



**Scott MacCallum sat down with Nick Park, Vice Chairman of the R&A Golf Course Advisory Panel, and discussed its work – and how greenkeepers can assist by providing research data.**

**What exactly is the Advisory Panel and what are its aims?**

The Panel has evolved from the original Greenkeeping Panel, set up by the R&A in 1985. Tim Taylor has been Chairman since 1988 and has provided the continuity so badly needed in this whole area. We now have a wide brief to work with interested authorities and organisations to facilitate improvements on our courses. The R&A is keen to ensure that profits which flow from the Open Championship are put to the best possible use - within the Panel itself are four Working Parties which take a closer look at specific areas.

**Which one are you involved with?**

I am Chairman of the Research and Advisory Working Party, a bit of a mouthful, which covers a great deal. Luckily I have a formidable team to help in both practical and theoretical matters. Walter Woods

and George Brown represent the best of what has happened with greenkeeping in the last 20 years. They have so much experience and it is now being put to use at the highest levels in the game. It is interesting to reflect that when I was first asked to sit on the Greenkeeping Panel in 1986 there wasn't a greenkeeper on it! We also have Mike Canaway, Chief Executive of the STRI, David Stansfield, of PSD Agronomy, and Mike Schofield, former Assistant Director of English Nature.

**What about the others?**

The other Working Parties deal with three areas: European and ecology issues, chaired by Jaime Ortiz-Patino, President (and Head Greenkeeper!) of Valderamma Golf Club; Construction and Design, headed by Donald Steel, and the most recently introduced, Communications, chaired by David Marsh.

**How often do you meet?**

The working Parties are in constant touch and meet at least twice a year. Also the full Advisory Panel meets twice a year.

**What sort of issues do you look into?**

As an example, the R&A continues to grant some £35,000 per annum for research into the earth worm problem and ways in which to combat the menace if (more probably when) our chemical weapons are banned. I have a horror that we could at some point head back to

the sort of mayhem we saw in the 1920's when fairways became muddy pathways for much of the year.

**You obviously see this as potentially a huge problem.**

I don't want to exaggerate it but on the other hand I don't want to underplay it. This is something we must prepare for because I can tell you, if it got really bad it could shut

# The R&A Golf Course Advisory Panel

a substantial portion of the game down for four to five months of the year. However, it is one thing to see the problem coming; quite another to resolve it.

## **What have you discovered so far?**

It seems clear from what the STRI has already done that there will be no "one-shot" answer but there may be a variety of methods which will have some effect. Our findings to date are contained elsewhere in this issue of Greenkeeper International - to clubs already experiencing problems I would say to take independent, specialist advice before embarking on a long term strategy of control. But don't ignore it! Remember, there are few alive today who can remember what it was like in the 20's and 30's. Go and read the journals of the period if you want to see what it was like.

We define two types of research: strategic and demand-led. Strategic research refers to broad brush areas like water conservation and usage. This is often pure research where you are not looking for a specific answer to a specific question but want to improve your stock of knowledge in an area. This does not necessarily mean we commission it ourselves - research useful to the game may be done by other industries (eg the water utilities but we have to be alert and organised enough to tap into it.

Demand-led research is the area in which I would ask BIGGA members to play a major role. We need to get a better picture of problems throughout the country and the best way is to fill in the questionnaire which is included in this issue of Greenkeeper International. I can assure all greenkeepers that the answers will be totally anonymous

and cannot be tracked back to their clubs - I would be most grateful for a few minutes of their time - and at least the postage is free! By analysing what comes back it will enable us to direct research funding into the areas which cause greenkeepers the greatest headaches. In turn this will get best value for money invested - the governing body would much appreciate support from BIGGA members in this matter.

## **You mentioned water, what are your feelings about that?**

The questions coming to golf clubs from the regulatory bodies are getting louder, especially in the south east. I cannot see how, in the longer term, clubs will be allowed to use the amounts of water they currently use. I have watched this happen in the USA: No matter what you are prepared to pay for water, the rest of the water-using community will not allow you to have it. Clubs could waste a lot of money installing redundant systems, especially on fairways. I think we will head back to drier, firmer, faster golf courses - a different form of golf to what we are used to but certainly the sort of golf I prefer to play. A good golf course, in my definition, is intrinsically environmentally responsible. Whether you can still use broad-soled, cavity back irons and solid balls on such courses is another matter!

## **These are all technical problems - what about the golfers?**

I know what you're driving at and I agree, in far too many cases courses have problems imposed on them by individuals or committees acting with a lack of expertise. It is ten years since "The Way Forward"

identified this as perhaps the biggest problem facing our courses. I have to say that ten years on, progress in reforming club structures has been painfully slow. A few clubs have shown the way but it remains to me a great source of frustration that the cycle of mistakes is still repeated at so many clubs. This is an area to be pursued by David Marsh's Communications Working Party. It is really a parallel process with the technical problems which occupy my time.

## **How does UK research fit into the world-wide situation?**

A very good question. The ability to reinvent the wheel is enormous and we are trying to stop the game wasting precious resources. I think it is perfectly natural that some countries would want to replicate research that has already been done, simply to prove its validity in their situation. But we must try to stop duplication of work; to this end we commissioned the STRI to pull together a database of research around the world, excluding the USA and Canada. They came up with a weighty file which we now plan to update continuously. I hope it will shortly be available on the Internet - and national golfing federations will receive a copy to see if a subject is being covered, before deciding to invest money in research. All this will be a useful adjunct to the USGA's Turfgrass Information File at Michigan.

## **What happens in the United States?**

The USGA has a different approach from the R&A, though they tend to work on strategic issues - not surprisingly water conservation is a big one for them. They put the work out to tender for an Institute or University to bid for the money to carry out the research. Their whole research effort

has been admirable for many years and has brought benefits to the game way beyond the boundaries of the USA. I think we will see greater co-operation between the two bodies in this area in years to come - we already have a link through Jaime Ortiz-Patino, who sits on the USGA Turfgrass Research Committee.

## **How did you come to be so heavily involved in the game of golf?**

My father, Eddie, was a former Chairman of Green at Lindrick and I did the job for six years from 1977. We both became absorbed by the challenges we faced but by the challenges we faced but by 1983 felt that the only way forward was to get involved in the national scene. Writing articles in *Golf Monthly*, encouraged by its far-sighted Editor, Malcolm Campbell, caused a certain amount of mischief. The R&A invited me onto the Greenkeeping Panel in 1986 and since then I have tried to do my bit to move things on. I cannot say it is an easy business, but few really worthwhile things are.

But there are high spots: I have just returned from playing the Old Course on a bright, breezy day and was thrilled to find it in such wonderful health - a great tribute to the years of Walter's rule, and his successor, Eddie Adams. For me golf does not get any better than this, anywhere at anytime. Quick, firm, devilishly difficult - on a course with sustainable management policies.

Whatever problems I might observe elsewhere, the Home of Golf is setting a wonderful example for all to see. Getting the lessons we learn there applied across the game is still the ultimate challenge for all of us. Please get your pens out for that questionnaire and many thanks for your help!