

Autumn



Turf maintenance

Nurturing Harry Colt's Sussex Gem – the experiences and technique of Ham Manor's Course Manager, George Barr. Report and photographs by DAVID WHITE



Unlike the professional golfers of the Sussex PGA, who vote their choice of 'Best Golf Greens Of The Year' on the somewhat emotive stand of putting condition on just one given day of play, the greenkeepers in this fair county are much less likely to give a 'thumbs up' to any course, certainly not to any greens, without due consideration of the many and varied imponderables. Talking to them, one name crops up again and again and is held in very high esteem: George Barr of Ham Manor Golf Club, the beautiful parkland course at Littlehampton that epitomises Harry Colt's design brilliance.

George is a transplanted Scot, and like many of his countrymen brings to his job of course management the skills culled from a greenkeeping career that began immediately after leaving school, when as a fine player and self-confessed golf addict he saw his future in the art of golf course maintenance. He began his training at Skelmorlie Golf Club, studied relentlessly at college and learned from masters of his craft, eventually moving to Greenock for two years before being persuaded to return again to Skelmorlie, this time as head greenkeeper. He remained there a further two happy years before the prospect of management at the Renfrew Club, a championship course on the banks of The

Clyde, lured him away. He remained course manager at Renfrew for about eight years, enjoying the challenge and the great golf to be found in these parts, before moving to Colt's sweet Sussex masterpiece early in 1988.

The beginning of autumn at Ham Manor heralds a gradual rather than drastic change, beginning with a very gentle raising of cutting height from 1/8th to 3/16th over a period of three weeks, done in a subtle way that ensures member satisfaction – always a prime consideration in George's mind.

In early October a hollow coring programme takes place using a GA30 with two inch centres, covering the ground just once before harvested with a proprietary core harvester, the whole twenty greens (18+ putting and bowling greens) cored and cleared in about eight hours! This is followed by overseeding, the seed being a straight highland bent which George has found best for his course, old fashioned though it may seem in some circles. "We've always had great results with highland", he said, "and I can only speak from personal experience. Highland gives a fine putting surface that suits our purpose perfectly, the putting surfaces speaking for themselves". He was quick to point out that overseeding was not always an annual event, such decision being → 23

'Pure sand dressing, though frowned upon in some official circles, has undoubtedly proved its worth at Ham Manor'

21 ➔ taken only after carefully considering the current state of play and how autumn may turn out, there being no point in wasting seed if the surfaces appear highly satisfactory. Seed once applied is then brushed in vigorously, even though the seeder has covered the surfaces, this followed with an application of soil conditioner, again brushed in before top dressing with pure sand.

The sand used is a medium to coarse sand, specially selected for zero calcification so that pH is not a problem – lightly dressed at first, brushed again and followed again over a period with light applications until the core holes are filled. George's predecessors at The Manor had used various heavy peat based top dressings and these have left a globulous mass layer of undecomposed peat and spent mushroom compost, a legacy from the sixties which must be penetrated. Pure sand dressing, though frowned upon in some official circles, has undoubtedly proved its worth at Ham Manor.

Once this first programme is complete, a settling in period of 3-4 weeks is followed by a further hollow tining, the members having been primed to anticipate somewhat disrupting autumn work and aware that it is to their benefit that the course is 'nestling down' so to speak, in readiness for a return to excellent putting surfaces in early April. George pointed out that in Scotland such a programme may well start somewhat earlier, adding that in the more mild climate of the south, some greenkeepers have considerable difficulties in persuading their green committee of the necessity for autumnal programmes. "It's hard to believe, but there are some Clubs that still take Society bookings in late October and beyond. Our policy is to advise any visitors that if they choose to come after our work begins then they



Note the adjacent housing, a radical move in the 1930s, the course built in order to generate interest in the Ham Manor Estate

must expect to find some changes and take it as they find it".

Asked if Societies were a pain, George was happy to point out this was not his experience, the Club policy being a wise one in that only about 25 days a year were given over to such groups, their visits therefore being most welcome.

Turning again to the programme, the pattern changes slightly for 1991 in that it has been some three years since the greens were last Vertidraind and this will be carried out again in the last week of October, to two inch centres and going to a depth of 8-10 inches. Fairways are not Vertidraind very often, the Club being fortunate in owning a Spiker which has 12 inch tines fitted which can get right down to the hilt. In the autumn they look to slit the fairways in two directions, slitting about 8 or 10 times over a period of two to three months or so. This action is regarded as a major contributory factor in rapidly recovering from the drought of 89, the considerable slitting carried out in ➔ 25



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'The sparing application of water can be just enough to take the sting out of a ball'

23 ➡ the winter of '89 and spring of '90 making a marked difference to fairway quality.

Two other processes feature, first the spraying of an organic farmyard manure mixture on every fairway, to encourage the finer grasses into activity and to give the fairways a stimulus which doesn't induce upper growth, in other words to get vigorous root activity again and to get the balance right in the soils, to get the roots to go down the slits that have been made. Following the drought two applications were made in autumn and winter, with retake of indigenous species being, in George's own words, "incredible, with a large amount of fescues moving back in again. What we recovered in autumn 1990 we kept and maintained in '91, the sward standing up well to the dry spells". It is now written into the Club programme that this process be applied every year.

Additionally, with worm-casts being a constant problem, more especially in past years, the Club now have it written that a selective worm-killer be applied annually, though at first with the restrictions of chlordane usage the chosen application didn't prove too effective, it being necessary to build up a level with repeated treatments. The committee had the problems of wiping out all worms by non-selective methods explained and once the importance of maintaining the soil ecosystem by retaining the non-casting varieties of earthworm was understood, the process, seen now to be working successfully, was rubber-stamped.

The members have always had a decided preference for fast greens and these are achieved in the spring and held throughout the season by the unhurried and gradual lowering of cutting height to a point where a speed of between 9 and 10 feet is maintained, without subjecting the sward to any stressful over zealous shaving. George is an advocate of the Stimpmeter and uses it regularly, not essentially to measure speed but to ensure total consistency on all greens. He's also enthusiastic about turf ironing, having experimented with the Australian machine which with just one movement gave a 12 inch rise in speed, increasing again by 6 inches with a second movement and found to be still appreciably faster the following day.

Just prior to the drought of '89 a new irrigation system was installed, cleverly designed in consultation with George to include not only tees and greens but green approaches too. As a golfer of some merit George had longed for the opportunity to include this feature, where the sparing application of water can be just enough to take the sting out of a ball on approach. He sees no merit in a well struck ball landing just short and scooting over a speedy green to unwarranted trouble. On the subject of water application he's a 'minimal' man, aiming always to strike a happy balance. "They keep saying irrigation is a very exact science", he ➡ 27

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'They are fortunate in working with a fine range of up to date machinery'

25 → stated, "though no one has yet come up with a true and tried formula. You can programme watering for two minutes at night and whilst in your bed an east wind can blow for seven hours and you wake up wondering where all the water went".

Wind is always a problem in coastal Sussex and though Ham Manor is three miles from the shore the salt air carries and can scorch off conifer trees found on the back nine in winter. "We try to explain that we should swing away from such species", he said, "but everyone seems to want quick results".

The seven man team at Ham Manor is complemented by deputy head greenkeeper, Alastair Cale, – "a superb, totally efficient man of the sort that every course manager needs," – two youngsters who are currently training at Plumpton College, grand stalwarts Paul Coombe and Ken Johnson and a wonderful old timer – 69 year old Arthur Garner – who has been with the Club seemingly forever and who lovingly nurtures all the beautiful gardens.

Mechanical repairs and upkeep are in the capable hands of Alastair and George and they are fortunate in working with a fine range of up to date machinery, including an up to date grinding machine. Nothing seems left to chance in the modern maintenance buildings and all logical presentations for necessary new equipment are looked at sympathetically, the Club secretary and George enjoying a one on one relationship which extends quite naturally to George's attendance at all relevant course management committee meetings.

For extra measure this autumn a completely new green is to be built at the 18th, the existing one having dropped considerably over the years. Though not a new experience for George, who rebuilt several greens at Renfrew, the team are all wildly enthusiastic at the opportunity of building a USGA spec construction from scratch, the correct mix samples now being analysed at Grass Technology International laboratories, again the professional aim being to reach perfection. As a final aside George made the valid point that nothing would induce him to 'interfere' with Colt's original 1936 architectural concepts, believing that Harry himself would be the first to approve the move to create a split level green that will stand the test of putting excellence for perhaps a century or more.

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