

"EVER since school days in Edinburgh, the job of greenkeeping appealed to me - I used to help out on a local course where I was a junior member during the weekends and holidays," Laurence Pithie said. "Although I was a keen low-handicap golfer, I did not see myself joining the professional ranks. My ambition was a career in greenkeeping, as long as I could attend college and study the theory, as well as the practical side, of golf-course management.

"After a three-year apprenticeship at Bruntsfield Links in Edinburgh, I moved across town to Mortonhall GC for another three years, where I was soon promoted to first assistant. Both these courses were extensively remodelled, so I gained a great deal of construction experience at an early stage.

"In 1976, I took the plunge and headed south to Sandiway GC in Cheshire as head greenkeeper. Sandiway is a semi heath/woodland course on light sandy soil. I spent five years there and made many friends in the north-west before moving further south to Minchinhampton where there are two 18-hole courses. My wife Sandra and children Jennifer and Alistair have settled well into the rural community. We enjoy life in the Cotswolds and are fortunate to live and work in such a beautiful part of the country.

"The Minchinhampton club was formed in 1889. Golf was played on part of the local common, which became known as the Old Course. Golf had been played there many years before and the area is, in fact, steeped in

OUT ON THE COURSE

John Campbell travelled to Minchinhampton GC in Gloucestershire to meet Laurence Pithie, a course manager with some rather uncommon problems...

history, Charles I having stayed at a local inn. The common now comes under the auspices of the National Trust, so I have to work within regulations imposed by the Nature Conservancy Council.

"The area is deemed as a site of special scientific interest. Added to that, I also have to deal with a commons committee representing the local people. Their ancient charter allows them to graze animals on the common for a nominal fee.

"The main problem on the Old Course is dealing with the depredation caused by the animals, of which there are approximately 450 grazing on the common. Cattle damage is usually inflicted when they bed down for the night on the greens and foul up the putting surfaces. The 50 or so horses can be more of a problem and often give us a few headaches."

Looking after a golf course on commonland is not an easy job (as I recall from my early experiences at Westward Ho!), so I asked Laurence if he had any advice for others with similar responsibilities.

"We are allowed to 'fence-off' up to six greens at any one time in a given year for repair and renovation. The fencing is usually left around these greens for a period afterwards to permit recuperation. This is a big help.

"The introduction of short flagsticks, about one foot high, helped. Normal length pins were always a target for the animals, being the only prominent objects on open expanses of windswept common. But having the short sticks now, they cannot rub their flanks against them, so they don't have the same attraction - this has reduced a lot of the damage.

"Routine control treatments, such as selective weedkilling and worm control, carried out on most courses are virtually out of the question. These chemicals can only be applied when no animals are grazing, between April 1 and May 13. In these parts, the weather is generally cold and dry so early in the season, therefore none of these treatments would really be practical. In addition, there is no irrigation on any part of the course."

The course is well drained, having a few inches of soil overlying limestone rock. Old quarries and gulleys where stone was once removed, along with old ditches and mounds dating back centuries, form the natural features along with a few clumps of hawthorn hedging. Grass cover is a varied mixture of species, but mainly fescue. The greens are predominantly fescue, with root depth of at least six inches. This is in spite of the fact that they receive virtually no aeration, no fertiliser, no water and next to no top-dressing. In fact, almost nothing except a 20in mower plus what falls from the sky. Their quality is superb.

"There is a head greenkeeper and assistant employed full time on the Old Course, but there are occasions when the strength is supplemented by bringing in staff from the New Course for competitions or special jobs. Greens are cut with pedestrian mowers, fairways maintained with Ransomes trailed triple gang units



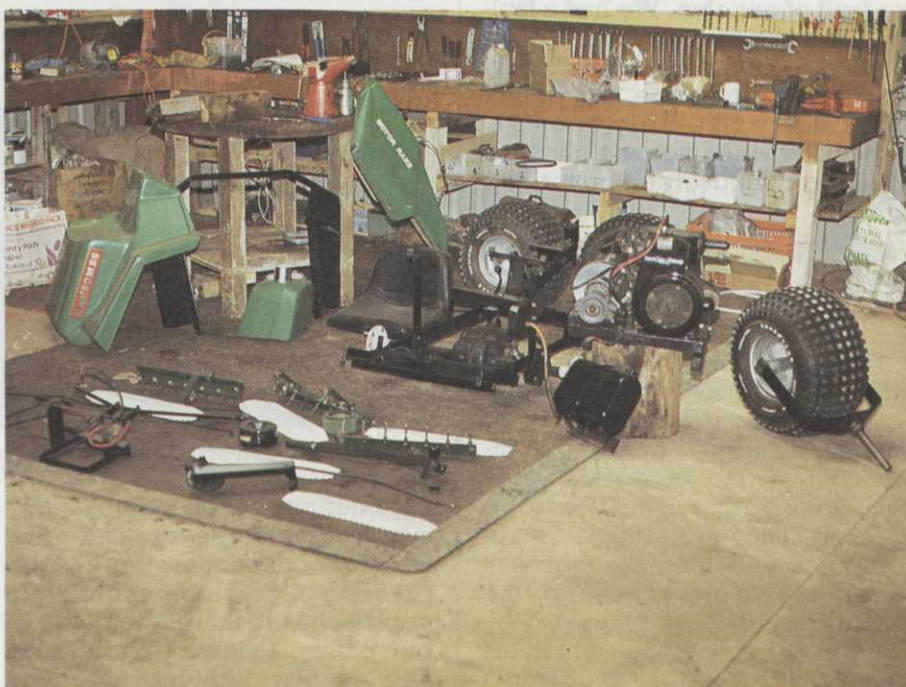
Horses for one of Minchinhampton's courses...

and tees, aprons and surrounds are mowed with a Toro 70 machine. There are no bunkers to worry about and the rough is kept very short by grazing animals."

At the beginning of the 1970s, the problems of playing golf on the Old Course were gradually mounting as the number of people using the common for other recreational purposes increased. Weekend competitions became intolerable and, indeed, dangerous with the public roaming around oblivious of the risk to life and limb. This finally prompted club members to look around for a suitable piece of land to build another golf course.

Some 135 areas of farmland were eventually purchased on the other side of Minchinhampton village, three miles from the Old Course and next to Gatcombe Park, home of HRH Princess Anne. The New Course was designed by Fred Hawtree and constructed by a local firm of contractors with no experience of golf courses and also on a limited budget. It was opened for play in 1975 and then suffered the following year's severe drought. From a somewhat troubled start, it is now a thriving club with a full membership of around 700. A new clubhouse created from an old Cotswold tythe barn includes an indoor alley for skittles, a popular West Country game.

"There are five staff including myself on the New Course, with my deputy doubling as mechanic. We have first-class facilities, which include a large purpose-built maintenance building, a soil shed that holds



The club boasts a well-equipped workshop.

160 tons of sand, soil and peat, etc, and also five outside concrete storage bays. There is an automatic irrigation system to the greens and a manual system for the tees, which was upgraded in 1984. We have recently acquired our own water supply, via a 300 foot borehole, so we expect a substantial saving in future water charges.

"We are fully mechanised with a good range of equipment, including three tractors, two Cushmans, two triplex mowers, three motor triples, hydraulic mounted gangs, motor rake and shredder, etc.

"We usually have three greens meetings a year, which I attend along with other members of the

greens committee. Any reports, plans, recommendations, etc, are submitted for discussion at this point and, once agreed, a plan of action is implemented immediately. This system has worked very well and I am fortunate to have the full backing of an enthusiastic committee behind the agreed policies. I am in regular contact with the chairman and liaise closely with the secretary, who has been a great help."

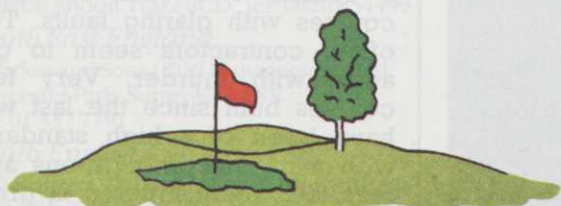
When asked about new machinery, he said: "as far as performance is concerned, I don't think I am qualified to comment, but I do have some reservations regarding certain machinery. Quite recently, we spent nearly £1,000 on one machine, through

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no fault of our own. We had a faulty hydrostatic pump, which even baffled the local distributor. Spare parts for some equipment can be extremely costly, especially when you are charged £145 for a windscreen motor and arm.

"The majority of my time is spent on the New Course, since there is a well-established routine on the common. My main problems on the New Course stem from design and construction, soil depth and grass species. The overall design is good, but individual styling of greens, tees and bunkers has left a lot to be desired. They are artificial in appearance and little thought was given to maintenance and the flow of traffic.

"Another problem, which is somewhat related, is the distinct lack of soil covering the limestone rock. As the volume of play has increased, the amount of wear on certain areas around the greens has left limited grass cover, which is even non-existent in some places. The exposed nature of a 500 foot plateau does not help either, since we are particularly prone to cold east winds and summer drought.

"Perhaps the greatest difficulty concerns the Ryegrass mixture with which the course was sown. Unfortunately, it was fashionable in the early 1970s for misguided advisors who totally ignored the indigenous sward content growing naturally on the common three miles away, which provides an ideal playing surface for golf. I cannot understand how we are expected to maintain a good playing surface containing two such opposing grass species.

"Our maintenance year is a



Greenstaff constructed this impressive lake.

very definite seven months intensified greenkeeping and five months construction work. Top-dressing of greens, tees and front approaches is the cornerstone of our policy, followed by aeration and regular light-brushing and verti-cutting, etc. We are now gearing ourselves up to top-dress five fairways each year in an attempt to improve the sward density along with other management techniques.

"Perhaps the most interesting period is during winter, even during the arctic-type conditions common to the Cotswolds. Our policy of improvement has been to redesign several bunkers, construct numerous tees and create large mounds, hollows and ridges, etc, in an attempt to break up the landscape and add character to the course. Last year, we constructed a lake and four tees, moving over 20,000 tons of material, mostly rock. All good fun! One problem we still have to solve is what to do with some of the green surrounds. Ideas and plans have been drawn up, so possibly next winter we will make a start."

"I like my men to feel part of the team and treat them as individuals with a contribution to make. When assigning them daily tasks, it is important for all staff to feel involved by discussing any aspects of the work programme and for them to express opinions."

Laurence's advice to young greenkeepers is: "be prepared to take the rough with the smooth and don't get too upset every time you hear someone complain about something on the course, since the majority of these remarks are often trivial. Ill-founded observations from a golfer who has had a bad round is something every greenkeeper has to take in his stride, hence the need for a thick skin and two deaf ears!

"To succeed in the job, you must learn to be observant, have an open mind and, above all, be ambitious and have the courage of your convictions. It's good to visit other courses, find out how they tackle their problems, study other methods of maintenance and compare notes with other experienced greenkeepers. Photographs or slides can also be a big help in forming a reference library.

"I still hold two main personal ambitions. One is to write a book in my later years on golf-course management, after I have accumulated a wealth of experience on a variety of golf courses. The other is to construct a course. I've seen so many courses with glaring faults. Too often, contractors seem to get away with murder. Very few courses built since the last war have been of a high standard, with many needing greens and tees, etc, reconstructed at great cost and inconvenience."



Typical of Laurence's headaches, a wrecked car in the semi-rough!