

**Jim Arthur looks back to when he started his career and shows that the advice he gave then is just as relevant now...**



Call Philip Ambury on 01853 344244

# Keeping it simple

Throughout more than 50 years of golf course advisory work I have steadfastly followed the principles impressed on me at the start of my advisory career by three remarkable people, of whom more anon. They taught me the time-proven and indisputable facts on which the basic principles of greenkeeping have depended since time immemorial. These principles have not altered simply because they are based on the needs of the fine textured 'turf' grasses - fine fescues and bent (*Agrostis*) - and these needs like the grasses have never changed. One sees so many passing fashions, hailed as the newest and best ideas, and none last more than a decade, and when they do conspicuously fail, their advocates have already shamelessly switched to the latest gimmick. The most important basis of my advice is and always has been - keep it simple and understandable. Greenkeeping is more of an art than a science.

Soil chemists, physicists, mycologists, soil analysts (particularly them!) and all the other 'ists' are there to support, not to promote unproven policies. Their worst crime is correct observation, wrong deduction. The work of the commercial element of

sports turf management is not to be denigrated providing it is confined to real improvements. Sadly, especially in the case of fertilisers, at times the motivation seems to be to try to create new markets by over-selling. I have maintained for more years than I care to remember, that golf clubs should buy very little fertiliser (and then nitrogen-only). Furthermore, clubs should order only what they need and should resist being pressurised into excessive purchasing.

Yet we still see case after case of gross over-feeding with inorganic fertilisers -

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one case this year relates to a new course where no less than three massive complete fertiliser applications had been given by mid March!, because the first two "didn't work". This chase after colour cannot be too highly condemned. We play golf on

fine turf not colour and traditional greenkeeping as well as giving better playing surfaces is so much cheaper!

To return to my mentors, my introduction to grasses was in 1938 when my professor, a doughty Scot and a golfer of course, while concentrating on agricultural grasses, explained that all the rest were still worth studying, as quite apart from being valued constituents of golf course turf, they were very useful indicators of soil fertility, or the reverse, - even if farmers did regard them as weeds! He started my enthusiasm for grasses, which is still with me. Then came five years in the Army and my close contact with turf on occasions had nothing to do with studying botany but everything to do with survival!

The philosophies taught me by two remarkable men when I joined 'the Research Station' at Bingley just after the war are simple, indisputable and unchanging. I do not understand why I am regarded as "invariably controversial", though Sir Michael Bonallack kindly qualifies this comment in his preface to Practical Greenkeeping adding "but infuriatingly nearly always right".



Jim Arthur

After all I am merely echoing the tenets of sound traditional greenkeeping which were old fashioned when I was first taught them 53 years ago. My mentor was Richard Libbey, the senior advisor, who was a botanist of international renown. When I was first appointed, their Director gave me three pieces of advice. First, my pre-war agricultural degree was useless and I had to reverse everything I had been taught on the principle of "ask a farmer what to do and go and do the opposite". Secondly, I was told to stick to grass and avoid architecture as "I would never be a good enough golfer to rank with the best and my agronomic advice could be compromised". Thirdly, (and even on a short acquaintance he realised it would be a severe hardship), "I was to go round for the first year being trained by Richard and I was to keep my mouth shut and my ears open."

Long advisory tours with Richard gave me a wonderful education - peering, probing and digging into turf

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by day and listening and discussing what we had seen in small, inexpensive (but licensed!) hostels in the evenings. It was an unrivalled way of learning about grasses - and weeds, pests and diseases - as well as people - based on botany not chemistry. It was Richard who taught me, with proof, that golfing turf never needs phosphates in fertiliser form and proved it, though we had many differences of opinion with Bingley's Director and its soil chemist.

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The other person, also a Scot, was Frank Smith - Superintendent of the Bingley plots, previously Head Greenkeeper at Cruden Bay, which was before the war the Gleneagles of North Scotland. His quiet advice and helpful practical tips were invaluable to me - and to many Bingley advisers who came after me - and stopped me from many beginner's mistakes. It was he who said, "Listen to the head man, but if he isn't talking, find out why, for without him on your side you and the Club are wasting your time and their money."

I have always tried to make a personal friend of my 'oppo' in the team, not just for politic reasons but for shared enthusiasms and many of the friendships of those days have survived 'retirement' and many is the welcome call I still receive from such elder statesmen.

However, I found that even the most died-in-the-wool, 'feed and water' enthusiasts have nearly always special interests in which I could share - botanical or ornithological in many cases - and once that mutual interest was shared we could develop amicable discussions and then agreement on greenkeeping principles.

I have always tried never to act as a surrogate Head Greenkeeper, although in the run-up to Turnberry's first Open and in the absence of trained staff, I had to guide on the basis of monthly visits for three years a dear old friend, Jim McCubbin. We made a good team and the results justified the means, backed generously by both cash and faith on the part of British Transport Hotels' Directors.

I have not got the space to cover these time-honoured basic principles in detail, but if anyone is anxious to learn then I suggest getting hold of a copy of Practical Greenkeeping - commissioned by the R&A and representing the

knowledge of many acknowledged experts in their specialised work.

Alternatively send for a 28-page folder of relevant articles and references which can be obtained (as can the book) from BIGGA HOUSE, for the princely sum of £2.50 to cover postage.

The basic principles of traditional greenkeeping hinge on copying the conditions in those areas where bents and fescues naturally dominate the turf.

Such areas are so diverse and seem to have nothing in common, yet there must be common factors. Clearly it is nothing to do with acidity or alkalinity as the same grasses thrive equally on acid moors and heathland as on alkaline dunes and downland. It is nothing to do with soil types which range from extremely sandy links and heaths, to heavy clays of old parkland and neglected pastures. It is nothing to do with soil moisture; there can hardly be a greater contrast between tidally flooded meadows and arid sandy links, yet the same species occur on both.

A little 'research' shows that the common factors are very low 'chemical' fertility coupled with free drainage and related absence of compaction, encouraging deep rooting species which are also our finest textured grasses.

Alter these conditions, deliberately or accidentally, by compaction or fertiliser treatment, and the grasses we want are penalised and in come our old enemy, *Poa annua*. In brief, the two main causes of its invasion and dominance are inadequate or too shallow aeration and above all phosphatic fertilisers. There is no possible argument against this tenet - with research references going back to 1913. Some fertiliser firms have accepted this for many decades and sell an 8:0:0 organic/inorganic nitrogen-only mix which is used by virtually all our

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**The two main causes of Poa Annuua invasion and dominance are inadequate or too shallow aeration and above all phosphatic fertilisers**

best traditional courses - very sparingly!

Even before the 1914-18 war, Poa annua was synonymous with poorer turf in the eyes of greenkeepers and research scientists alike (Dr. Murray 1913). Today, however, there are too many voices which excuse or even praise this enemy Number One - either claiming it is inevitable, or because, as with Tour Professionals, they never play in this country when Poa is at its worst - and get presented with tarted-up putting surfaces for their big day - and never see or care what happens to those greens a few months (or weeks) later.

Let there be no question - annual meadow grass is the source of 90% of all greenkeeping problems and is an extremely expensive grass to maintain, and is tolerable only in the peak growing periods when its rapid recovery from damage and in response to fertilisers and water make it possible to produce good if slow putting conditions - for six to seven months a year.

The grasses which produce (on much smaller budgets) good conditions all year round for golf are the bents and fescues. Therefore we need to know how to encourage them. Many greenkeepers over the years have succeeded. It is therefore depressing to hear speakers at seminars either extolling its virtues or saying Poa dominance is inevitable. It is reprehensible because this unquestionably is confusing to younger greenkeepers, plagued as they are by unqualified salesmen some of whom, if told the truth, would conveniently forget it to make a sale.

Equally depressing is the number of greenkeepers at all levels who maintain that however wrong they may be, their members (new golfers) have to be given the nice and green lush turf that attracted them to golf in the first place the Augusta syndrome. Such heretics forget that golf is an all year round game (Augusta is open

perhaps four and a half months a year). Our courses also have to stand up to heavy play and picture-postcard Augusta is probably the most underplayed course in the world. Finally, the budget to produce such visual 'delights' is enormous, with money, manpower, machinery and materials wildly beyond the means of 99.9% of U.K. courses.

Once you start on the slippery slope, one cost leads to another. Excessive fertilisers lead to increasingly ineffective and hugely expensive fungicidal treatments. Our best courses use minuscule amounts of nitrogenous fertiliser and virtually no fungicides.

Above all else, we must combat the insidious dual evils of misplaced commercialism and apathy. Those who care for traditional standards tight lies; plenty of run on the ball; firm, fast greens - and abhor target golf, must put their heads above the parapet. Do not be afraid of being criticised; your reward will come, though perhaps not in this world.

Stand up and be counted and join the swelling ranks - both side of the Atlantic - for the 'bump and run game' and counter the ranks of misplaced commercialism - even those most eloquent in favour of feeding have not the slightest idea that they are completely wrong.

Do not let dodgy speakers get away with misrepresentation, whether caused by ignorance or cupidity. Stand up and argue your case. Demand more audience participation time in seminars. Good speakers on sound ground welcome such interventions - at least it shows that their audiences have not been put to sleep. Remember the speakers' adage: "Repertee needs to be rehearsed!"

Fight for our traditions and rout the target golf, summer-only school.

If you are presented with technobabble, demand that the perpetrator explains in simple terms - nine out of ten cannot. Do not spare the miscreants!

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