

ON THE COURSE



Aeration is the secret at Churston

Forty years a greenkeeper, Gordon Child talks to Michael Bird about his work on the golf course and his devotion to the profession.

There's a saying at Churston Golf Club that the only place that is not aerated is the car park.

Well, some of the more wayward golfers had better start improving their game, because course Manager, Gordon Child, is well on his way to treating every part of the course from where a golf ball might be played. And that includes the car park, landing spot of the occasional badly-sliced shot from the 18th fairway.

This may be just another tall-tale

from the 19th hole, but it's thanks to the care and experience brought to the course by Gordon Child over the past nine years, that unplayable greens over winter or after heavy rainfall are now just a memory at Churston Golf Club.

Indeed, Churston is one of the few courses in South Devon able to boast that it rarely, if ever, turns golfers away due to the weather. And that is a fine testimonial to a man who has devoted a lifetime to improving the standing of the green-keeping profession and the educa-

tion and training of its members.

For apart from his daily course maintenance and management duties, Gordon is also the regional administrator for the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association.

Gordon Child was appointed course manager at the 6,201 yard, par 70. Churston Golf Club in December 1980, following seven years at Moor Park, and before that at St Georges Hill, Weybridge.

The course now in his charge commands a superb position on the

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Setting the programme on the Watermation irrigation system.

southern shores of Torbay and, apart from the first and 18th holes, clings tightly to the coastline with the back nine played virtually straight into the prevailing south-westerly winds.

Six of the holes around the turn - from the sixth to the 11th - offer totally different characteristics to the remaining 12 on the course, being located on a thin, shaley sub-soil with very little cover before solid rock is encountered.

The other holes lie on deep, heavy clay, providing a year-round challenge to the greenkeeping staff.

"The terrain at Churston imparts the characteristics of both a heathland and a parkland course," explained Mr Child. "When one half of the course is wet, the other is much drier. And when the heavy soil dries out, the six holes on the shallow land are facing drought."

Fortunately, the experience and knowledge gained by Gordon over 40 years as a greenkeeper supplied a ready

answer: "There is absolutely no substitute for mechanical work on a golf course," he said. "When I arrived, there were parts of the course which had never been touched or where very little aeration was carried out. Now, there is virtually nowhere that we don't spike or slit to help keep the ground open."

Regular aeration is an absolute must to Gordon Child. "Greens, sur-

An acid soil to limit the spread of meadowgrass

rounds, tees and fairways all receive routine treatment," he pointed out. "The operation saves time and it saves money. Quite simply, it has to be looked upon now as a regular job on most courses because of the amount of golf played and the compaction that results.

"If golfers want to play all year round, we have to aerate all year round."

Irrespective of the hole, aeration of Churston's 18 greens is carried out every week, weather permitting, with one of the club's two Cushmans equipped with a variable-depth aerator fitted with 'V'-shaped tines.

Operating depth is set to 3in during the summer and 5in over winter.

Year-round aeration of the greens and their surrounds is accompanied by tractor-towed slit tining of the fairways during the winter months and occasional Verti-draining. The greens are also hollow or solid tined for both aeration purposes and when Gordon feels there is a need to correct pH levels.

"We try to maintain a slightly acid soil on the course to limit the spread of meadowgrass which tends to grow very easily," he explained. "A top dressing of sand and peat, plus iron, after tining helps keep conditions nicely balanced. And it assists in maintaining an open surface.

"Verticutting also helps and in

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summer we regularly slit and then verticut before mowing the greens.”

The Child philosophy on top dressing is “little and often”. Other than when correcting pH levels, Gordon Child also applies dressings to maintain speed on the greens, always matting in the mix, the majority of which is produced on the course to his own formula. Fendress makes up the balance.

Automatic watering of the greens is under the control of a Watermation system, updated in 1987 with the replacement of all components apart from the mains and storage tank. The system is said to work extremely well, especially on the greens with little sub-soil which could otherwise quickly show signs of stress in dry weather.

Weeds are not a major problem at Churston, with treatment against daisies on the fairways being the only regular reason for a sprayer being attached to either the Cushman or one of the club's two tractors.

This is carried out twice a year, with spot treatments as and when necessary. The greens are weeded by hand.

Despite the apparent low use of pesticides on the course, Gordon Child said that an immediate priority was the construction of a separate lockable chemical store, with shower. “I believe that this is absolutely crucial and would urge all greenkeepers to place it at the top of their equipment priorities list.” he stressed.

Apart from daily greens mowing during the summer, the fairways are cut twice a week using a ground-driven trailed set of five gangs.

“We're a bit out of date there,” commented Mr Child, “and I shall be looking to replace them with modern equipment soon. There are definite advantages to collecting grass cut on the fairways, and that is the direction in which I am looking.”

No reseeding has ever been carried out on the greens at Churston as the club does not seem to have a problem with either regrowth or re-establishment after winter or dry periods, due to a combination of good drainage and regular watering.

Mr Child admitted that the pre-



Gordon Childs pointing to the 13th green where trees have been removed to improve turf growth and drainage.



Gordon Childs in his office (at home) with a plan of the Churston Golf Course.

dominant meadow grass had been difficult to reduce, but pointed out that he had managed to raise the percentage of bents and fescues through regular aeration, better drainage and a reduction in fertiliser usage which, he said, had been too high in the past: “The course was literally overfed.”

Drainage improvement has been one of the major areas of attention on the course since Gordon Child's appointment.

“Even fairly light rainfall caused the bunkers to fill up with water and overflow onto the greens,” he

explained. “We have drained a number of bunkers and also around the edges of greens to eliminate most of the problem areas.”

Gordon Child and his staff of four, headed by assistant, David Prosser, have also been busy on other parts of the course, with at least one important project being completed each year.

Last winter, with advice from golf course architect, Fred Hawtree, the team removed a rock bank adjoining the 8th green, setting in three new bunkers in its place.

Previously, a golf ball just six

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inches off line could strike the bank and be "kicked off" into undergrowth, never to be found again. Now, it is just another challenging golf shot, with the alteration much appreciated by members.

Projects in other years have involved removing trees that were shading a green, making it unplayable in winter, to let in light and air and improving the green "beyond recognition"; building new tees in positions designed to both enhance and encourage golf shots; and altering the line of a fairway to keep play away from a busy road.

Despite bearing the title course manager, Gordon Child is very much a working greenkeeper. "That is the only way to keep in touch totally with what is going on," he said. "The club management has been tremendous and we have established an excellent relationship. They respect and appreciate what we are doing on the course."

This understanding has been

New tees designed to encourage golf shots

most important to Gordon for his work with BIGGA.

Although he says that he has found it easier to relax at the end of the day since he arrived at Churston, Gordon Child's work does not finish when he locks up the sheds at night.

As administrator for the South West and South Wales region of BIGGA since its inception, he is totally absorbed in the education, training and welfare of greenkeepers within their chosen profession.

"The formation of the Association is the best thing that has happened in our industry for many years," he said.

"Although funded by headquarters at the start, the regions are now looking to stand on their own feet. For that reason, we are hoping that our first Turf Care Trade Exhibition to be held at Long Ashton Golf Club on 24th May will be a success for the region and become an annual event."

Ever generous in his praise, Gordon Child admits that he could not have coped with the ever-growing paperwork and responsibilities of his full and part-time jobs without the invaluable help and support of his wife, Marion.

And yet, with all his interests, Gordon Child still finds time to relax. An ability which he believes is essential to all involved with a job where pressure and pride go hand in hand.

His great passion is for horse riding, so if you can't find Gordon Child on the golf course or in his office, look out for a windswept figure galloping along the cliff top. But there again, he could just be in the car park at Churston Golf Club checking for compaction.

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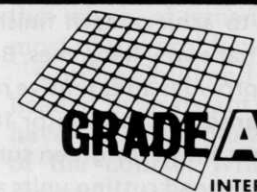
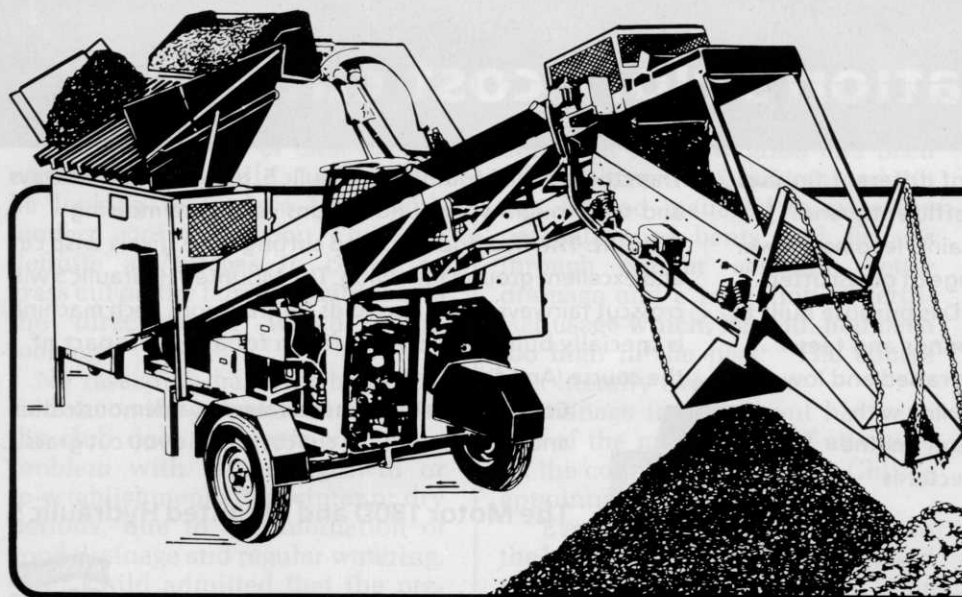
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