Just when things start to
go right... something
always goes wrong. Take
comfort from Murphy's
Law in the knowledge
that other greenkeepers
too are having their
problems.

If you're managing a golf
course under unusual or
particularly trying
conditions, Greenkeeper
International would like
to hear from you.

Drop a line to the editor.
Meanwhile, sit back,
read on - and realise
you're not on your own...

Run, rabbit, run
Wind, rabbits and a severe lack of
water are the three principal diffi-
culties facing John Phillips, who sin-
gle-handedly looks after the nine
hole St David's City golf course in
Dyfed, west Wales. If those three
handicaps are not enough, the sight
of small mounds of finely excavated
soil on the fifth tee reminds John of
a fourth problem which appears reg-
ularly at random around the course.

“Moles simply come and go as they
please,” he points out. “I’ve tried
most deterrents but they just pop up
again somewhere else, usually in
the middle of a green or a tee. I’d
welcome advice from other green-
keepers who have managed to get
rid of moles.”

Founded in 1902, St David’s City
Golf Club has the dubious distinc-
tion of being the most westerly course in
Wales. Situated within the
Pembrokeshire Coast National Park,
it enjoys spectacular views over
Whitseys Bay towards Ramsey
Island, while being directly exposed
to the prevailing south-westerly
winds which sweep up St George’s
Channel from the Atlantic Ocean.
And therein lies the greenkeeper’s
main problem.

“There’s rarely a day when the
wind doesn’t blow,” comments
John. “This causes erosion, difficulty
with establishing new grasses and
rapid drying out of the turf.”
The last-mentioned point is com-
bounded by the fact that there is no
irrigation on the course. As a result,
John spends much of the summer
carting water from a nearby well to
each of his nine greens. Using a sec-
ond-hand farm vacuum tanker of
1000 gallons capacity, water is
sucked out of the well, carried to
the green and forced out over a 30 yard arc
via a hand-held hose and
spray nozzle.

“The level of the well means that I
am limited to about 500 gallons per
green, applied every other day dur-
ing the worst summer dry periods,” he
explains. “I would like to water
more often, but we simply do not
have the supplies available.” Water
did dry up in 1990, so the greens
were left to fend for themselves.
Fortunately, the rain came before all
the grass had died away. Being built
entirely on sand, there is little mois-
ture retention within the turf. This
reasons John, is not necessarily a
bad thing: “The grasses that do
grow are of very fine quality and
extremely hardy,” he explains. “Fur-
thermore, in the 12 years that I’ve
been here, the course has never had
to close due to poor surface or
weather conditions. Even when it
snows, the combination of wind and
fine, close turf prevents it from set-
tling.”

The one problem which gives
John the biggest headache of all can
be seen on and alongside all nine
fairways on the course. Rabbit holes
litter the ground like mini bomb
craters creating hazards for golfers
and the mower alike. “We are under
attack by rabbits on three sides,”
comments John. “Their digging reg-
ularly results in lost balls and impos-
sible lies. It also means that some
part of the course is always under
repair.”

Lack of funds has kept the lid on
temporary fences around six greens, and these are only permitted after damage has been caused to the turf and repair is necessary. "It really is heart-breaking to mow a green only to see a horse or cow running or urinating on it minutes later."

The effect of urine on fine turf is devastating. "The grass is dead within a couple of days," said Derek. Hoof marks are easier to deal with, but it all takes time. Ask Derek how many days Lionel and himself spend repairing the turf. The rest of the time is spent clearing, cleaning and repairing the turf. Grazing cattle and horses are not the only headache faced on Minchinhampton Golf Club's Old Course.

Because the land is open for the enjoyment of the public on foot or horseback at all times for recreational purposes, the two greenkeepers have a number of other regular problems to deal with. It is not uncommon to see riders direct their steeds straight across a green, while summer weekends would try the patience of the most mild-mannered person.

Car loads of picnickers, dog walkers, kite-flyers and 'nature' lovers descend on the common to take in the delights of this corner of the Cotswolds. However, their appreciation of golf and the greenkeeper's skills varies greatly. "I've chased games of cricket and tennis off the greens," pointed out Derek. "And at night, the joy riders appear. One green was churned up recently three times in a week by a car or motor bike."

In spite of all the aggravation, Derek and Lionel derive great satisfaction from the fact that they manage to keep the course in excellent condition for much of the year. The results of their efforts are highlighted by the club's 600-strong membership and a 12 month waiting list, proving that golf on the unique and totally natural Old Course at Minchinhampton has never been more popular.

"The most common problem is ball theft after a golfer has driven the 465 yard fifth hole," explained Steve. "However, much more serious is the vandalism caused to the greens and tees, with flags and markers stolen or broken. The irrigation equipment is also a prime target. In the past few years we have had to replace or repair sprinkler heads, control valves and solenoids to the tune of £4000, and that's no laughing matter."

Maintaining the security fence on the remote south side of the course takes one man eight hours a week during the summer. And even the 'razor barb' has not produced an entry proof barrier. Despite being made from high tensile steel, it can be cut neatly and quickly using bolt cutters by anyone determined enough to want to gain entry. "The police have said they are powerless to prevent people breaking in," commented Steve Wood. "We'll simply have to persevere with our fencing systems."

Another time consuming task, adding at least an hour to the normal daily work routine around the 18 hole course, is the repair of bunkers and the surrounding turf following the onrush of visiting golfers during the summer, it looks as if John could be hand watering the greens on this beautiful, yet remote green of a course for a few more years to come.

"Repair is carried out by filling the holes with the excavated soil or sand," explained Steve. "However, the sand is often contaminated and will require changing to maintain the correct particle size. Foxes can create a lot of mess and damage." One time a car was completely surrounded by housing as many of the local people like to encourage the foxes, leaving food out for them at night. As a result, the preferred control method is by trap, releasing the caged fox in a remote corner away from Birmingham. Early Sunday morning shoots have been arranged, but these have to be finished by the time the first golfers appear and also produce protests from the club's animal-loving neighbours.

Apart from controlling unwanted humans and creatures, the other major problem faced by Steve is the level of grass growth on the course during the spring and summer months. "If we don't cut the Airways every day, the grass becomes virtually uncuttable and the ball unplayable," he commented. "As it is, we have to spend more mowing if it's all at wet from dew or rain. This action helps the grass both stand up and dry out, improving the throw from the mower and minimising the risk of clumps of wet, freshly-cut grass dropping onto the turf. The reason for the phenomenal growth is a subsoil of dense, yellow clay which holds the water and makes the course 'a real picture' during even very dry summers."