

To hire or to buy? Michael Bird weighs up the options and talks to greenkeepers with their own ideas about capital investments.

Machinery hire has become a profitable venture for Whitchurch Golf Club on one specific item of machinery.

In the early 1980s, the Cardiff club hired in a turf cutter up to four times a year to help with tee extensions, course repairs and other turf renovation work. Today, Whitchurch owns its own machine, hiring it out to other golf courses when available. The venture's success has now covered both the turf cutter's initial purchase price and its running costs.

"A two day hire used to cost us £36," explained course manager, Dennis Archer. "The machine might be on the course for up to a week at a time, but was standing idle more often than not while the ground was prepared ready for turf laying. When delivery charges were added to the total hire bill, we found that that the annual cost was substantial."

Reasoning that a turf cutter should last for many years if properly used and looked after, Dennis produced figures to demonstrate the economies of

buying. In 1985, Whitchurch purchased its own Brouwer machine for £1,700.

"As soon as it arrived, we had requests from other organisations wanting to borrow it," said Dennis. "We were happy to do this providing it was available, but with three conditions. It could go only to other golf clubs. They had to collect and return it. And a charge was made to cover blade and machine wear and tear."

Demand was such that by 1990 the turf cutter had paid for itself. The current hire charge made by

Greenkeepers count the costs of hiring or buying

Whitchurch Golf Club is £19 a day and Dennis points out that, nine years on, the machine is still in excellent condition. "The major benefit is that we have our own equipment and have first call on it. The fact that it produces an income is a bonus."

Dennis believes that a turf cutter makes an ideal hire item due to its ease of use and limited number of wearing parts. He commented that the club had looked long and hard at joint ownership of larger, more complex machines but had been dissuaded by concerns over availability during difficult seasons and the ultimate responsibility for breakages, damage and major repairs.

"Buying and hiring both have an important role to play," he said. "For example, we use a contract service for the annual patch spraying of fairways, bunker edges and other problem weed areas, and yet have our own sprayer for pesticide and liquid fertiliser applications on the greens, tees and surrounds."

"The benefit of the contractor is that he does the complete job for what it would cost us in chemicals alone. I estimate it saves the club up to £600 a year."

Pat Murphy, course manager at Shipley Golf Club, West Yorkshire, stressed that the decision whether to hire or buy was dictated first and foremost by budget. He prefers to own the machines he uses and the club has a five year forward replacement policy, placing machines on the purchase list according to need.

"Obviously, important equipment such as mowers are changed on a regular basis," he commented. "Other items that we would like but cannot afford immediately are noted and hired until we have the money available to buy them."

An exception to that rule is the Robin Dagger, a portable machine which injects compressed air through a steel probe to loosen soil and relieve compaction at depths up to 45cm (18in).

"We hire it in to do all the greens twice a year and the tees when needed," noted Pat. "Although it does a superb job with minimal surface disturbance, the club will not consider spending almost £4,000 on a machine which can be hired for £300 a week. It's almost made the list, but concerns over long-term reliability and running costs will probably keep it as a hire item."

One machine which went onto the club's "shopping list" the first year it was hired was a combined flail cutter, scarifier and sweeper with integral collection hopper. "We used to hire one in twice a year for leaf collection in the autumn and general turf tidying in early spring," explained Pat. "When we saw its potential for scarifying and mowing, we realised it could earn its keep throughout the year."

Despite the obvious benefits, it took eight years for the machine to reach the top of the purchase list. The problem, as Pat explained, was that long-term forward planning and budgeting was not formalised at the club until four or five years ago.

As a result, Shipley Golf Club did not take delivery of its own machine - an RL 1502 Versatile unit from Richard Long Engineering - until last autumn.

The contract hire of a JCB digger/loader with driver is one item that will, however, remain an annual event. Used for greens' reconstruction, tee building and drainage works, the man and machine arrive in September and remain for about a week. "We've had the same operator for the

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A popular hire item with most golf clubs for seasonal course works, the digger-loader can make a good buy at plant hire auction sales

past 24 years, so he knows what he's doing," commented Pat. "The combination makes a valuable short-term addition to my team."

Brian Turner, head greenkeeper at Worplesdon Golf Club, near Guildford, Surrey, used to hire in a JCB and driver for tree planting and course construction works two or three times during the year. That was until he noticed that a nearby plant hire company was holding a liquidation sale.

"We picked up a JCB and a vibrating roller at knock-down prices," he said. "I can now choose the optimum times to carry out course work to suit the weather and turf conditions. If it rains one day, we can get on with another job without paying for a day's wasted hire. The vibrating roller has also proved invaluable for path construction. I recommend all greenkeepers to keep an eye open in the local and trade press for plant hire sell-offs."

Gerry Haynes is responsible for 18 and nine hole parkland courses at Hartsbourne Golf and Country Club, Bushey Heath, Herts, where hiring is preferred to buying in two particular situations: For short, intensive jobs carried out once or twice a year and for those tasks which tend to be highly repetitive or slow and, as a result, boring for his staff.

"Verti-draining is one example which combines both situations," he said. "I cannot see that it is worthwhile buying and maintaining a £12,000-plus machine which will be used for a maxi-

mum of three weeks out of 52."

To ensure that the machine and operator are available when he needs them, Gerry books the Verti-drain up to nine months ahead with Surrey-based contract firm, Turf Machinery Ltd. However, this arrangement does not commit him to taking the service if the weather or turf conditions are not suitable.

"The company is both flexible and helpful, always checking a few days ahead that we are ready for the Verti-drain," he pointed out. "I use them also for hollow coring every other year. They are the only local contract hire firm I know which offers a mechanised core collection service. As a result, we can do all 27 holes in a day. The core collector can clear 18 greens in the time it took us to do one by hand."

A different specialist contract hire service is offered by



Dennis Archer, course manager at Whitchurch Golf Club. Hiring out the club's turf cutter has paid for its purchase and running costs

Turfmech Machinery Ltd in the form of fairway scarifying and grass collection. Based at Hixon in Staffordshire, the firm uses its own scarifier, tractor-mounted blower and vacuum collector to treat up to nine fairways in a day.

Head greenkeeper at Stone Golf Club, Mark O'Malley, has used the service for the past three years to encourage stronger and finer grass regrowth on fairways suffering from compaction due to increasing levels of play. "We had not carried out any regular fairway maintenance during the previous 10 years," he explained. "Drainage was suffering, so we bought a fairway slitter."

Being a nine hole private course, funds for machinery investment are limited to essential items. The ability to hire in a contract fairway scarifying service therefore proved a great attraction, especially when told that for around £1,000, one is hiring machinery valued at £30,000 together with the labour to carry out the work.

"The fairways have benefited tremendously from the treatment and golfers have commented on the improved grass growth," commented Mark. "We plan to scarify again this year and then will probably alternate it with a hired Verti-drain, according to need."

Hiring of a rotary mower is not a typical golf course requirement, as most clubs are normally well equipped with grass cutting equipment. Blairgowrie Golf Club in Perthshire, however, needed a rotary mower for a rather special

task – the management of heather covering large areas of the 54 hole course.

Course manager, Alan Holmes, explained that the freedraining glacial soils did not encourage heavy grass growth. As a result, gangs were used for the semi-rough while the club's flail mower kept the rougher area under control.

Although the flail machine had been used successfully on the heather in the past, its action is quite aggressive and the plants took maybe two seasons to recover. Burning was out of the question.

"I reasoned that the best course would be regular topping to maintain even, yet controlled growth," he said. "However, I did not want to spend £12,000 on a machine that would be used for only 20 days a year. Hiring was the obvious solution."

Turning to Huxleys Grass Machinery at Broxburn, near Edinburgh, Alan hired a Turf Blazer 727 outfront ride-on rotary mower. "We experimented at various cutting heights and found that 5 inches was ideal," he said. "Apart from doing a good job on the heather, it appears that rotary topping will also help keep the broom at bay."

"Hiring provides sufficient flexibility without an accompanying high level of expenditure. For our particular needs, I see no advantage in owning a machine whose depreciation in the first year is equivalent to three times the hire charge."