

# BOOKS FOR GREENKEEPERS AND GREEN COMMITTEES — THE PHILOSOPHY OF GOLF

THE first article in this series (*Greenkeeper*, July 1986) listed books on golf greenkeeping. I expect many of you reached the conclusion that it was a rather short list and that many of the books were out of date or not relevant, writes *Eddie Park*.

There are people who would tell us that golf greenkeeping is really not a complicated subject — one easily learned. Not a bad strategy if they are golfers or members of golf club committees, because it would ensure that they could get their golf course cheaply and that they could interfere and impose their particular theories. The truth is that it is a very difficult subject, just like any other discipline in which nature holds all the trump cards.

I am, therefore, going on from greenkeeping books specifically to suggest other subjects that require investigation and understanding — not just a list of books to acquire, as many are becoming expensive and rarely appear for sale, more the *type* of book that is helpful.

I have come to believe that many of our problems stem from widespread ignorance of what I term *The Philosophy of Golf*. By that I mean what kind of golf the golfer is seeking to play and, therefore, what requirements he will ask of his golf course and those who prepare it. We can then investigate if these requirements have changed and make a cautious and knowledgeable approach to the 'crunch' question — Are we being asked to produce golf courses that are not ecologically or financially viable in British conditions?

We must start with some study of the original Scottish game as it evolved on links land and its spread to other British links and, later, to other habitats, some far from ideal.

I know perfectly well that in going back over the years I will be accused of being a 'traditionalist,' as if that is some kind of dirty word, and we should all be bowing down to

the altar of 'modern' golf. That is not really surprising when you realise the commercial involvement of those who benefit from the excesses, deficiencies and diseases that seem to follow in the train of 'modern' golf.

Such people will certainly not want us to go back and trace what has happened — we might just find we can do without some or all of the expensive hardware we are being sold, be it chemicals, irrigation or cutting machinery or fancy golf balls and clubs, etc. Even in my memory, golf was a much simpler game and a 'fun' game. A drainpipe bag, a few clubs and balls, ordinary clothes and shoes with hobnails in the soles. A different game, especially in summer, with a great mental fascination, played on well-selected, easily-maintained, natural sites.

Early authors who describe these things so well include amateurs, such as Horace Hutchinson and Harold Hilton, from the Edwardian era. Both were prolific writers in *Country Life*, *Golf Illustrated* and penned some splendid books.

My favourite is John L. Low who, like many of his amateur contemporaries, contrived to be a member of something like a dozen famous clubs across the country. He edited *Nisbet's Golf Year Book*, which was not just a list of courses, but gave a description of their playing qualities and terrain written by a leading architect or player. Low wrote longer pieces on St Andrews and Hoylake ('the best test of golf in England').

It was variety and skill that counted with these men and they approved of courses that provided a scholarship level examination of the player. A great variety of different strokes were demanded, especially in approach shots.

Low wrote *Concerning Golf* in 1905, lambasting legislators, who had to deal with the problem of the new India rubber balls, for 'being neither prompt nor brave

enough to carry out their own convictions' and, subsequently, he became Chairman of the Rules of Golf Committee himself.

In this book, he also gave minute descriptions of varied techniques with approach shots — shots that would never be even dreamed of by modern golfers with their bouncy golf balls hit by wedges into boggy greens.

Incidentally, I read that Gary Koch, the leading American in this year's Open, remarked that perfect fairways and receptive greens are making the game 'too automatic,' or, as an old traditionalist like me would say, 'too boring.'

Forty years ago, we played a very enjoyable game on good courses and it was ecologically and financially viable. Let me hasten to add that it was also too cheap — mainly at the expense of the greenkeeper. Don't just take my word for these things — delve into any old golf book you can beg, borrow or steal. Unlike golf writers of today, earlier authors featured courses as protagonists in a struggle with the player.

The great triumvirate of Vardon, Taylor and Braid produced excellent books. Vardon, especially, wrote with great style from 1906 to 1933.

Ted Ray, a winner of the British and US Opens, produced *Inland Golf* in 1915, showing how golf was spreading from 'links' to 'courses' and delineated many of the problems that still beset inland courses today.

So, on to the many books by that superb writer Bernard Darwin (1922 - 1952), which have been recognised as the classics they are. I recently came across a large collection of old *Country Life* magazines on a market stall, in which Darwin, like Hutchinson before him and Pat Ward-Thomas later, did an excellent weekly column. His descriptions of play and courses bring the scene alive.

A book that is frequently to be seen is *Golfers Companion*

(1937) by Peter Lawless – a very good anthology.

Abe Mitchell and George Duncan were among those who wrote books on technique that also give sidelights on the nature of the game in their day.

Henry Cotton was a prolific writer and photographer and, especially in *This Game Of Golf* (1948), he began to chronicle changes in the American game which, when transplanted to this country, were not always beneficial.

Bobby Jones and Henry Longhurst were always entertaining while filling in background detail.

Robert H.K. Browning, editor for many years of *Golfing* magazine, was a perceptive writer with one special gem *A History Of Golf – The Royal Ancient Game* (1955).

This list could go on and on, but if I had to select just one

book to take with my records to that desert island, it would be *A History Of Golf In Britain*, edited by Sir Guy Campbell and published in 1952. I remember that my wife bought it for my birthday that year. I think it cost two guineas (£2.10), a lot of money for a book in those days, but it remains a favourite bedside volume. Better than any other, it describes how the game started and progressed for many years.

I am reminded that this study of history opens the doors to the study of your own course. There may be a club history, but it is even more interesting to study the history of greenkeeping methods at a particular club.

Chairmen of green committees might think of looking up old minute books with a view to staff trying to piece together the history of the environment in which they work. The idea that

each generation should start again with its knowledge is plainly ridiculous and wasteful. Why not find out more about what went before on your course?

Golf writers today do not seem to discuss or query the philosophy of the game. Reports in the Press and magazines are little more than blow-by-blow accounts of a player's progress, as related to par, in an event.

As tournaments are frequently played on courses that seem to be a poor test of shot making and ball control, you have to wonder if writers have been told *not* to give readers the details. Or perhaps it is simply because their living is dependent on the 'pro' circuits. We seem to have to go back in time to find a free, frank and informed Press.

Next time, I will look at books on golf courses, especially those on golf architecture.

## Golf's ultimate partnership Continued...

preciate fully all of the characteristics that make golf such a truly beautiful game.

Therein, in essence, lies the key element of this ultimate partnership, where one partner, the superintendent, provides the beautifully playable playing surfaces and the other partner, the true believer amateur, mobilises and brings to bear all of the characteristics that make what the superintendent has done worth the doing.

Having so identified and joined this partnership, we need some further definition of its purposes.

First, all of us should join in the mission of preserving and promoting this ancient and honorable game. We should note that promoting and preserving are not necessarily complementary activities. A lot of promoters hovering around this game are anything but preservers.

We should also note that it is worth preserving, not so much because it is ancient (although its antiquity helps to distinguish it), but because its heart and its soul

derive from its being, above all, honorable.

The honorable part of it is given some distinctive emphasis by the fact that, in all of its long history, no one has reached the very pinnacle of this game who was not a person of distinctive character. In considering that remarkable distinction, contemplate the Tom Morrises, both old and young, Vardon, Jones, Hogan, Nelson, Palmer, Watson, and Nicklaus. Is there any other game, or indeed any other activity, that has identified such an array of quality as the very best of their respective times?

While we are promoting, we should be promoting understanding among the partners – on the true believer amateur side, appreciation for all the incredible complexity involved in properly maintaining a golf course, and on the superintendent's side, what a relatively lousy experience it is to slog around an overwatered golf course.

Finally, I am moved to observe that if he had not been so involv-

ed in Elizabethan drama and if access to the game had been easier in the 16th century, William Shakespeare surely would have been a golfer. Why am I so sure? Because anyone with such poetry in his soul could not have resisted the game, given any exposure to it, and, 'To thine own self be true,' has to be the ultimate credo of the true believer amateur.

While to be or not to be true to himself is a choice a golfer can make, no such choice is available to the superintendent in the pursuit of his profession. Nature does not allow him any counterpart of the self-conceded putt or the surreptitiously improved lie. Every decision the superintendent makes, good or bad, is inevitably reflected in the way the golf course looks and plays.

In that sense, therefore, they are unequal partners. In the much more important sense, however, of determining whether all that the game can be and mean is going to be realised, they are not just equal partners, but, indeed, golf's ultimate partnership.