

HARD on the heels of the discussion document 'The Way Forward', produced by the Greenkeeping Panel of the Royal and Ancient, comes another paper commissioned by the Royal and Ancient's Development Panel dealing with the expansion of golf. It would be invidious to compare these publications, though both are designed primarily to stimulate discussion and to postulate problems rather than propose solutions at this stage. Both cover aspects of the game of golf which are threatened by many factors, not least the sheer popularity of the game itself. That there is a demand for more courses is unarguable. What is more debatable is the realistic level of expansion, from which develops the discussion on how to provide the predicted increase in golfing facilities.

The Demand for Golf' despite the unarguable fact that a great deal of work and research has gone into its preparation is, in my opinion, seriously flawed. It purports to show that 700 new 18 hole courses are needed in the next ten years. This is based on the arbitrary assessment that one course is needed for every 25,000 of the population, man, woman and child. This takes no account of the regional or indeed national popularity of the game and therefore related demand and indeed the paper accepts this by admitting that the actual level in Scotland is one course to every 12,000 population, - but not even a Sassenach would find this extraordinary! This arbitrary yardstick has incidentally long since been abandoned e.g. in the States and by those conducting U.K. feasibility surveys.

If one works out the projected population of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the year 2000, it does not need an Einstein to calculate on the above basis the total number of courses required, nor, by deducting the actual courses, to find the balance. It is however an incontrovertible law of logic that incorrect observations always result in wrong deductions!

At least the survey has provided one excellent service to golf, by demolishing the often-quoted statement that "there are more than 2000 golf courses in England, Scotland and Wales". In fact the figure given (including 58 in Northern Ireland) is 1862 facilities - and by facilities is meant anywhere where golf can be played from pitch and putt Par 3's to 36 hole 'championship' courses.

The demand for golf

Simple arithmetic has produced the figure of a 700 course deficiency, 600 of them in England - but this is clearly wishful thinking and takes no account of the difficulties in providing them. Such problems would have been brought to light by exposing the paper to debate and discussion by qualified persons and bodies before publication, such as the EGU Golf Development Committee. As it stands, the paper will be of value in stimulating discussion and lead to a much more accurate assessment of the realistic and achievable demand. To fail to ask the opinion of either the Architects or the Contractors, through their Associations, seems to be an extraordinary omission. Indeed it is not very clear who provided at least some of the evidence on which these conclusions were based and recommendations made.

by Jim Arthur

It is in connection with the deductions based on wrong criteria that the greatest exception will be taken by those who really know the more accurate picture.

Equally, one must admit that in periods of enormous change, it ill behoves anyone to stick rigidly to the precepts which governed previous decades. One is all too conscious of the extent and rapidity of changes taking place in Eastern Europe, to dismiss such a scale of change in golf as totally impossible - but it is certainly stretching credulity to the limit to calmly state that we must build more golf courses in the next decade than in the previous eight, especially when no account is taken not only of the inordinate time it takes to get any new project off the ground in terms of planning and financial restraints but, even more pertinently, the huge problems in regard to planning permission and conservation limitations, which are not even mentioned, nor is the desperate scarcity of even half reasonable

land or the equal shortages of Architects to design the course, Contractors to build them, Greenkeepers to look after them and Advisers to deal with problems. Eighty years ago, in the pre 1914 boom, excellent golfing country could be bought for nothing and courses cost even less to build.

It is with regard to the recommendations based on these assumptions that issue must be taken. The first is the rash assumption that the interest in golf will continue to expand on a straight line graph - and life certainly never runs so smoothly and predictably and golf, like life, has always suffered from ups and downs, as many of us can confirm on both counts! Golf has boomed in response to television coverage but there are signs that television's paymasters are looking askance at present levels of cover, let alone considering increasing them. Participants and organisers in many activities and sports have had unpleasant surprises in the past when television coverage was reduced, and golf is not immune.

Sources of providers of the new courses are briefly itemised - but many are debatable. The report accepts that members clubs can take no more golfers - but what it does not say is that many are considering taking far less. Societies and asking members to pick up the financial short-fall. This will have increasing relevance if the Inland Revenue persists in the view that the money from societies is primarily being used to keep subscriptions lower than they would be and so would be liable to taxation. Whilst accepting that there can be no significant provision from creating new member-owned and run clubs to fill the need, the report suggests that members clubs could utilise adjacent spare ground to provide public facilities - but this is highly debatable as very few Clubs that I know have any such spare land, especially in areas where it is most needed. Most are increasingly cramped by today's demand for extra length to accommodate longer drives with improved balls and clubs to bother about providing facilities for non-members. I doubt whether this source might produce more than about 1% of the demand, if that.

Local Authorities, it is suggested might help but, in England anyway, where the demand is greater, none has spare cash for such expensive developments and are in any case being pressed to privatise the management of their existing courses. Public course golfers may get a nasty surprise - with a

round of golf on public courses quoted in the report at only £1.70 for Richmond Park, down to 44p-90p in Scotland. With greater accountability to their Poll Tax payers and their extravagances being made more obvious in the near future, I cannot see municipal authorities filling any of the need.

The report accepts that proprietary courses and clubs will provide the major share of the increase - but ignores the fact that golf courses built by hotel groups are not for the benefit of the golfing public but are there to fill hotel bedrooms, attract conferences, or even to build houses round them. Many in fact insist on some proof of competence before paying guests are let loose to wreak havoc on heavily played courses. Clearly there is a limit to the number of such hotels on grounds of sharing a limited market. Furthermore, experience contradicts the report, in that if there is a club at such 'hotel facilities' it is there purely for social and competitive reasons and is barely tolerated and certainly has no influence on course presentation, for which those in charge are duly grateful. All this may be of some encouragement to the more proficient of club-less golfers but holds out little real hope for the beginners whose enthusiasm can be measured in reverse order to their ability.

There may also be scope for a very, very few proprietary ventures where money is no object and sheer expensiveness keeps membership exclusive, but some of these multi million pound ventures could well be vulnerable to any change in the country's economic health - quite apart from the fact that some have been built to standards more applicable to Texas or the Middle East, producing conditions which both research and practical experience shows will not stand up to being intensively played on during our wet rather than very cold winters and relatively short growing period.

At the other extreme the report suggests that very inexpensive courses may be built to supply local demand. This advice to entrepreneurs to start low-cost, low-risk ventures might just work if some ideal natural golfing country were cheaply available, as it was to our forbears, but it almost never is. Light, sandy, free-draining sites are rare indeed. What is generally available is heavy, poorly-drained, flat land where skimping of (expensive) drainage means problems. Frankly the days when one could fob off rubbishy conditions on new entrant golfers are over. As the Society

problem illustrates, many are used to playing over the best courses.

Advice to build on the cheap and improve later is simply bad advice. One does not need to spend millions - but skimping on basic specifications means eventual rebuilding to achieve a longer playing season and better profitability - with all the vastly increased costs as well as disruption to play and income. "Do it right first time" is a much better maxim than "fix it later" and applies equally to small DIYS schemes as to major hotel-based tournament ventures, whether built 20 years ago or recently.

The one recommendation that the report should have made is missing. That is that there must be some form of control, or if that is impossible, detailed advice must be readily available to developers on the question of specifications as well as the practical advice offered by the EGU golf development committee. We want to see no more of those awful muddy golf-in-a-field ventures of twenty years ago, with ryegrass fairways and with bad drainage. Equally we do not need vastly expensive courses built with pure sand greens, which research at the STRI has demonstrated so clearly are simply not relevant to our climatic conditions. If such greens are not fed generously with lime, as well as with phosphate and potash, the grass just dies - not surprisingly in such sterile hydroponic conditions. If it is fed, then the fine grasses (often of strains bred especially to withstand very high temperatures and the associated very high irrigation of hot arid environments) revert to annual meadow grass which is not a risk in desert conditions and as the recent heavy rainfall has shown, those unplayed-on, research plots flood! Waterlogged conditions on pure sand? Yes, because the water is held by the annual meadow grass thatch. By sand greens, few people expect 'browns' - i.e. greens with no grass on them, even if they do drain well!

I understand even the latest extravaganza to be built in Surrey, to a design by Robert Trent Jones Jnr. will have a sand-soil mix for its greens. Advice in the report to start with nine holes in preference to eighteen is again short sighted. In all costs, be they construction or maintenance, nine holes cost disproportionately more than half the same items for eighteen but the revenue is only half at best. One of the first rules of feasibility surveys is that if financial restraints

make a start on nine holes inevitable, there must be adjacent space to develop the second nine quickly, or the project is unviable. Similarly golfing hotels must have in excess of a hundred bedrooms, with two 18 hole courses, to be guaranteed to be an economic success.

Another dubious source advised by the report is the development of 'surplus' farmland. This is so fraught with problems that few proposals actually take off. One problem is that often the land is too distant from its potential clients, with no major attraction locally to draw customers. Unless there is a hotel with ancillary attractions (swimming pool, sauna, squash, tennis etc.) clients will not come and frankly farmers have in general little experience of dealing with the human race and so must employ costly management, so good bye to the profits. Furthermore, developers want to build their own hotels and are not ready and willing to take over existing affairs and what farmer wants to sell his land for a marginal (development) profit - even if he could negotiate in addition a small share of the profit.

Another problem with farmland is that it is all too often flat, prairie land devoid of natural features and what is far worse is that it has been intensively farmed with such high residual soil fertility that it is impossible to grow fine turf on it - it becomes golf in a meadow and a high-cost meadow for maintenance at that! Costs of construction to provide some contours or features or tree planting are consequently much higher.

It is worth noting that even in America, where far from disinterested sources claim that the needs of golf can be met only by opening one new course every day for the rest of this century, there are areas away from the coast or in basically dull farming areas where supply exceeds demand. In other areas climatic considerations, from the extremes of deep snow to a combination of heat and humidity, limit the effective playing season to much less than the full year and there, unless clubs can charge members more to pay for the high cost (e.g. disease control) of times when they cannot or do not wish to play, some clubs are in financial difficulties. Equally, one has to admit that in the States there are enough examples of entrepreneurially-built leisure centres, initially without a golf course, lacking profitability, which has dramatically improved by later incorporating a golf course.

POLITICS

Where, then, do we go from here. Clearly a level of 700 new courses is highly unlikely even if they were all needed.

There is no law which says the demand for golf will continue to expand on a straight line graph - and indeed all the experience this century shows a cyclic pattern with peaks before the First World War, again in the twenties, in the sixties and currently.

Who is to provide these new facilities? Clearly it is not going to be by new member-owned clubs, and the supply for local authorities, entrepreneurs and farmers will be relatively small. The bulk must come from hotel and leisure groups who are the only ones with the money - and money is needed in a form, since we are not just talking about new courses but the associated 100 + bedroom hotel and leisure buildings. This again must be limited or it could be self defeating - you can easily end up with excessive competition leaving low occupancy rates!

My guess is that we shall see perhaps a maximum of 200 new courses in the next decade - and we shall be hard pushed to find the money, the land, the architects, the contractors and the greenkeepers to build and run them well, quite apart from endless battles with planners and conservationists. There are welcome signs that the Nature Conservancy Council do not now automatically reject any golf course proposals, even on environmentally sensitive areas (which are often on the best golfing country anyway), as they accept that golf courses when established, like motorway verges, are some of our most valuable conservation areas - less subject to man's interference over large areas than (especially) farmland. These developments will benefit the well-heeled element of new golfers but will do nothing for the rest. In areas where golf is the natural game we are probably reasonably well supplied with

existing courses, but there is an undoubted need for expansion in high population areas and in traditional holiday areas. In such cases it may be more constructive for golfing authorities to mount an official campaign to woo the planners and coincidentally the conservationists.

There is however one point in the report which is unquestionably wrong and indeed dangerous. It concerns a proposal to set up a National Golf Development Council, chaired by the R & A, to include "all those who stand to benefit" from golf development. An advisory organisation is certainly needed and would be welcomed, but I would agree with the report that it is unlikely that "leadership from a group of honorary Committee members supported by a part of the available time of the EGU Secretary can provide enough input to achieve the dramatic increase in the rate of development of facilities." as the problem requires a more "full time" solution.

The National Golf Foundation in the States is quoted as the prototype. This is a trade-supported and motivated body which is kept very firmly at arms length by the USGA. Those formulating rules or providing impartial advice must never be seen to be in cahoots with those benefitting, or those who are penalised will call foul in very expensive Anti-trust law litigation. By all means listen to what interested parties have to say - but they should not be part of the ultimate decision taking. It is all very well talking about inviting trade Associations to contribute and worse still to pay - but it is as well to remember that not all members love each other and any apparent discrimination in favour of one (say a convincing lobbyist) would mean litigation by disappointed suitors. We have too many grandiloquently titled trade bodies already in this country taking on a 'National' mantle. The

NGF in America provides the statistical arm of golf - a useful function if you believe in statistics - and also feasibility surveys. Those of us in this country conducting feasibility surveys, if we are honest to ourselves and our clients, turn down far more than half of potential schemes as being predictable failures and usually make some qualification on the rest. This is why I think 200 new courses is top weight in the next decade in the U.K. but in the States "one a day until the end of the century" is still the parrot cry! The R & A are to be congratulated for publishing "The Way Forward" and "The Demand for Golf". They are intended to create discussion and there is nothing like throwing a rock in a pool to stir ripples - as I should know being one of the best and oldest rock throwers in the business!

What is needed is sensible, informed and expert debate. It is certainly not going to come from those with an axe to grind nor from those who live in isolation from today's problems. What we need in the next decade is not only more courses but better courses (which might take some pressure off the existing ones). We are not going to achieve this by listening to the wrong advice or ignoring all the experience from previous golf booms. Hindsight has many advantages and should not be ignored. One must remember the parable of the old and young bulls and consider that the old one might just have a better answer than his junior.

Since this article was drafted and submitted in the form above, it has come to my notice that there will be an opportunity for discussion and debate of the document 'The Demand for Golf' at a date early in 1990, this date shortly to be announced and advised to relevant parties by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club.

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