

**Jack McMillan recalls the early years of his career when the stresses were more physical and compares it with now when the mental strains can be excessive.**

I came into greenkeeping by accident in 1946. I was leaving school and looking for a job when a vacancy arose at East Renfrewshire GC. Like so many before and after me, we all stayed long enough to become obsessed with the job.

Every aspect of the job then involved a demanding physical commitment. There was an element of physical drudgery in greenkeeping, which has left many greenkeepers of my generation with aches and pains in places they never knew they had.

We constructed a cut and fill tee at East Renfrewshire GC during the winter of 1946/47, one of the more severe winters I can remember. It involved physically digging with picks and shovels into the hillside, the cut material was thrown over the fill area until it was too far to throw, it was then wheeled forward into place by wheelbarrow, until the required level platform area for the tee had been created.

We can, with the available equipment, build and construct a new golf course from start to the finish in four or five months, without too much physical stress on those involved.

During this year's Harrogate show I met an old friend, a greenkeeper of my generation, and commented that he was looking well. His reply was that he may look all right on the outside but he very much doubted if he would pass his MOT.

The introduction of new technology in equipment, sophisticated irrigation systems and the pressure from the changing expectations of the golfer have all, I believe, changed greenkeeping into what could now be considered a stressful job. Golf course management has been identified in the US as being a high risk stress profession.

The pressures of the job are today much more demanding than ever before. With our ever changing way of life, travel and golf abroad, televised golf and heavier levels of play, comparisons will be made and very often they will be totally unreasonable and unfair.

There are levels of work related stress that I have always felt could be considered a healthy stimulant. However there are unfortunately levels that can make life painful. We have as an industry had more than our fair share of nervous breakdowns, heart attacks and sadly, has in some instances created enough tension to have caused suicide.

The greenkeeper is always going to be the recipient in the front line when it comes to complaints from angry golfers finding fault with the weather, bad tees shots, missed putts and the price of subscriptions.

This job also involves that most sensitive of all roles communicating with people. The



# 'More important

greenkeeper earns a living by having to communicate with some 500 "experts" who think they know more about his job than he does. The unfortunate circumstance in this situation is that they all have differing ideas on just how the job should be done.

Private members golf clubs adopt the attitude that each and every member and their guests are your employer, with all the power that entails. Making one of the more impor-

tant skills that has to be developed early in the job is that of tact and diplomacy.

The Course Manager is somewhere in between his own staff and the client/customer. To the green staff their employer is a faceless committee that they rarely, if ever, see. The Course Manager is normally the only continuity that most golf clubs have. Thankfully many of the enlightened clubs have taken the opportunity to prepare sensible on

going policy documents that can be excellent guidelines for ever changing committees.

I can remember in the 1960s going out with 16 committee members to look at a piece of available land that had been purchased to extend the golf course. It became evident that there were 16 differing ideas on how these holes should be laid out. The situation became so unmanageable that I was then instructed to find a good 3, 4 and 5 in the card and get started on the construction.

Greenkeeping could never be considered dull or boring it is the complete opposite of that.

Greenkeepers are inordinately proud of their golf course, most of them in my experience are workaholics and spend time on the job that far exceeds the length of day expected in other professions. There is always a machine to set up or repair, an irrigation leak to find and repair, you name it they will find something that requires their time. Very often sacrificing time that should be spent and shared with their families.

Talk to any young greenkeeper's wife, she knows when things are going well and more importantly she is well aware of the anguish when he is at the mercy of the extremes of weather. Something he has to live with but very often does not have the necessary resources to do anything about. She will no doubt tell you of meals missed, hurried meals, a reluctance to take holidays and very often work taken home.

better part of six months in the year. The level of play runs at about some ten thousand rounds of golf annually and they have climatic conditions that allow for year round growth. The budget provision, is I am sure, in line with that required for a Roll's Royce golf course.

The UK members are looking out onto a course that has a normal level of play somewhere in the region of at least 40,000 rounds, many I am sure a great deal more, and much of that played over seven months of dormancy when there is no recovery whatsoever from the ever increasing traffic.

Having been privileged to have visited Augusta National and been impressed with everything I saw and indeed pleased that the golf world can provide such excellent standards.

We are now seeing that quality and standard extended to similar projects here in the UK. "I would not however exactly call any of them working golf courses." They will however rightly or wrongly become the benchmark for judging standards of excellence.

I recently was taken to task by a very fine young Course Manager for suggesting that a golf course with a generous budget, limited level of play, (9,000 rounds per year) and a staffing level and equipment provision that compares with the best was only an ornament.

He also informed me that if it was considered necessary they would close the course for the winter months, or at least ensure very lim-

budget, levels of play and more important the level of winter play. The increased traffic over the winter months can be a major area of concern for greenkeepers. It is however an occupational hazard we have to live with.

One of the joys of playing golf is the diversity in the types of course we have – they all vary in character and they all deal with the problems of traffic and the extremes of weather differently. They will however still be compared one to the other.

The role of the Course Manager has in the main improved greatly – I recollect a cartoon in an early edition of the old Scottish Greenkeeping magazine *Turf* where car parking for the Secretary and the Professional were clearly defined and there was a bicycle rack for the greenkeepers that could afford a bike.

Material rewards have moved on in keeping with the new responsibilities and as would be expected with the better rewards comes the expectation for better and higher standards.

The golf course is more than a means of earning a living, it very often becomes an extension of their lives. There is an ongoing search for perfection sometimes in very difficult circumstances. In my experience the golf course managers are naturally high achievers and set their sights high and can on occasion be their own worst enemies.

There are the pressures and sometimes frustrating circumstances associated with the job eg equipment breakdowns, too heavy a work programme, the varying weather conditions, responsibility without authority and in some instances a feeling of insecurity, ever changing bosses introducing new management styles and sometimes an unclear line of authority.

Who could explain the communication they find at Harrogate, there we see the greenkeeper at his best, he is among his peers, they

# than **life** itself'

As this article is published we shall be about to go through the annual ritual of having Augusta National Golf Course and the Masters on our TV screens – members of our golf clubs will be watching it on television and at the same time looking out the window at their own course "with a touch of poor me's" and wondering what is wrong.

The answer to that is clear, very simply put the Augusta National golf course closes for the

ited play. The kind of situation I am sure most young greenkeepers only dream about.

Some of the comparisons made by the golfer can very often be totally misleading and illogical. Comparisons are fair when comparing apples with apples and when the playing field is level. An almost impossible situation in the golf course business with so many and varied items to be considered such as course type, staffing levels, equipment provision,

share a common bond one with the other they are comfortable and the pressure of work is for a brief period left behind – I am sure they all come away from Harrogate having enjoyed each others company with their batteries charged and ready for another challenging year ahead.

By bending Bill Shankly's quote I would suggest that greenkeeping is not about life itself, it is more important than that.