

THE NORTH, SOUTH DIVIDE

Roger Newman compares two courses and finds differences, but much in common

Is there a 'North-South divide' as far as golf course management is concerned? Roger Newman looked at two 18-hole courses, one in the leafy lanes of stockbroker Surrey, the other on the edge of industrial Sheffield.

Essentially, there does not appear to be what Disraeli termed 'two nations' in golf course maintenance and ideology.

There are, of course, problems found in one and not in the other, and there is certainly a different management policy at West Surrey Golf Club, compared with Abbeydale Golf Club. But both have one aim in common: to keep the course up to the highest standards required by players.

Another interesting fact in common is that both were designed by W. Herbert Fowler, the distinguished golf course architect and landscaper, best-known, perhaps, for the championship course at Walton Heath.

West Surrey Golf Club, near Godalming, was set up by a local landowner, John Eastwood, in 1910. It has spectacular views towards the great ridge known as the Hog's Back and an attractive Clubhouse designed in the style of a typical Surrey farmhouse. Apart from the loss of several mature trees in the 1987 hurricane, the appearance of the course has changed little over the years.

Abbeydale Golf Club, in the Sheffield suburb of Dore, was designed on its present site in 1922 - it is interesting to note that Fowler's fee for a report and travelling expenses was £20. The original course, at neighbouring Beauchief, was only leased and a change of landlord meant that much of the ground was required for building development. As at West Surrey, the new site of Abbeydale has magnificent views, this time over the Tetley Moors towards the Peak District. And here too, the general layout is little altered from Fowler's final designs.

West Surrey Golf Club is wholly-owned by the members, so there is no requirement, as secretary Ralph Fanshawe pointed out, to 'generate and put into reserves any more funds than they wish to spend'. There is a course management committee chaired by an elected director plus two elected members, secretary Ralph Fanshawe and greenkeeper Mike Kirkham.

Abbeydale, on the other hand, has the more usual Board and Committee structure, including the green committee chaired for the last 10 years by David Wish. It is unusual too, in having a husband and wife team - Paul and Jane Ryan - as greenkeepers. Previously at Whitby, they came to Abbeydale at the beginning of 1983. Also unusual in a sector which has always been male-dominated, Abbeydale has a lady secretary and a lady steward. As the secretary, Kathryn Johnston, suggested: 'A number of northern clubs now have lady secretaries and I followed one here. There must be a message there, somewhere!

The soil at West Surrey is very fine sand, not necessarily typical of Surrey, and classed as Lower Greensand - but it is far from muddy, even in heavy rain. Ralph Fanshawe said that the course is usually ready to play soon after heavy rain, although the third and sixth greens, which tend to flood, are always the last to clear. As an experiment, Ralph Fanshawe has invested in a small rain gauge which relates to the condition of the sixth green. It is a simple attempt to judge from the Club House the likely condi-

only two fairways and improving. Last year's hot weather produced some patches on greens but this is now cured.

Inevitably, both clubs have suffered from compaction and drainage problems, although four years ago both purchased a Verti-Drain from Charterhouse Turf Machinery Ltd and both Mike Kirkham at West Surrey and Paul Ryan at Abbeydale saw 'immediate effects'.

'Even the problems with the third and sixth greens, after rain, have eased significantly', said Mr. Kirkham; while Mr. Ryan added: 'Our greens never drained well, but they do since we began to use the Verti Drain. They used to be the first area of the course to be closed: not any more.

The Verti Drain encourages deeper rooting, and both clubs agree that grass seed companies should seriously consider the introduction of deeper-rooting cultivars, particularly if the mild weather pattern, apparently set last year, continues in the 1990's.

Ralph Fanshawe of West Surrey said: 'There is no real growth here until the beginning of May, and



Gun-booted greenkeepers Paul and Jane Ryan are one of the few husband and wife teams on Britain's courses

tion of greens during heavy rainfall. Waterlogging can be a problem at Abbeydale also. Much of the course is solid clay over shale which goes down to 18" and much of Abbeydale lies on North facing ground and gets little sun in winter. Torrential rain used to close the course completely and slime would appear, but now this is confined to

we could be facing a new and unwanted experience if we have a repetition of the drought last summer. We will certainly be looking to create the environment for deeper-rooting grasses'.

At Abbeydale, following a hard winter, there is no real growth until early June, commented Jane Ryan - usu-

ally because the weather on the edge of the Peak District is too cold. Ideally, we Verti Drain and top dress at the end of August when have some growth coming through, and then we top dress in May with a seed-compost mixture. Both clubs have recognised an eternal conundrum: how to educate players to use the course correctly, without placing undue and unpopular restrictions on them. At West Surrey there are 600 playing and intermediate members, and while the course is not over-used - as at Abbeydale, the period between Christmas and the New Year is busiest - it is essential that players' feet cause as little compaction as possible. To these ends, West Surrey has laid 600 railway sleepers as steps and curbs on pathways and woodchippings have been spread as a surface - both tidy and rural in appearance. Steps are also being laid on the tees at West Surrey, to ensure that players use them, and the first tee is being developed as a collection point; although Ralph Fanshawe insisted that 'we don't want it to look like a bus stop'.

At Abbeydale, Paul Ryan is more outspoken. There are too many golfers: the 'hard core', if you like, is greater than it used to be. Obviously, we need the revenue - we pay £25,000 a year rent and rates to Sheffield Council. During the war, the club was short of funds and sold the ground to the Council. We would like to buy it back, but at the moment the likelihood of doing so seems unlikely.'

There are 514 members at Abbeydale, but something in the region of 15,000 rounds a year are played. As in West Surrey's case, there is no shortage of courses in the immediate area, but Abbeydale has always been especially popular - and, as Paul Ryan stressed ruefully, 'too many golfers just don't seem to know the etiquette'. Competitions now run through to October, and golfers want to keep playing all year round. This, coupled with the results of the mild weather means that the grass gets little chance to recuperate.

Unlike the management of West Surrey, Paul Ryan does not agree with steps on tees. It simply makes holes on the top and bottom.'

Increasing the appearance of the course, without making them appear artificial, is naturally a primary aim at West Surrey and Abbeydale. Investment in equipment, notably the Verti Drain, has resulted in a much better appearance at both courses. With deeper rooting encouraged, bounce reduced and drainage improved. Neither club favours one particular manufacturer where machinery is concerned. Different equipment is



Mike Kirkham (West Surrey) shops around for best equipment

used for different tasks.

Paul Ryan and Mike Kirkham 'shop around' for whichever machine performs its task best, and both clubs have a good workshop for running repairs. Both men are agreed, too, that a great deal depends on the back-up available from manufacturers or dealers.

There is no clash of personalities over management at either club - unfortunately, the same is far from true of every golf club in the UK. Mike Kirkham sits on his management committee; Paul Ryan has a good working relationship with his green committee.

Abbeydale also sets an example that could be more widely followed by encouraging its greenkeeping team to play golf at the club - not just granting permission condescendingly and restricting it to 'after hours'. The past captain, Warwick Ward, has, in Jane Ryan's opinion, 'done more for the staff in his 12 months in office than anyone else she has known in fifteen years of greenkeeping'. He made sure that all the staff had handicaps and invited them all to play on his Captain's Day, and donated a trophy to be played for annually in a match against the club officials.

With an increasing use of machinery and automatic irrigation - Abbeydale has a Watermation system, although at West Surrey the tees are hand-watered - one might presume that a

greenkeeper's lot has eased. But all too often a greenkeeper is treated by his official as little more than a hired hand. This is certainly not the case at West Surrey or Abbeydale, but Jane Ryan's words should be noted: 'Greenkeepers should be encouraged to feel that they belong to their club in every sense. Get them to play - give them a handicap - give them clubs, if necessary. It all helps them to set up a course with the mind of a golfer. To teach them the game is essential: it means that a greenkeeper will take a real pride in his course if he plays on it, and is encouraged to play. And that, in turn, will result in the calibre of greenkeepers that golf clubs need.'

So, what of the future? There are no plans to redesign either course, but at West Surrey improved practice facilities could well be provided if areas of scrub and woodland are developed. At Abbeydale there are hopes that, in time, the club will own the course again, although this depends largely on a change of heart by Sheffield Council.

In the meantime, general improvement continues, and the comments of W. Herbert Fowler in his report on Abbeydale, submitted on 7th September 1922, are applicable to both courses. 'We have no hesitation in saying that in our opinion you have the most wonderful chance of making a first-class course.'