

If it's Wednesday, this must be Belgium...

DAVID WHITE travels Europe with Ransomes

We're cruising the Autobahn, Germany's main artery, my life in Andrew's hands, speedo flickering 90. Low-flying Merc's, Beamer's and Porsches zoom past so swiftly we might almost be standing still, the impression given that 90 is snail-pace slow. It's not unlike the M25 on Friday afternoon, but speeded up like an old Mack Sennett cops and robbers movie! Returning from a five day, four country invasion, a fact-finding jaunt for me and just another routine week of selling for Andrew Sunaway, who is the international sales manager for Ransomes, we are trying to make the Dutch ferry before nightfall – and he is quizzing me.

'How did your interviews go', he asks, 'what line will you take with your story on Belgium, how will you describe your impressions of Denmark, will you include that guy we had dinner with last night in your story, wasn't he fantastic?'. Come off it, Andrew, don't ask me such things, I can rarely visualise a story until I've agonised over it, won't recognise the end until I get there.

Well okay, let's first look at Belgium, which, if my memory serves me, was on Wednesday? It's a country that holds good memories for me, having lived and raced there in the '60s. I'd forgotten how nifty Belgium could be, found myself floating in a reverie – it was always a good place to live and the natives are still as charming as ever.

Belgium, as I recall, is famous for Hercule Poirot, Django Reinhardt, Brussels lace, world-class racing cyclists, addictive chocolates and mind-destroying beer. However, I remember no nationalist banner-waving or claims to fame where golf was concerned. Right, it's established I know nothing of golf in Belgium, but it doesn't matter, Danny Verbeke will put me wise.

Danny Verbeke, urbane, perfect exponent of



Krist Calmeyn, head greenkeeper at Palingbeek: position invites respect and he gets it

the English tongue and – a bonus – the keenest of golfers, is one of three brothers. Their business, A Verbeke & Zonen N.V., is of the select few that have earned the Belgian Royal Warrant, seen throughout the country as a commitment to service above the norm. The Verbeke group, a diverse company employing about 100, is divided into three sectors, consumer; playground equipment and professional, with the professional side masterminded by Danny. The company was founded some 89 years ago by grandfather Verbeke, the old man forging the Belgian link with Ransomes as long ago as World War One, thus making their combined business connection the longest established in all of Europe. They distribute Ransomes professional machinery throughout the whole of Belgium, Luxembourg and parts of northern France. Outside of North America, they are Ransomes' largest distributors.

The Verbeke company, I learned, is in a unique position, for they have over 200 dealers – it seems as though every village in Belgium offers something from their huge product range. Whether golf orientated or not, these dealers are the eyes and ears of the par-

ent company: nothing escapes them and every new business opportunity is followed up with swift efficiency. In addition Verbeke have their own retail stores, thus enjoying a network that is hard to fault. With offices in northern France and Belgium serving the professional division, and with a sales force of six to cover an area not dissimilar to Wales, they can reach every client (and get back) in the same day – three hours at most to the farthest point.

Danny explained there are just 56 golf courses in Belgium and Verbeke's are in

contact with every one, plus all five located in Luxembourg and 25 more in northern France. The company lay claim to a giant share of the total Belgian golf market – between 66% and 75% – and without elaborating, I fancy the company's trading rule, that every end user of capital equipment purchased must be given a thorough course of instruction, has a lot to do with it. Be they operator or mechanic, they come automatically to be trained by Verbeke's own professional service manager – which gives users a closer feeling for the machinery and instils into them an affection for their charges. It is altogether a praiseworthy philosophy, and it works! Twelve such courses are held each winter, all hugely popular with the greenkeeping fraternity.

Professionalism, however, is not confined to the sale and servicing of machinery alone, as I discovered when Danny took me to one of Belgium's newest golf courses, the G&CC de Palingbeek, open just one year. At this club, as indeed at most others, Danny Verbeke is simply a good friend. As like as not when he visits, the fat cats will gather for luncheon: president, green chairman, captain, head greenkeeper and D J Verbeke. A little wine, a little food –



War graves at Palingbeek: final resting place for several hundred British soldiers. Inset: a German World War I pillbox, now a feature of the golf course



between them the world can so easily be set to rights.

The Belgians have yet to adopt the pomposity of golf, prevalent elsewhere and especially so in nearby France, as a snob game. Golf in Belgium is still a 'young game' (only ten clubs were instituted between 1888 and 1939) and the greater proportion (39 clubs) were built in the '80s and '90s, Belgians simply get on with the job of being golfers, without the lunacy of 'crass class'. As an example, Krist Calmeyn, Palingbeek's head greenkeeper, is fully integrated, with all relevant decisions on purchasing or policy being made through his guiding the committee, rather than by his being guiding by them. Democratically, any questions the green chairman cares to pose are provided in writing before any meeting, likewise if Krist has questions, they also are put in writing before such a meeting takes place. Krist is as much at home inside the clubhouse as the president, he invites respect, and gets it. Incidentally, Palingbeek's delightful president, Carl Vanbiervliet, is a non-golfer, elected (though he has numerous other qualities), specifically for this reason – to ensure that golfing techno-babble forms no part of his domain.

The G&CC de Palingbeek, near Ypres, is an evocative place reeking of history, located upon a Great War battlefield that echoed once to the sound of exploding shells, of men dying and of too much blood spilled by too many unsung heroes. Excavated, the course revealed remnants of cannon and mortar (some still primed) and there are still reminders of the futility of war for all to see, here an old German pill box that is now a course hazard, there an overgrown track cut deep by gun carriage wheels. It is peaceful now, though lest any should forget, a military cemetery lies hard by the ninth green, a Union Jack flying to remind of the countless thousands who perished...

What of Palingbeek as a golf course, a test of mettle? Well, its designer, 72 years old Harold Baker, has used the land imaginatively without shifting huge quantities of earth, making it no



Danny Verbeke

'...it seems as though every village in Belgium offers something from their huge product range'

push-over. It looks natural and belies its youth. Though I personally don't much care for water features, the natural lakes (not excavated) at holes 3, 10, 16 and 18 serve to enhance rather than inhibit – and of course they're valuable sources of irrigation water. The fairways flow nicely and the greens still show a goodly percentage of the Pennlinks sown some two years back. Krist is fortunate in having a stable of fine modern equipment – unsurprisingly, predominantly Ransomes – and he has an empathy for the machinery which suggests Verbeke's have worked their magic.

It's interesting to note that many of Belgium's new courses have been built on traditional lines, natural enough – almost typically British – yet with a high predominance of American method: countless pure sand greens sown with Penncross or Pennlinks. Time will tell, but I doubt that too much Penncross will survive more than a few years – and what of the high cost of maintaining such strains?

Problems? Krist indicates there are not too many yet, though rabbits are a real pest and the surrounding woodlands (a nature conserve) are just too huge to encircle with wire netting – they shoot and trap and numbers are being contained. For agronomic advice he calls the BASF advisory service – which is indepen-

dent of the parent company – though we both chuckle when I ask him which fertilisers he uses. 'Can't you guess', he replies.

The Belgian Greenkeepers Association is small but flourishing, Krist attends most meetings and they entertain speakers from Belgium, France, Holland and, occasionally, Britain. Belgian greenkeepers are, it seems, teaching each other and are at their best when bouncing ideas back and forth: problem shared equals problem halved – or even solved.

Is it so different from Britain? Well the democracy factor is refreshing and is something from which we all might learn. The original 14 industrialists who conceived the idea for a country club at Ypres – the nearest before was 40 kilometres away – have certainly got the act rolling along prettily. Such is Palingbeek's attraction that the Belgian PGA plan soon to establish Palingbeek as their headquarters. The golf offered is of a high standard whilst the club's culinary standards are of such quality that 'Golf & Gastronomie' mini-breaks are hugely popular. If all else failed (and it is unlikely so to do), glorious food will always get my vote.

Machinery in the Palingbeek stable

- 1- Cushman Turf Truckster
- 1- Top dresser
- 1- Quick aerator
- 1- Ransomes Super Certes
- 1- Ransomes 1800 D
- 1- Ransomes 213 D
- 1- Ransomes GT Greens Classic
- 1- Ransomes GT Champion
- 1- Super Rake
- 1- Mataway + overseeder
- 1- J R Sodcutter
- 1- Greensaire GA 30
- 1- MF tractor
- 1- Kubota tractor
- 1- Vertidrain