

# The good, the bad

This feature was to have focussed on Britain's Local Authorities and their golfing activities. The many hours spent by your editor on asking questions – and receiving totally negative answers or being stonewalled – turned out to be the most unrewarding experience of all time. What have they to hide? Why are they so negative? Whose corner are they protecting? One highly capable head greenkeeper in charge of a local authority course in Kent summed it up rather succinctly by declaring that in his case the reason was one of ignorance: "None of the faceless ones from my authority know 'beans' about golf", he said, "and they frankly couldn't care less."

## Local Authority Golf – getting it wrong X



## Local Authority Golf – getting it right ✓

### GOLF AT THAMESDOWN – a dutiful local authority and its golf programme

Thamesdown – the borough centred around Swindon – is extremely conscious of its duties to its citizens and over the years has invested in many amenity facilities. Their golf includes an 18 hole and two 9 hole courses, three pitch & putt courses and a 34 bay driving range. The majority of these are centred around the Broome Manor Golf Complex, where Kelvin Dudley is the head greenkeeper with a staff of six. Also under the same management in the adjoining Coate Water Country Park are extensive pitch & putt, mini golf and putting green facilities. The complex, under the management of Tom Watt, has a pro shop and a restaurant and bar, these being available for private functions.

The driving range, which re-opened recently with an additional 14 bays, has been given a sand-filled synthetic surface to allow the majority of balls to roll towards the centre for mechanical retrieval. It was the need to mechanise the facility (six million balls a year) which led to the refurbishment. Kelvin said that in wet weather balls 'plugged' and had to be picked and washed by hand.

The new carpet was made specifically for Thamesdown and extends over six acres. In re-contouring the site a considerable tonnage of clay subsoil was removed and replaced with a stone sub-base over which 500 tonnes of sand was placed. New lighting was installed and the range is now open from 8am until 9pm, seven days a week.

In common with most local authorities, the advent of competitive tendering has placed restrictions on availability of facts or figures which could be used by a competitive tender. Tom said this was regrettable, as they (Thamesdown BC) liked to be helpful, but CCT was a fact of local authority life and you never knew if the next complex manager might not be from a Dutch or French firm. Thamesdown have tendered for their own contract, and while expecting to win they are nervously awaiting an answer on their future.

Tom claimed not to be political, and within the popular meaning he certainly is not, however he is proud and possessive of Thamesdown's attainments and their 'value for money' services. In particular he is sincere in his belief of the

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# and the faceless

rightness of providing rate-payers with golf a reasonable prices, green fees being a maximum £6.85 at weekends, with concessions for the unemployed mid-week. Even at these modest levels Thamesdown's golf makes a substantial contribution to the borough's income. Perhaps as a result, councillors are positive about the facility and willing to re-invest.

Thamesdown has invested £800,000 in golf in the last two years, the major projects being at Highworth and the extensions and improvements at Broome Manor. They also plan a further £250,000 for a substantial expansion of the Clubhouse. The authority's interest in golf stems from 1976 when the original 18 holes were laid out, the range coming in '82 and the additional 9 holes a year later.

Neither men claim that these courses are the country's best and are well aware of the problems, many of which stem from past work carried out while working to a budget, resulting in obvious deficiencies. Kelvin is acutely aware that the courses are over-used, adding that compaction required a lot more work to be carried out.

Soil at Broome Manor is predominantly clay, allowing the formation of several ponds and streams, and adding significantly to interest. While there is only limited under-drainage there have been few problems in recent dry years, though one specific area of more sandy soil is heir to compaction as it slumps in the wet. However, the complex has its own Verti-drain.

The golf side works autonomously within the parks department and they have their own machinery, which is relatively modern and well maintained by their own fitter.

Tractors are usually second-hand after Parks and Highways have finished with them, as they do no road mileage, nor is their duty onerous. Mainstays of the mower fleet are two trailed gangs for rough and fairways, changing duty being a matter of altering the height rollers. Rough is kept short to minimise searching for lost balls. For greens and tees they have a fleet of GreenKings and Tri-Kings at Broome Manor, whilst at Highworth, where the nine holer only opened this April, pedestrian mowers are used. Both sites have irrigation on all greens, but this is used fairly frugally, with water abstracted from the mains.

However, they are meeting popular demand with an annual 60,000 rounds at each of Broome Manor's two courses and an anticipated 40,000 at Highworth. Nor will Tom allow that the standard of play is sub-standard, for they have several county players and one junior national player (Gary Harris).

The atmosphere is one of relaxed, informal friendliness, though there are disciplines, with perhaps the biggest problem being slow play. A ranger is employed to keep matches moving, though no-one admits to being slow – they always have an excuse – was Tom's comment.

Tom's view on the expansion of golf courses was entirely consistent. He considers there should be more 'village' courses of nine holes, based (perhaps) in a redundant farm building and run by a village sports club. Such facilities, he suggests, could be set up for around £120,000 and would give the maximum amount of pleasure to the maximum amount of people.

Furthermore, obtaining planning permission would be easier.

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● The author, Hugh Tilley, is a journalist specialising in the field of golf course machinery and maintenance. He lives in Wiltshire.



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