

# Looking back at The Way Forward

**The Way Forward, a discussion document of British golf course management produced by the R&A's greenkeeping panel, is now five years old. It pointed the way for greenkeepers and course management to go, but did it change anything? During a recent trip to Scotland, Chris Boiling went to see Michael Bonallack, secretary of the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews, to find out. After the initial pleasantries, the conversation with the former amateur champion went like this...**

*Greenkeeper International: The Way Forward is widely read in greenkeeping circles. Can you give me some insight into how it came about, the R&A's role in it, and whether it's changed anything?*

**Michael Bonallack:** The R&A have a very strange role in golf. We are the governing authority for the rules of golf and amateur status, and we have no other responsibility really apart from the championship side where we run the Open Championship, amateur championships, and pick players for Great Britain and Ireland's amateur teams.

We got involved in the Way Forward as a result of forming a committee to decide where the money generated from the Open was spent. We decided that there were three particular areas where money could usefully be spent – greenkeeping, new golf course development, and coaching for youngsters.

This was at a time when greenkeeping associations were not totally unified, as they are now, and we formed a technical committee to examine the various problems that they could see in greenkeeping. On that committee, with others, were Jim Arthur, who is an agronomist, a golf club secretary in Keith Almond, and Walter Woods, who's the course superintendent here at St Andrews. In this document the committee set out what they thought was the way forward for committees to go about greenkeeping matters in the future. It was putting more emphasis on the greenkeeper controlling how the course was maintained rather than six or seven committee people who were there for one or two years dictating the policy. In that document they set out their ideal committee structure,

which is a committee of one plus the head greenkeeper.

Once it was published, we said to the national unions, 'OK, this is what we believe should happen and now we hope that the national unions will take this up and will educate the golf clubs, and committees in golf clubs, on how they should go about reacting to the proposals with their greenkeeping staff.' The English Golf Union in particular have been very active in this respect, and run seminars and educational programmes and I think it's gone well in England. It has in Scotland but probably not to the same extent.

We also formed a joint golf course committee which is composed of a chairman from the R&A and representatives from the four Home Unions. The idea of that committee is to recommend to our external funds committee areas where we might usefully provide money whether it's for research into greenkeeping matters, whether it's in support for the Greenkeepers Association, or greenkeeper training through the Greenkeeper Training Committee. The joint golf course committee has been fairly active, they've now become involved in things like the environment and in particular in setting a standard which we hope will be accepted by Brussels, so that golf will be setting its own environment.

mental standards rather than having them imposed on the game by bureaucrats in Brussels. That is really where we've got to now. These things are all ongoing, it's a comparatively slow process – you don't expect to change things overnight, but I think certainly people are more aware now, and we still get requests for copies of The Way Forward from golf clubs.

I think the standards that were set out in that booklet are becoming much more acceptable, people recognise now the needs for





firmer, faster greens, for regular aeration, for less water, less fertilisers, and this is common practice now. Nearly every club seems to use deep aeration every winter on their greens. And so I think the Way Forward has done a lot of good.

*GI: Are the problems highlighted in it, like overplay, year-round golf, faulty construction, unsound agronomic management, ever-changing committees, insufficient budgets, any better now?*

*MB:* In a way I think things are better because there have been a number of new golf courses built, so some of the demand that was causing the problems has been taken off existing courses. I think the human aspect, through greenkeeper education, is improving all the time. Standards of greenkeeping are improving, the advisory services are very good, and, generally, golf clubs are accepting now the need for proper maintenance.

*GI: Is the golfing public becoming better educated about greenkeeping matters?*

*MB:* Yes, I think they are. They'll soon tell you if the course is not in good condition....

*GI: But from a knowledgeable point of view?*

*MB:* I think they recognise now that it is a false idea to have soft greens where you can stop the ball with almost any club. I think that was one of the biggest problems we had in golf – the wish that anybody could stop a ball on the green whereas the pros have considerable skill to stop it and they do it on very

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hard greens. I think greenkeepers tended to pander to the players who wanted to stop it just by making the greens softer – anybody can stop it on a soft green, that doesn't require any skill at all. Even the average golfer recognises now that that's not a good way to go about it because with soft greens you get thatch and you then get all the problems of poor greens in the winter, the course closed, or playing on temporary greens. That's one thing I think which has improved over the past few years, the number of courses now that don't require temporary greens in the winter. They can keep going on their proper greens because they've been properly maintained.

I think there have been a lot of improvements but a lot of them are fairly gradual and you don't notice that they're taking place. When the Way Forward was written very few courses would use aeration to any great extent. A lot of clubs have bought their own verti-drain machine now. That's become a regular occurrence now whereas it was the exception rather than the rule. That can only be good.

*GI: Is the technical panel still in existence?*

*MB:* Yes, they have been very busy in trying

to draw up a British specification for construction of golf greens. If courses are constructed in the right way in the first instance then there is going to be less chance of them going wrong during the maintenance.

*GI: What else are they working on?*

*MB:* The other thing they've been working on is environmental concerns. The environmental lobby has certainly become fairly vocal recently. There's a group, I think, formed in the Far East which is the Anti-Golf Group trying to stop all golf development, but I don't think they'll have very much success. But golf has got to be seen to be responsible and not to desecrate the countryside and in actual fact golf has a very strong case as it protects wildlife rather than destroys it. The game's got nothing to apologise for, it's just got to publicise its work better and show people that golf courses are havens for wildlife, you get rare flowers, animals and insects that don't exist anywhere else but they do on golf courses. So this is an area where we have been actively concerned.

Also, greenkeeper training, the committee has become involved in that, and in research at the Sports Turf Research Institute. They recommend to our general committee which areas of research should be encouraged and which ones we should give money to. It is ongoing, you can't expect the manufacturers to do it all. Manufacturers are trying to sell a product whereas the STRI should be trying to find out what is the best way of tackling a particular problem without any commercial bias.

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*GI: In The Way Forward, those areas where the panel would like to see action taken were asterisked. How many of those areas have seen change?*

**MB:** I think we have seen some movement away from the demands for Augusta type courses which call for a lot of water and fertiliser and the idea that green is beautiful.

Nature conservancy, as I have said, is something that is a concern and is being dealt with. A proper working relationship with the Nature Conservancy Council is being established. We've published a joint booklet with them on nature conservancy.

Tests are certainly going on on the effect which golf balls have on playing surfaces. That's certainly being looked at, especially the possible damage they can do to greens.

The Unions have certainly become more aware, as I've said, conducting their own seminars at club and county level.

The role of the greenkeeper has undoubtedly grown over the years, through the growth of BIGGA, the exhibition at Harrogate and their profile as shown in the magazine. That's one of the things that they suggested, that BIGGA needs a much higher profile in putting across the role of greenkeepers, well that's happened.

The STRI must have ways of publicising their advisory service. I think there is still plenty to be done with the STRI but that is something that is being looked at.

When you look at it, all in all, the areas which have been highlighted have all been tackled to some extent, not as greatly as some people would like but we have no authority to force people to carry out any of these recommendations. It was an educational process in that the panel put up certain ideas which they thought would be good for the long-term future of golf in the hope that people would adopt them. And I'm glad to say that many clubs have.

*GI: At the BTME I heard some greenkeepers saying that they thought it might be time for another Way Forward. Are there any plans? Has it been discussed at all?*

**MB:** Well, if there really was a need for a new Way Forward we would be happy to back it. I'm not sure that we should take a lead in that. I'm not sure what is meant by a new Way Forward, it suggests that the ideas put forward in this document have been superseded by something else. That's a very different matter, but I don't think they have. I think the basics are still the same, it's just a question of re-raising them and reminding people of them. If that's the idea, fine, but it's not really our role. Having done it once I think it's up to the Unions and probably BIGGA to get together on that. I think the greenkeepers, as this document suggested, should be taking a very much higher profile in all greenkeeping matters. Maybe they should be relaunching The Way Forward.

*GI: In general, what's the R&A's view of greenkeepers?*

**MB:** We are totally supportive of the role of greenkeepers, that's why we've been supporting them financially and also trying to help them with the education of greenkeepers, we help the greenkeeping colleges. We think that

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greenkeepers are one of the keys to the whole future of the game. If you've got good head greenkeepers you're going to have good golf courses. Without good golf courses you won't have many golfers.

*GI: What more can greenkeepers do to improve their lot?*

**MB:** They are already making it a much more attractive industry for people to come into and I think that the new video produced by the GTC and BIGGA is going to attract a lot of youngsters into the profession because they can now see that it is a very worthwhile and rewarding career. I think that one of the things that they have got to do is to sell the opportunities that are there in greenkeeping because golf is still expanding, especially on the continent. There are still new golf courses being built and for every new course that's built you're going to need greenkeepers. I think the opportunities for greenkeepers to progress and to get involved, as they do in America, in management is going to come over here.

*GI: Do you think the Home Unions could do more to support greenkeepers?*

**MB:** Some of the Home Unions are a bit wary about greenkeepers getting too powerful. I don't see that as a problem at all. I think the greenkeepers should be encouraged to improve their education. The Home Unions are certainly supporting greenkeeper training and education, but I think some people were a bit scared that the Association was becoming a trade union rather than an association. They thought there might be problems with clubs being faced with demands for wage increases and that it would be far more costly to maintain golf courses. I don't think that's a danger at all. I think as greenkeepers become better educated and better trained you're going to pay them more because you get the results on the golf course – the golf course will be better maintained and you'll get more people playing and you'll get a bigger income.

*GI: When the Way Forward was produced, BIGGA was in its infancy. What are the R&A's views now about the Association, its role, where it's going?*

**MB:** I think it has developed very well. It has a definite image now. It has its own trade magazine. It has its own exhibition which has been very successful. And I think the whole profile of the greenkeeping profession has been enhanced.

*GI: What exactly is your job as secretary of the R&A?*

**MB:** If you look at it in terms of a company, the R&A is a parent company of a number of subsidiary companies. We have a general committee which is the overall committee of the

club. Under that we have a championship committee with its own championship secretary which is responsible for running all the British amateur championships (boys, youths, seniors) and international matches, and they also run the Open Championship which is the oldest championship in the world and now a very big business. We then have the rules of golf committee which is responsible worldwide for the rules of golf, except in the United States and Mexico, and that committee again has its own secretary and that's responsible for making new rules, for making decisions on existing rules, and educating people on rules. They run seminars and exams for referees.

The amateur status committee, also has its own secretary and is responsible for laying down the rules of amateur status worldwide. Then we have the finance committee which is responsible for all the financial affairs of the club and the club committee which is responsible for the R&A as a golf club in St Andrews, and run like any other golf club except we're in the peculiar position that we don't own or run a golf course.

These are the committees and I am secretary of the R&A as an entity covering those different functions. It's my job to make sure the committees operate in accordance with the policy of the general committee. They lay down the policy and, through the committee secretaries, it's my job to make sure the policies are followed. We are also involved in the World Amateur Golf Council which is responsible for running the world amateur team championships, for men and women, on a biannual basis. Then we also have sub-committees, such as the external funds supervisory committee, and their job is to distribute the profits that are made from the Open back into the game of golf for the development of the game on as wide a scale as possible because one of the policies the general committee laid down many years ago was that the profits from the Open cannot go back into the R&A as a club. The profits from the Open have to be distributed for the benefit of golf, and it's for this reason that we have been supporting greenkeepers and greenkeeping matters, because that is one positive way of putting money back into the game for the benefit of everyone.

*GI: How long have you been doing this job?*

**MB:** Nearly 11 years now. I came to the R&A in June 1983 and took over as secretary in September '83. It seems like yesterday...

*GI: Do you still play golf?*

**MB:** I play occasionally, when I can. Everyone imagines a golf club secretary has a lot of time to play golf, but that isn't the case.

*GI: What's your handicap these days?*

**MB:** Three.

*GI: Do you play here at St Andrews?*

**MB:** Yes, but I play mainly at Elie which is just down the road and is a wonderful example of how a golf course should be. The greens there are superb all year round, never on temporary greens. The greens are fast and true, even in the middle of winter. And the course is never closed unless it's got snow on it...