Greenkeepers Training Committee

This month it’s GTC Chairman Donald Steel’s turn to write the column...

GTC Chairman Donald Steel examines two ways of doing the same thing. Could greencare throw up anything more contrasting?

One part of a job description for a Head Greenkeeper should surely be “you do what you have to do it”.

It might even carry the rider, “if you can do it. Constant adjustment, on account of the weather, makes me wonder how often, in fact, programmes can be implemented in any year without a hitch. Either that, or important exercises don’t get carried out at all. Which is worse?

It’s cold comfort that, in the more predictable climate of Augusta, preparations for the Masters pro-gress uninterupted with every conceivable technical aid at their disposal. On the other hand, the bigger question is whether the maintenance and presentation of the course is the right way of doing things.

Although the Masters is watched on television from Kuwait to Kathmandu via Karachi, and hailed by some as golf’s colourful shop window, to others it represents more what not to do.

Scott Corrigan pulled no punches in his article in last month’s edition. I must be careful not to tread on his toes.

As far as I am aware, such extremes would work, Chris with a bottomless purse and Brad Owen, the Augusta Superintendent, restricted by austerity.

The first peculiarity in that, while Ashdown is launching a new playing season, Augusta is shutting its doors. In the heat of summer, the Augusta greencare crew have the place to themselves - mostly carrying out one of the changes to the course for which they are famous.

They may be cursed that they can re-lay a green in May and have it back in full play by the fall. As we heard and saw on television, the 14th green was the latest to be re-laid although it is still a minefield of crazy slopes.

Another revelation in the Links Golf Magazine was that Augusta has started using sensing camera technology on the 13th and 17th greens. The “Hawkeye” system provides infrared temperature readings every ten minutes to detect areas of stress caused not only by temperature, but by insects, fungus, disease, and other environmental stressors. That is in addition to four iPad controlled sensors on every green to monitor soil moisture, temperature, and salinity.

As far as I am aware, such extremes of scientific assistance haven’t yet infiltrated Forest Row where Royal Ashdown Forest is celebrating its 125th anniversary and, without bunkers, has claims to being the most natural of golf’s settings. However, one joint aim shared by Mitchell and Owen is a preference for a fast running course to highlight strategic subtleties.

Augusta was, after all, designed for Bobby Jones by Alister Mackenzie based on the love of both for Ashdown Forest. It isn’t rain for The Masters and the greens are firm, chipping and putting becomes a test of nerve and judgement like no other but, if other element is slightly awry, even the best can look stupid - horribly stupid.

Some players may try to blame the insects and soil temperature readings although the caddies may not include their iPads in their golf bags. In any event, they could constitute an outside agency but they are further examples that The Masters and the Augusta National Golf Club occupy a golfer world of their own, a far cry from the days when Bobby Jones founded the Club so that no other professional could gather in the winter for a little, gentle golf. Now, look what’s happened.