

Evolution of a series

Readers of the recent series on golf courses by my son Nicholas in *Golf Monthly* may have wondered how the articles came about and why he should have been chosen, or, indeed, be qualified to write on this subject.

We have both had a considerable amount of greenkeeping experience, not without its ups and downs, and while we are now finally certain of what we want for our own course in terms of sward and playability, we are constantly made aware of the average club golfer's ignorance of greenkeeping matters.

Such ignorance is not surprising when you consider the structure of clubs as they are run in this country. So, we hope the series in such a popular golfing magazine will enable more club members to understand what the problems are, how they have come about and what so many greenkeepers are now striving to achieve, while, at the same time, pointing out that there are no soft options.

I was born and lived in the home of Cumberland turf, which older generations will remember being shipped to all parts of the country. Composed mainly of creeping red fescue, it was literally sea washed, often with a fine silt layer. It was greatly in demand for the best bowling greens, but often deteriorated when moved. Hindsight would suggest that this was due to faulty management.

I was embarking on a career in scientific agriculture at Reading University about the same time Jim Arthur was leaving there to go to Bingley. I had a grounding in those very subjects that now seem so important in greenkeeping and I had an involvement with a golf course as a part-time replacement for a greenkeeper on war service.

By Eddie Park

Eventually, I changed to another profession entirely and only returned to golf after qualifying in Edinburgh. Settling in Sheffield, I became a golfing fanatic. At that time, many courses were still without water and the two that saw me most had lovely fescue greens. Dry in winter, green and firm in spring and autumn and often brown in summer. Using mainly pre-war instruction books and with a professional in his seventies, I developed a short game to cope with the difficult bouncy periods.

The newly introduced wedge seemed of less value than the old niblick with which a greater variety of shots could be played. In 1957, I witnessed the thrill of a lifetime—victory by Great Britain and Ireland over America at Lindrick and, soon after, joined the famous club.

By 1967, members were somewhat less than happy with the course and in 1968 I found myself in the hot seat as chairman of the green committee with a brief to discover what had gone wrong. In truth, although we made some improvement, it was to take ten years to work it all out. By that time, Nicholas had taken over as chairman and the committee called in Jim Arthur. That started a period of fairly public disagreement over the methods to be used which, up to then, had involved heavy use of both fertiliser and water.

Living near the course, I had been asked to undertake periods of daily supervision and we had both been

forced to relearn the basics of botany, plant ecology and soil science to be sure we were really on the right track. We had uncovered remarkably full club records and also, by courtesy of Peter Hayes, full records from Bingley from 1928, in Norman Hackett's time, up to 1968. Taken together, they showed a 90 year history of ups (in the shape of sound traditional greenkeeping) and downs (in the shape of high-risk methods encouraging poa annua at the expense of indigenous bents and fescues).

Five years from the start of the programme, we are well along the road to re-establishing the dominance of the indigenous grasses. We have not overseeded or used any other gimmick and we have realised some important truths. The policy may be obvious with hindsight, but at the beginning it is not easy to understand—especially for the members who are in for a period of suffering. Above all, it is the daily judgements involved in the implementation of the policy that are so difficult.

Our chief asset has been a wonderfully enthusiastic and increasingly highly skilled young staff (all I hope with a great future) and the support of a particularly knowledgeable section of members. We wouldn't pretend to have gone all the way and there are a number of problems, mainly due to faulty construction, left to solve.

Through this period, however, it has become obvious that not all golfers enjoy the return to agrostis/festuca turf even if that is the only option, both financially and ecologically (i.e. anything else will end in disaster). That sent Nicholas back to research the 'physics' of golfing turf—what actually happens when a ball meets turf—as very little research had

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been done on this subject. His preliminary views appeared in *Greenkeeper* (July 1983). The editor of *Golf Monthly* read this article and invited him to contribute a series.

We spent much of this past winter pursuing the story from early times to the present day, looking at the history of golf courses and greenkeeping and also at the game in general. It became plain that the introduction of the bouncier and heavier rubber cored ball from 1900 onwards had produced an element of luck for which golfers had demanded remedies, such as water and fertiliser, which had produced their problems.

The aim of the series is, therefore, to get golfers to think about the game and their demands on their golf course. Only then will greenkeepers have any chance to pursue (and be able to stick to) sound policies. We hope greenkeepers will find it a help in discussions with committees and members.

I believe strongly that it is more than time to stop the pernicious view that the golfer (and, therefore, the greenkeeper) has a choice of numerous options. We don't! Chemicals, machines, water and any other inventions are merely useful aids. We must work with nature and that means this country's climate and conditions.

So, there we are—'amateurs', so we can say what we think, which is not always possible when you earn your living from the golf course. 'Traditionalists'—believing British golf, as it was invented, is the most enjoyable game and that traditional British greenkeeping, updated by modern machinery, can produce the best golfing turf in the world (and, in this climate, the only turf with a viable future).

Jim Arthur is still our valued source of advice and I am still in daily charge of things and if you are thinking that I don't really understand your problems you would be wrong. Over the last 42 years, I think I've met most of them. It has left me with little sympathy for those who do not want to learn, but great admiration for the sensible majority trying to carry out a difficult job with too many obstructions.

Maybe through *Golf Monthly* we will have reached a wider audience than this excellent technical journal could hope to achieve and possibly with helpful publicity from the likes of Tom Watson and Ben Crenshaw and other 'traditionalists', we shall get home to Mr Average Golfer the message that it is all worthwhile, especially if he wishes to play all the year round.

In·My·Opinion Continued...

and soon filled its 36 holes with 1,200 members.

Fashion, snobbism and commercial connections also tend to direct aspirants to a few established clubs. Even the higher subscriptions of those where there is most demand may not be as high as those new ones where profit is part of the operation. The earlier clubs have paid for everything except upkeep. The new ones have to look at the interest on the loan.

The dilemma may be solved where estate development accompanies the golf course. This combination has facilitated the formation of only a few courses in Britain, such as Wentworth, Moor Park and Little Ashton, but now it leads, because of the large funds it develops, to the competitive window-dressing that menaces us all. The more extravagant the claims, the more numerous those persons, one of whom is said to be born every minute, who queue up to weekend, retire or holiday beside these lush and elegantly syringed fairways.

Once the possibilities of extravagant length alone were exhausted (even the professionals jibbed when it got to 8,000 yards), the sandhills, spectator mounds, lakes, palm trees and other extravaganza were imported to bait the hook.

Unfortunately, because colour printing is so much cheaper than formerly, they have become part of the everyday vocabulary of better-known designers; still more, of their imitators and especially of those professional golfers who turn to the design department in order to extract an extra dividend from the reputation they have built up on the tour.

Their household names also permit the developers to stick another worm on the hook. Whether this tit-bit is as tempting as it should be, may or may not be proven. (There are still people who believe in the shoemaker and his last.) But we can be quite sure it is not going to make the budget any slimmer.

One of these newcomers also provides himself with a residence on each of his favourite developments. Presumably, this goes on the bill, too. Thus, a few hundred golfers can casually let slip that they happen to live next door to The Master. This is still good for their personal publicity,

even if they only see him over the fence or through the palm trees once a year.

Since the United Kingdom is built on a relatively small scale, its planners tend to have strong views about the development of housing in their backyards. Competition from the Costas, whether Blanca, del Sol, Smeralda or de la Luz, also restricts imitation by home developments to more austere lines, even if the British climate is to be ignored.

The return to nature, if indeed we ever left it, is, therefore, welcome as British endeavours to splash out Florida-style have all been on the pawky side of enchanting. Even Robert Trent Jones must have found himself limited by some atavistic quirk, for so knowledgeable an authority as Peter Alliss to have had reservations in describing Moor Allerton.

I am not so sure that the return to nature in greenkeeping is quite so simple as the philosophy suggests and one or two advocates insist at great length. Artificial demands on grass by insatiable golfers can hardly be met on traditional lines. Green and tee construction must be abreast or rather in advance of the state of the art. Intensive use, often in unfavourable conditions, must alone demand artificial preparation.

This work already adds 40 per cent in real terms to the bill for 18 holes compared with 20 years ago. But no amount of pools, ponds or sleeper-faced bunkers will comfort a golfer if the greens are soggy when he wants to perform.

Frills can, however, be added later, but they should be envisaged in the original concept. Too much frippery at the start will soon bring us to the end of the road. Then, only government grants for reclamation, rehabilitation or investment by those with large funds in estate development, hotel, time-share or prestige projects will give us new courses.

We shall have lost forever the scope for a group of golfers to get together, scrape up funds, find a piece of land and build themselves a golf course. Provided they start with a good master plan, programme it, build it and maintain it sensibly, they will be achieving something precious for themselves, their neighbourhood and for golf—at least, in the next generation.

We should not forget that in these hard times—especially if they get any harder—golf is not too cheap. We should not let it get too expensive either.