARKLAND PROBLEMS CONTINUED...

gone, greater care is necessary in all everyday greenkeeping tasks. Machinery must be maintained to high standards. Oil or petrol leaks can be disastrous on slow-growing, at times, near dormant, turf.

Cutting cylinders should be razor sharp for use on tender turf. Regular backlapping, even weekly on greens mowers, is most important. This is all made much easier if the equipment is maintained and replaced on a planned basis.

Obviously, low-density turf cannot absorb vast quantities of sandy top-dressing at one time. Several light dressings, spread through the season, are necessary. This treatment, with adequate staffing and mechanisation, can be achieved with little disturbance to play and further helps to smooth the putting surface. For example, this year I plan to give five or six dressings at half a tonne per green throughout the summer and a final double-rate dressing in the autumn.

The frequency of aeration usually recommended on our heavier inland soils, between weekly and fortnightly, presents some problems. On a thin turf, with inevitably some bare areas, frequent slitting will cause some surface disruption. But, with care, patience and well set up machinery it can be minimised. Disturbance decreases as time goes on.

Commonsense would suggest that weak *Poa Annua* should be more disease-prone than healthy *Poa Annua*. In fact, it is less likely to suffer severe attacks of *Fusarium* patch. Fungicide use drops dramatically with lower applications of water and fertiliser. The money saved could be spent on top-dressing - quickly, before the club treasurer notices!

On the other hand, starved turf is susceptible to Basal Rot, caused by the fungus *Colletotrichum graminicola*. It attacks *Poa Annua* mainly, so chemical treatment is not required - even if it were possible. It starts innocuously enough with a slight yellowing of the leaves but, combined with starvation, it can devastate a *Poa Annua* dominated area.

The policy stated minimum use of fertiliser and water. But how much is minimum? Commonly recommended fertiliser mixtures are zero phosphate, zero potash, a little nitrogen, plus iron. The aim is to kill the *Poa Annua* over a number of years - not all in the first year. You cannot continue to supply the nutrients essential for healthy growth of *Poa Annua*.

The same applies to irrigation. I try to keep *Agrostis* thriving, while *Poa Annua* is continually under stress. Just how far you can push it depends on how well you have done your public relations, how committed the green chairman is and how thick skinned you are.

Golfer education is a good idea - try to get as many members on your side as you can. A folder of appropriate articles left in the clubhouse certainly helps. In the height of summer, I keep the greens dry and keep out of the bar! In the autumn, I reappear to remind the moaners that the greens are good in winter because they were dried out in summer.

These are some of the problems commonly found in the management of a parkland course. Some, such as excessive growth, can be solved with money and manpower. Weeds and worms can be treated with accurate and intelligent use of chemical technology. Lastly, the problem of the turf quality has to be tackled with guts, determination and not a little diplomacy.

To the golfing purist, parkland courses can never be ideal. But they are the most numerous and are usually conveniently sited. It is the course manager and his staff who allow golf to be played at all. The greater their skill and professionalism, the better the golf.

In conclusion, I believe that we should have good golf courses that happen to be on parkland and not parks where golf is sometimes played.

It is the golf that matters - not the park.

● *The above text formed an acclaimed paper delivered by Martin Jones at the recent EIGGA conference.*