

A few years ago Stewarts of Edinburgh, Company of Seedsmen Ltd, celebrated their 100th Anniversary. A company which has served the greenkeeping and horticulture industry. One man in particular, Mr Ian Forbes, will always be remembered in his quest to assist the greenkeepers with their educational pursuits by often giving lectures which would develop or enhance their educational career. Many years ago he was asked if he would write down some of his memories on the experiences or growth of the Greenkeeping Association, which he did and passed one to me at St Andrews. This fine gentleman has now passed away leaving the company, Stewarts of Edinburgh to be run in the good hands of his son Graeme Forbes, who is following exactly in his support to Scottish and North of England greenkeepers. A few months ago the document saw daylight after laying dormant, but I would like the readers of BIGGA to read it as it will be of interest.

Walter Woods

• Back in time

Dear Walter,

Some time ago, Graeme told me you would like to have my views on the status and training of Golf Greenkeepers over the years. At the time, I had to attend two conferences away from home, and in effecting my retirement from business at Stewarts and elsewhere. I hope, therefore, my delay in acceding to your request has not caused you any inconvenience.

It is my view that, for a variety of reasons, the history of Golf Greenkeeping could be said to fall into a number of very distinct periods. Unfortunately, sources of information have turned out to be very scarce, and in order to do a really good job, one would require to contact a large number of clubs who might be willing to furnish details for their records as to numbers employed, wages and status in the club, eg, honorary membership etc.

My sources are the few remnants of Stewarts records, these are very sketchy as during the 1939-45 war, part of our premises were taken over as a fire watching post and the records stored therein, destroyed.

Two copies 1920 and 1929 of the British Golf Greenkeepers Journal,

and a few books, one written by a greenkeeper, being all I have at Stewarts, except for a photograph or two.

I have spent some days at the National Library of Scotland, but they do not have records of the BGGGA Journal, which is a pity as they would be most helpful. I did find that the library had copies of the Golfers Handbook from its original publication in 1903 onwards, however, after consulting a number, although not all of these publications, I found that the records of Head Greenkeepers, even when this was given, was by no means complete, even the R&A holders of this office were not always shown.

Much of what follows is therefore just my own opinion, based on what little I have found and supported by a none too reliable memory.

The first phase of the Greenkeeping profession would surely be the period from around 1750 to 1876. During this time the number of golf courses was very restricted and they were mostly situated in the East of Scotland, on sandy links or heathland. This was probably the only areas golf could have been played on,

owing to the problem of mowing grass which grew to any height. I recall my father had a letter dated around the early 1900's describing the work of an East Lothian Greenkeeper who concluded after describing how he constructed drains, ditches and sleeper faced bunkers, by writing that he scythed the greens and the rabbits kept the rest.

Up until 1886, the number of new golf courses appears to have been only a few each year, five being the largest number recorded and only in the period from 1875. I think it would be fair to conclude that during this period, the only exchange of greenkeeping experiences would be between the various Fife and East Lothian men, and that most of the other courses in operation at that time would have had a greenkeeper who came from these areas or had a connection with them. A possible exception might be where a man from a cricket or bowling club took over the office of Head Greenkeeper.

1887 saw the start of a boom in golf course construction which was really astonishing, and is attributed in the

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Back in time

I recall my father had a letter dated around the early 1900's describing the work of an East Lothian Greenkeeper who concluded after describing how he constructed drains, ditches and sleeper faced bunkers, by writing that he scythed the greens and the rabbits kept the rest.

Golfers Handbook to the advent of railways, and the visiting of Scotland by people who before did not travel to golfing areas.

1887 saw the number of new courses rise to double figures, 1888 - 20 new courses were built, and 1889 - 30. From then to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, between 22 to 55 new courses were opened every year except for the period of the Boer War, when the numbers opened fell to around 12 to 15 courses opened each year.

This astonishing increase in golf courses must have required a very large number of greenkeepers. The invention of the lawn mower would have played a big part in making golf possible, and the arrival of the gang mower, even though horse drawn, would enable fairways to be cut.

It is probable that a good number of gardeners became greenkeepers. At this time in Scotland, the landed estates usually took young men into the "bothy" system where a number of apprentices and journeymen sometimes in considerable numbers, were housed at or near the gardens of the large estates.

As promotion to a house became possible only with the status of foreman having been obtained, there was at times a surplus of trained gardeners.

Stewarts among other firms, ran an employment bureau whereby head gardeners would write in asking for details of men available and also those of men looking for jobs. Stewarts' operated this service for greenkeepers sometime around that period, especially when they were emigrating to the USA or Europe.

The term Gullane Greenkeeper was at one time often used, and I can

recall letters using these precise words being received as, East Lothian produced a lot of trained gardeners as well as greenkeepers.

During this pre World War I phase, companies such as Suttons and Stewarts, along with others, used to prove information and booklets on greenkeeping practices, some greenkeepers wrote articles and books. In 1908 the Scottish Greenkeepers held an outing at which my father acted as Secretary. I think this was the first meeting the greenkeepers had held, but was more of a golf occasion than an educational one, but in some cases lectures were given to greenkeepers at the outings.

The use of fertilisers, worm killers and seed mixtures was common before 1900, and many greenkeepers were already knowledgeable as to the uses and practices of greenkeeping. Others probably entered the profession because they were good golfers and the office of Greenkeeper Professional was not uncommon. As far as I know the Head Greenkeeper was at that time ranked in most clubs above the professional as far as status is concerned.

In 1914 the boom in golf came to an end and from then until 1919 few golf courses were built. The BGGGA Journal of 1920 states that 90% of its membership served with HM Forces during the war years and a number were decorated for distinguished service. The membership of the association was just over a hundred, which must have been a very small proportion of the total number of greenkeepers as the Golfers Handbook of that time states there were around 1000.

By 1920 the BGGGA Journal was again being published and new cours-

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es were opening, but never again on the scale of the pre First World War period. During the between war years, the development of greenkeeping went ahead rapidly, the hand mower had superseded the scythe on the greens and tees, the horse drawn mower was replaced by tractor drawn equipment and the rapid development of motor mowers for greens proceeded.

There were regular lectures in many areas of the country and some agricultural colleges ran evening classes in greenkeeping. In 1929 the Board of Greenkeeping Research was opened at Bingley.

I remember discussions around this time, that it would be a good thing to have a greenkeeping certificate available. It was proposed that, after a period of around three years, men who their Head Greenkeeper thought able, should proceed to spend a month or so at two or three other clubs whose Head Greenkeepers were held in high regard.

These greenkeepers were to write a report and if the applicant received three good reports, a certificate would be awarded. However, as far as I know, this scheme never got past the talking stage.

The main difficulty as always was the wide spread of greenkeepers in relatively small numbers, the difficulties of transport and no real facilities for education of greenkeepers existed.

There were always a few wise heads crying for something to be done, but they got little support in many cases and golfers as a whole were not very interested. Occasionally a Head Greenkeeper would be given honorary membership of his club, where the professional was still not allowed

into the club house, but in general, by the 1930's the professionals were taking large steps up the status ladder, led by players such as the late Sir T H Cotton, and owing to this and the depression which reigned at the time, it was not easy for greenkeepers to improve their lot.

1939 saw the start of the Second World War and again golf and greenkeeping went very nearly out of existence. There was a call for food production and parts of some courses were ploughed up. I was abroad for most of the war and have no first hand experience, but understand that there were no fertilisers allowed for clubs unless they kept grazing animals and even then it was also severely rationed. Equipment and supplies of all sorts were difficult, and according to the Golfers Handbook, wooden balls were at one time not uncommon. Greenkeepers were mostly on military service or in other national service occupations. Unlike the recovery in 1920 after the First World War, which was fairly rapid, the years from the end of hostilities in 1945 were very restricted. Rationing of almost everything continued and golf courses got very few supplies including petrol, for some years. This was allied to a lack of transport, the supply of vehicles which was very small and almost every item of equipment difficult to come by.

Golf gradually revived, but the Americans were not supporting the Open Championship to any great extent and it was not until the arrival of Arnold Palmer and mass TV which brought about the second great boom in golfing history.

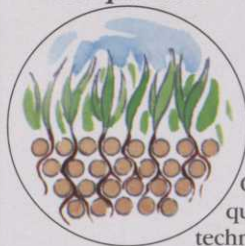
I well remember a Head Greenkeeper in Ayrshire telling me in



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Back in time

Occasionally a Head Greenkeeper would be given honorary membership of his club, where the professional was still not allowed into the club house, but in general, by the 1930's the professionals were taking large steps up the status ladder, led by players such as the late Sir TH Cotton, and owing to this and the depression which reigned at the time, it was not easy for greenkeepers to improve their lot.

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the 50's that he thought the occupation had gone from the best paid artisan to the worst paid in a period of ten years, and I think it is fair to say that golf and golf greenkeepers went through a very trying period between 1945 and 1960.

Nonetheless, the Board of Greenkeeping Research, which became the Sports Turf Research Institute, was providing the authority on greenkeeping practices in addition to an advisory service and training courses. The companies specialising in Turf Culture Supplies had increased considerably in number and research on grass cultivars was increasing. New developments in fertilisers, fungicides and compost manufacture were being introduced.

Education in the form of lectures carried on during the winter months, and a wide range of subjects were covered. Among others, I gave talks usually illustrated, for many years to various sections of the Scottish Greenkeepers Association and the Northern section of the BIGGA, those were in the main well attended by 20 to 50 greenkeepers at a time.

In conclusion, I would like to say that there cannot be many professions which in a 100 years has had so many ups and downs, especially when one considers how difficult it has been to build up an organisation or provide opportunities for education.

The system of green committees has never seemed a good one to me.

These committees with honourable exceptions have often consisted of people who knew little or nothing about greenkeeping, and had no wish to learn. But then the general public would subscribe to the view, "everyone knows how easy it is to grow grass".

I hope this rather rambling letter is of some use to you, and if I can be of any further help, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

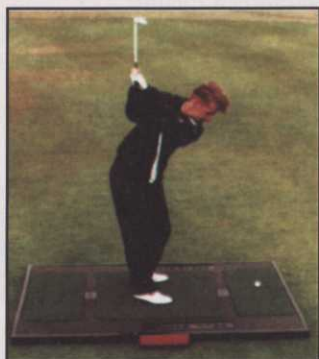
Meantime, all good wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

With kindest regards,

Yours sincerely,
Ian Forbes



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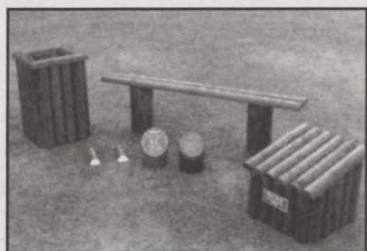


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