



## Golf course expansion bunkered by bureaucracy

Despite a known need for 500 more courses in Britain, John Lelean finds that minority self interest and local planners are blocking development

**T**he "set-aside" scheme offered to British farmers which grants aids taking land out of food production, has led to a number of land-owners examining the viability of building golf courses on suitable sites of 120 acres plus.

This move has had the support of central government, but judging by the number of rejections to proposals put before local planning authorities, often supported by vociferous and well organised adjacent residents, the policy is not receiving endorsement at local level.

A land owner at Scarborough raised a storm of protest when he applied to construct an 18 hole golf course within

the boundaries of the holiday resort, including opposition from an adjacent farmer.

The reasons put forward for objection included; golfers would frighten the cattle, golf balls hit off line could cause injury to stock and there was also the danger of cattle inadvertently eating lost golf balls with the grass!

Planning applications for golf courses rarely receive consent without opposition from one source or another. Whether it is from local residents who adopt the attitude "not in my backyard", highway authorities saying the access will be dangerous or the roads unsuitable for increased traffic, desecration of areas of natural beauty

or visual intrusion by the construction of a club house and car park facilities.

If these objections are overcome then there is always the fallback ploy of "creating pressure for further development."

**B**ecause golf courses require a large area of open agricultural or park land, nearby existing residential development is invariably up market, extensive and expensive. The owners regard any new development as a gross intrusion on their privacy and are prepared to seek every

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means at their disposal to resist replacing a couple of hundred grazing sheep with a similar number of visiting golfers. If the viability of course construction is dependent on raising finance from house building similar to their own, then the outcry can be heard to the twon hall steps.

Hard information on planning application for proposed golf course developments is difficult to obtain, because planning officials at local level do not have to notify central government of either plans submitted, approved or rejected.

The only time the Secretary of State for the Environment becomes involved is when an applicant appeals against a rejection by the local planning authority.

The appeal can be made in one of two ways. The first is by means of a public inquiry when an inspector is appointed by the Secretary of State to consider the written and oral representations from the potential developer and hear the counter objections of the area planning authority, as well as other interested parties such as parish councils, local residents preservation societies or amenity groups.

This is potentially expensive, as both sides with much at stake, bring out the "big guns" by way of eloquent counsel, incurring legal costs sometimes running into thousands of pounds.

The second method and by far the cheaper is to proceed by a written submissions at a "closed appeal", where an inspector considers the evidence from both sides, visits the site, may ask questions, but is not available to listen to arguments either for or against. He makes his recommendation purely on the facts as he

sees them.

Earlier this year Mr Peter Dutton, the President of the English Golf Union called for the building of 500 new courses in Britain just to keep pace with demand. He also announced the setting up of a four man Golf Development Committee to study ways and means of expanding golf in England. They also find information hard to come by, as planning officers are under no obligation to tell the EGU or the Sports Council of plans submitted, accepted or rejected. They obtain most of their information from farmers and developers looking for official backing or help and so far this year there have been 127 individual inquiries, directed toward the English Golf Union.

### *Not behind my garden says greenbelt residents*

Until the EGU set up the Golf Development Committee there has been no co-ordinating body since the Golf Development Council was closed down some years ago. It is possible that a sympathetic authority could grant permission for several courses within a small area, none of which when built, could be financially viable in the face of local competition.

**N**ew courses involve a massive capital outlay without the opportunity to recouped any investment within three years, this is why developers are seeking to tie residential housing, hotels and a sports

complex into the overall scheme. Collingtree Park at Northampton is a case in point as is Titherington Links near Macclesfield, both developing into fine golf courses with the finance raised from sales of property.

Although central government have offered grants to farmers for the development of other leisure enterprises on surplus land, golf was ruled out from the start. So without a capital sum from the likes of Wimpey, Barrett or Ideal Homes, a pure golf course developer is looking for at least £1m up front without any opportunity to produce any income for at least three years.

It hardly needs the use of a pocket calculator to estimate if the capital has to be borrowed, the sum required is more realistically £1.5m.

Once the course and club house are open, financial costs, repayments, staff and maintenance costs, could amount to £.25m a year. What is left could be called profit. There must be easier ways of making a good living!

It is right that all development schemes should be examined in detail, but too often local authorities are attempting to maintain the status quo without any justification.

It cannot be on grounds of conservation as golf courses are probably the most protected areas for wild life, where a balance of nature can live virtually threat free.

The Golf Course Wildlife trust, set up in 1987, is a body that promotes nature conservancy and is willing and able to give impartial advice to both planners, owners and those who maintain golf courses.

On all new courses trees are planted in large numbers, streams and ponds maintained for fish and water birds,

## IT'S ALL A QUESTION OF TAKING THE RIGHT STEPS

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the grass is cut neater than most people's private lawn, areas of rough support wild fauna, fringes are left for birds, animals and insects to exist completely undisturbed. What is more it opens up land for the population at large to enjoy.

The Southern Region of the Sports Council have recently published the results of a survey \*Providing For Golf in the Southern Region. They contacted 103 established private commercial and municipal courses and received an 81% response. The findings are set out in a 28 page booklet, which is essential reading for anyone contemplating constructing a golf course or extending an existing layout.

They found membership in the private clubs ranged from 350 to over 1,000 where the club supported two courses. In the area of the survey, from Buckinghamshire in the north to the Isle of Wight, including Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Hampshire 59 of the private clubs out of the 70 who responded had a waiting list for membership, extending from six months to ten years.

Few were able to provide accurate figures of the number of rounds per annum, though the pay and play courses reported from 24,000 on a nine hole course to over 64,000 on a 18 + 9 complex. Although firm statistics were not available it was obvious that the combination of member rounds plus visiting parties and green fee casuals put considerable pressure on course maintenance.

The survey also discovered thirty-two of the courses planned additional facilities either by clubhouse improvements or course extensions, but did not discover whether such proposed expansion had encountered opposition.

**T**he main conclusions drawn from the survey by the Southern Region of the Sports Council are as follows:-

*The demand for golf in the region is not being met by the existing facilities.*

*Many more commercial pay and play and municipal courses are required to cater for the beginners at golf and more clubs are needed to accommodate those who have developed a proficiency at the sport.*

*One of the major obstacles facing those who wish to build new courses or extend existing ones comes from local planning authorities.*

*The necessary initial financial outlay by developers, could lead to cut backs in the essentials of drainage and infrastructure and landowners intending building a golf course should obtain the services of qualified consultants.*

*If more facilities are not provided, golf will remain the preserve of the privileged few, fortunate to be members of a private club.*

The South Western Council for Sport and Recreation have also published the results of an even more extensive survey in a \*Strategy Document, conducted during 1987, covering all counties west of Wiltshire, where the total population is over 4.5 million, and expecting to rise by a further .25 million, by 1991.

The 1987 survey estimates there were 108 courses with 18 holes and 26 nine hole courses throughout the South

## EGU regional officers report

**R**ay Baldwin from the Midland Region reports that he has received 54 enquiries for either new golf course developments or extensions to existing layouts, but to his knowledge only four are actually under construction, others are awaiting planning permission or at the feasibility study stage. The courses under construction are all on farm land, where the farmers have decided to diversify.

Among the proposals within the Midland area 31 are for 18-hole courses, two of 27-holes and four golf complexes. He has given advice for a putting green for a retired persons leisure complex.

**I**n the South West, John Goodban has also received some 50 enquiries, but few have yet come to fruition, though he knows of two new courses at Clovelly and Libbaton plus a driving range in the Ilfracombe area. A new course has been approved in Cornwall and is about to commence construction outside Lostwithiel, to be called the Restormel Golf and Country Club.

However, planning approval for the rebuilding of a golf course at Lynton has twice been rejected.

**I**n the 14 counties of the South East, which includes the Channel Islands, Guy Shenstone says he has replied to over 40 enquiries from potential developers, the majority, farmers, looking to take land out of food production, by building 'rough' pay as you play, 9-hole and some 18-hole courses. He believes professional developers, within the hotel industry are seeking advice elsewhere and others who should be contacting the EGU are going ahead without realising the value of available assistance at their disposal.

**B**ill Murray in the northern section of the country also reports a number of active enquiries, eighteen

he has inspected personally.

He believes local planning officers without experience of golf course development are not aware of the nature conservancy benefits that can be safeguarded from the construction of golf courses and they also are not coming to the English Golf Union for what is in effect free advice.

He said he knows of a potential three course development near Billingham on the borders of Durham and Cleveland where the master mind behind the Gateshead Metro Centre has some 6,000 acres of land at his disposal.

Bill also pointed out that farmers who intend obtaining the grant under the set-aside scheme should be aware that the £80 an acre grant only applies to grade 2 or better land.

"We can offer a great deal of help and point both developers of new courses and clubs exploring expansion in the right direction, if they would only contact us", added Bill Murray.

This would seem to be sound advice as all new courses will eventually seek affiliation to their county association. It is better to ensure the layouts and yardages are correct from the outset, rather than become involved in expensive alterations later.

### English Golf Union Development Committee:

**South West** - J. W. D. Goodban O.B.E. (Chairman) Applegarth, Hills View, East Hill, Braunton, North Devon. EX33 2LE Tel: 0271 814405

**South East** - G. G. Shenstone, 25 Kings Court, Kings Road, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex. SSO8LL Tel: 0702 352722

**North** - W.P. Murray, Highnam Lodge, Park Mews, Hartlepool TS26 ODX Tel: 0429 273185

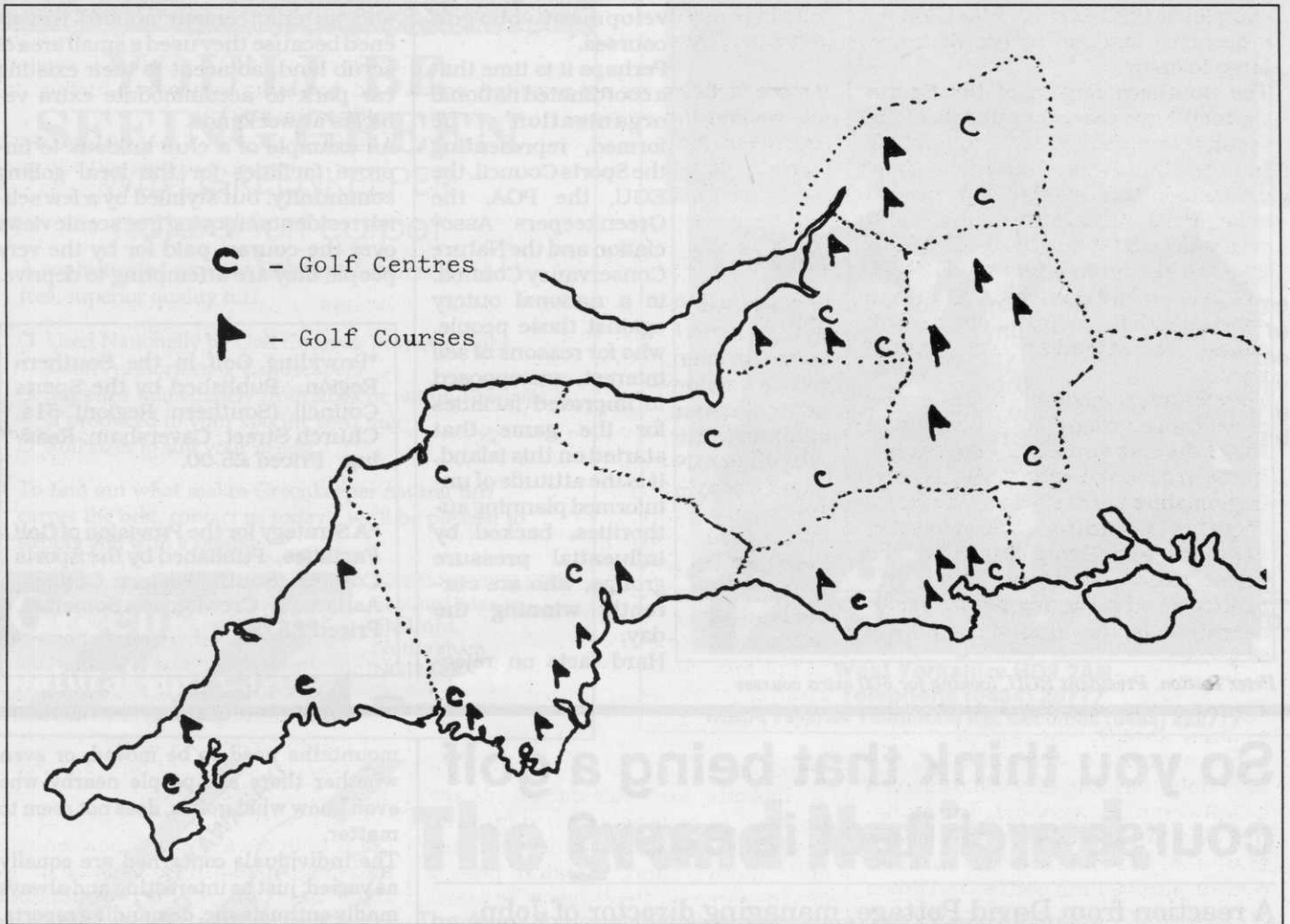
**Midland** - R.J.W. Baldwin, Chantry Cottage, Friar Street, Droitwich, Worcs. WR9 8EQ Tel: 0905 778560

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West, with a total of 64,274, club members, paying an annual average subscription of £156, though this figure is probably now out of date and is significantly affected by a relatively

averaging 76, taking about two years to acquire membership. Somerset would appear to be the easiest county to gain membership at a club, some having no waiting list, others

drawing board stage to planning approval and under construction. It is hoped to maintain the impetus now created to satisfy the wish of many more people to play golf and the



*New golf courses and golf centres proposed in the South West*

low rate of £117 in Wiltshire.

What is significant however is the reported non playing membership of golf clubs, which averages at only 14%. It would seem that people no longer join golf clubs purely for the social cache, paid for out of company expenses, members join because they intend to play the game.

This figure is even more important if one accepts that all clubs have a number of long established stalwarts, who although accepting that their playing days are over, keep their membership to enjoy the company of life long friends.

The survey also discovered the average weekday green fee was just over £9.00 and £11.50 at weekends, which leads one to conclude that the annual subscription is far too low, the equivalent of less than 14 rounds per year.

Most counties have a waiting list, with Avon, Devon and Dorset

offering entry within six months.

Commenting on the English Golf Unions efforts to increase the number of golf courses in England, the EGU President Mr Peter Dutton said, "In March '89 the Union's Development Committee under past-president John Goodban made an excellent start when a representative from every golf body attended a meeting in London to identify the problems of providing more golf courses, where they are most needed.

That meeting gave the EGU whole-hearted approval for their initiative to co-ordinate all the enquiries.

Through the four regional development officers, each county was invited to appoint a liaison officer and the combined effort has obtained a great deal of co-operation from local planning authorities.

The EGU offices in Leicester, though the counties, will be keeping a record of all projects in England from the

desire by farmers and other developers to make good use of suitable areas of land".

Mr Dutton added that a commendable start has been made.

**T**here is also a hidden factor to be considered concerning membership and that is club policy. Many of the private clubs keep the membership figures below the capacity of the course to maintain a degree of exclusivity. Although this may be annoying to a golfer anxious to join a club, particularly if he has been forced to move because of business reasons, it is nevertheless understandable that existing members do not wish to compete for tee off times at weekends.

The recommendations of the South West Region of the Sports Council include the provisions of 19 new 18 holes courses and 9 commercial golf centres, a concept long established on the North

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American continent, but here mainly in control of local authorities. The survey did not seek to examine the

success rate of current applications in the pipe line from commercial undertakings, but offered advice and technical guidance to those contemplating the development of golf courses.

Perhaps it is time that a coordinated national organisation be formed, representing the Sports Council, the EGU, the PGA, the Greenkeepers Association and the Nature Conservancy Council, in a national outcry against those people, who for reasons of self interest, are opposed to improved facilities for the game that started on this island. It is the attitude of uninformed planning authorities, backed by influential pressure groups, who are currently winning the day.

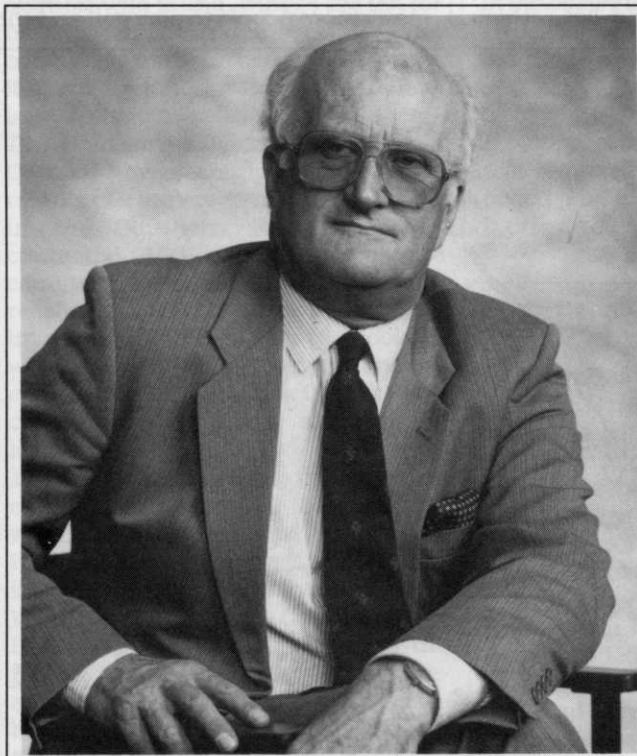
Hard facts on rejection

rates are difficult to obtain. However, it is common knowledge that a well-known Yorkshire club, with a ten year waiting list has had two applications for a new clubhouse rejected and an enforcement noticed threatened because they used a small area of scrub land, adjacent to their existing car park to accommodate extra vehicles at weekends.

An example of a club anxious to improve facilities for the local golfing community, but stymied by a few selfish residents enjoying free scenic views over the course, paid for by the very people they are attempting to deprive.

**\*Providing Golf in the Southern Region.** Published by the Sports Council (Southern Region) 51a, Church Street, Caversham, Reading. Priced £5.00.

**\*A Strategy for the Provision of Golf Facilities.** Published by the Sports Council (South Western Council) Ashlands, Crewkerne, Somerset. Priced £5.00



Peter Dutton, President EGU, looking for 500 extra courses

## So you think that being a golf course architect is easy?

A reaction from David Pottage, managing director of John Jacobs Golf Associates Ltd

I don't know how my competitors are coping with the current golf boom. Very well, I am sure. It is, as far as this company is concerned, a wonderful period, filled with many glorious opportunities to provide golf at all levels and for players of all abilities.

It is also a period of great frustration, sometimes because one cannot always see the 'goldmine' to end a struggling farmers nightmare, hoped for with the winning of planning permission. There are also the frustrations of the local authorities, who do not automatically accept that "we know what is best for the land", or that "what is best for our client is automatically best for the community in general". Having spent 20 years in local government myself, I have to admit that I sometimes tend to see their point of view.

The biggest frustration, however, is the length of time one waits trying to go places. Airport lounges, railway stations,

traffic jams in general and especially the M25, that wonderful short-cut, that free car park, that cause of more delayed appointments than perhaps anything in the South of England - it can, however, provide a good excuse of just being plain late! Over the relatively short period since its completion, one has at some time been stationary along almost all of its 120 odd miles!

To balance the frustration is the tremendous variety of site, project and indeed individual who wants to "do a golf course". The projects vary from driving range, through par-3 course, executive golf course to public pay-to-play golf centres. They range from new member's club courses and alterations to existing courses to corporate golf, from nine-hole through eighteen to thirty-six holes, from "to build it myself" projects "to money no object". The combination is endless. The locations are worldwide. Whether or not there is any soil or water, or whether

mountains need to be moved, or even whether there are people nearby who even know what golf is, does not seem to matter.

The individuals concerned are equally as varied, just as interesting and always madly enthusiastic, demanding reports, feasibility studies, plans and meeting, usually yesterday or at the very least, this week sometime! They range from the farmer, who may be finding life increasingly difficult, because of milk quotas or general agricultural policies, to the young professional who sees the driving range as a way of breaking free though every possible combination of individual to the chairman and managing directors of the multi-national companies. Their reasons may be different (superficially at any rate) but their aims are the same. They all want GOLF.

The whole situation is still bubbling along, for how much longer who can say. Government policy and maybe continued European success in the World's golf tournaments will be factors. Future government policy is anybody's guess, I would, however, like to put in a plea to Tony's lads "Please fellows, win the Ryder Cup and help keep the boom going". The actual golf course architecture? - Oh I leave nearly all that to John Jacobs, he is very good at it.