



**Autumn  
TURF  
MAINTENANCE**

# Minchinhampton

## How we'll tackle the new season

Special report and exclusive photographs by DAVID WHITE



The Club with the knack of picking winners plans its next success

# Golden future

Opinion suggests there are just three essentials in the building of any new golf course. They are, in order of priority, location, location and location! The good members of Minchinhampton Golf Club, whose ancestors made the first smart move in 1889 in forming a Club to play upon the immensely pleasurable Minchinhampton Common high in the Cotswolds, have every reason to be pleased in getting their priorities well sorted. Rightly so, for having tired of growing disruptions from an ever increasing motorised population, including week-end picnic parties that encroached upon bunkers and greens, they have mastered the art of moving house.

The old common is still in play and indeed continues to delight its many devotees, but for the greater number of Minchinhampton Golf Club's 1,400 members, home is now a mile or so from the common at the delightfully attractive setting of Avening. Here they have a Fred Hawtree designed layout of some 6,600 yards, construction of which began in 1972 and opened for play in 1975. It affords essential privacy, a fine test of golf and often breathtaking views that look toward three counties. It is high, wide and handsome.

Soon their pleasure is to be further increased, for plans have been approved for another 18 holes on adjacent land and construction will commence in 1993. Once again, constructors will be working to a detailed Hawtree design, though this time it is Martin Hawtree who is the architect, continuing proud family traditions that span four generations.

Moving house is never without trauma, but in one essen-

tial respect the Club have been blessed with true leviathans in the field of course management. They have the unique knack of picking winners, a skill which first began when they secured the services of Tom Lindsay, the younger half of a father and son team - Lin-Hire - responsible for constructing the course. It speaks volumes for the high regard that Tom earned as course manager, for upon his untimely death the Club erected a memorial in his honour.

Of the next incumbent, Laurence Pithie, there is little that has not been said or written. He was Britain's first Master Greenkeeper, is a writer and lecturer on turfgrass management, a skilled; meticulous and above all essentially practical exponent of the art of greenkeeping. It has been suggested that Pithie is a tough act to follow!

It is my firm belief that following tough acts present no problem for Minchinhampton's new course manager, 35 year old Paul Worster, who has only very recently taken over the reins following Laurence's move to Candover Holdings. Far from it, Paul has all the skills imaginable not to be overshadowed by his formidable predecessor. He is articulate, immensely skilled in greenkeeping technology and has the distinct bonus of having 18 years practical experience culled entirely in local conditions within the county of Gloucestershire.

Paul began in the time-honoured way as an apprentice greenkeeper at Cirencester, rising through the ranks to become deputy head after just four years. He joined Lilley Brook in 1982 and soon took over from then pro-greenkeeper Forbes Hadden as their head greenkeeper. Lilley

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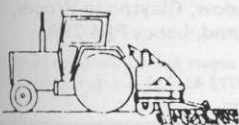
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## 'Being a golfer gives me a sympathetic insight into players' needs'

Brook under Paul's management was always the pride of Cheltenham and he now brings to Minchinhampton this same wealth of expertise, coupled with one unmistakable extra, a masterly touch with a golf club. Gloucester folk know him as a solid three handicapper and remember with affection his colt days when he was a force to be reckoned with in the Gloucester County Under 25s. There is little doubt he could have made the professional ranks as a player and he can certainly recall giddy moments (and a lower handicap) when contemporaries who are now touring pro's – the likes of Andrew Sherbourne and Gordon Brand Jnr. – often fell victim to his playing prowess. Further, Paul is the highly respected secretary of the BIGGA South West section, a burgeoning group of greenkeeping professionals that has grown from a mere handful to over 170 under his astute leadership.

In conversation with Paul I touched on the playing aspect of course management. "Being a golfer gives me a sympathetic insight into the needs of players" he declared, "a recognition of those often insignificant touches that make all the difference to the conclusion of a good round. One thing is certain, there will be few if any changes made with regard to the management regime instituted by Laurence, my job essentially will be a case of 'business as usual' in that respect, for what took place before was practical, sound husbandry. If anything, I guess my job will come down to a little fine-tuning, but even that will only come in the light of what I might find".

We talked about the differences between Lilley Brook, a course with a heavy clay subsoil, and that of Minchinhampton, which is constructed directly upon a carpet of Cotswold limestone. Paul explained: "to understand the principal differences, Lilley Brook is heavy in winter and comprises bent and *Poa annua*, whereas here water runs straight through to the limestone brash, which is like a blotting pad. The grass here is a mixture of fescue and *Poa annua*, for bent grass



does not grow well where a high pH (in the region of 7.5 – 8.00) prevails. You could say that greenkeeping at Minchinhampton is almost at subsistence level – a most careful and economical use of fertilisers – as it is so easy to tip the balance away from fescue and toward *Poa*. The greens were constructed with local sand and top soil and this is rather gritty in nature. This causes somewhat shallow rooting of both active species and as a result water is vital in maintaining growth. Perhaps one priority might be to improve our irrigation system- which appears to need upgrading – and certainly we need to increase water availability. We have a borehole, though this doesn't meet even current demand and thus we need more storage. When mains water is called-for to fill storage tanks it deprives the clubhouse, so in the main it's a non-starter.

Paul Worster, left, and the Minchinhampton team



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## 'If there is one trick worth repeating, it is to leave plenty of grass cover going into winter'

Plans are afoot to build an irrigation lake and work will commence this winter. This will be topped-up from the borehole and thus provide a buffer or reservoir. Though it will serve both courses, this is a separate undertaking rather than being part of the new construction. Digging it will be a problem, for with limestone below; anything over six feet in depth will need Semtex explosives rather than a digger – so it will probably end up being large and fairly shallow”.

The new course is certainly high, wide and handsome, but there remains one insuperable problem: lack of soil depth. Minchinhampton has a top soil cover of just 3”-4” and is brashy (gritty and abrasive) by nature. Growth is further impoverished by virtue of the high pH value and drought on this -indeed any- hilltop site can be a constant worry. Gazing upon the course in late July, at a time when rain had fallen abundantly over several days and where fairways looked green and lush, one could be forgiven for overlooking that this was an area bleached near white by sun and lack of moisture just a month previously. The recuperative power of

grass remains one of nature’s miracles.

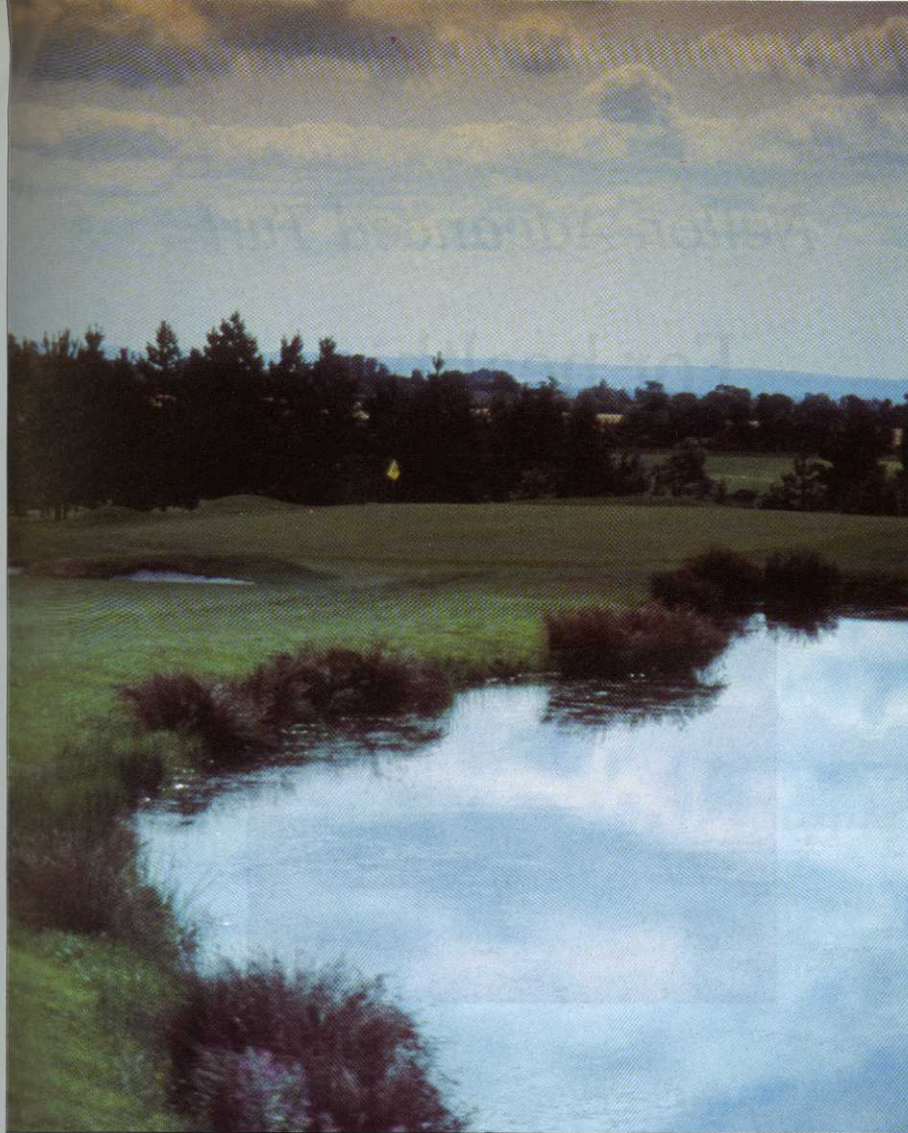
Talking of his upcoming autumn maintenance programme, Paul began by stating: “if there is one trick worth repeating, it is to leave plenty of grass cover going into winter. The greens have never been cut below 3/16” and there is no thatch at all – anywhere. This is largely down to the nature of the soil. In addition, groomers on greens mowers take care of any lateral growth”.

Moving into autumn sees the beginning of a well-established maintenance programme which is based around regular aeration. Assuming the ground is not too dry, Paul will begin the onset of winter and the slow-down of growth by both solid tining on fairways and making a single pass with a Varicore hollow corer on all greens and tees. Two weeks are written into the schedule for this activity and the Vari-core will be set at 3” spacings and core to a depth of five inches. There can be no aeration of green surrounded, for the brush is too close to the surface, further compounded by irrigation pipes that also are too close (sometimes as near as 3”) to allow such luxuries.

Coring completed, the greens will be dressed with a seaweed/meal supplement, overseeded with a fescue mix and finally top dressed with an 80%-20% dressing. In addition, some four fairways are dressed each year with a sand/peat mix, essentially to aid in gradually improving the depth of the growing medium. Uncommonly, a problem peculiar to Minchinhampton greens is the original construction material. This comprises a very angular grit mixed with local top-soil and has an impacting effect which severs roots when







**'Trees abound on the course, planned and planted in light copses in order that they might both encourage and protect each other in the poor soil'**

pressure is applied. This results in turf that is prone to shallow rooting, quickly effected by drought and prone to wear more than most. Many greens are of the upturned saucer variety: high in the middle and shedding towards the outer perimeter. These can effect irrigation, with run-off a constant worry. They can also effect less than 100% perfect golf shots – an apparently fine shot often finding a greenside bunker – and there are some members who view such saucer shapes as bordering on the unfair. Perhaps, one feels, there may be a reasoned case for some uplifting in the future?

Trees abound on the course, planned and planted in tight copses in order that they might both encourage and protect each other in the poor soil. The time has come to thin such plantations and it is apparent that in some places some species have struggled to grow at all. Trees always struggle on hilltop sites and Minchinhampton is no exception. Paul plans to do some selective culling during the winter and to further encourage further growth of the more healthy specimens by feeding with a proprietary slow-release. He is loath to upset nature's balance and feels that concentration on native species will bring the greatest rewards, though it must be observed that Scots Pines appear to have gained the upper hand.

The course is maintained by just six staff, one a full time mechanic, and the machinery stable is adequate rather than overly high-tec. The plan is to hold off from any machinery replacements until the second 18 holes are on stream. Then the current machinery – or some of it – will be utilised on the fresh, almost certainly stony and undoubtedly inhospitable acres, safe in the knowledge that brand-new tracks hammer the living daylight out of machinery. That stated, the Club have always believed that money spent on the course is money well spent and are equally adamant that maintenance should be left to the absolute discretion of the course manager – they practice great wisdom in hiring a professional and leaving him to it – would that more might follow the same rationale.

Paul reports directly to the green chairman via the secretary and thence to the Club chairman. He will sit in on green committee meetings, which mercifully meet just twice yearly. It speaks for efficiency that the last meeting expired after just 57 minutes! "Bet-

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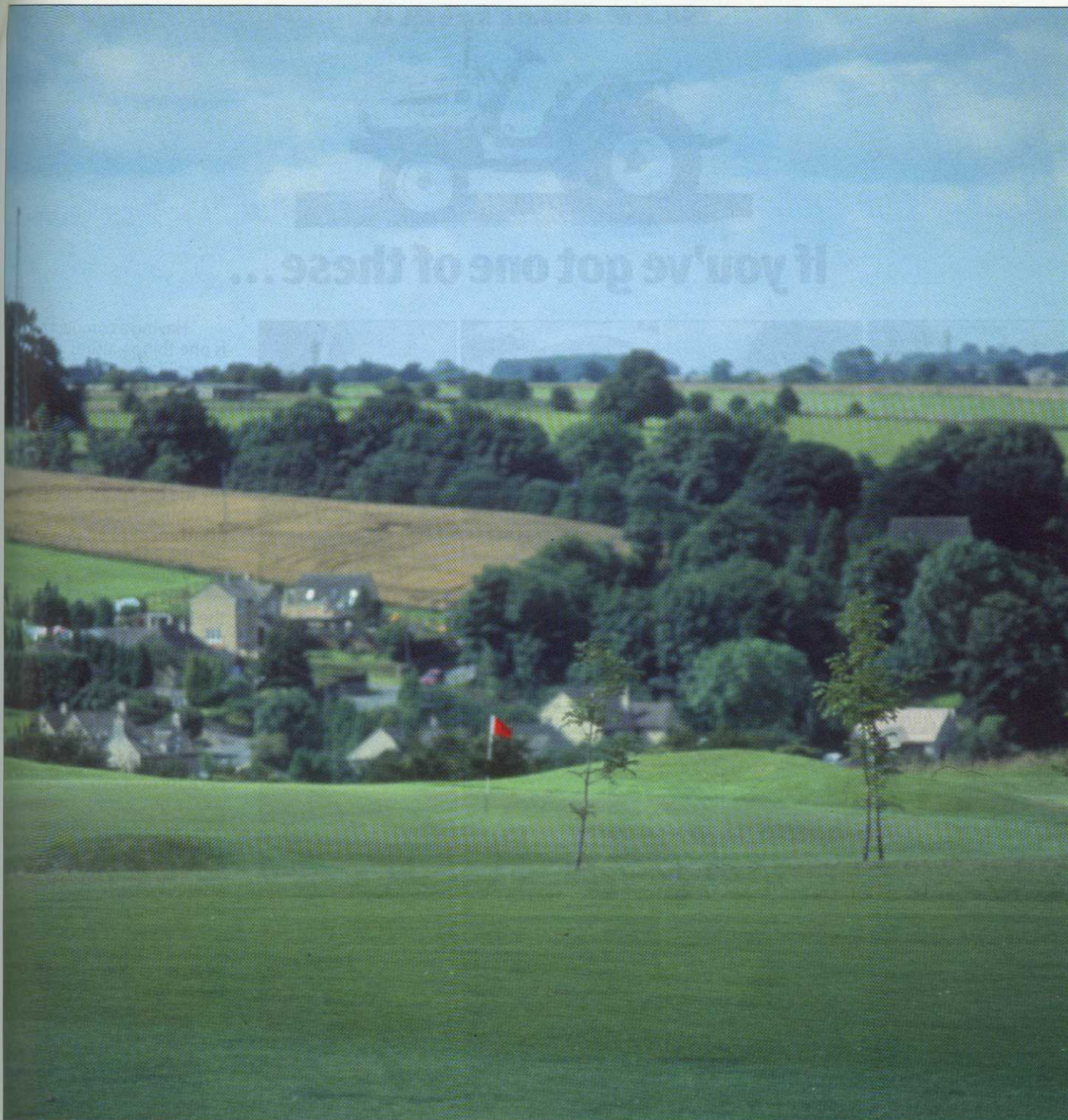


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## 'The course remains in the most expert of hands'



ter than two hours once a month" Paul wryly observed. I cannot resist relating an amusing end to my visit. Sitting in the bar alone after my meeting with Paul, I couldn't fail to overhear snippets of conversation. The talk, almost inevitably, was of 'when I was captain', or 'when I served on the green committee' etc. "Have you met the new greenkeeper?" one asked. "No", replied another, "but I bet he'll keep a low profile for a few months at least, I know I would". The talk centred around Paul and one wag observed that he (Paul) had thoroughly beaten a committee member at golf before being given the job! "He's following a tough act" was the consensus of opinion and I had to bite my tongue not to interject. I desperately wanted to urge them to seek out their new course manager, to grasp him warmly by the hand and thank him for continuing to provide the first rate playing surfaces they have come to expect. The good members of Minchinhampton may indeed rest easy: their course remains in the most expert of hands.

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