

# FACE TO FACE

FROM the first part of the report on my talk with Jeff Perris and David Stansfield it was apparent that the STRI has made a very positive commitment to the sometimes thankless task of advising golf clubs on the best ways to manage their courses. The personnel involved in the new golf unit have a considerable understanding of the problems of those at the sharp end.

Attitudes, whether of greenkeepers, club officials, golfing authorities etc, play an enormous part, and it was my task to explore these matters further.

We started by reviewing the width and extent of the services now offered. The pattern of the annual advisory visit, established in 1930 by Dawson and Hackett, would seem less than adequate to deal with some of the problems stemming from the massive increase in course usage.

David Stansfield was quick to point out that, in the past year, the number of visits he made to individual clubs varied from one to six "depending on whether there was a major problem or not."

## 'The number of topics has increased'

"The number of topics which now require discussion during a visit has increased enormously. We now have to look carefully at subjects other than standard greenkeeping - social issues, messing facilities, health and safety, provision of adequate machinery and implement sheds, efficiency of both shed facilities and machinery and conservation issues to name

but a few. Conservation is a subject which has become of major importance - especially in the south east of England, and this is spreading to other areas of the country. With all these subjects, if we do not know all the answers, at least we can point the club in the right direction to find the requisite expertise, be it an irrigation engineer or conservation expert."

## 'We are extending our services'

Jeff Perris said: "We are extending our services to golf right across the board, beginning with more feasibility studies at the planning stage and an increasing involvement in construction."

A new, and welcome, departure is for the STRI to be involved in club membership meetings, with the opportunity to explain the problems, and their solutions, to golfers. Such meetings give a chance for the incorrect beliefs of lay membership to be nailed with scientific information. It is a common observation that the really awkward club member rarely attends a site visit; in his heart of hearts he isn't sufficiently sure of his ground, but he can do great damage at the bar. At a full club meeting he has to put up or shut up.

"At one course" said Jeff, "I had been doing advisory visits for years and years, imploring the club to follow certain advice and yet progress was poor. Matters came to a head within the club and I was invited to address the members. The clubhouse was packed, they were hanging from the rafters

## PART II OF EDDIE PARK'S INTERVIEW

and we achieved more in a couple of hours than in sixteen years of annual visits. The membership is now emphatic that, whoever sits on their committee, they must implement the professional advice rather than the whim of an individual committee."

"We have to make sure that clubs are aware of the potential of THEIR course and that they realise that some courses do not have as high a potential as others - perhaps due to unfavourable soil characteristics or poor initial construction. We try to encourage clubs to produce a proper policy document as a means of introducing some continuity into the system. We do try to stop the situation where we are seeing changes of committee and of direction each time we visit the club. It is really essential to try to stop the club that "yo-yos" in its policy." Continued Jeff: "I can think of one club where I can guarantee that the chairman of the green will be one of two local professional men. Mr A favours the links type of course with firm fescue greens.

## 'Water and fertiliser mad'

After two years of this regime the members begin to think they want the opposite and install Mr B, who is water and fertiliser mad, only to find after a further two years that they really preferred links after all. This has now gone on, believe it or not, for twelve years, but at last we have managed to have an agreed policy document put in place.

"We try to establish a policy

**WITH  
JEFF PERRIS  
AND  
DAVID  
STANSFIELD**

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which clearly spells out all the objectives and which can be taken to an AGM and voted on as official club policy. There is then an obligation on committees to implement it for five, seven or ten years, or whatever period has been decided. The greenkeeper does not then have to worry that a maverick incoming captain will be able to reverse things.

"Of course we have to think of our professional reputation, and when we find ourselves advising a club which is not implementing that advice we have to think fairly hard about our position. No one will gain in this situation - not ourselves and certainly not the club. There may well be a case for being dogmatic and saying that there is obviously no point in continuing to come to that club. Circumstances vary and much depends on whether we can see any hope for an improvement in attitudes."

I questioned what would happen in the situation, not all that uncommon, where a greenkeeper agrees with a policy, but unwittingly is not achieving results because of some misunderstanding of methods. Both advisers reckoned they could spot enough clues to be able to tell what was happening. David put it this way "If you co-ordinate what you see, both on and under the ground, with what you see in the sheds, you often don't even need to ask what is being done."

### **'Standards have risen vastly'**

There was total agreement that standards of greenkeeping have risen vastly, coupled with

a desire that BIGGA will go from strength to strength. There was concern, however, that education and training is still "rarely valuable because greenkeepers tend to go to college to learn HOW to do something, when they should be learning WHY they are doing it. They expressed the hope also that there will be a greater emphasis on management, and in this respect the course at Elmwood received praise.

Current problems? The most intractable seem to be overplay and resultant wear, especially on walk-on and walk-off areas of greens.

### **'The greatest need is to look ahead'**

The greatest need for many clubs is for them to look ahead, but this is actively discouraged by their constitutions with short-lived committees. I suspect that the pressures on clubs which result in someone wanting to play in every hour of daylight, winter and summer, are now out of control. There is now a sober warning from knowledgeable men that this may not be able to continue.

Even assuming that greenkeepers can get on the course to undertake suitable treatment on areas of high usage, there could arise the necessity for two very unpleasant measures: The need to constrain play to manageable proportions and, on some courses, there may be no alternative to the reconstruction of badly constructed greens.

The hope is that, for most clubs, both these measures are in the future and that most clubs will, in the meantime,

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realise the need for expert advice and leadership. The golfing authorities were thought "Not to be sufficiently positive and very similar to club committeemen who are at best part-time and not in a position to take an overview of the whole situation."

Jeff Perris went on the remark that "In all sports, the STRI run into difficulties with the structure of ruling authorities and this makes it difficult to get a message through. The added difficulty in golf is the large number of clubs, all of whom regard themselves as independent republics, answerable only to their members."

Talking to Jeff and David, who have such a wealth of experience behind them, and realising that there is little difference between any of the professional agronomists on basic principles, I really began to feel that this would be good time for those who believe that THEY don't need advisors to think again. Some are just being stubborn, but others are perfectly sincere.

### **'Excellent presentation, hard work, but...'**

Again and again, though, I find the same picture on their courses.

Excellent presentation shows that a great deal of hard work has been done, but fails the acid test of botanical analysis and consequently fails to provide a twelve month golf course. In this day and age nothing less will do.

Sympathetic help is now available at the end of a telephone line. The number? 0274 565131.