

QUESTIONS, questions and more questions. Any comparison between the greenkeeping meetings of twenty years ago with those of today would have to take account of the fact that more people are asking more questions than ever before.

Not just technical questions, but much more fundamental questions concerning the whole structure of the game of golf.

A prime target for criticism among those involved with the maintenance of golf courses are the national golf unions and their apparent inability to shoulder tasks that would seem to be their responsibility. It would perhaps be only fair to first establish how they operate. So it was that I made my way to the headquarters of the largest of the national unions, the English Golf Union at Leicester to talk to their secretary Keith Wright.

Our first task was to put the EGU into a proper historical context. We all understand that the R & A constitutes the ruling body of the game outside America, but it is not responsible for the running of the game in each golf club. From a fairly early stage, in order to arrange local competitions, clubs banded together to form county unions. National unions were a later development and the English Union is a relatively recent newcomer, dating from 1924. The Scottish, Welsh and Irish unions consist of all their constituent clubs, but their English counterpart has as full members only "the county unions of England and the Isle Of Man".

Thus there is no direct link between the national body and the clubs. Everything has to pass through the county unions with funds collected by the county from the clubs and services given in return have to use the same roundabout method.

In recent times, considerable efforts have gone into modernising the mechanics of the EGU starting with the move in 1985 from Wokingham to a more central site at Leicester in a building specially adapted for the purpose. At that time Keith Wright was appointed as secretary, an encouraging if rather surprising appointment as his previous career was with the Football Association.

Keith and his very capable deputy Paul Baxter have now had time to set up an organisation well equipped for today's world. So where does it obtain its income and what does it do with it? Keith did his best to give me some answers.

Looking at the financial report it is clear most of the income is raised, by an annual levy on all golfers, currently set at 60p per head. This amounts to £204,000 out of a total of £260,000. There is some additional aid from both the Sports Council and the R & A.

It is when we come to look at the other

side of the figures that some doubts arise in my mind. Administration accounts for £97,000 of which salaries make up less than half, the remainder going on the general expenses of maintaining a national headquarters. Quite modest, but it then appears that the principal services being rendered are the running of committees and coaching, matches and competitions for the good players. Indeed the accusation has been levelled, that they do little more than train budding professional golfers. Keith Wright thinks that is putting it too strongly, arguing that "traditionally any governing body is expected to conduct and run a programme of competitive excellence and the EGU is not unique in this".

However, the first of the three official aims of the Union is "to further the interests of Amateur Golf in England" and if amateur golf is taken to include club golfers it is difficult to refute the argument that most of the money is being spent for the benefit of a small minority.

There's £2000 for greenkeeper training and £700 for the STRI

The Council and Executive Committee consist solely of members elected by the county unions and any debate as to desirable further services which might be carried out by the EGU will be carefully monitored to ensure that they do not encroach on the territory of either the county unions or of their constituent clubs.

Perhaps an examination of the ability to survey current problems and to react to them on a national scale is called for and it is first essential to identify the true aims of amateur golf. The sort of help that can follow could be illustrated by recent examples such as the problems of Common Land and taxation of green fees where clubs have been delighted to receive a national lead.

That brings us to today's problems on the golf course and here there is plenty of sympathy from the EGU which has not always been translated into action in the past. Although the EGU has always been strongly represented on the board of the STRI financial contributions could not be described as generous. Part of the blame for this must be shared by CONGU which is the body set up to represent all four Home Unions, with responsibilities in the field of handicapping and international competition. Representing all British golfers it might be thought that it could have ensured that matters appertaining to the health of British golf courses were properly looked after.

Now we are beginning to see the difficulties. CONGU has no teeth and no way of enforcing its will. Worse still, it has little in the way of income. Income is also a problem for the EGU. In most fields of sport the organising body has a

# FACE TO FACE

**Eddie Park  
talks to  
Keith Wright  
Secretary  
of the English  
Golf Union**

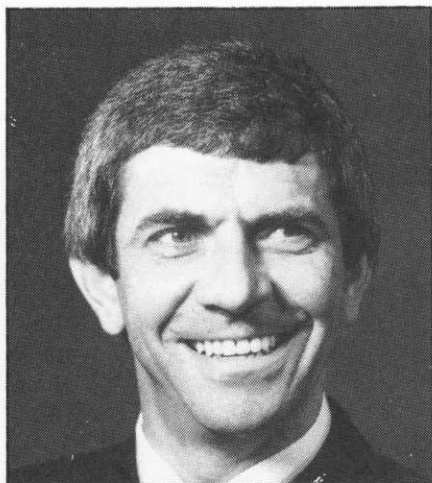
money-making event which it can finance desirable ends.

In recent years the R & A has begun to derive substantial profits from the Open and has set up a mechanism to distribute any surplus. I am not sure that the cash is really reaching the best targets for the good of the game as a whole, but both BIGGA and the STRI are receiving very necessary assistance.

The EGU championships are not regarded as being of enough interest to even justify admission fees, let alone TV interest and there is a limit to what can be derived from levies, but only this year when the R & A suggested that the unions should join them in better support for greenkeeper training the EGU have agreed and will gibe a two pence per head contribution which will provide in the region of £8000.

I asked Keith for some general comments on how he personally sees the future and he made some interesting points. For example, it really ought to be possible to cut out some of the overlap between the activities of the many fragmented bodies involved with golf eg. the EGU, the PGA, BIGGA, the golf Foundation and so on. The same goes for new developments with the Sports Council, the architects, the constructors, STRI etc.

Sponsorship is another difficult subject which is at least being thought about. The Golf Foundation has done a splendid job in interesting more and more young people in golf, but very little to ensure that good courses are available for them to actually play.



**"It does seem sensible for the EGU to pull one way and another body to pull in a different direction"**

**KEITH WRIGHT**

What is worse is the fact that commercial organisations do not readily see an alternative home for their generosity. A plan that has been in the back of Keith's mind for some time is the concept of a golf development body, financed by sponsorship, that would act as a channel to funnel money into worthwhile projects.

"The indications are that there are problems with courses and it would seem sensible for a fund administered by the EGU to be set up to support any project which is required" stated Keith, "and it could be argued that the EGU has a duty to provide services that individual clubs cannot provide, chief among which is education". There is at present nobody to educate golf club members and their committees in how to manage their golf courses. In some other countries there is a much greater input of expertise into golf clubs and it need not be costly.

A further criticism of the EGU is that, if it runs competitions with a view to encouraging excellence, it does not always select venues which match that aim. Youngsters need not master ball control if the examination is target golf. Some of the courses seem to have been selected more on past reputation than on current excellence. The EGU does not consult or employ expert advice in selecting courses, but that problem may be more easily solved now that a member of the executive, Peter Wilson, is also chairman of the STRI.

It will be of interest to readers of this magazine that Keith Wright told me that when the EGU is running a tournament it prefers to deal at first-hand with the course manager. He is also realistic enough to recognise that the members of a host club have more influence over course preparation than a visiting union.

I went to Leicester armed with a barrage of criticisms that I have heard over the years from those involved in the

maintenance of golf courses, especially from members of club committees and Keith was able to answer many of my points or at least explain the difficulties. I certainly came away with more optimism that problems are being investigated with sympathy and efforts being made to find solutions.

A few doubts remain in my mind. A common feature which seems to link most bodies working on the interface between golf and golf course maintenance is that they frequently lack expertise and therefore fail to appreciate what they don't know! I remember raising this point with a VIP in the golf world when talking about one of the most important committees in golf. (no names, no pack drill!) "Well they have all been good golfers and they're all good chaps".

Applying such criteria does not help very much if decisions are taken which affect the way a golf course is to be treated. This criticism is equally valid whether discussing club committees or national committees and national unions are certainly not exempt.

Appointing a consultant and then ignoring or misusing his advice is another mistake. Of course, this kind of criticism works both ways. Do the boards of management of the STRI and BIGGA know enough about the needs of their customers?

A more serious matter in my mind is the cumbersome arrangement that stems from working through the counties. The EGU seems to be a sleeping giant and efforts are being made to rouse it, but the process is agonisingly slow - much too slow if help is to come in time to the men struggling to maintain English courses. The tragedy there is that all this has happened before. In the late Twenties, when the EGU and other unions joined with many clubs in setting up the Board of Greenkeeping Research when courses faced a peril similar to that of today.

Continuity is a frail commodity in golf and golf courses are the losers.

The EGU headquarters staff have already been able to offer BIGGA some help with such things as computer lists of club details and I feel sure the time is ripe for BIGGA officials to talk about the problems of their members with the EGU.

The last word must rest with Keith Wright. "The responsibility for maintaining a golf course does not rest with the EGU; it rests with those charged with responsibility within the club. The role of the EGU is in the long term concerned with providing means whereby people in clubs can obtain educational help to do a better job. The fact that a club has not come to grips with a thatch problem or whatever is not the fault of the EGU.

"The future role of the EGU must centre around the building of a better co-ordinated programme for golf and golfers. It does not seem sensible for the EGU to pull one way and another body to pull in a different direction".

**FACE  
TO  
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