

Muck and magic aside...

One of the major changes I've seen in the last 14 years is in the quality of golf greenkeepers. The degree of professionalism has improved particularly over the last 10 years. I was Chairman of BIGGA's conference at Harrogate this year, and will again next, and I've been extremely pleased by the performance of greenkeepers in their ability to present themselves. I also sit on interview panels and the quality of candidates is now excellent compared with ten years ago. Much of the credit must to BIGGA and the training courses and seminars it holds. There is no doubt they are beneficial.

"The second big change concerns the amount of money golf clubs are prepared to spend on their course. When I first came they didn't buy much equipment or pay staff very well. That has all improved," said Dr Hayes who



Dr Peter Hayes, pictured, Director of the Sports Turf Research Institute at Bingley retires at the beginning of June after 14 years during which time he has presided over a period of unprecedented success for the Institute and witnessed many changes in the industry. Just before his departure he talked with Scott MacCallum.

has seen the turnover rise from £300,000 to £1.5million.

"Research work and new ideas are also better accepted but I'm disappointed at the number of greenkeepers who tend to still use "muck and magic" products which they think are a solution to all their ills.

"These products can all do the

most marvellous things – I even ask if they will restore my hair – but the problem is compounded because they don't just use one at a time, they put on two or three and can cause real problems."

He also has some bad tidings for a large number of clubs in the country which are looking at the need for major course surgery in the next few years.

"The time has come for a lot of golf clubs to dig up all 18 greens and put down something to a better specification. There could be four or five hundred inland courses which are getting to a stage that major reconstruction should be high on their list of priorities.

"The greens will not withstand the play that's expect of them. The clubs will have to work out whether to do it in three sixes or two nines, but it costs a lot of money."

Dr Hayes explained the reason why the courses have reached the crisis point.

"No-one used to play golf from November to April and the demand for winter golf was not there. Now the young people joining clubs want to play all the year round but the courses were just built with summer play in mind. They didn't expect hundreds of people trampling on them in winter.

The STRI's aims and objectives have been the same since the Institute was formed in 1929. It acts as advisors to golf clubs – currently over 1,200 in the UK, Ireland and continental Europe; general turf advisory service; research, education, consultation, golf course architecture, labora-

tory testing, construction and drainage consultancy and ecology.

Of these Dr Hayes has been responsible for introducing the architecture and the ecology departments and the others have all expanded. A total of 70% of the Institute's work revolves around golf.

"I'm most grateful to the R&A which has given us grants of roughly £50,000 a year for the past eight years to undertake research on various subjects. For example at the moment we are researching into earth worm biology and control and into root-zone mixes for new greens. The R&A has financed that.

"All our research work is published and is available to everyone, even our direct competitors," he added.

There have always been consultants competing for the same business as the STRI, but none of them can offer the same across the board expertise.

"We've got experts in turf disease in fact one of our rivals sends its turf diseases to us. We have a turf diseases lab, a soil chemistry lab and a soil physics lab. In addition we have specialists in the varieties of grasses and ecology. So all the expertise is here."

Another initiative introduced in the last few years has been the regionalisation of STRI agronomists.

"We have five and by the end of the year we will have three more in the London area. It allows us to build up a relationship with the clubs, cut down on travelling and react more quickly if there are any problems."

One of the main problems facing the industry, and the STRI's new Director, Dr Mike Canaway who moves into the hot seat from heading up the Institute's Research Division, is the increased threat of litigation. Everyone from suppliers, architects, consultants and contractors are going to have to be wary of the threat of legal action and insurance premiums are bound to go up.

But that won't concern Dr Hayes. He'll be back in Northern Ireland writing and enjoying his main hobby of photography.

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