

# THE WAY FORWARD

*Jim Arthur reviews the R & A's document on golf course management*

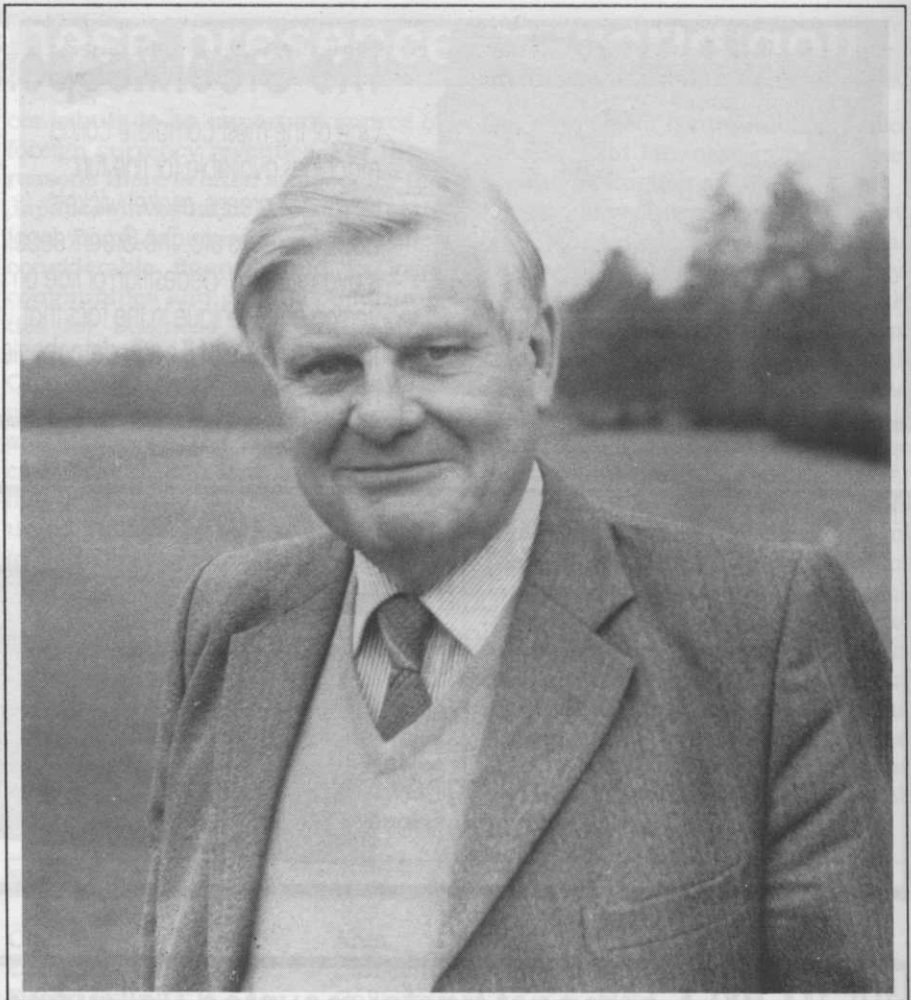
**S**hortly a discussion document with the above title should be available to any interested golfer through his club.

It has already gone to the Golf Unions, the PGA, etc. This paper represents the opinions of the Greenkeeping Panel of the Royal and Ancient on British Golf Course Management, and it attempts to define the problems, which today affect the game from every angle and which face every organisation which influences each and every facet of this rapidly changing recreation. In this paper observations are made, some critical but constructive, about golfers, their clubs, the golfing unions, architects, professionals, greenkeeping associations, education, the media and even the Royal and Ancient itself.

The aim of this much revised, edited and discussed report is to stimulate constructive examination of stated problems, few if any of which are debatable. Whether they are capable of being resolved is an entirely different matter. However, the General Committee of the Royal and Ancient consider that the maximum benefit will come from the document if the bodies to whom reference is made, including the R&A, are willing to constructively examine the problems which are identified and work together to bring about improvements within their power, both singly and collectively.

This document is issued as a joint and unanimous expression of the opinions of the panel who's members are T. B. Taylor, (Chairman), P. H. Wilson, R. T. Robinson, J. H. Arthur, K. Almond, N. Thomas, Dr. P. Hayes, E. N. Park, W. Woods.

It started life as an article I had prepared in 1987 entitled "Can golf as we knew it survive?". The same worrying factors which led me to the conclusion that it could not, have become greatly



exacerbated in the intervening years. In passing it should be made clear that the function of the greenkeeping panel is to advise, as one of the four committees, the External Funds Commission of the Royal and Ancient, as to the most effective way for the R&A to fund projects for the great and good of golf. The Panel feels however, that it also has the function of urging the R&A to maintain a broader view of golf and greenkeeping than in the past.

The debates, especially where sensitive toes have been trodden on will undoubtedly be loud and long, but we must have some agreement if money is not to be wasted. One good point derived from the revolution which has hit the game in the past two decades, is that money is now available in amounts totally unbelievable, when we were for example, scratching around for pennies to help greenkeeping education in recent years.

In passing, a fringe benefit from the (to me) appalling expenditure on "American Style", multi million pound courses (where most of the money seems to

have been spent in moving half of the landscape from A to B and then back to A again, with disastrous effects on basic drainage) is that constructors and architects do not now have to face the incredulity when told of the true costs of clients wanting to build new courses for unrealistic prices. Only a few years ago the going rate for constructing a new 18 hole course was well under £200,000 including irrigation. Now when £600,000 (admittedly for a better specification in which tees are built like greens) is mentioned, one sometimes gets a reaction more akin to "what, only £600,000", rather than the usual "you must be joking".

To support constructive discussion it may be helpful to itemise the main areas of concern. Hopefully this may stimulate correspondence, as only by the acceptance that we have problems, can they be resolved. "The Way Forward" deals with the following topics, as forces acting on the management of British golf courses', viz. the authorities, clubs, greenkeepers, agronomists and architects, professionals, commerce, the media and non

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golfing community and environmental considerations. It is not my intention to go into detail at this stage on all that is set out, as the debate will continue for many months to come, however, I will make reference to some of the more important items.

**F**irst the Governing authority which controls golf in this country, the Royal and Ancient has three stated functions; first as a Private Club, secondly as the Governing Authority for the Rules of Golf and Amateur Status and thirdly as the body responsible for organising and running Championships and Internationals Matches. As a Private Club the R&A has an interest in greenkeeping namely the maintenance of the links at St. Andrews, through its representatives on the Links Management Committee, and in this role they have set an enviably higher standard. Secondly as a governing authority on the rules the R&A has the power to influence balls and implements used to play the game. It is evident that considerable research is needed to get these items right, in order that traditional golf can be maintained and such research is already being undertaken by the STRI and funded by the Royal and Ancient. Thirdly the Championship Committee has a responsibility to choose courses which will present a test of golf commensurate with the status of the Championship in question. Alas, far too often they are not. Many championship courses have unacceptable levels of annual meadow grass in their greens. Few would agree that the influence of television has been totally beneficial. Undoubtedly it has made golf one of the fastest growing and most popular of all participatory and spectator sports, but this in itself has produced problems. It is, in fact, now "show biz", attracting vast numbers of new entrants into the game, with little understanding of, and even less desire to learn about, rules, let alone traditions. Those struggling to maintain tolerable all year round playing conditions, are faced on the one hand, with impossible demands by players and promoters alike, to have everything "right for the night". Never mind what that causes in subsequent deterioration, to the course, by the apathy or ignorance of those in charge. One such top official, requested by one of our most experienced course managers to veto a proposal to put

more fertilizer and water on one of our famous links, which would encourage annual meadow grass to take over, responded with the remark "but what's wrong with annual meadow grass. It produces good putting surfaces." The continued acceptance of Poa Annua as a golfing grass is undoubtedly a point of major concern for the Greenkeeping Panel. What is worrying is the number of championship courses, where those in charge should be guarding our traditional fast fine links turf, which have succumbed to the argument and influences of the touring professionals, who never play competitive golf in this country in the winter, anyway. The role of the National and County Unions in greenkeeping has always been somewhat distant, although, there is considerable activity now taking place with the English Golf Union taking the lead with sub-committees on golf course management and golf course development. Likewise the STRI must be properly funded through golfers and golf clubs rather than to have to rely on funding from the R&A. Any steps taken by the R&A in trying to improve the state of British courses must be matched by a spirit of co-operation with other interested bodies.

**C**lubs and their members are clearly the main target for education, to know what is both acceptable to ensure all year round playing conditions, and that which is economically viable. Golfing manners, it seems to me, have deteriorated in reverse proportion to the increase in membership. A true and recent story from a respected club of no great distance from where I write, illustrates an all too common problem. A visitor took an almighty divot under the nose of a man in overalls working on the course. He was asked politely to replace it and responded by telling the "greenkeeper" in Anglo-Saxon terms where he could go. He was then asked to call in at the secretary's office to be told that he had just insulted the captain (who as an extremely busy and good landscaper was helping out the green staff in an emergency). When the truth dawned, abject apologies were offered but refused, primarily because the offender thought it perfectly in order to swear at a member of the greenkeeping staff, if not at (incognito) Captains. How much longer before captain's and sec-

retaries are threatened with physical as well as verbal abuse from such jobs, (refer to my article in the Nov/Dec 1986 issue of **Greenkeeper**).

So far as course maintenance is concerned, few of those at the practical end will disagree that there has been a serious decline in manners in recent years. But this concern is not necessarily believed by those at the top, many of whom lead sheltered lives as members of our older respected clubs, where standards have been maintained and traditions cherished. Already many of those managing the lovely old courses, where I, until recently, used to advise on greenkeeping and other matters, report attacks by newcomers who want something quite different and will stop at nothing to achieve it. Greenkeeping as I have often said, suffers from cyclical patterns of disaster and recovery. The trouble is that we do not, generally, even seem to take two steps forward and one back, but at best go back to square one and start all over again. If the rush of newcomers has produced some with no wish to respect either traditional all year round conditions, it also has produced two more major problems.

The first is traffic, and frankly many of our courses can stand no more, witness the R&A's decision not to hold the 1990 Spring Meeting over the Old Course. Even if repair budgets can be boosted by massive injections from green fees this is no solution as it also has an effect on members enjoyment of their own clubs.

The extra revenue is by no means a gift and much if not all of it must be spent on extra maintenance, let alone providing improved facilities for players, so that members are faced with either increased crowding to the detriment of their enjoyment or increased subscriptions to pay for the higher standards which today are regarded as obligatory.

The other factor created by increased numbers is the demand for new courses. Sadly few of these will be private member clubs, because of the enormous costs involved, and yet one more controlling factor on behaviour will have gone. Developments, hotel courses and pay as you play (through the nose) will be the rule. One is reliably informed, without undue surprise, that there are now more golfers outside clubs than those who are members. One factor regarding new courses that really does worry me is

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the poor, or indeed absence of any control exerted on the specifications for new ventures. We are told that several hundred new courses (up to 500) are needed by the year 2000. Although it is statistically obvious that the demand exists, many of the courses that will be built will go bankrupt as golfers will vote with their feet when faced with poor conditions. Furthermore, much of this development is very vulnerable to any possible economic recession.

Sadly, too many of those putting up the money for new ventures, be they hoteliers, property developers, local authorities or just plain farmers trying to exchange the managing of four legged stock for two legged ones (which answer back) have not the least concept of what is technically involved. This is where the authorities must intervene and offer sound advice and assistance.

**G**reenkeeper training and the improvement in working conditions is another area that the document covers. It is perhaps too early to judge the greenkeeping associations success, although funding from the R&A has been essential in getting a unified body off the ground. With regard to training, the greenkeeper training committee has to a certain extent lost its way and needs to be re-vitalised with more stringent controls on the number of colleges approved and close scrutiny of the courses they offer. The Home Unions are to be applauded for assisting with funding but the 2p levy per member is really derisory if authorities and golfers alike are to treat greenkeeping and thus golf course maintenance seriously. It is important that the sum's raised should go to improving, through training skills and not to support the association itself, which should be self financing through member's subscription and monies raised from elsewhere, without bowing to trade influence.

**I** have already mentioned the role of the STRI and advice in general but it seems to me that there are two areas for urgent attention. There are too few staff to deal with the certain extra demands for advice, both because of the increase in courses and also because there will be more need for advice as pressures mount. Furthermore, research must be not only more related to current problems but even preliminary results must be

widely disseminated so that mistakes can be avoided. For example research has already shown that specifications designed for hot arid climates and thus requiring intensive irrigation have no validity in Northern temperate zones.

**O**ne of the greater contrasts in the game is the comparison between golf architects and greenkeepers. Both are intimately involved with course management, but one group is held in awe by golfers whilst the other struggles to gain recognition.

Yet, as with greenkeeping, to set up as a golf architect requires no formal qualification although the British Association of Golf Course Architects has started to instigate examinations. All too many golfers or developers imagine that the overriding qualification for the architect or designer is that he should be or have been a very good player.

It is essential to differentiate between the titles "architect" and "designer". The former must be restricted to members of the BAGCA and their American counterparts. They are governed by specific conditions, terms of engagement and scale of fees. Currently, virtually all members are qualified in a relevant science and have passed a probationary period.

In contrast, the "designers" have no formal qualifications and are quite often golf professionals seeking to widen their interests in the game and provide a new source of income once their playing career has ended.

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect any change of attitude among the many unqualified persons who dabble in so called course architecture. Therefore, in the future, sensible golfers and golf course developers should look to the more responsible elements to be found in the course construction industry.

**T**here is no doubt that professional golfers have a historic link with golf course management, as many of their earlier number doubled as keeper of the green. However, since those times they have split into two groups, club and tournament professionals. As good golfers, many club professionals have opinions on how to manage their golf course. The temptation to assume that the function could be tacked onto their existing job specification is an obvious one. Yet in reality they probably have little more knowledge of the

subject than the average member.

The impact of tournament professionals on course management is a different matter altogether. The enormous front page, banner headlined, press coverage of the Ryder Cup, gives a clear indication that golf is becoming dominated in thought and motives by the tournament professionals, each with his own vociferous fan club. Money has entered into the soul of what used to be an individual game. Looked at superficially, the requirements of tournament professionals are reasonable. They want "consistent conditions in order to eliminate luck." In Britain and Ireland, this is an impossibility. Our climate just does not allow turf to be presented with the same characteristics each week. Greenkeepers are consistently put under pressure to try and achieve false conditions which can only do long term lasting damage. The PGA European Tour have been guilty in the past of playing their tournaments on courses totally ill suited in order to satisfy their sponsors demands. With the advent of their own courses it is to be hoped that their position becomes more realistic.

**T**he trade (or sections of it) are seizing what they see as a boom in the golf market, little appreciating or being unwilling to admit that many of their products are used very little if at all on our best courses. The poorer elements have always had undue influence and equally some greenkeepers have encouraged some unhealthy practices. It is clear that the authorities through the STRI must ultimately lay down guidelines to cover all products and services that good course management needs.

**T**he media, with a few honourable exceptions are self admittedly not interested in course presentation and standards, but only in personalities and their performance. It is essential that the three main groups, TV, press and golfing magazines, are educated as to what is achievable and desirable in our climate. Once this is achieved if indeed it is possible, the biggest hurdle will have been overcome, as it is all too obvious how much power the consumer media have over the average golfer. Likewise, the authorities must be more prepared to advise the golfing end user of what is happening and why both in terms of legislation and equipment. Also the STRI and the Greenkeeping Associa-

tion must be more aware of the need for self publicity within the golfing community.

**S**o the message is obvious. What is known, proven by research and confirmed by practical experience, must be blazoned from the roof tops and supported by every possible authority and influence. We have no brief and less ability to stop fools from being parted from their money by rogues, but we do have a responsibility to see that the information to prevent it is widely available. Remember that, otherwise we are going to be increasingly clobbered by deteriorating disasters, which perhaps would be better, sooner rather than later, converted to safari parks.

What is really worrying is that all the problems are freely recognised by many in authority, who have ducked their responsibilities in the past by saying it was not part of their brief, or that the opposing view has some validity, or that there are extenuating circumstances, particularly in the choice of venues.

Failure to stand up and be counted will inevitably result in all the hard won ground over the past 20 years in which there has been some progress back to traditional course standards

and all year play will be lost, as faulty remedies are advocated to correct the results of faulty management, wrong construction methods and undue emphasis on ephemeral presentation for televised events. Those peaking courses should always remember that peaks are preceded and followed by troughs. My fear is that the troughs will be measured in months and the peaks in days.

Thus, it seems that the R & A - as the senior body in the game - has a definite role to play in co-ordinating action between all interested parties. A role which perhaps extends beyond the original function envisaged for the Greenkeeping Panel. However, this role should only be a short term need, until the results of co-ordinated actions start to be seen. By then, the R & A will have effectively demonstrated again its capacity for showing a lead in golfing matters when the need arises.

My remarks concerning "The Way Forward" are only a re-iteration of what I have preached over the years and it has given me no satisfaction to be proved right by events. All I hope is that thought will be stimulated and constructive discussion ensue to ensure an appreciation of all the better things in golf.

Do not dismiss my comments as the sentimental ramblings of a geriatric yearning for the past, but as a sincere attempt to influence a change of course. If this article and the document generates sufficient interest I might later return to discuss in more detail the subjects covered, for I am well aware that there are many involved who are implementing sane policies and who fear as much as I do for the healthy future of our Royal and Ancient game.

**F R O M   T H E   F A I R W A Y**

**'Never to old to learn' - says Sid Arrowsmith**

I read your September issue of the Golf Course with great interest and have been prompted to put pen to paper after reading the new feature entitled "Topical Turf Tips"

One of the many reasons why the art of greenkeeping has not improved sufficiently over the years is due to greenkeepers like the 60 year old man who was refusing to "go back to school" (his words) to study chemical applications. He also said he believed he knew more than any College Lecturer on this very technical subject. How wrong can a man be!

I have recently completed the courses

and one examination, so let me put all minds at rest. These courses are very, very good. Not too technical, lots of practical information well presented and with the growing interest in the environmental situation, absolutely vital for those of us involved in the industry. Not only did I learn much regarding actual spraying techniques, but the necessary safety aspects including storage requirements, handling products and the essential recording procedures.

So much so that I can now boast probably the best chemical container in greenkeeping, to a design with MAFF guidance.

My recording systems, for both bulk storage of chemicals and applications,

the safety clothing storage, washing facilities, etc, all came about from attending the Greenmount College in Antrim where we were instructed by a qualified farmer, whose lecture technique was second to none.

So a plea to my colleagues - please go out and search for training and guidance. To do otherwise is to let down our wonderful profession as well as breaking the law. If we are to be treated as professionals in our industry we must act in a professional manner.

Sidney Arrowsmith,  
Head Greenkeeper,  
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