Where would you think to go if you wanted some information on out of bound markings; or whether smooth or grooved rollers are preferable for fairway mowers, or even help with problems with herons?

Of course, you could visit your local library (if it still exists) or Google it and take your chances with what that turns up, or, much more sensibly, you could log onto the Members’ Area of the BIGGA website – www.bigga.org.uk – and place a posting on the Bulletin Board.

Those three issues were recent topics on the Boards and for each one of them the poster was rewarded with some excellent responses and some superb advice. The Bulletin Boards were introduced to the website around six years ago and quickly established themselves as a popular feature, offering the chance for members to pass comment; share the odd joke with fellow greenkeepers and, perhaps most importantly, request advice or information from the wealth of human resource within the Association.

“The Boards are not limited to technical information. They are also heavy on the human issues in greenkeeping,” explained regular Bulletin Board visitor and Past BIGGA National Chairman, Paul Worster, Course Manager at Minchinhampton Golf Club.

“Anyone under pressure or stress at work can find instant empathy and helpful feedback on dealing with the situation. We may work alone in isolated golf clubs but there is no need to isolate ourselves from the world. The old adage is very true ‘A problem shared is a problem halved’,” said Paul.

Another regular visitor and contributor is De Vere Mottram Hall Golf & Golf Club Course Manager, Stuart Stenhouse, who says he visits the Boards three to four times a week.

“I’ll have a general read or follow up on an interesting thread if there have been more replies since my last visit,” explained Stuart, who has also posted questions.

“I always find that you get plenty well thought out responses and in general terms they are courteous. I am also surprised at how often I get a reply and it turns out to be something that has never crossed my mind before. It has had a practical impact on how I have done things on my course,” he admitted.

He is a huge fan of what the Bulletin Boards can offer.

“They are invaluable because it is a great way to learn and it doesn’t cost a penny, other than your membership subscriptions. They are a source of education and I think that fact is sometimes lost on people.”

“Some see them as Ideas’ Boards; some see them as Solutions’ Boards; others see it as somewhere to go and sound off, but fundamentally it is a free source of education.”

Stuart Stenhouse

“…”Some see them as Ideas’ Boards; some see them as Solutions’ Boards; others see it as somewhere to go and sound off, but fundamentally it is a free source of education”

Stuart Stenhouse

expecting me to say the strimmer or plant growth regulators but I replied, almost without thinking because to me it was so obvious, that it was communications – the speed at which we can contact a colleague or industry professional to gain assistance,” he said.

And the great thing about the Bulletin Boards is that they can be viewed from anywhere and comment can come from any part of the world.

One of the most regular contributors is Sean Sullivan, Superintendent at The Briarwood Golf Club, in Montana, who says he logs on at least four times a day.

“I’ve posted questions several times when I’m looking for technical information that I feel the UK greenkeepers will have a unique answer or solution to,” explained Sean.

“Following the responses I’ve received I’ve re-introduced more maintenance programmes and blended some American methods with some UK methods and my members have made positive comments concerning the condition of the golf course which coincides with me joining BIGGA and starting to gather information from the Boards.”

Sean has posted questions about the use of focus on golf courses, the use of seaweed extract, fertilizer usage and about rain gear.

“I’ve posted questions on the use of fescues on golf courses, which coincides with me joining BIGGA and starting to gather information from the Boards.”

Sean Sullivan

Some 101 replies. Such was the interest generated that it was the catalyst for a major seminar on the Continue to Learn programme at Harrogate in 2010.

“Got involved in the 2mm debate on the Boards and actually went down to visit Greg Evans (who promotes cutting at 2mm at Ealing Golf Club) to see it first hand,” said Stuart.

“I do believe that Greg came in for unfair criticism. He makes people think and it is just another option. No-one is actually forced down that route.”

Stuart has also formed firm friendships with members of the Gingerbread Men group, with many of the posts being taken opposing agronomic views on the Boards.

“Remember my little spats with the Gingerbread men from a few years ago, but to be honest we are good friends (and I really made no attempt to win mutual respect but people don’t see that side of it).”

On the other side of the Atlantic Sean would heartily recommend the use of the Boards to anyone, with one reservation as being the only BIGGA member in his region giving him a competitive advantage over his neighbouring golf clubs.

“At some time or other we all need help or information so why not get it quickly from qualified experienced individuals. I would suggest that everyone uses the information on the Boards as a starting point but that you must also do your own research to make sure the solutions are safe and have merit.”

Sean also offers some advice to those who may be reticent about “opening up” in public.

“Rest assured the Boards are monitored and instances of inappropriate or bullying responses are very rare.”

Indeed Paul comes in for praise from Stuart for his contribution to the Boards.

“One guy who always stands out to me is Paul Worster. No matter who it is who is asking a question Paul’s answers are always very courteous and to the point. In fact I really like reading his answers myself and I get a lot practical help out of them.”

If there was one tweak Stuart would like to see it is something to assist the younger members.

“I’d like to see more of the younger guys posting but currently it is difficult for them as the response when they ask a question is often ‘Why haven’t you asked your Course Manager?’.”

“Opening up” in public.

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BIGGA is committed to developing the Website and the Bulletin Boards, so if you have any ideas or comments to make about them, please email Scott MacCallum, scott@bigga.co.uk
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Continental shift

Mark Alexander finds out how an Irish greenkeeper ended up at a Dutch course run by a group of Scottish golf pros
Continental shift

Mark Alexander finds out how an Irish greenkeeper ended up at a Dutch course run by a group of Scottish golf pros.
Driving across Holland, you don’t get the sense that this is a golfing nation. As you would imagine, the place is falling down with windmills, canals and tulips, but flagsticks are conspicuous by their absence. It’s a strange omission considering the country claims it can trace its golfing heritage back to the very origins of the sport.

In fact, the relentless flat plains of this low-lying country provide no hint of the fervour with which the Dutch have rediscovered the game in recent years. According to KPMG’s 2010 Country Snapshot, there are more than 360,000 golfers in the Netherlands with 12 times more people playing the sport now than 20 years ago. This impressive rate of growth (10% per annum) has outpaced the growth in supply (5%) which has produced 192 courses.

With this fevered backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that Holland recently put together a bid to host the 2018 Ryder Cup. And it wasn’t just any bid. Of the five countries to make it to the final selection stages of the bidding process, only two presented their case based on the merits of existing courses. The French bid was one - the Dutch was the other.

Opened by Ryder Cup captain Colin Montgomerie in May, the Dutch - as it has been officially named - is for all intents and purposes a rough-and-ready links-style course.

“Radical shaping has been used to create a rugged golf-course character where undulating fairways, featuring many bumps and hollows, are framed by dramatic mounding,” explains a note on Montgomerie’s website, who lent his signature to the course.

In between the bumps and hollows, the course stays true to its origins by incorporating a host of water features which are an inevitable by-product of building a course on land below sea level. The transformation, masterminded by Eurogaolf Design (EGD), has been absolute with straight and angular canals magically remoulded into meandering streams and sweeping lakes.

The man in charge of the grow-in and ongoing maintenance of the course, which was opened shortly before the Ryder Cup announcement in May, is Niall Richardson, Talented, focussed and possessing a wicked sense of humour, Niall arrived in Holland three years ago following a challenging stint at Moyvalley Golf, Hotel and Country House in his native Ireland. “I was banging my head against a brick wall trying to produce the highest possible standards,” he admits.

The EGD-designed Darren Clarke-signature course was the third high-profile build he had been involved in. His first had created one of Ireland’s most acclaimed resorts - Carlton House. “That was a special place,” he recalls.

“The owners were custodians of a 13th century estate and developed two fabulous golf courses. They had real passion and drive.”

The 36-hole complex featured Mark O’Meara and Colin Montgomerie-signature courses and established a clear pattern that Niall has followed ever since. Typically involving big-name players and the input of EGD, Niall naturally gravitated towards new developments and the lure of the grown-in.

“This is my fourth grow-in. I must be a gluten for punishment or something,” he jokes.

“I love it – the excitement and the buzz of creating something new. The enthusiasm of everyone involved is infectious.”

He certainly caught the bug when he met the team behind The Dutch, who collectively operate a networking company based around organised golf days. Devised and operated by golf pro, many of whom originate from Scotland; Made in Scotland was formed a decade ago with the idea of taking corporate clients to play some of the world’s most iconic courses.

The team cornered the Dutch corporate market, but their success was dependant almost entirely on access to and the service of their hosts.

An idea was duly hatched to form a golf club especially for Made in Scotland and its clients, and Niall was drafted in as the man on the ground.

“I arrived on a very dull, misty April day and met about 11 of the guys, who were all high-fiving each other and chatting away,” he recalls.

“I remember thinking these are the kind of people I want to work with. And then I went to the site. It was just farmland, terrible, wide open farmland. I thought they were having a laugh.”

“They weren’t. The soggy terrain was to provide the foundations for a championship course, and Niall was the man to make it happen.

The featureless and sudden ground would be a problem, but looking closer at the project, Niall found there were more issues below the surface.

“When building a USGA-spec green, the sub-base must be identical to the gravel layer and the root zone. You have to have a stable foundation”

Niall Richardson

“When you’re building a USGA-spec green, the sub-base must be identical to the gravel layer which must be identical to the root zone so that everything forms properly. You have to have a stable foundation,” Niall explains.

“Our Project Manager, Hubert Lendering who is an industrial engineer, suggested we use floating foam concrete which is used over here to support roads and under-ground car parks. It would act as a low-weight sub foundation to go under the greens.”

The idea was to create three layers of concrete built-up in a pyramid shape beneath the greens. Each covering would be about 350cms deep with the first outer layer spread out to around 1,200m2, the second to about 1,000m2 and the last to about 800m2.

“The foam concrete guarantees there is a stable plateau under
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The featureless and sodden ground would clearly be an issue, especially in terms of settlement and especially around the greens. When you’re building a USGA-spec green, the sub-base must be identical to the gravel layer and the root zone. You have to have a stable foundation.”

“When you look at the tender, I saw there was no reference to a stone burier, and asked who was going to bury the stones. They didn’t know what I was talking about,” he says.

“There are no such things as stones over here. The only stones on this site are the ones in the rubble mixed in with the filling ground. It’s sand, silt and organic material deposited over a hundred years, that’s what they have here.”

In terms of construction, the saturated ground would clearly be an issue, especially in terms of settlement and especially around the greens.

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each green so there is no sinkage or settlement,” Niall explains. Although the idea was simple, it had to overcome serious ground issues that could literally undermine the course.

With the potential for unstable greens, the completed putting surfaces are surprisingly fast and pleasingly firm. More importantly, they run true.

Equally as impressive is their health which can be attributed to the considered approach adopted by Niall.

“I am always concerned by how the staff treat the greens,” he admits. “For me, the most important priority is the greens. We treat each one as an alter and refer to them as our babies. It’s the old policy; start at the pin and work out.”

Although golf in Holland can be traced back over many centuries, the expertise needed to maintain championship-standard courses is typically thin on the ground. As a result, Niall’s emphasis on green care had to be introduced to a new breed of Dutch greenkeepers.

“I try to instill in my guys respect for the greens,” he says. “But in order to do this project, we couldn’t always get fully qualified greenkeepers - three of my guys had never set foot on a golf course before they started here.”

The Irishman’s approach wasn’t all about teaching respect and parenting skills however; he also introduced some practical steps to safeguard his cherished offspring.

“We fenced each green,” he recalls. “The Made in Scotland boys asked if the fences were to protect the greens from the animals, and I said yes, especially the two-legged animals who like to bring clients out here! I wanted to keep everyone off the greens.”

Of course, during a new construction soil can be often brought in from any number of sources with each consignment potentially transporting weeds, disease and unwanted grasses. In order to protect the 100% creeping bentgrass surface, Niall introduced a forensic approach more akin to television programmes like CSI.

“We introduced a policy of tennis-shoes only on the greens,” he says. “The idea was to take the machine up to the edge of the green, make sure it was clean, put the machine onto boards, change our shoes and get on with the job.

“Thank you to our Gold and Silver Key Sponsors

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CoUrSe FeAtURe

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“That’s for disease management so you’re not bringing something from outside, in. It’s also for cross-contamination and it protects the greens from workmen’s boots which aren’t the most delicate things. I don’t want that kind of footwear going across my babies.”

Caught short, the greenkeepers at The Dutch have even been known to go about their work shoeless.

“A lot of the lads will take their steel toe-capped boots off and walk onto green surface in their socks. There’s probably a health and safety code against that, but I don’t argue with them.”

The staff of 10 full-time greenkeepers not only tip-toe across the greens, they also hand-mow and hand-spray them, as well as hand-mowing the surrounds and tees, and hand-raking the bunkers.

The finish is spectacular and has worked a treat in attracting and retaining members. Indeed, despite a lavish joining fee of €43,500 and hefty annual subscriptions of €2,500, the number of members at The Dutch has swelled to over 750. Bearing in mind, 150 of these are corporate members who pay anything up to €250,000 a year, it’s clear the greenkeeping staff are doing something right.

Indeed, with a second course in the offing and a boutique hotel planned, the future looks bright for The Dutch.

Unlock the potential of greenkeepers

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France boosts some long-established golf clubs in superb settings which have large memberships but also attract visitors and holidaymakers. As a result, these courses are worked extremely hard and many experience long, hot, dry summers. This, together with many years of experience, lead to courses being part of one of France’s leading sports clubs, Racing Club de France, and has frequently hosted the French Open. It boasts 18 hole courses, Le Forêt and the older, La Vallée.

The greens are old and were built on a poorly draining base. The soil is clay with a terracotta drainage layer at a depth of 40cm.

“Due to this construction, we have been having problems with grass that were slow to drain after heavy rain,” said Director, Jean-Franck Burou.

“The greens were very compacted and the growth was weak,” Ecosol Turfcare was called in to Drill n Fill all 18 greens on Le Forêt course, while the following year there was a return visit in 2010 to the older course, La Vallée.

Three aerators and two SQRLs. Despite being hampered by frozen greens, requiring a late start in exceedingly cold weather, the French greenkeepers were extremely supportive.

“The operation on La Vallée was similar, with three aerators and two SQRLs. Despite being hampered by frozen greens, requiring a late start in exceedingly cold weather, the French greenkeepers were extremely supportive.

“Although we injected 60 tonnes of material, the job was very smooth and efficient,” reported Head Greenkeeper, Guillaume Graf. It was felt that the local sand used in the first job had been a little fine, so for La Vallée, the backfill was imported from Bespoke Blending and Bagging (BBB) in the UK. It was a 95:5 mix of 20/30 Kiln Dried sand and Sportslite, which has the additional benefit of retaining water in the rootzone - important in France where water used for the irrigation of sports grounds is rationed.

“The results have been very satisfactory,” said Jean-Franck.

“At La Boulie there has been a nett improvement in the drainage level and also from being able to introduce sand into these clay greens. This has resulted in a ‘tightening’ of the greens and they are now much firmer with better grass growth. The greens are already firmer and draining faster.”

Golf de Chantilly is another club, which decided to carry out work this summer. The club offers two courses, the older, is 100 years old. There is a team of 15 greenkeepers and normal turf care includes vert-draining and the John Deere Zero Spike which goes to a depth of 3-4cms.

“Although our soil conditions are good, greens are constructed from Loire Sand to a variable depth,” said Director Remy Dorbeau.

“We had a problem with water not moving off the surface because, at 50cm down, there is a layer of chalk and a lot of organic matter. We needed to get down to the gravel drainage layer at 30cm deep which is why we used Drill n Fill.”

The whole of the old course was treated, grass growth has already improved and surface drainage performing well after the first rain of autumn.

Golf de Pourqueux is in the environs of Paris, which offers 27 holes - three sets of nine which are interchangeable and so offer different 18 hole challenges each week. Superintendent Jean-Marie Pardo contacted neighbours Chantilly about the deep aeration and backfill process, liked what he saw and booked four greens, 2000sq m, for treatment.

“We had been struggling with compaction and poor drainage because we have old clay push-up greens,” Jean-Marie also decided to import the sand/Sportslite backfill from the UK.

“It was of a higher quality and more suitable grade than I could get locally,” he said.

“They were very compacted and we had been worrying about the build-up of top dressing on top of the new 15th green and a view of the Eiffel Tower from the 14th. Course construction at St Cloud is again push-up greens out of clay. Topped with fine native soils. As with the other courses, Director Denis Couture was experiencing slow drainage of the greens due mainly to build-up of top dressing on top of the clay base as our photo shows, heavy had the entire older course, Vert, Drill n Filled this summer and has booked in the Jaune course for 2012.

“We have seen good results from this process at other clubs and feel sure it will be the answer for us. Paris has experienced some very hot summer recently and the greens have had a lot of use, so draining down to around 90cm, completely replacing the rootzone and leaving a network of ducts will aid water percolation and improve grass growth,” he said.