

Greenkeeper players and professional superintendents

By Jim Barclay

LEGEND has it that the first professional golfer to cross the Atlantic over a hundred years ago was fired after one season for refusing to take on the duties of course superintendent. William F. Davis was an assistant at the Royal Liverpool Golf Club when Royal Montreal in Canada hired him in 1881 to be its first professional.

For his fixed wage of \$4 per week, Royal Montreal also expected him to maintain the course single-handed. This probably involved no more than cutting the grass, rolling the greens, and re-seeding the divot marks.

But Mr Davis refused.

Royal Liverpool, with five hundred members, could afford a groundsman to do manual work on the course. At Royal Montreal, with only twenty-five members, it seemed not an unreasonable request to ask Davis to do this.

If Mr Davis had belonged to a trade union, he would probably have sued for wrongful dismissal. On balance, I think he would have lost his case. Precedence was against him. Strictly speaking, he had not been engaged as Royal Montreal's 'professional.' No such post existed. He had been engaged as its greenkeeper. And by custom and practice, a greenkeeper was, among other things, the keeper of the course.

The name greenkeeper was of Scottish origin. Whoever thought of the title and defined the duties of the greenkeeper, was an astute gentlemen or a conniving rogue, depending on which side of the table you were seated.

Consider the skills expected of the greenkeeper. He had to be an expert clubmaker and club repairer, he had to make and repair golf balls, he had to be a good enough golfer not only to teach the game, but also win money-matches against greenkeepers from neighbouring clubs, he had to control a squad of uncouth caddies, some of them children of uncertain age, others 'old, bent and frosted by many winters' and not always sober, he

had to know all there was to know about the upkeep of a golf course, and - if the club could not afford the luxury of a labourer - he had to personally keep the grass short, cut the holes on the green and fill in the holes on the fairway.

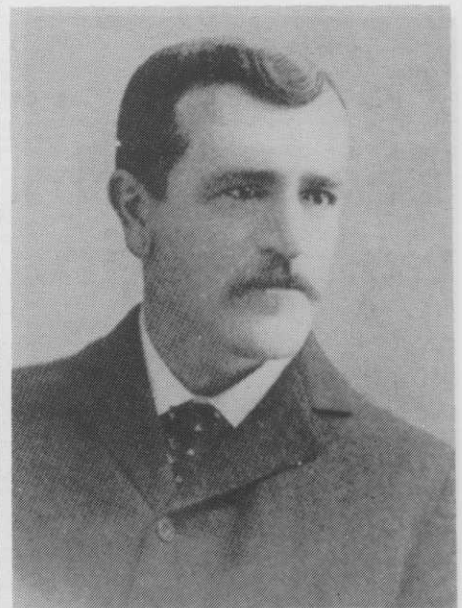
(You will note that there is no mention of 'raking the bunkers.' The concept of raking bunkers to make them easier to get out of is a 20th-century absurdity. It only makes sense in a society that sees nothing wrong in selling radar detectors to motorists to make it easier to get out of speed traps.)

Clearly, a golf club should have been forced, by written agreement, to employ fifteen men, each to his own task, clearly defined and demarcated, with not a scrap of overlapping, at the risk of a strike: golf teacher, match player, clubmaker (woods), clubmaker (irons), club repairer (woods), club repairer (irons), ball maker, ball repairer, grass cutter, hole cutter, divot reseed, sand-box filler, caddie master, union shop steward and tea maker.

None of these, you will note, is given the title 'professional.' But, in fact, they would all be professionals, in the sense that they could no longer be amateurs, since they would all be making a living out of the game - for a week until the club went bankrupt.

In large clubs, the division of duties into those of today's club professional and course superintendent seems to have been a gradual process. As early as the 1880s, some clubs used the rather grandiose title of 'Resident Professional and Custodian of the Green,' which was at least a recognition of his dual responsibilities. But like all early greenkeepers, this man was a player and teacher first, a clubmaker second and a keeper of the green third.

This order of priority was all wrong for clubs in new golfing countries. At a pinch, members could teach themselves, or be taught by club members from the



William F. Davis, North America's first greenkeeper.

Old Country. And there were plenty of gardeners to cut the grass.

But making and repairing golf clubs by hand was a skilled business, requiring a four-year apprenticeship. In the days of hickory shafts and beechwood heads, a golfer needed a club repairer at hand, or several sets of spare clubs. It was probably for this reason that Royal Montreal did not fire Mr Davis after one season (as legend would have it), but kept him in Canada for twelve years, giving him an assistant to cut the grass. And when Davis left, he was replaced by a professional from St Andrews. Not by a 'professional' as we use the word today, but by a professional clubmaker, who also happened to be an excellent player of the game.