

TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT(?)

WE ARE always being told – especially by those who do not know anything about greenkeeping methods – that there are alternative schools of thought in greenkeeping. This, in fact, has been a problem from which greenkeeping has suffered since its earliest days. In the sense that there are opposed theories, or that there is good and bad greenkeeping, there may be an element of truth in the contention, fostered especially by those who have little knowledge of the physical principles of the game and equally by those trying to find new markets for products, that, in most cases, have little or no relevance to true greenkeeping practice.

What has altered, of course, is that golf is no longer a game played by a handful of enthusiasts outside Scotland and by the majority of Scots, however far from their native heath. Equally, it has also become a spectator sport with massive commercial overtones. You wonder when watching the Open Championship, let alone a major tournament, and listening to the comments of near-by spectators, whether they have ever been on a course before, let alone held a golf club. One man was heard to say at a major event that he thought it was “the prettiest course he had ever seen.” He enquired which green he was looking at and was not in the least abashed when told that the admired turf was, in fact, the fairway and ryegrass at that! And this was from one of those who had *paid* to watch. What of those who watch only on TV?

Greenkeeping has had to alter drastically to accommodate far more intensive winter play and techniques that were standard practice only a decade or so earlier are now impossible to implement, partly because of the lack of time and partly because, with busy courses, you cannot get at the greens for golfers.

Top-dressing is a typical example. Not so many years ago, greens were closed in late autumn and very early spring and heavily top-dressed – often with far from finely screened material, which was brushed in as and

By Jim Arthur

when the greens dried out. In those days, there was no winter play to talk of and so the pin could be placed on the apron without serious inconvenience or subsequent damage and even if it took three weeks before the top-dressing was absorbed, few grumbled.

Today, to top-dress when there is no growth is fatal because, even if there is no growth to aid absorption, there will still be plenty of traffic, smearing and smothering the turf and disease is inevitable. Midseasonal, little and often, applications of necessarily finely-screened materials has had to replace this pattern.

In passing, I must comment that fusarium is widely reported as being an increasingly serious disease. This is a classic example of the first error of logic, namely correct observation, but wrong deduction. I am reminded of the young medical student being taught that he must both observe accurately and deduce correctly if he wished to make accurate diagnoses. Strictly in accordance with his tutor's instructions to go out and observe the human race, he found himself in London's Windmill Theatre and observed correctly that the first few rows were occupied exclusively by balding old gentlemen. He, incorrectly, deduced that watching nudes induced baldness! So with fusarium!

Fusarium

Indeed, there is a great deal more fusarium about and the damage to some greens throughout autumn and winter has been so great that they are virtually unputtable. There are a number of reasons for this. First, our EEC masters in Brussels have decreed that the use of the super-efficient mercurials should be banned (despite the very low rates used in greenkeeping). So, we have to apply less efficient fungicides more frequently. The main reason, however, is

management and if greens are heavily fed with fertilisers in late summer and heavily top-dressed when there is no growth, disease is inevitable and often almost uncontrollable – especially as such treatment creates annual meadow grass dominant greens and this grass is especially susceptible to disease.

I still find errors of greenkeeping being perpetrated – ammonia and iron applied in autumn instead of straight iron; top-dressing applied after growth has ceased or greens not mown or brushed regularly, inducing high humidity levels and thus disease.

It is all the more regrettable and a serious retrogressive step that we hear of some fertiliser companies (not those, I hasten to add, that have supplied the majority of clubs with their modest needs for nitrogen only, which is all our courses need) pressing the sale of autumn fertilisers. Surely, no one, save those with a commercial axe to grind (or fungicide to sell!) now advises NPK fertilisers in autumn. Few, *if any*, advise anything other than light nitrogen applications in spring and summer. This is no new fad. Ian Forbes of Stewarts of Edinburgh confirms in his letter (reproduced here) that the use of nitrogen only – as soot – goes back as long as greenkeeping history.

Another factor that encourages a greater incidence of disease is linked with the fact that trees grow! Unless sensible tree management is enforced, thinning out too closely planted trees and clearing scrub and undergrowth near greens and tees (which shade and increase humidity), light and ventilation are reduced and disease is encouraged.

We are constantly bombarded with news of this and that ‘marvellous new product’ – the result, we are told, of years of research. Such research as has been done is almost always concerned with topics totally unrelated to greenkeeping, or even to UK farming. At one research station, some years ago, I was very impressed with the depth (and cost) of weed-killing research. I was, however, equally

surprised to find that almost all the research was, at that time, concentrated on one weed - Morning Glory (*Ipomoea*), which I was assured was the worst weed and most difficult to control of all tropical crop production.

Naturally, in the course of true (multi-million pound) research, products discarded for the purpose of that specific research may have spin-off value, which can be investigated in other aspects of cultivation, but the truth is that virtually no *fundamental* research is done (or has ever been done) into specific greenkeeping problems.

In greenkeeping, we use only products that have a major agricultural use. This should not be construed, in any way, as denigrating the *investigatory* work - i.e. checking products and the claims made for them - but this is not, in the strictest sense, research.

The pathetically small sums that golf generally still contributes to the work of the Sports Turf Research Institute can never be expected to produce results for golf. In no way is the substantial contribution now being made by the R & A to the STRI not acknow-

ledged gratefully by those of us who want to see Bingley fully regain its place as the centre of such investigatory work, if only to provide an authentic, independent counter to extravagant claims or mad theories, but it is not, and never can be, research.

Current propaganda about the benefits of research into fertilisers in greenkeeping, made by firms serving largely the agricultural market, is nonsense. We do not want phosphates and very little, if any, potash in greenkeeping. The use of nitrogen on any well-managed course must be minimal. Few clubs with good courses spend more than £100 to £200 a year on fertilisers as such - compared with 25 per cent of American clubs which, we are told, buy the equivalent of £35,000 a year.

My message to the new entrants into the fertiliser game is that the market is so small that it is not worth exploiting! Their reputations, as well as the courses, will suffer serious harm by adopting agricultural standards and practices. Keep your ideas for agriculture.

I know of no adviser without commercial attachments advising

NPK fertilisers for golf courses today. I am sure that any who do will not fail to tell us why, if they still are!

Firms extolling their soil analysis service should quietly forget about it. Such analyses tell the experienced greenkeeper or adviser nothing that he should not be able to deduce from the character of the vegetative cover of that soil. If the pH turns out high - i.e. over pH 5.5-6.0 - what can we do about it? Precious little, save increase the sulphate of iron dressings or think of applying sulphur to wet, badly draining clay fairways. If it is very high (pH 6.5 or over), this need not be a nuisance *if* the soil is sandy - e.g. links turf, due to its receiving heavy applications of shell (and thus lime) in blown sand, but no clay in the 'soil'. If it is low, give thanks - certainly, *never* apply lime!

I still hear of nitro-chalk being applied to acid fairways - irreversibly altering the acid-tolerant grasses to alkaline-loving ones (and creating lush lies) but, of course, 'nice and green' fairways. Usually, all such turf ever wanted is air!

The main difference today in presenting courses for a tournament or an R & A championship can be simply described by the fact that the R & A has no wish to alter course character (and course design only where it is necessary to improve course handling). They would not select courses where massive upheaval is necessary.

Furthermore, the R & A - and I know where the championships are to be hosted years before the event and long-term planning is possible.

With professional tournaments, the accent is on 'tarting' up the course often at short notice for the week of the tournament, so that everything appears lush and green under the eagle eye of the television camera. Often substantial commercial interests are at stake in associated hotel complexes and, since the hotel will be dealing with largely unskilled golfers who measure quality by colour, who can wholly blame them?

In case I am accused of being patronising, let me make it clear that the biggest problems facing those like me who strive to retain old standards and thus the

Continued on page 9...

Dear Jim

As a regular reader of your articles, which I enjoy immensely, I just felt that I had to write as you recently mentioned that soot was a slow-acting nitrogen fertiliser. It brought back memories of long ago.

I have vivid memories of which bags of soot arriving from the various chimney sweeps with which the company maintained connections. The soot came in hessian sacks with about as much soot on the outside as there was inside and it was an absolutely filthy job handling them.

However, the real snag arose when we had to put the soot through a riddle in order to remove lumps of stone and cement that had been disturbed from the old city chimneys during the sweeping process.

Not only was the soot sought after by greenkeepers, but also professional gardeners used it as a repellent to carrot and onion

fly. They dressed it along the drills.

The view was also expressed that the continual application of soot particularly to light soils helped them to warm up as the dark colour absorbed more of the sun's rays. This sounds reasonable and it was certainly an act of faith with many of the older gardening brigade.

Unfortunately, most of our records were burnt during the war, but it might interest you, in view of the eternal argument about fertilisers, if I give details of the oldest mixture I can find, which was Stronghold Grass Manure in 1901.

The mixture was 8cwt bone meal (very finely ground), 4 per cent nitrogen, 3cwt Liebeg's Guano 6 per cent, 3cwt dried blood 12 per cent, 3cwt super phosphate 35 per cent, 2 cwt potash and 1cwt sulphate of ammonia making 20cwt in all.

*Ian Forbes, Stewart & Co
Seedsmen, Dalkeith.*

Jim Arthur – Continued...

character of the game, is that most golfers are *not* category one players, by definition. Too many high-handicap golfers seem to get their kicks by getting on green committees and endeavouring, thereby, to impose their ideals – soft target greens and lush leafy lies – on everyone. When I have remonstrated with them that this inevitably means long periods on temporary greens in winter, they inform me that this is no concern of theirs because they play little or no regular golf in winter.

Perhaps we should yearn for the days when, as Bernard Darwin used to say, golf was a game played by all Scots and some gentlemen and no gentlemen dreamed of playing golf before May 1st! At least then course management was left to the con-

trol of the fanatic few who opted for all-the-year-round golf – quite apart from the fact that there was no money to waste on fertilisers, etc., and so few mistakes were made. Those that were, were made on a modest trial basis to save expense.

Today, those in charge of presenting courses for a one-week tournament seem to go overboard with money, spent on a scale that is breathtaking in its extravagance, with little thought for the repercussions in the state of the course for the other 51 weeks of the year, not to mention massive expenditure on fungicides, deworming, weed control or doomed attempts at reversing the lush meadow-like character that such over-generous treatments bring with them.

Golf, thankfully, is still a game controlled by amateurs for amateurs and the ugly face of commercialism has been limited, if only because few clients have the money, even if they lack the sense, to implement gross expenditure on the American scale, which seems to me to be the aim of too many tournament profes-

sionals, though, thankfully, not all. I should, perhaps, qualify my remarks by observing that I count many *club* professionals among my personal friends, especially when they are such devoted servants to their club.

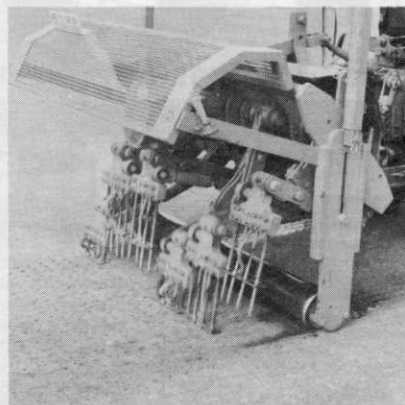
Equally, I am well aware that there is still something very much wrong with the management of many of our courses. I tend to see those not without problems, but those that have taken the first step to solving them by admitting that there are problems. There must be hundreds of courses in Britain that never see an independent adviser. At best, they only see a series of trade reps, some, but by no means all of whom, put sales before science. Members at those clubs accept three inches of soggy thatch as inevitable 'because their course is on clay not sand.' Yet, many of our best courses are on clay. There is not much sand at Walton Heath, but there is no thatch on its excellent all-weather greens and fairways. Everything hinges on proper management and that, in turn, means proper greenkeeping education, but that is another story!

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