

Just when things start to go right... something always goes wrong. Take comfort from Murphy's Law in the knowledge that other greenkeepers too are having their problems.

If you're managing a golf course under unusual or particularly trying conditions, Greenkeeper International would like to hear from you.

Drop a line to the editor. Meanwhile, sit back, read on - and realise you're not on your own...

You think you've got problems..?

Run, rabbit, run

Wind, rabbits and a severe lack of water are the three principal difficulties facing John Phillips, who single-handedly looks after the nine hole St David's City golf course in Dyfed, west Wales. If those three handicaps are not enough, the sight of small mounds of finely excavated soil on the fifth tee reminds John of a fourth problem which appears regularly at random around the course.

"Moles simply come and go as they please," he points out. "I've tried most deterrents but they just pop up again somewhere else, usually in the middle of a green or a tee. I'd welcome advice from other greenkeepers who have managed to get rid of moles."

Founded in 1902, St David's City Golf Club has the dubious distinction of being the most westerly course in Wales. Situated within the

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, it enjoys spectacular views over Whitesands Bay towards Ramsey Island, while being directly exposed to the prevailing south-westerly winds which sweep up St George's Channel from the Atlantic Ocean. And therein lies the greenkeeper's main problem.

"There's rarely a day when the wind doesn't blow," comments John. "This causes erosion, difficulty with establishing new grasses and rapid drying out of the turf." The last-mentioned point is compounded by the fact that there is no irrigation on the course. As a result, John spends much of the summer carting water from a nearby well to each of his nine greens. Using a second-hand farm vacuum tanker of 1000 gallons capacity, water is sucked out of the well, carried to the green and forced out over a 30 yard arc via a hand-held hose and spray nozzle.

"The level of the well means that I am limited to about 500 gallons per green, applied every other day during the worst summer dry periods," he explains. "I would like to water more often, but we simply do not

have the supplies available." Water did dry up in 1990, so the greens were left to fend for themselves. Fortunately, the rain came before all the grass had died away. Being built entirely on sand, there is little moisture retention within the turf. This, reasons John, is not necessarily a bad thing: "The grasses that do grow are of very fine quality and extremely hardy," he explains. "Furthermore, in the 12 years that I've been here, the course has never had to close due to poor surface or weather conditions. Even when it snows, the combination of wind and fine, close turf prevents it from setting."

The one problem which gives John the biggest headache of all can be seen on and alongside all nine fairways on the course. Rabbit holes litter the ground like mini bomb craters creating hazards for golfers and the mower alike. "We are under attack by rabbits on three sides," comments John. "Their digging regularly results in lost balls and impossible lies. It also means that some part of the course is always under repair."

Lack of funds has kept the lid on



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John Phillips examines freshly-made mole hills in the middle of the fifth tee at St David's City golf club

machinery investment over the years. As a result, fairways are mown with an elderly set of standard trailed gangs which tend to scalp the undulating turf, further encouraging erosion and rabbit attack. "We desperately need a twin-roll floating head machine to limit the scalping," says John. "My second investment priority is for pumped irrigation to every green." However, with just 120 members and a major reliance on visiting golfers during the summer, it looks as if John could be hand watering the greens on this beautiful, yet remote gem of a course for a few more years to come.

Common as muck...

The approach of spring is viewed with more than a little trepidation by the two greenkeepers responsible for Minchinhampton Golf Club's Old Course, near Stroud in Gloucestershire. For Derek Hankins and his assistant Lionel Creed, D-day is an annual event, marked by an invasion which leaves the ground looking not unlike the Normandy beaches in places. The critical date is 13 May – the day each year that grazing is permitted once again on the common land on which the famous old course is situated.

"It's like a rodeo here during the middle of May," commented Derek. "Can you picture the scene? Up to 500 head of cattle arrive on the common from their winter quarters and see all the fresh, lush grass just aching to be eaten." The regulations concerning the use of the common, of which some 100 acres are leased by the club from the National Trust, state that only the fairways, tees and greens can be cut. The length of the grass, however, has no bearing whatsoever on where the cattle go or where they sleep, excrete and urinate. As a result, the first three hours every morning from 14 May through to late October see Derek and Lionel setting off in different directions around the 18 hole course. Shovel and switch in hand, they remove droppings deposited on the turf the previous day and night, placing them carefully in the rough and semi-rough.

Any thought of using them on the vegetable or rose garden cannot be entertained because the rules state that no manure can be removed from the common. When the piles of droppings get too large, they are spread far and wide by chain harrow. As a result, the grass and the grazing are, in Derek's words, 'absolutely fabulous'. Minchinhampton's Old Course has shared the common with livestock for close to 100 years, so golfers have become quite used to carefully lifting and replacing the ball on the fairways and greens' approaches.

One aspect of the National Trust's regulations on which Derek would appreciate a little greater flexibility concerns the fencing of the greens. "Under the bye-laws, we cannot fence any green without the permission of the land owner," he explained. "At the moment, we have



Derek Hankins, left and Lionel Creed remove horse droppings from the ninth green on the Minchinhampton Old Course

temporary fences around six greens, and these are only permitted after damage has been caused to the turf and repair is necessary. "It really is heart-breaking to mow a green only to see a horse or cow running or urinating on it minutes later."

The effect of urine on fine turf is devastating. "The grass is dead within a couple of days," said Derek. Hoof marks are easier to deal with, but it all takes time. Ask Derek how many days Lionel and himself spend each week on pure greenkeeping and his answer is "about two". The rest of the time is spent clearing, cleaning and repairing the turf.

Grazing cattle and horses are not the only headache faced on Minchinhampton Common.

Because the land is open for the enjoyment of the public on foot or horseback at all times for recreational purposes, the two greenkeepers have a number of other regular problems to deal with. It is not uncommon to see riders direct their steeds straight across a green, while summer weekends would try the patience of the most mild tempered person.

Car loads of picnickers, dog walkers, kite-flyers and 'nature' lovers descend on the common to take in the delights of this corner of the Cotswolds. However, their appreciation of golf and the greenkeeper's skills varies greatly. "I've chased games of cricket and tennis off the greens," pointed out Derek. "And at night, the joy riders appear. One green was churned up recently three times in a week by a car or motor bike."

In spite of all the aggravation, Derek and Lionel derive great satisfaction from the fact that they manage to keep the course in excellent condition for much of the year. The results of their efforts are highlighted by the club's 600-strong membership and a 12 month waiting list, proving that golf on the unique and totally natural Old Course at Minchinhampton has never been more popular.

Wired for defence

Two hawthorn hedges, a water-filled ditch and two wire fences topped with barbed wire have not proved a sufficient deterrent for trespassers wanting to get onto Wall-sall Golf Club's 120 rolling parkland acres. So, with full police permission, course manager, Steve Wood, has installed 'razor barb' wire in the most vulnerable areas within the southern perimeter of this picturesque wooded course, situated just three minutes from the M6 motorway and less than eight miles from Birmingham city centre.



Steve Wood with 'razor barb' wire

"The most common problem is ball theft after a golfer has driven on the 465 yard fifth hole," explained Steve. "However, much more serious is the vandalism caused to the greens and tees, with flags and markers stolen or broken. The irrigation equipment is also a prime target. In the past few years we have had to replace or repair sprinkler heads, control valves and solenoids to the tune of £4000, and that's no laughing matter."

Maintaining the security fence on the remote south side of the course takes one man eight hours a week during the summer. And even the 'razor barb' has not produced an entry proof barrier. Despite being made from high tensile steel, it can be cut neatly and quickly using bolt

cutters by anyone determined enough to want to gain entry. "The police have said they are powerless to prevent people breaking in," commented Steve Wood. "We'll simply have to persevere with our fencing systems."

Another time consuming task, adding at least an hour to the normal daily work routine around the 18 hole course, is the repair of bunkers and the surrounding turf following the ravages of foxes and their cubs. There are about ten pairs of foxes living on or close to the course and Steve said that the scene resembled a zoo in the early mornings. The biggest problem is caused by digging in the faces of the bunkers, with holes often appearing on the green's apron or even the putting surface itself.

"Repair is carried out by filling the holes with the excavated soil or sand," explained Steve. "However, the sand is often contaminated and will require changing to maintain the correct particle size. Foxes can create a lot of mess and damage." Control is difficult in an area surrounded by housing as many of the local people like to encourage the foxes, leaving food out for them at night. As a result, the preferred control method is by trap, releasing the caged animal in the countryside away from Birmingham. Early Sunday morning shoots have been arranged, but these have to be finished by the time the first golfers appear and also produce protests from the club's animal-loving neighbours.

Apart from controlling unwanted humans and creatures, the other major problem faced by Steve is the level of grass growth on the course during the spring and summer months. "If we don't cut the fairways every day, the grass becomes virtually uncuttable and the ball unplayable," he commented. "As it is, we have to brush the turf before mowing if it's at all wet from dew or rain." This action helps the grass both stand up and dry out, improving the throw from the mower and minimising the risk of clumps of wet, freshly-cut grass dropping onto the turf. The reason for the phenomenal growth is a subsoil of dense, yellow clay which holds the water and makes the course 'a real picture' during even very dry summers.

Of course, it's a different story in the winter and Steve and his five assistants have to plan their work accordingly. Although extensive drainage has been carried out on all fairways, the subsoil takes a long time to dry out, especially after extensive rainfall. This produces soft surfaces which cannot take heavy equipment without marking. "Construction work, aeration and many other turf jobs need to be completed by November or we face having to wait until the spring," pointed out Steve. "However, I'm sure there are many courses which could do with the water we've got, so I'm not complaining. It's all part of the joys of greenkeeping."

Michael Bird