

Golf's increasing popularity has brought a big demand for new courses; and the market has responded with some 1,400 planning applications to satisfy public need. But are the *right* courses being built?

LAURENCE PITHIE examines the facts

A few years have passed since an advisory panel to the R&A published the document 'Demand For Golf', stating the need to provide another 700 or so courses over the next decade. With some 1,400 planning applications currently being lodged with local authorities, it appears the initial target will be reached well before the end of the century. However, this does not necessarily auger well for the future since there are not enough qualified architects, contractors or greenkeepers available to design, construct and maintain them to the desired standard.

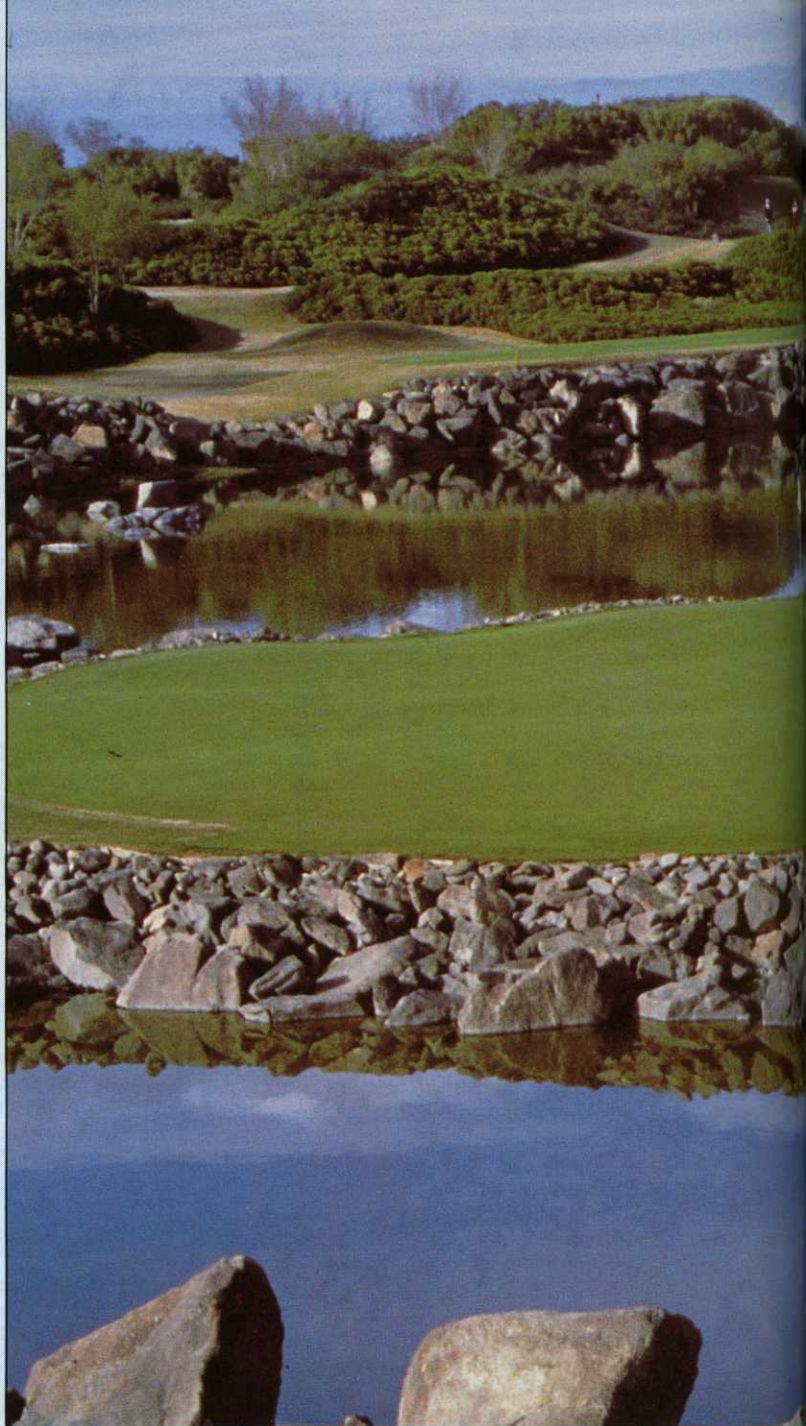
Whether or not the R&A's assessment is accurate is perhaps irrelevant. What is important is that the right type of course is provided, one that is developed in a professional manner and at a price which can be reflected in acceptable future playing costs. This article examines the current situation and asks: 'Are these new courses meeting current demand?'

From its early origins in the 15th century and indeed for the next 400 years, golf was a game enjoyed only by the affluent members of society and mainly limited to the east coast of Scotland. Since the costs of hand made clubs and balls were prohibitive, the game remained an exclusive pastime until the invention of the 'guttie' ball around 1850. The spread of the railway network and the much publicised matches between the Dunn's and the Morris's also had a significant influence on golf's advancement.

Since the late 19th century golf has enjoyed various surges in popularity, as well as periods of decline brought about by two world wars and economic depression. The phenomenal rise in golf's popularity in the USA and the advent of TV coverage during the early '60s brought a resurgence of interest to our shores, which was further enhanced by the arrival of celebrities such as Palmer and Nicklaus. In fact it was Nicklaus who did much to encourage more American professionals to play in The Open Championship, despite its then 'sagging' fortunes, and for this the R&A are eternally grateful. The emergence of European players and the effect of Ryder Cup victories, along with increased leisure time, has led to a dramatic rise in the game's popularity. People from all walks of life are eager to tread new ground and, subsequently, golf is currently being played by well over a million people, with many more attending driving ranges and pitch and putt courses, making it a multi-million pound industry.

To many observers, it would appear that the game is in a healthy state. Most private Clubs have long membership waiting lists and public courses are played from dawn till dusk, often with players sleeping in cars overnight in order to reserve a tee time later in the day. The reality is that many wishing to take up the game can neither apply to join or play at a private Club, as they do not have a handicap. Public courses are few in number and it is tiresome obtaining a tee time booking, especially in the more populated regions. It is this dilemma which the R&A recognised, leading to the conclusion that many new courses were required.

At first glance the solution appears relatively simple. Since agriculture is proving less profitable due to EC quotas and falling grain prices, many farmers can sell off surplus land to enterprising developers or indeed finance course construction themselves. A recent survey indicated a vast untapped market ready to take up the game, so it would appear that

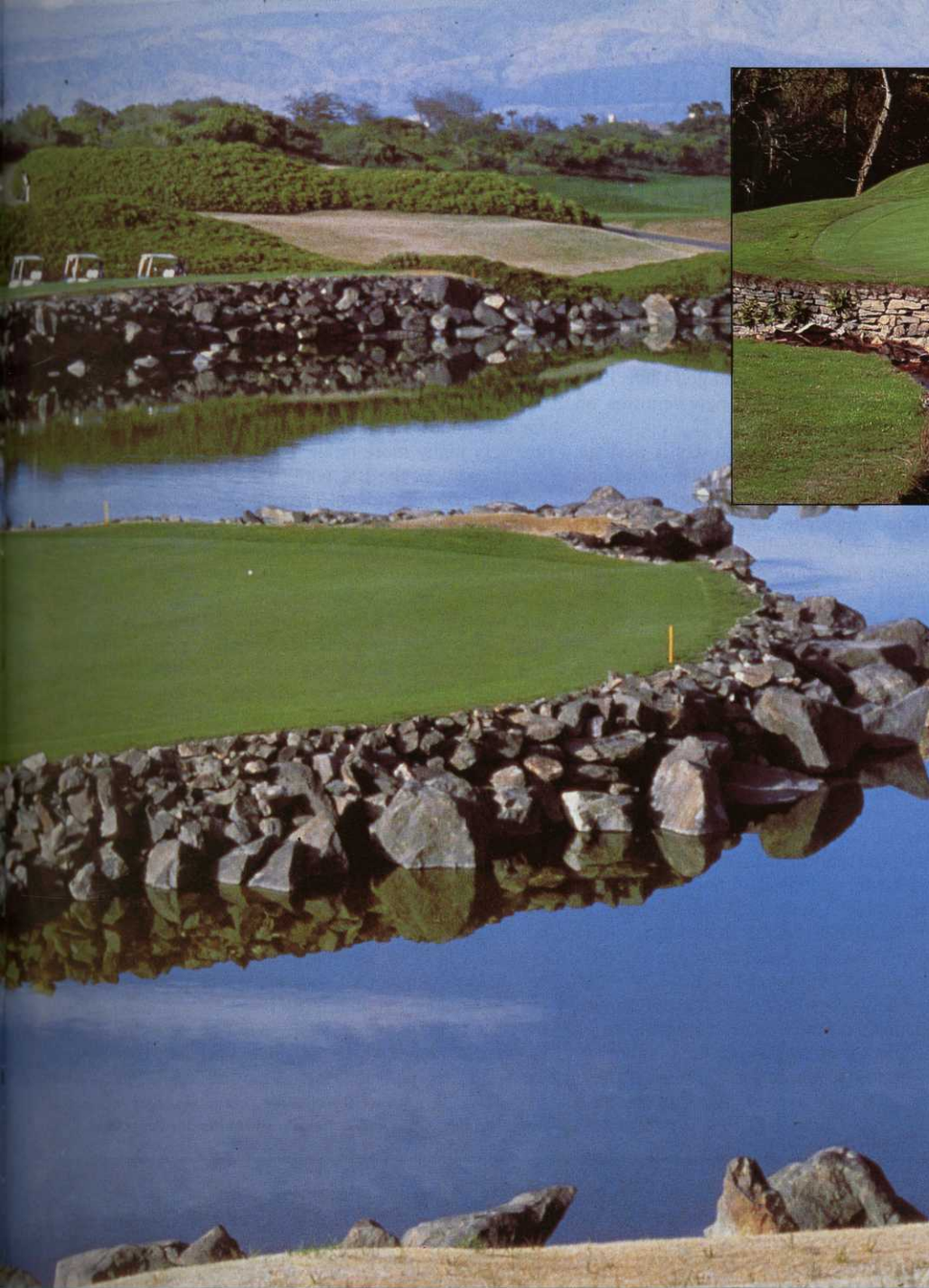


Supply

'The days when enthusiasts met to discuss forming a golf Club and creating their own course are probably gone forever'

turning fields into fairways was as safe a bet as initial investment in electricity shares. A number of local councils have been practically deluged with planning applications, but are not quite as sympathetically inclined as previously, especially where many applications had proven to be 'back-door' approaches to building hotels, housing, conference centres and the like. Proposed new ventures are now met with tighter controls, with the question of golf's environmental impact one of paramount importance for planning committees to consider.

The days when a group of enthusiasts met in a local inn to discuss the forming a golf Club and creating their own course on nearby land are probably gone forever. The majority of new ventures are either 'pay as you play' - often quite expensive and with little or no private membership - or exclusive American-style country Clubs offering a range of five star facilities. In some areas there appears to be a



and demand

plethora of the latter, some with adjoining hotels, all vying for a slice of the same limited market. Some, like East Sussex National, have been the centre of much media coverage and indeed golf can be played at East Sussex National on two immaculately maintained courses, but it will cost the earth for that privilege.

One of the main problems facing the industry today is that too many 'executive' style courses are being built at over-inflated cost, often designed by ex-tournament professionals who have become self-acclaimed golf course architects seeking a living by other means. These 'signature' courses have a glitzy and glamour approach, with the aim of producing even more spectacular courses seemingly for the sole benefit of being photographed for glossy magazines, which help to increase membership and sell a few adjacent houses. Many have become 7,000 yard monsters and are far too severe and demanding for the vast majority. They also tend to be

maintenance nightmares, requiring an almost unlimited budget, which in turn must be reflected in the cost of memberships and green fees. It comes as no surprise that many such ventures have either collapsed or are facing financial ruin, as potential customers are frightened off by the exorbitant costs featured. Indeed, many such courses have been forced to reduce green fee charges considerably, merely in order to survive.

Similar projects are unlikely to get off the ground as the current recession bites deeper, the reality being that there are just too many of these 'top end of the market' ventures. The escalating costs in once favoured regions such as the Algarve and Costa Del Sol (now nicknamed Costa too Much!) should have rung alarm bells for the developers back home. It is beyond doubt that the average British golfer is just not prepared to pay the vast sums demanded, and this has resulted in these sun-drenched courses playing host

Main picture: High cost constructions will push fees beyond the reach of most golfers.

Top: Picturesque, but possibly too difficult.

Centre: Constructions on this scale need to be well financed and planned, and, lower picture, this way of contouring fairways may beat deadlines - but at what cost to soil structure?

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Supply and demand

mainly to Germans and Scandinavians – often high hand-cappers – who take in excess of four hours to complete a motorised round and are quite willing to part with large sums for the privilege. However, even in Spain the bubble appears to have burst – as both hoteliers and golf Clubs have found to their cost – and there are many new ventures 'on hold' awaiting financial investment.

The other main problem facing the industry is perhaps even more damaging. I refer to the actual construction and specifications used in creating these new courses. All too often courses are built too quickly by inexperienced contractors, attempting to meet project deadlines and oblivious of those who must follow to maintain such 'creations'. Contractors are often too severe and reveal scant regard for future maintenance, as also do green surrounds that are often an afterthought, with bunkers having more in common with front line trenches. Materials used in green construction are seldom properly tested for particle size, porosity and bulk density, with sub-standard local soil mixed with sand from the nearest gravel pit often being used in the mistaken belief that this saves time and money. It is little wonder that seed-take is poor and 'ponding' and compaction occurs so readily after play begins, resulting in the use of temporary greens on a brand new course!

Once the 'architect' and contractors have been handsomely rewarded and have headed off to another site, the onus for solving these problems falls upon the shoulders of the poor greenkeeper. Sadly, this scenario is all too common and still continues to be the case up and down the country. Even with the availability of modern technology and research there are probably more badly constructed courses now than ever before. It therefore comes as no surprise to learn that at least one client is attempting to sue his contractor for failing to deliver the goods. In most instances these problems could easily have been averted by using qualified personnel and seeking proper advice in the first place. All

materials need to be laboratory tested to meet necessary criteria, with designs critically examined to assess their suitability.

Perhaps there is a need to look beyond our shores for guidance as to the direction our beloved game is heading. In France, 75% of all new courses are aimed at the public sector and built at an appropriate cost. Even in the USA there are very many more public courses per head of population compared with the UK, with most playable for a very modest dollar output indeed. The real need in this country is for more low-cost public or pay as you play courses, offering membership at realistic cost, as well as numerous par three and nine hole courses which would encourage family participation or the occasional leisurely evening round. Both architects and developers should turn the clock back and stop trying to emulate Augusta National or Pine Valley!

St Andrews is a shining example of how this may be achieved; namely courses that may be enjoyed by every standard of golfer. Courses do not need to cost several millions to build, nor do they need the tag 'championship' listed in their sales brochure. A well drained course, including properly constructed greens and tees and capable of accommodating at least 40,000 rounds each year and offering a moderate test of golf can be built for under £1 million, inclusive of irrigation to greens and tees. The course should also be capable of relatively quick and efficient maintenance within a modest budget, which can then be reflected in the cost to the golfer.

There will of course always be a need for a few 'up-market' country Clubs, but they should be minimal and built only to satisfy a genuine need. If the average golfer is not to be 'priced out' of the game, there must be a realism attached to the direction in which the game is heading. Only then can we claim that the real 'Demand for Golf' is being met.

● The author, Laurence Pithie, is course manager at Minchinhampton Golf Club and is Britain's first Master Greenkeeper.

Greenkeepers forced to go back to basics as pesticide products dry up

Once upon a time there was a reasonable choice of pesticide products available to the greenkeeper. Though new products were always slow in appearing, the big agricultural producers made available some of their new products for the smaller specialist companies to develop for the turf market and there was always regular dialogue; with products being granted back-to-back registration. With others, some interesting joint development programmes were undertaken.

With ever tightening budgets for development and the increasing demand for more information about efficacy and safety from MAFF for Approval purposes, products nevertheless came onto the amenity market, slowly but surely. Quite rightly, the emphasis is now on having products that are as environmentally friendly as possible and on them being applied through more accurate machinery.

But what has happened? Has the amenity sector been abandoned because of its traditional low demand for pesticides? We seem to be going into reverse, with products being

discontinued because of the non-availability of raw materials, together with mysterious periods of product shortages due to 'supply difficulties'.

The weeds, worms and diseases are not going to go away, in fact there are indications of an increase in the number of problems occurring, especially in grass grown on special cultural media and 'foreign' grass mixtures. Where are all the new bio-control agents developed for use in turf? We hear of great strides being made in bio-control in commercial horticulture and if *Bacillus thuringiensis* is now commercially viable as a product to control caterpillars, I must ask where is the work to evaluate a similar product to control chafer grubs in turf?

If amenity horticulture is not a viable market for the development of new specialist products that will be environmentally acceptable, I would like to hear from those who might have been in a position to help but won't or can't, possibly because the 'big boys' will not make their products available.

Is there a more sinister side to this conundrum? Some of the big chemical producers

are on the other side of the channel and one wonders if they are aiming to strangle our very important small, indeed some not so small, specialist producers and create a monopoly situation after 1992?

The real worry in all this is that the enterprising greenkeeper may well be forced to revert to practices of many years ago to control pests and diseases. Already we hear talk of some that are using home-made remedies or using approved products for non-approved purposes.

It is sad to see these potentially dangerous and illegal practices creeping back in a profession that elsewhere is raising standards to new heights.

So come on, let's hear it from the manufacturers – what are you doing to help the greenkeeper? Or have you abandoned us and are without the courage to say so?

● The author, Jon Allbutt, is a regular contributor to the pages of Greenkeeper International. He is an independent practitioner in the fields of testing and training pesticide and herbicide application methods and in unravelling the mysteries of ministerial regulations.