

# DIGGING FOR DIRT



A review of the Golf Landscaping and Construction Industry and a plea for responsible reporting in the national press

by MARK PIERSON

**T**he Golf Course Construction Industry, like many others, is cyclical. Last year, and to a certain extent this year as well, the steady increase in the number of new golf courses available to golfers was maintained, with the only noticeable difference in '91 being that as banks and financiers began to draw in their horns, several highly publicised and ill-conceived projects ground to a halt.

These bank inspired closures gave the national press something of a field day in highlighting the often more imaginary than real problems and gave great joy to so-called 'environmental guardians', who took delight in shouting *golf is bad for you*. Not only are golf courses a bad financial risk, they howled, but just look at the effect on the environment!

Curious then, it seems to me, that the most desirable houses in the country are often found in our beautiful English countryside nestling close to or on a golf course, itself a haven and often last preserve of certain rare or endangered species or flora and fauna.

Bankers must live somewhere and they are often the lucky ones enjoying such residential delights, sad then that their actions and those of the misleading environmental issues should have muddled the otherwise clear water.

Pressures on the environment cannot be overlooked by any thinking and responsible body and thus it is → 30

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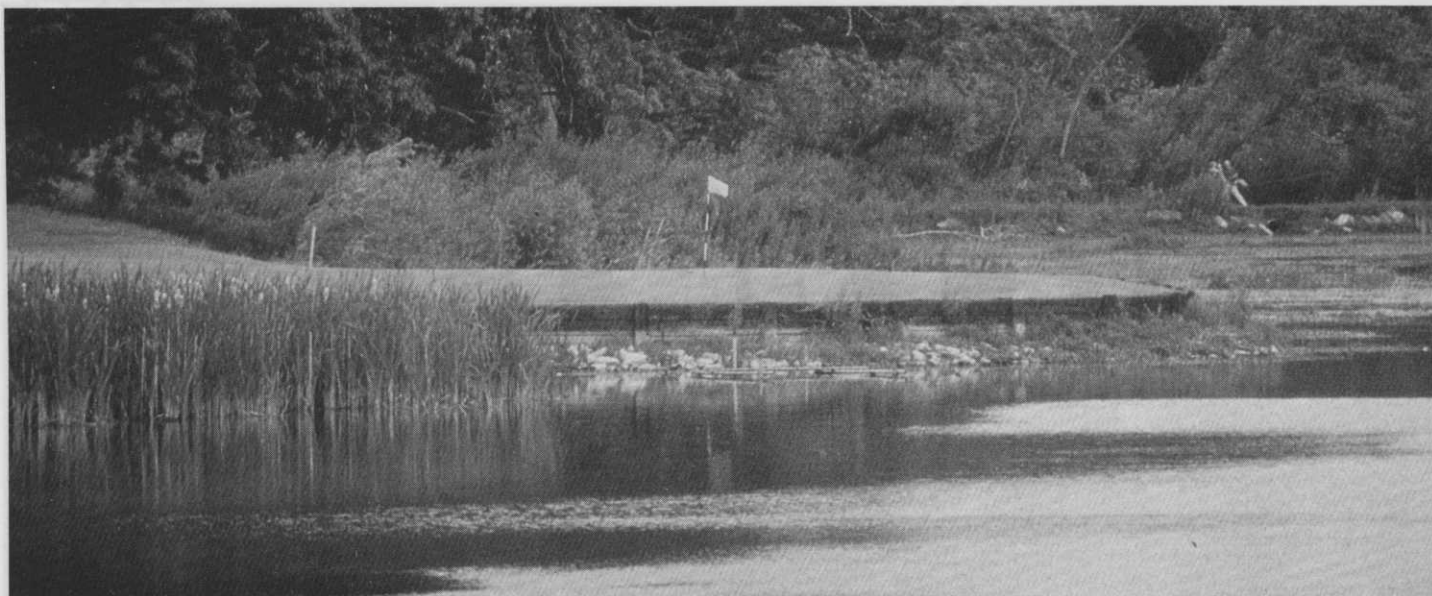
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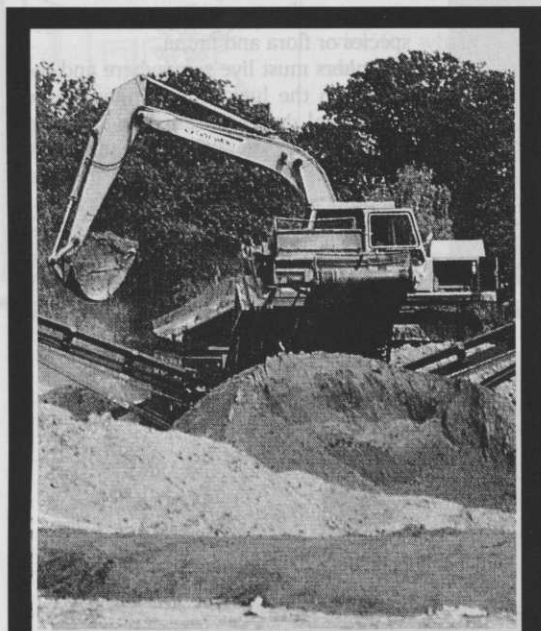
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Beautiful endings from machinery-scarred beginnings. Are such developments really the work of 'the devil incarnate'?



**'Our industry is environmentally friendly and we continue to be the envy of many other industries'**

galling to those in our industry, who spend their working lives enhancing the landscape, to hear that within the space of a single year our work is now that of the devil incarnate. Certainly we know we must respect the countryside, but the issue of *carte blanche* directives and inaccurate statements does no good to anybody, save that of giving one environmental pressure group a chance to score brownie points over its rivals.

How many of the pessimists and killjoys, I ask myself, have ever made contact with the BAGCA, BAGCC, BIGGA or governing bodies of the game to establish just

how practical – or indeed how necessary – their proposals and demands really are? We know for certain that local planning authorities *will* listen to sensible proposals outlined by organisations wishing to protect our countryside and heritage, but how will they know which organisation is right?

I concede that the lobbyists have a point about Trojan Horse developments. They are not what our industry is about and are best left to property speculators, who should properly be divorced from the golf course industry. However, given the 1,400 or so *granted* applications for new golf courses, how will local authorities judge and compare those applying with the right sort of land in the right place to those already granted in the wrong place?

As an example, I know of one county where 12 new courses have been approved and that – thank you very much – is quite enough! Does this strange sort of logic now preclude

the one good site that is sensibly drawn up, located in a prime position (where golfers can travel easily) and on the right land? Do not think I am advocating an opening of the flood-gates, but to illustrate my thinking I know of one site where a partially-built course is described by locals as being smack in the middle of a bog! It seems unlikely ever to be completed, but should it be, the players will need to emulate Jacques Cousteau.

My point is this: the bog is registered as a golf course and forms one of the total for which permission has been granted. Its presence gives a distorted view.

Balance in newspaper narration is very important but since the recent rash of 'let's bash golf' reports in the tabloids, I haven't seen a single report of the good side and wonder where the reporters are hiding. My feelings run high on such irresponsible journalism and I know that some local authorities are having their judgement clouded by misinformation.

Our industry has the right information to hand and longs to give out the good news – the many successes – but no-one wants to listen.

Here, for those tabloid reporters who may chance upon these words in *Greenkeeper International*, are the good tidings.

The standard of new courses is improving every year, we are meeting the demands of new players and golf is still relatively inexpensive at the pay and play end and seemingly attractive at the private and very exclusive end. Massive attention is being paid to environmental and archeological issues, a good example being the introduction of barn owls to a new course in the Midlands. Our industry *is* environmentally friendly and we continue to be the envy of many other industries, with a growth potential that is quite staggering.

We believe golf occupies a very special place in our national way of life and that development tempered with good husbandry and caring attitudes has a very long way to go before ever reaching saturation. We hope the irresponsible pundits may begin to understand and will soon change their tune to one that heralds *golf is good for you*.

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