

# Is Greenkeeping in Germany an opportunity not to be missed?

Ja - Ja, says Stephen Goldthorpe, but with reservations

**A**s one of those increasing number of British greenkeepers, who have been tempted to seek their fortune on the Continent, in my case, West Germany, I have been asked many times, "Is Greenkeeping in Germany all it has been cracked up to be?"

In my case the answer is - Yes!

Two years ago, after spending the first ten years of my working life at Lees Hall Golf Club in Sheffield, I successfully applied for the position of Assistant Head Greenkeeper on a championship course on the outskirts of Munich and this year was promoted to Course Manager.

The past two years at the 18-hole Olching Golf Club has convinced me that I certainly made the right decision. Brought up on a background of tight budgets, staff shortages and low wages has increased by belief that the majority of greenkeepers in Britain are expected to give far more in time and effort than is justified by their rewards.

The average Head Greenkeeper in West Germany can earn a salary ranging from £350 to £600 a week, dependent on the position, size and quality of the course. First assistants are paid between £250 and £300 a week, and rank and file greenkeepers around £200.

**A**lthough compared to wages in Britain, this may seem high, what must also be taken into consideration is the increased cost of living and the compulsory expenses, such as private health insurance. A single man will also pay around half his salary in tax.

Low wages in Britain must reflect low membership subscriptions and green fees, coupled with poor club management practices, which in turn results in insufficient course budgets for the Course Manager to invest in capital equipment and day to day maintenance materials.

As a comparison, my course budget for next year allows for the purchase of £50,000 worth of machinery, £17,000 for chemicals and fertilisers, plus a monthly allowance for items such as petrol, oil, spare parts and repairs. Most of the newer courses have a high quality irrigation system and it is not

unusual to find two or three Ransomes 350Ds, plus a number of triplex mowers in our Greenkeeping Sheds.

We do have our problems however. Fertilisers and chemicals are difficult to obtain in Germany so we find that it is necessary to have them sent over from England, with the result that we often fall foul of the German Customs Authorities.

Earlier this year they confiscated three cases of fungicides and only after they had been tested by the appropriate authority and been paid the money for the testing and release did we receive the goods - three months later! Machinery breakdowns can also be a headache. There is no such thing as a prompt reply in response to an urgent telephone call to a dealer, like at home. A three or four day wait is much more likely, though the situation is slowly improving.

As far as working conditions are concerned, they are far better than at most British clubs. A car or utility truck such as a Jeep is at the disposal of the Head Greenkeeper which can be used on and off the course. Also living accommodation is invariably provided for both the Head Greenkeeper and his first assistant either free or at a reduced rental.

**A**t Golf Club Olching I have a staff of five, including an English first assistant who has been working in Germany for the past four years. The

four other greenstaff are German locals, who despite no formal greenkeeping training are able and willing to tackle any new job on the course. Their training has been "on the job", but starting this year a three week crash course has been set up for assistants, which one of my staff will be attending in January. Hopefully this is just the start of greenkeeper education and training in Germany.

All my staff are allocated specific work tasks and each one is responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of certain items of machinery.

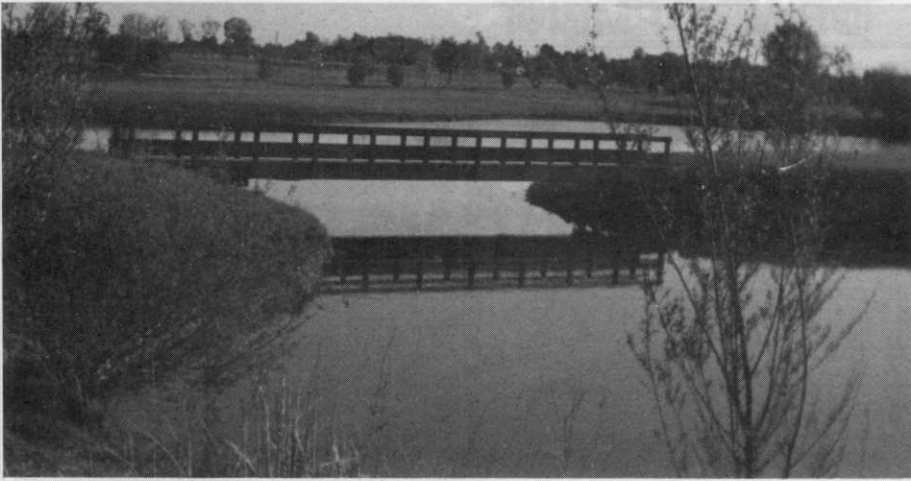
Although Olching is in a highly populated area, my course can be said to "come to life at night", not from merry makers, but from the emergence of a teeming population of wildlife. We have six lakes on the course, attracting various species of duck, geese, swans and a colony of kingfishers.

The anglers of Sheffield, well known as the home country's largest number of fishermen, would be green with envy if they could see the huge carp, tench and roach in the lakes. However the laws on fishing in this part of Germany are very strict and a licence can cost up to £300.

As the sun sets, the sight of a deer roaming across the course is common place, rabbits and hares are in abundance, and at dusk the course becomes a naturalists haven. Although there is a certain amount of damage, they don't take divots!



Course Manager, Stephen Goldthorpe does not regret leaving Sheffield for West Germany



Lake in front of 15th tee looking towards club-house

My biggest problem at present is moles. They have wrecked havoc on numerous tees and fairways in their search for worms, but hopefully this little headache will be solved as I have just obtained a licence to set various traps to reduce the population. As you can see, we need a licence for everything here in Germany.

German golf is enjoying a "boom" at present, with large numbers of beginners applying to join clubs, but it is very, very expensive compared to golf clubs in the UK. Entrance fees for a new member can cost anything up to £100,000, plus an annual subscription of £2,000.

The atmosphere at Golf Club Olching can be described as friendly, though they take their golf seriously. On tournament days, the players join in with a meal in the club-house after the competition, followed by the prize giving and this makes for a very enjoyable evening. Food and drink is always served on the course at the half way stage for major events. In the summer, cold drinks, ice-cream and sandwiches, in spring and autumn it is usually hot soup and warm rolls.

As a relatively new sport, golf course etiquette leaves something to be desired and differs from club to club. Some for instance allow the members to bring their dogs with them to walk the course during a round, though they are supposed to be on a lead. More often than not the owner slips the leash, causing a great deal of aggravation to the greenstaff, who the dogs probably feel have no right to be there! Etiquette is a problem the professional golfers have realised will have to be tackled and a number are now holding behaviour evenings which will hopefully improve the situation.

Moving to a country with a foreign language, despite the fact we are all part of the European Community is very demanding and requires considerable stamina. For every five ex-pats

from Britain who arrive here to seek their fortune, three will return home, unable to adjust to a new way of life. It is the single man without ties that golf clubs will seek out. The married man with children will find it much more difficult to adapt, not only because of the language barrier, but the difficulties with schooling, a job for his wife and the ability to make new family friends.

Learning German is absolutely essential, but most clubs will pay for language courses. It is not necessary to be fluent, though the better one can communicate both in the written and spoken word, the easier the job and for that matter your social life becomes.

For instance the paper work is never ending, what with work permits, health insurance, registering as a citizen, plus the usual daily requirements to complete forms, order materials and the hundred and one other items of literature.

Having printed the black side, with perseverance, hard work and a determination to succeed, the rewards will actually be reaped. New golf courses are under construction throughout Germany, offering the opportunity to move on to better positions, find greater challenges and seek improved status,

with of course the advantage of higher salaries.

All work, despite its challenge, can make Jack a dull boy, so there is also time for relaxation. Any member of the staff can play in the club tournaments and this is something I try to do when possible. Playing off a 16 handicap I have managed to win two of the club events this year, which I must confess has given me a great deal of pleasure.

The of course there is the Munich Beer Festival in October. Ten tents each one housing over 5,000 people, take three months to put up. There are also rides shooting galleries, side shows and many other attractions, but for me, I'll settle for the German beers!

I have not regretted exchanging the steel mills of Sheffield for the motor manufacturing of Munich, nor the Derbyshire Peaks for the Bavarian forests. In this part of Germany the course is usually playable from the beginning of March until the end of December and these are the months when all the work has to be completed. There is no overtime payment and in the spring and summer the days are long and hard, but there is always the three months holiday to look forward to - and if you ski! But that's another story.

We cut out our own ski-tracks on the course during the winter, so people can go cross country ski-ing. The club own a snow mobile which makes the tracks as it is driven along. There is little or no damage to the course as the greens and tees are fenced off at the end of the playing season to keep the ski-ers on to the open part of the fairways and rough.

If any greenkeeper would like to know more about applying for jobs in Germany, then don't hesitate to write. I would be very pleased to answer any questions that they might have that has'n't been covered. \*Stephen Goldthorpe can be contacted c/o Golf Club Olching, Fourstrasse 89. 8037 Olching. Nr. Munich. West Germany.



Approaching the 18th green in front of the impressive clubhouse