

# Flying Divots

**Farewell to the boom and hello to doom and gloom? Not so, says ecologist DAVID STUBBS, who argues that despite recession and clampdowns, obstacles can be overcome and there are grounds for genuine optimism**

■ Noting that greenkeepers often have different views on what makes a golf course great, especially when making comparison with those who do no more than play the game, Greenkeeper International invites members to send in their own personal 'top ten', with reasons for their choice. Given sufficient participation, individual listings will be published on a monthly basis, with a final aggregate 'greenkeepers top thirty' listed at the end of 1993.

■ The previous system of fixing abstraction charges, where ten different regions of the National Rivers Authority all used different methods of charging, has been changed with effect from 1 April. Now such charges will be on a national basis, effectively levelling out charges so that some customers may end up paying more and some less. In the end it is declared that the new system will be fairer all round – and easy to understand! In effect, the new charges for 93/94 will see a rise over the 92/93 total of 1.7 per cent.

■ Today technical expertise in turf grass maintenance comes from all directions. Yet with the high cost of specialised machinery and materials there is an apparent vital need for a simple and workable system of combining planning, monitoring and recording. With the dynamic nature of turf grass, there is a need for a continued appraisal of response to wear, site limitations and treatments applied.

Consulting agronomist Gordon Jaaback, with the financial support and marketing expertise of Rolawn, has developed a simple visual system that will create interest, spark discussion and pinpoint the full picture in a sports turf maintenance programme. Full details of this free system were not available as we went to press, but will appear in next month's issue.

■ Greenkeepers' ideas are worth pounds! This magazine is eager to promote greater reader participation in its editorial output and is looking for YOUR good ideas. Any feature-length idea will be worth £15\*, each picture that is published: £5\*. In one or two hundred words tell us what you did, why you did it, how, when, where and the results – including money or time saved and simple guidelines for others to implement such techniques. We'll need to know if the idea conforms to good practice with regard to health and safety, the type of course (links, heathland, parkland), and the prevalent soil structure, natural or otherwise. Finally, if the idea is one that has been passed down over the years, we'd like to know who to credit.

You don't need to be a journalist, we'll see to it that your good ideas are turned into good copy.

Write to the editor, 13 Firlie Close, Seaford, East Sussex BN25 2HL. Decisions to publish will be based on originality, appeal and merit.

\* Paid on publication.

Due to BT's continuing digitisation programme, BIGGA HQ's telephone numbers have changed.

Telephone numbers are now:

**0347 838581**

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and the fax number is now:

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**T**he twin perils of economic recession and tighter environmental controls have given the golf development industry much cause for thought. Gone are the heady, optimistic days of the recent boom period but nor is it all doom and gloom. While a few spectacular failures make the headlines, a good number of new courses have come on stream and will doubtless become successful ventures. Evidence of plenty of unmet demand yet to be tapped, coupled with the increasing difficulties faced by rural landowners and continued emphasis on land use diversification, suggests there is life in golf course development for a good few years to come.

What has to change is the methodology. Traditionally the emphasis has been on design and this has led the way on most projects. However this has some fundamental flaws which are being exposed in the new circumstances of the late 20th Century. Crudely put, golf development needs more science and less art. Boring perhaps but the bottom line is that golf projects must pay and this leaves little room for sentiment.

Good design will always be a vital aspect of golf but it is just one component of an increasingly complex process. Environmental and technical deficiencies may ultimately pose more serious and costly problems.

On the environmental side, the combination of public pressure and conservation lobbying has influenced the planning climate to such an extent that projects have to be presented in a much more studied and detailed manner if they are to be at all acceptable. This is no bad thing, it promotes a more responsible and site responsive approach to development which has been lacking in the past. But the golf world has been slow to appreciate the value of using the environment as an indispensable ally rather than a constraint to conquer.

One important effect has been a strong curb on the grandiose projects with associated real estate development. Such schemes are now rarely acceptable on attractive green field sites and market conditions have further put on a brake. This means that golf itself has to pay its way, unsubsidised by houses and hotel profits. Environmentally acceptable golf course sites tend to be concentrated on low grade urban fringe farmland and these are the target sites for pay and play developments. Here the premium is on low development costs and efficient management, not on big name designers and championship style marketing hype.

These dual environmental and economic pressures acting on golf course development in turn impose a rethink on

## 1 Tougher planning constraints



## 2 Technically difficult sites



## 3 Tighter financial margins



technical matters. Low grade urban fringe farmland is not the most suitable land from a pure golfing point of view but it is what we have to work with. Modern technology may have the potential for converting virtually any site to golfing land but this comes at a price.

Capping off a landfill with a golf course is one viable route, since the landfill profits easily cover the golf course construction costs (the site would have to be made good anyway) and golf provides a profitable end use with virtually instant returns. What's more, the design is likely to be less constrained, while site restoration offers long-term environmental benefits. The snag is of course that there is a limited number of such sites suitable and available for golf, while getting a landfill licence on a new site is even harder than getting permission for golf.

In general therefore, the modern golf course developer has to contend with the triple difficulties of tougher planning constraints, technically difficult sites and tighter financial margins. In theory this ought to elevate the importance of course managers and greenkeepers in the development process since it would be insane to press ahead with a project which has serious flaws which would lead to major, costly repairs and/or management difficulties.

However, it has not been fashionable to worry about soils, drainage, irrigation,