

OUT ON THE COURSE



with Ken McNiven.

EFFINGHAM Golf Club lies in the heart of Saxon England – an area of Surrey that is a feast of rural beauty. There is scarcely a village without some picturesque association with the past.

A fine Georgian clubhouse lends an air of dignity and splendour to the character of the golf course. Like most others in the downland belt, Effingham is built on chalk, the finest base after sand for a golf course.

The course opened in 1927 and is a tribute to the architectural genius of Harry S. Colt. There are no drainage problems on the beautiful downland turf. The gently undulating terrain and fairways of ample width help inspire a golfer's confidence, its hazards are generally visible and, in keeping with modern requirements, its large greens are fair and interesting to play to, but provocatively subtle to putt on.

Course manager Ken McNiven (see footnote) is an engaging personality with an infectious sense of humour. Among his special qualifications in greenkeeping, he has a wealth of experience on different kinds of golf course.

"When I left school, I went into greenkeeping at Williamwood Golf Club, Glasgow, which was a heavy clay, parkland course not too easy to manage, but it was extremely good experience for me. From there, I moved to Ralston

Golf Club for a short spell before taking up my first head greenkeeper's appointment at Old Ranfurly Golf Club, Bridge of Weir, a moorland course. Later, I went to West Kilbride, a links.

"As I was relatively new to links type management, I was fortunate to meet an old greenkeeper, John Wilson, who had worked on the course for over 50 years and we spent many hours discussing the problems involved. His knowledge and shrewd advice was invaluable to me and, as a result, we resorted to using sand from the dunes and started collecting the seaweed on the doorstep, which was plentiful and free. This was stockpiled, shredded and mixed to make an excellent compost, which was used on the links in tandem with a regular slitting programme and it dramatically improved the quality of turf.

"I have two sons and a daughter and the boys have followed in my footsteps. The oldest, Graham, started at Effingham with me and did a four-year training programme, involving a three-year greenkeeping course and a 4th year in management at Elmwood College, Cupar. He has since moved to Sunningdale to broaden his experience. My youngest son, Ian, has also been at Sunningdale for the past two years. Daughter Kirsty, 14, is a great help to my wife Linda in the house.

"My golf handicap is five, but my main sport has always been shinty which I have played almost since the day I started to walk. I was born in Tighnabruaich, Argyleshire, a great stronghold of

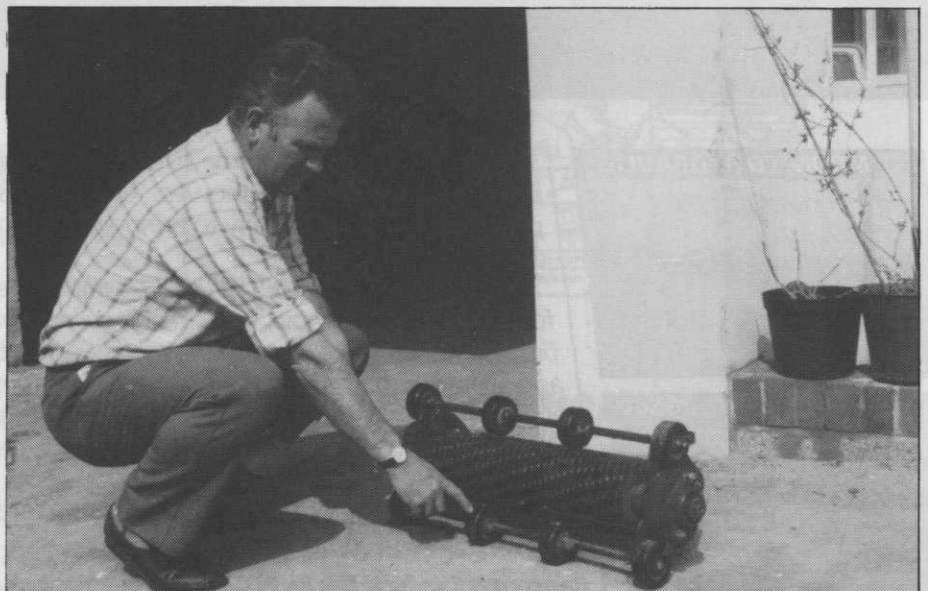
the game. It became a way of life for me – in fact, I was playing until the very day I moved to Effingham. I have represented Scotland on a number of occasions, playing in Dublin and Cork, as well as other international games – it's a fine sport.

"My move to Effingham in 1981 presented me with an entirely different situation from the heavy clay, semi-moorland and links courses that I was familiar with. Being on the chalk downs, I had to contend with another type of terrain and problems, so it took a little time to adapt to the new surroundings. That is one of the exciting aspects of our profession, it is never dull.

"The club is run on business lines. There is Effingham Golf Club and Effingham Limited, both of which are run by one board of management and I am totally responsible to the general manager, John Norman, a fine administrator with whom I have an excellent working relationship. His long experience with the club is a great help to me.

"A general budgeting system allows us to have the best of machinery and a staff of six greenkeepers to look after 18 holes set in 300 acres. Of this, 100 acres in the middle of the course is arable farming land.

"We have one of the first automatic irrigation systems ever installed by Watermation. This was updated about six years ago. As we're on chalk, the fairways don't dry out very easily – deep roots tend to draw a lot of moisture from the chalk. In winter, the turf is always clean



Ken shows the extra roller wheels he fitted to this verti-cut unit, preventing the scalping of high spots on greens.

and dry and a joy to play golf on.

"Among my responsibilities is the upkeep of four tennis courts, two of which are grass and two hard surfaces. With no previous experience of looking after such sporting facilities, I had to look around for someone to give me a few wrinkles on the subject. I was fortunate enough to meet up with Jim Thorn, head groundsman at Wimbledon, and he gave me a lot of sensible advice and good information about all kinds of tennis court. This is a different kind of management from golf green-keeping.

"On the chalk downs, our main problem is the weeds and worms - if you don't keep the worm population under control, it means a lot of weeds, particularly daisies. I have also inherited a lot of speedwell, which takes time and considerable expense to get rid of as it spreads so rapidly.

"Our maintenance programme for weed spraying has to be done with a certain amount of care and caution. We have a great many wild orchids and flowers in certain areas that have to be preserved at all costs. A few of the copses get cut in the winter with a rotary, after which they are left to flower for the rest of the period. The trees on the course are mostly beech apart from a few ornamentals that have been planted by the club over the years.

"Effingham has formulated a long-term policy for the good of the course, so that the green-keeping staff can work within certain guidelines and plan the work programme accordingly. Many clubs don't have long term policy documents and work plans chop and change at the whims of every new committee. This is not good



Effingham GC.

for the course and it often disorients the staff to a point where they lose interest in the work.

"With regard to course upkeep, we slit the greens fairly regularly and topdress from February through to October on a monthly basis with a sand based compost - about 1½lb per sq yd. We spray the greens occasionally in the winter with sulphate of iron. This gives them a good colour and keeps fungal disease at bay. In the early spring, sulphate of ammonia is added to stimulate gentle vigour.

"I have always been a firm believer in the use of sulphate of iron. Its a good remedy for many things and is applied at 1lb per 200 sq yds to the greens. The best way is to spray it on and mix it with a wetting agent. It needs

very hot water to liquify the material after which it should be strained through a nylon stocking before using.

"I have been seen sneaking away from the rear of the clubhouse clutching a pair of ladies' tights, which makes me feel guilty, but it's all for a good cause!

"We try to maintain an even standard of upkeep and don't bring the course up to a peak for any one competition. If you take things to a peak, then you obviously must have troughs. We strive to keep the same standards every day, so we treat all golfers the same - one golf event is not necessarily more important than another.

"We have three acres of putting surface, which take just over three hours to mow with a TORO 300. We also have two GM3s; one is used for verti-cutting and the other, a back-up machine, does tees and surrounds. The fairways are cut three times a week with a set of Lloyds Leda Gang units even though there might not be a lot of growth. This always keeps them trim and tidy, in keeping with club policy."

Ken McNiven is popular among his contemporaries in the Surrey area and his enthusiasm to promote the cause of greenkeeping deserves some acclaim. His organising ability recently brought together greenkeepers and club officials for an enjoyable day's golf and dinner at Walton Heath. It was a convivial day for the 150 who took part.

● *Since John Campbell conducted the interview, Ken McNiven has accepted a post at Old Thorns.*

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