COURSE

NO ACCESS DUE TO FOOT & MOUTH DISEASE
Two years after serving King and Country and for the first time legally entitled to vote I was given what I thought at the time was some pretty sound advice. “Listen to what they all have to say, take your pick and no matter which party you vote for it won’t make a scrap of difference. Politicians don’t run the country - it’s the Civil Service.”

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They may have done so reasonably efficiently in the early 1950s, but having researched this report on the affects of ‘foot and mouth’ on the game of golf, I have come to the conclusion that the State machine has grown into such a gargantuan bureaucratic autocracy, the country is no longer run, it is being strangled!

Without hopefully being too political, it would appear that the Prime Minister did eventually recognise the problem, which is why he moved the centre of operations away from Whitehall into Downing Street and gave the Army a significant role as the only organisation capable of cutting through the ‘red-tape’.

The spread of the virus infection caught most in the know by surprise, not least the civil servants at the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries & Food. Though it was their policies involving the closure of local abattoirs and the encouragement of nationwide livestock dealing that transmitted the disease from Northumberland to Essex, Cumbria and Devon overnight.

There are many tales to tell, some golf related others worth an airing in print, all point to one of the most serious economic crises since the middle-eastern sheikhs shocked the world by picking up the oil prices in the 1970s.

One lady in the office of a golf club secretary in Devon was almost in tears as she related the affects of the disease in her village. Every aspect of business and the social life of the community had come to a stop. The shops and pubs were empty, darts matches cancelled, all the guesthouses and hotels reported cancellations, even the Women’s Institute meetings were postponed indefinitely.

“It is just like a ghost-town, people have been laid off, there is no money to spend and no end in sight”

Devon has been hit very hard, with Westward Ho, Torrington and Yelverton forced to close before the end of February. Not because there has been an outbreak of foot and mouth on their land or near it, purely because both are on common land with footpaths crossing the course. Head Greenkeeper Mark Evans at Royal North Devon has 120 sheep on his course that the local graziers refuse to move. They could if they applied for a licence, but by mid-April refused to act. This has led to the Torridge District Council who own the land banning access.

Mark, who normally operates with five staff, has been forced to lay off two and cut the working hours of those still employed. To add insult to injury a council official has ordered that no maintenance work can take place, apart from cutting the greens once every ten days. Even the grass cuttings cannot be removed, they have to be deposited in a designated storage area.

“It is very frustrating,” added Mark. “If we could only carry out our normal daily work schedules, the course would be in first class condition when play is resumed. We have painted just about everything that doesn’t move. There is disinfectant in the club car park and we all go through the procedures on entering the course and leaving it.”
It is these two clubs in the Dartmoor National Park who have suffered most. Within three days of the first reported case in Devon, the park closed and that also included the golf courses, where sheep and ponies graze freely.

Suan Getson, Head Greenkeeper at Tavistock, is permitted to carry out essential maintenance, cutting the grass and maintaining the three new holes recently constructed. He runs the course with only two assistants, but the club have said there is no question at present of laying anyone off. They are fortunate to have a strong social membership to keep the club staff in business, but the only golf being played is on an enclosed putting and chipping green.

At Yelverton, seven miles south of Tavistock, Steve Evans said the Dartmoor National Park Authority, which he is part of, is fully enclosed. The golf course is the seventh part of the park. The club has introduced a disinfectant system, but not because of MAFF instructions.

A former Devon farmer, Martin Petherick, who owns the Waterbridge Golf Club at Crediton has been able to keep his course open and continues to welcome visiting golfers, though there is a rigid infection prevention and control. However, the club have said there is no income at all coming into the club, how long can the staff expect to be paid a salary?

Three strong committee of Torrington Golf Club, how long can the staff expect to be paid a salary?
Above: Tavistock GC greenstaff have to wear protective clothing. Even then, they can only carry out essential maintenance work.

Injections were taking place to re-open, but that very morning adjacent farmers had opened their gates and let on two separate flocks and allowed them to intermingle.

His reaction was quite predictable. One can only wonder what advice MAFF gave or if they had been consulted.

At Penrith to the north, the course is open for the simple reason the danger of infection has ceased. All the livestock for miles around has been killed, either because they were infected or as part of the culling policy to stop the spread southwards.

Silloth-on-Solway, one of Britain's finest links, is still in play. John Hill, the club Secretary said the Committee were reviewing the situation daily, but only a small part of the course backed on to farmland where there was an outbreak. Access to the course was through the town, with the sea as the major boundary, so there was nothing to be gained by closure.

The majority of the members at Silloth are in the farming community and for them it must be very distressing to see their quality herds transformed overnight to rotting carcasses with no foreseeable end to the problem. They are being compensated, but it is working capital that is going into the bank without the means of re-investing back on the land.

With the main area of infection so far confined to the west side of the country from the Borders to Devon, a confusing situation has arisen in Wales where the Welsh Golf Union web-site reports nine courses closed, mainly in north Wales, though the Vale of Glamorgan Council closed Southerness for five weeks. It reopened in time to stage the prestigious Duncan Putter with an international field after MAFF carried out a 'risk assessment', but said no golfers from infected areas could take part.

Course Manager, Garry Scott, has 300 free roaming sheep on the course and has instigated a fully operational washing down procedure for all machinery, plus the usual disinfected mats and beds of straw.

At Pennard, the Swansea Council closed the course and footpaths for three weeks because there were ponies on the fairways. With the nearest infection over 50 miles away, it was allowed to reopen on March 24 despite farmers putting on sheep and cattle, said club Secretary, Morley Howell, though they are hoping to have them removed.

No doubt as part of the pressure to counter the fear that Britain is in quarantine, the footpath ban at Pennard was lifted on April 10.

From this review of the country, Cumbria has lost the most livestock, Devon suffering the greatest financial setback as far as tourism and golf is concerned. The South West Region also lost its annual Westurf Show as a direct result of the outbreak.

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We'd like to hear from any BIGGA member with similar stories to tell, perhaps in different parts of the country.