Jim Arthur looks back to when he started his career and shows that the advice he gave then is just as relevant now...

Throughout more than 50 years of golf course advisory work I have steadfastly followed the principles impressed on me at the start of my advisory career by three remarkable people, of whom more anon. They taught me the time-proven and indisputable facts on which the basic principles of greenkeeping have depended since time immemorial. These principles have not altered simply because they are based on the needs of the fine textured ‘turf’ grasses - fine fescues and bent (Agrostis) - and these needs like the grasses have never changed. One sees so many passing fashions, hailed as the newest and best ideas, and none last more than a decade, and when they do conspicuously fail, their advocates have already shamelessly switched to the latest gimmick. The most important basis of my advice is and always has been - keep it simple and understandable. Greenkeeping is more of an art than a science. Soil chemists, physicists, mycologists, soil analysts (particularly them!) and all the other ‘ists’ are there to support, not to promote unproven policies. Their worst crime is correct observation, wrong deduction. The work of the commercial element of sports turf management is not to be designated providing it is confined to real improvements. Sadly, especially in the case of fertilisers, at times the motivation seems to be to try to create new markets by over-selling. I have maintained for more years than I care to remember, that golf clubs should buy very little fertiliser (and then nitrogen-only). Furthermore, clubs should order only what they need and should resist being pressurised into excessive purchasing. Yet we still see case after case of gross over-feeding with inorganic fertilisers - fine turf not colour and traditional greenkeeping as well as giving better playing surfaces is so much cheaper!

To return to my mentors, my introduction to grasses was in 1938 when my professor, a doughty Scot and a golfer of course, while concentrating on agricultural grasses, explained that all the rest were still worth studying, as quite apart from being valued constituents of golf course turf, they were very useful indicators of soil fertility, or the reverse, - even if farmers did regard them as weeds! He started my enthusiasm for grasses, which is still with me. Then came five years in the Army and my close contact with turf on occasions had nothing to do with studying botany but everything to do with survival!

The philosophies taught me by two remarkable men when I joined ‘the Research Station’ at Bingley just after the war are simple, indisputable and unchanging. I do not understand why I am regarded as “invariably controversial”, though Sir Michael Bonallack kindly qualifies this comment in his preface to Practical Greenkeeping adding “but infuriatingly nearly always right”.

If you are presented with techno-babble, demand that the perpetrator explains in simple terms - nine out of ten cannot.
After all I am merely echoing the tenets of sound traditional greenkeeping which were old-fashioned when I was first taught them 53 years ago. My mentor was Richard Libbey, the senior advisor, who was a botanist of international renown. When I was first appointed, their Director gave me three pieces of advice. First, my pre-war agricultural degree was useless and I had to reverse everything I had been taught on the principle of “ask a farmer what to do and go and do the opposite”. Secondly, I was told to stick to grass and avoid architecture as “I would never be a good enough golfer to rank with the best and my agronomic advice could be compromised”. Thirdly, (and even on a short acquaintance he realised it would be a severe hardship), “I was to go round for the first year being trained by Richard and I was to keep my mouth shut and my ears open.”

Long advisory tours with Richard gave me a wonderful education — peering, probing and digging into turf knowledge of many acknowledged experts in their specialised work.

Alternatively send for a 28-page folder of relevant articles and references which can be obtained (as can the book) from BIGGA HOUSE, for the princely sum of £2.50 to cover postage.

The basic principles of traditional greenkeeping hinge on copying the conditions in those areas where bents and fescues naturally dominate the turf. Such areas are so diverse and seem to have nothing in common, yet there must be common factors. Clearly it is nothing to do with acidity or alkalinity as the same grasses thrive equally on acid moors and heathland as on alkaline dunes and downland. It is nothing to do with soil types which range from extremely sandy links and heaths, to heavy clays of old parkland and neglected pastures. It is nothing to do with soil moisture; there can hardly be a greater contrast between tidally flooded meadows and arid sandy links, yet the same species occur on both.

A little ‘research’ shows that the common factors are very low ‘chemical’ fertility coupled with free drainage and related absence of compaction, encouraging deep rooting species which are also our finest textured grasses.

After these conditions, deliberately or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, Poa annua. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, Poa annua. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, Poa annua. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, Poa annua. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, Poa annua. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, Poa annua. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion
The two main causes of Poa Annua invasion and dominance are inadequate or too shallow aeration and above all phosphatic fertilisers.

best traditional courses - very sparingly!

Even before the 1914-18 war, Poa annua was synonymous with poorer turf in the eyes of greenkeepers and research scientists alike (Dr. Murray 1913). Today, however, there are too many voices which excuse or even praise this enemy Number One - either claiming it is inevitable, or because, as with Tour Professionals, they never play in this country when Poa is at its worst - and get presented with tarted-up putting surfaces for their big day - and never see or care what happens to those greens a few months (or weeks) later.

Let there be no question - annual meadow grass is the source of 90% of all greenkeeping problems and is an extremely expensive grass to maintain, and is tolerable only in the peak growing periods when its rapid recovery from damage and in response to fertilisers and water make it possible to produce good if slow putting conditions - for six to seven months a year.

The grasses which produce (on much smaller budgets) good conditions all year round for golf are the bents and fescues. Therefore we need to know how to encourage them. Many greenkeepers over the years have succeeded. It is therefore depressing to hear speakers at seminars either extolling its virtues or saying Poa dominance is inevitable. It is reprehensible because this unquestionably is confusing to younger greenkeepers, plagued as they are by unqualified salesmen some of whom, if told the truth, would conveniently forget it to make a sale.

Equally depressing is the number of greenkeepers at all levels who maintain that however wrong they may be, their members (new golfers) have to be given the nice and green lush turf that attracted them to golf in the first place the Augusta syndrome. Such heretics forget that golf is an all year round game (Augusta is open perhaps four and a half months a year). Our courses also have to stand up to heavy play and picture-post card Augusta is probably the most underplayed course in the world. Finally, the budget to produce such visual 'delights' is enormous, with money, manpower, machinery and materials wildly beyond the means of 99.9% of U.K. courses.

Once you start on the slippery slope, one cost leads to another. Excessive fertilisers lead to increasingly ineffective and hugely expensive fungicidal treatments. Our best courses use minuscule amounts of nitrogenous fertiliser and virtually no fungicides.

Above all else, we must combat the insidious dual evils of misplaced commercialism and apathy. Those who care for traditional standards tight lies; plenty of run on the ball; firm, fast greens - and abhor target golf, must put their heads above the parapet. Do not be afraid of being criticised; your reward will come, though perhaps not in this world.

Stand up and be counted and join the swelling ranks - both side of the Atlantic - for the 'bump and run' game and counter the ranks of misplaced commercialism - even those most eloquent in favour of feeding have not the slightest idea that they are completely wrong.

Do not let dodgy speakers get away with misrepresentation, whether caused by ignorance or cupidity. Stand up and argue your case: Demand more audience participation time in seminars. Good speakers on sound ground welcome such interventions - at least it shows that their audiences have not been put to sleep. Remember the speakers' adage; "Repartee needs to be rehearsed"!

Fight for our traditions and rout the target golf, summer-only school.

If you are presented with technobabble, demand that the perpetrator explains in simple terms - nine out of ten cannot. Do not spare the misconceptions.