

TALKING HEADS

Heard it before?

Blaming greenkeepers and the state of the course for a bad round is one of the oldest excuses in the book, says Steve Isaac, the STRI's Scottish regional agronomist

Tired of listening to complaints that the greens are bumpy this spring? That there seems to be a lot of disease about this autumn? It's only a case of what the medical profession term "golfer's amnesia" flaring up again.

The greens are always bumpy in the spring, it's the variable growth rates of the different grasses you know. The greens are always scarred in the autumn, being annual meadow-grass and the weather favouring fusarium there ain't much I can do about it, guv. In one ear and out of the other. You can put money on the same moans coming at exactly the same time of year. Has the golfing boom brought a plethora of unenlightened golfers onto our courses or do they just like raising the greenkeeper's hackles?

It may come as no surprise to learn that the golfing fraternity has always had its benighted element and although the contents of this article may do nothing to lighten the load when the annual tirade is upon you, it may at least prove of some comfort that your forebears suffered just as much.

The history of golf is littered with little gems of banality, focused not just on course condition and the supposed incompetence of the greenkeeper but on every aspect of the game. The written word is a major source of such platitudes with no better source than the renowned golf journalist, Bernard Darwin, a good golfer in his day too.

Although any reference to the condition of golf courses by golfers has to be taken with some caution, the descriptions from Darwin do give some indication of how golf course maintenance and presentation has improved over the years. During the 1890s Darwin received a letter from his father who had been visiting some links, other than his home course, where "the lies are so good that I think a professional could take his

driver anywhere."

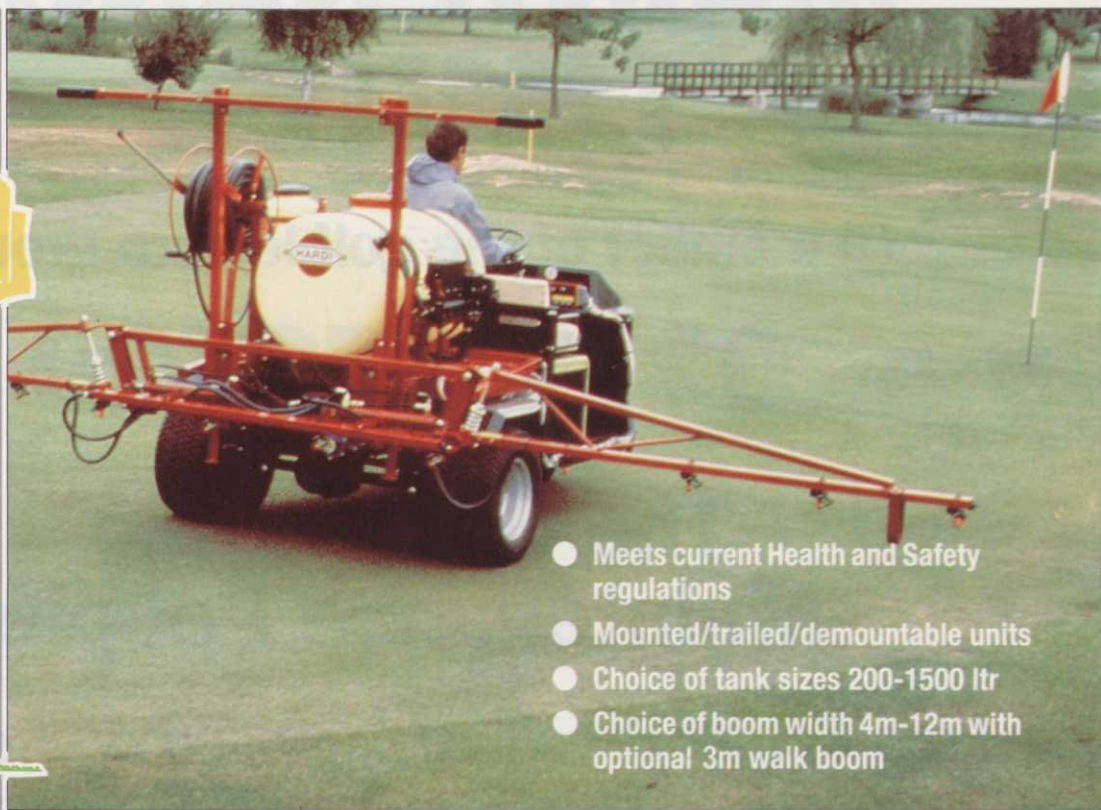
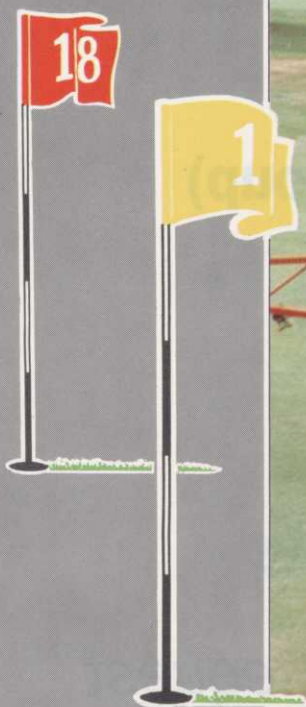
The insistence on the quality of lies was considered a mute point by Darwin who was writing in the 1930s when a good lie was regarded as a right. In an article on St Andrews, written in 1934, he remembers a time long past when one remarked "I've got a good lie", whereas by that era of high-tech maintenance equipment one only commented on a bad lie! Times have obviously changed little since the 1930s in this respect, though with much busier courses complaints of a poor lie may be more frequently heard, particularly where, as seems increasingly the case, poor golfing etiquette is commonplace.

From the same era it is reported that a distinguished professional, whilst playing in a tournament on a well known links, remarked that he could not see which was fairway and which was putting green. The comment was intended as criticism that the green was not distinct from its surrounds but Darwin praised the fine texture and naturalness of the links turf that caused the fairway to melt into the green. The attitude of the professional

would, I am sure, be mirrored by the majority of today's golfers, whatever their standard of play. If everything isn't in a contrasting stripe and clearly defined from rough, through semi, fairway, surround and fringe before one sees the green then there is something seriously amiss with the man looking after the course. If only we could follow Darwin's example, especially on links and heathland courses where nature has carved out the golfing territory, then the golf course would be a much more environmentally friendly character, and far easier to maintain.

Support for this view comes from a rather unexpected source, the top American professional Bobby Jones who in 1926 compared the heavily watered American greens and artificial American courses to the naturalness of the British links with greens "watered only from the skies". Jones stressed the variable conditions of the links which "afford ample opportunity for the display of any strategic talent we may possess, and preserve in the most human of games that fascinating personal element which is its chief attraction."

Golfers of the present day would do well to heed these words before they throw the next tirade at the greenkeeper. There does seem to be far more emphasis these days on producing golf courses that favour the less-skilled golfer, holding greens and no impediment to a good lie and stance even into the semi rough, than encouraging the player to improve his game so that he can adapt to prevailing conditions. Yet, it has been known for professionals to make adverse comment on the condition of a true links that is in, by most accounts, good order. Darwin noted a distinguished professional of the era excusing his poor performance in the Open Championship with the quip "I can't play on these beastly seaside courses." One might dismiss the quote as misguided rancour **Continued on Page 62**



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spewed forth to hide embarrassment and frustration if it were not a sentiment that has been echoed time and again right up to the present day. If those having some mastery of the game express such opinion what chance the Rabbit accepting a need to change his game to suit conditions favouring pitch and run rather than the American influenced target golf?

Darwin comments that the greens in the 1880s "were nothing like so smooth and trim" as they had become by the 1930s. However, the turf was a cause for concern, true fine seaside turf, sometimes bare and sandy, wiped off the face of the links by feeding and treatment. Sound familiar? Up until the 1920s nutrition of sports turf was largely based on agricultural practices, using generous amounts of organic manures, mixed fertilisers and lime, although there was some awareness of the difference between agricultural and golfing needs.

Hall (1912) suggested that the use of potash manures be avoided on golf links and that lime or fertilisers containing lime, such as basic slag, be used with discretion. He then went on to recommend basic slag at 753 kg/ha with guano and superphosphate! The Rhode Island Experiment Station after 20 years research work that began in 1905 concluded for turf of bents and fescues that:

- nitrogen is the most important nutrient and should be applied as an acid-reacting fertiliser such as ammonium sulphate;
- acid soil conditions so produced are harmful to weed species but tolerated by fescues and bents;
- as a consequence of this "acid theory", the use of lime should be avoided;
- where there is sufficient potassium and phosphorus none should be applied, except in composts.

There have been notable cycles of greenkeeping since then when these basic principles have been followed or ignored, in the latter case universally to the detriment of turf quality.

Let us return to the writings of Darwin and his much belated report (by some 80 years) on a match at St Andrews in 1849 when Allan Robertson and Tom Morris met the two Dunns. Remarking on the high scores from what were great players of their day, Darwin highlights changes in the development of the course with the fourball of 1849 facing infinitely narrower fairways with gorse encroaching, all manner of indifferent lies and greens which were known for their different poor qualities; "one for its roughness, the next for its sandiness, the one often for its heather roots all over it."

The holes, unless freshly cut that day, were probably enlarged through the influence of foot traffic with uneven edges as there were no supporting cups in those days. It would be very interesting to have Darwin's comments on the quality of finish to greens, never mind the rest of the golf course, today in comparison to that of the 1930s. When one reads what golfers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had to contend with then today's player must be considered a most cosseted animal.

The principles of good design have changed little with time though around the turn of the 19th century there were still many sites onto which the architect could re-

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ate a course without major upheaval. Whilst staying with his cousin in North Devon, General Moncrieffe from St Andrews was taken for a stroll on Northam Burrows, where he remarked "Providence evidently designed this for a golf links." The site moulded the shape of the golf course and a year later the Westward Ho! links existed. This event took place in 1863 yet how often do we hear a similar tale being told by the golf course architects of today when they pronounce the opening of their latest masterpiece, many of whom have moved vast amounts of earth to produce their providential links?

Increasing popularity for golf necessitated a move inland, away from its true links origin to capitalise on the suburban masses. The vast majority of inland courses in the late 1800s were made on clay, "hard as a rock in summer and unspeakably squeulchy in winter", according to Darwin. I am sure this rings a bell with course managers and golfers alike, even on some courses built within the last 20 years. Sad to say, the quality of construction, in some instances, hasn't significantly improved.

How often do we hear of ludicrous sums of money being talked when discussing the cost of building and maintaining the modern golf course? Compare these multi-million budgets with advice given by B Radford in 1910 to a meeting of golfers planning to build their own course when entering into negotiations with the farmer for the land. Radford was concerned that the group were being unrealistic in their estimates for the cost of building the course and fee structure proposed to fund future maintenance. He suggested that a 9-hole course could not be developed from farmland and brought into play under an expenditure of £250! For a club with a membership of 200, possessing 18 holes, the subscription should be at least three guineas! It is perhaps indicative of the strange world in which we currently live that the cost of golf course construction and maintenance has risen beyond compare since then, yet green fees have remained in line with inflation!

Radford thought it curious that the largest and most exclusive clubs of the day, siting Hoylake, Westward Ho! and St Andrews, did not spend as much per year on the upkeep of the course as did some of the small Metropolitan clubs with 90 acres, referred to as a "worm's paradise". This is a truism today when we

appreciate the benefits of natural drainage and infertility in sustaining quality turf and cutting costs. Unfortunately, Radford saw this in a different light and suggested that the custodian of the seaside course required little skill but that on the heavier inland course the art of greenkeeping came to the fore. Managing any golf course requires skill if good playing conditions are to be presented, the necessary skills between the two sites may well differ, on the "worms paradise" the greatest artistry may be that shown with a sprayer or a course closed sign!

Club golf has become extremely, some may say excessively, competitive with many clubhouses losing atmosphere and clubs the camaraderie that used to bring people into the game. This is nothing new. As early as 1931, Darwin was lamenting that golf in the early 1880s was a much "cosier" game. With far fewer playing the game there was a fraternal sentiment to others walking the hallowed turf. Neither are golf booms anything novel to the latter half of this century.

The 1880s saw the first real boom in golfing numbers with social groups other than the "gentleman" taking up the sport. Originally few young people in England played the game but by the 1930s there were "boy golfers by the thousand." In the 80s Darwin recalls ladies having tea in the clubhouse and perhaps walking around the course but he had no recollection of ever seeing one play, yet by the 1930s even ladies were a not uncommon sight on the links. Lord Wellwood, posing as an enlightened man, welcomed ladies' links as "a kind of Jew's quarter". A comment to that effect these days would bring down the full wrath of the anti-racist and sexist lobbies, though an inference that may still echo around many a gents locker room!

Over the last 15 years, developments in golf equipment have added yards to the average golfers game. Yet not all have been seen as a benefit to the game nor looked upon kindly by those that govern the game either side of the Atlantic, remember the contention over "square grooves"? Such incidents are nothing new and in 1902 the introduction of the Haskell ball from the USA caused a furore amongst the British golfing traditionalists. Stalwarts of the gutty foresaw that the game of golf would be robbed of some of its finer points as the Haskell provided extra distance, likely to ruin the playing of the links of the day, but they were shouted down by the majority who had never hit a ball so far in all their lives. Do you sense a touch of *deja vu* when hearing commentators of our day bemoaning the length obtainable with graphite shafts, metal woods and two piece balls?

To allay the belief that the litany of excuses for poor play including everything other than a lack of skill of the golfer himself is not a modern-day phenomenon, a final reference from the archives of golf. However, though the golfer playing in the days of the Charleston and The Great Depression had more than just his handicap to contend with when out on the course, he had the grace to vent his frustration on disruptive influences other than the quality of greenkeeping. A 1924 publication states that the main excuse of the time for poor play was indigestion!

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