

# "Ah, I remember it well...!"

**IN conversation with a group of young greenkeepers on a training course the other day, one or two questioned whether greenkeeping was all that different in the immediate post-war years when I started advisory work and which period they clearly equated with the start of life on earth, writes Jim Arthur.**

This made me think because, when I looked back, I realised that the greatest changes did not really start until much later. I make due allowance for the tendency of the old to philosophise on the past and to remember what they want to remember, but I have always had a good memory!

It seems hard to accept that the first Auto Certes was produced in January 1950 and the Paladin not until 1961. Up to that time, most greens were mown with hand-pushed Certes or the equivalent, needless to say, *not* every day of the week.

The controversies over triplex mowers, which still keep returning, were then centred on the Overgreen, first produced in 1937 and the last of which was made in 1963. Because the units could not be 'lifted,' the machine had to be turned on the putting surface. The technique, I well remember, was to turn, very slowly and under the momentum of the machine and not under drive, to avoid scalping the ends. This resulted in the greens having to be mown one half in one direction and the other in reverse, leading to dark and light half-greens.

We had the same nonsenses talked then about nap and different putting speeds as we do today, with the alternate wide stripes with a triplex. Incidentally, the same embargo on turning under power on putting surfaces applies as much to modern triplex machines as to the old Overgreen. I fully agree that some greens are so designed - or, like Topsy, just grew - with tightly surrounding mounds (so characteristic of Braid's courses); steep banks; close bunkering or very narrow surrounds, making it impossible to turn off the green, that they do not mow satisfactorily with a triplex.

I am all for the occasional cut with a 'hand' machine, but it is more important to mow every day, including weekends, in peak growth seasons and also to verticut as often as weekly - this is impossible without triplex mowers.

What the controversy is all about, as with so much in greenkeeping, is in the eye and the TV camera lens! The narrower stripes look nice, so they are put on by a dawn cut with 'hand' machines for the Open, but the main cut the previous evening is often with a triplex.

The first triplex mowers came into this country in the very late 1960s and did not take off until the 1970s. I well remember criticising (and being abused by) agents selling triplex mowers on the basis that, since all the greens could be cut with one machine and one operator instead of three, the machine could be paid for by sacking two greenkeepers. As one old Scot enquired, "does yon machine build tees in winter?" Of course, machines do not save men - they save time on a golf course, keeping essential work ahead of play.

## Laziness

It always annoys me when pompous members hold forth on the laziness of greenkeeping staff. "Never see anyone working on this course," they say. But if play catches up with, for example, mowing, this doubles the working time with unproductive delays. In any case, the greenkeeper was out working at first light before the aforesaid member had probably emerged from his bed!

Pop-ups came relatively late - the first five courses had them installed in 1965. The early systems were very inefficient, using the only equipment then available. Indeed, almost every system installed in the first decade has been substantially upgraded and improved to get better coverage and, therefore, making it possible to use less water. All too often, the early systems dumped water in the centre of the greens and left missed areas. Equally all too

often, by a thought process the logic of which eludes me, pop-ups were then set for longer periods in a predictably futile attempt to catch the missed areas, thus aggravating the effects of uneven application and so thatch started.

In fact, thatch was a very rare problem forty years ago. We were emerging from war-time austerity in every sense. No fertilisers could be used in the war and everywhere reverted to more natural swards. Few courses had irrigation and many of those with pre-war installations had suffered damage to them from war-time ploughing up of some fairways. There were certainly problems of neglect, which are always much easier to correct than those of misguided kindness and over-feeding.

The pressures on turf were, literally, far less, with fewer people playing, especially in winter. Membership figures were not all that much lower, but there were many more non-playing members and only a handful of fanatics played winter golf, except on links courses and in Scotland generally. This meant that winter work could proceed with minimum notice, let alone objections by members. We used to say, thirty years ago, that a good greenkeeper could lift and relay a green and have it back in playing condition without more than a handful of members knowing the work had been done.

Prior to more efficient machines, enabling more intensive routine aeration to be carried out, it was a common pre-war practice to lift one green a year, especially on sandy courses, fork over the base and relay. Today, we dare not, and would not, get away with it, so we Vertidrain instead!

I suppose the big changes in techniques came with the increasing popularity of golf, engendered by television coverage, and the associated golf boom of 20 years and more ago. This was accentuated by many new courses being built on basically 'unsuitable' land, as sandy heaths and links were naturally in short supply near the main urban areas.

The effects of extra play, and more winter play especially, had to be counteracted by more aeration. There is still debate about how to aerate greens, though I note with quiet satisfaction that some of the more extreme views have since been modified. No-one denies the need for more aeration. Yet, thirty and more years ago, many greenkeepers were aerating greens once a year only and fairway aeration was not carried out, if at all, more than once a year, despite the fact that SISIS brought out its first (horse-drawn) fairway spiker in 1936!

## Mechanisation

Changes in mechanisation of greenkeeping equipment have taken place in two phases - first, putting engines on hand machines in the 'fifties and then putting man on as well in the late 'sixties. The next phase was to treat tractors as tractors and not as horses with direct-mounted machines - aerators as well as mowers for greens and fairways alike.

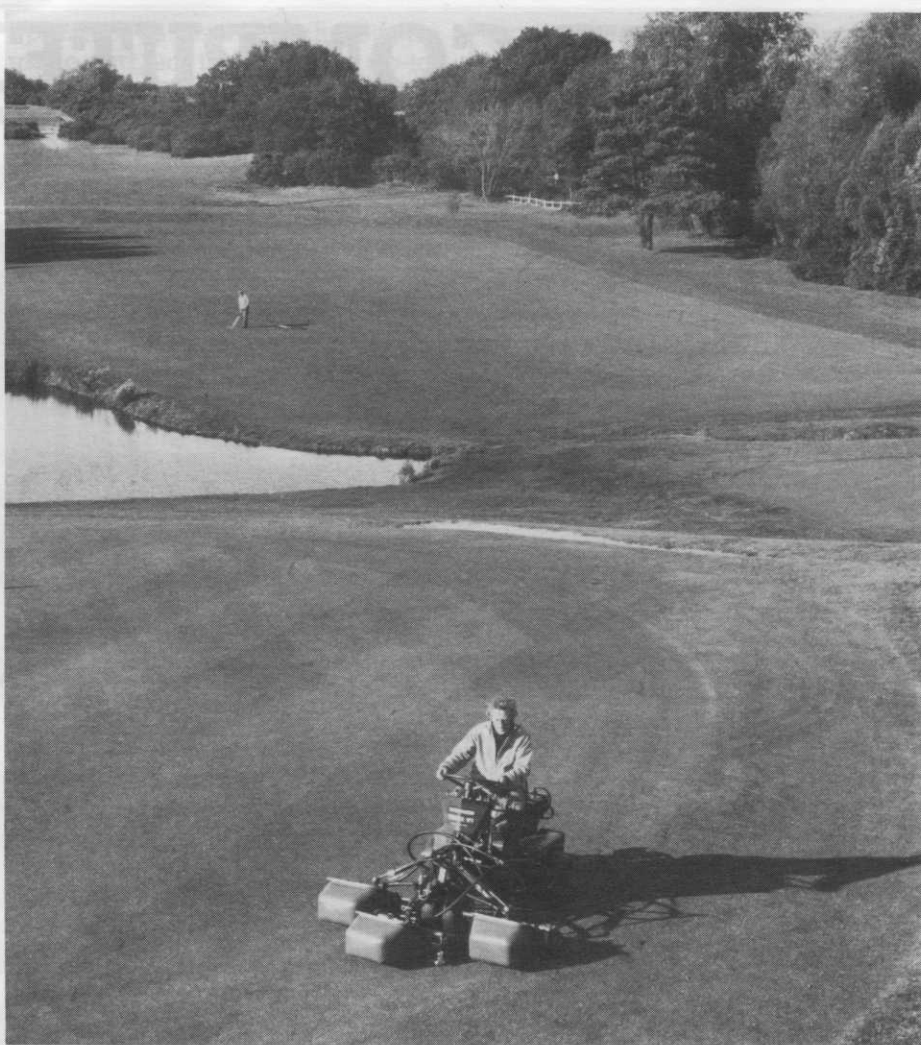
Progressing from using existing rear wheel drive agricultural tractors, more and more the emphasis is changing to four-wheel drive, which has the advantage of better power/weight ratios, not to mention adhesion and traction. There are some very interesting developments in this connection which, doubtless, will be unveiled at Windsor, if not before.

Certainly, greenkeeping forty years ago was much less complicated for various reasons. One was that lower standards were accepted. We rarely discussed anything in detail except green-management, with a few lines on tees and nothing on fairways, unless some disaster loomed.

Second, there were neither the machines nor money to treat much more than greens. In a way, this was a help, as the lack of money prevented disastrous mistakes being made, which would have cost even more to correct! Sadly, mistakes are made on an heroic scale today and cost astronomical amounts to correct.

Third, pressures with play were far less.

What is relevant, however, is that the *principles* of greenkeeping, relating as they do to the 'cultivation' of a narrow range of grass species adapted to low-



Regular mowing - the typical modern-day scene.

fertility soil conditions, the direct opposite of agricultural grassland husbandry, have not changed.

The battle against annual meadow grass was as important in the 1940s as it is today, but we had more chance of winning then as we did not have to first correct mistaken overfeeding (except to try to counteract the 'harmful' legacies of war-time crop production on many of our courses) and were less subject to the courtship of fertiliser firms, which were then too busy supplying farming to have time to worry about a miniscule market in golf.

Now, of course, the wheel has turned - maximum agricultural production (no matter at what marginal cost) has ceased to be economic and disappointed suitors are turning their amorous attentions elsewhere.

What is certain is that there is nothing new in this world. Even in the early 1930s, agricultural experts were warning that the management of fine turf and agricultural grassland was diametrically opposed in end-

result and, therefore, method.

All I can emphasise to today's young greenkeepers is that the British soils and climatic conditions have not altered; that the game of golf is played at its best on fine wiry turf and that the needs of those grasses have not altered either. We must modify and intensify treatments, especially the physical ones, but if we try to paint greens green with fertilisers, we shall be in as much trouble as were earlier generations of greenkeepers in the 'thirties, 'fifties and 'seventies!

Hopefully, better greenkeeper training means that the next generation of head-men will be even better equipped to think for themselves and not be swayed by high-pressure salesmanship, masquerading as the results of research.

Every club should insist that its young staff become technically qualified, encourage and liaise with the new greenkeeping centres and pay *qualified* staff more while treating them as professionals.