

# Golf winning the battle against

## Temple leading by example in the search for sustainable growth

By Colin Callander

When you first arrive at Temple Golf Club, near Maidenhead, there seems little to distinguish it from most other traditional British clubs. It has an attractive, but far from opulent, clubhouse which offers fare you might find at clubs all over the country.

It has its own professional's shop and even an obligatory pole on which a flag flies at half mast whenever a member dies. It all appears remarkable only because it is so unremarkable. Then you set foot on the course.

It is almost as if you have been transported back twenty or thirty years - to a time when British courses were in their prime. And never is this more apparent than if you visit in winter - when many other traditional clubs are so wet underfoot as to be almost unplayable. You can play here.

Regular amateur golfers will be aware that during the last two decades

course conditions throughout Britain have deteriorated alarmingly. This is particularly the case during the winter months, when the weather is at its worst.

Where once we could consider ourselves unfortunate to encounter temporary tees and winter greens even in the most inclement conditions, now they are commonplace for three months of the year.

It is no exaggeration to suggest that, at some clubs, golf is no longer a twelve month game. We might all fork out annual subscriptions which, on the face of it, entitle us to year-round golf, but the reality is that many courses are now in such a state of disrepair in winter as to dissuade all but the most enthusiastic golfers from venturing out at all.

Ten years ago Temple, like so many other clubs, was heading that way too. Then Head Greenkeeper, Martin Gunn, Chairman of Green, Malcolm Peake and Secretary, Keith Adderley

decided to transform the club's maintenance policy.

Their plan proved successful. So successful, in fact, that the club recently won the British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association Golf Environment Award for 1999.

What Gunn, Peake and Adderley realised, was that the club, like so many others, had almost inadvertently, fallen foul of the "Green is Great" mentality. With grim consequences, it had become all the rage at clubs throughout the country.

Intent on replicating the verdant and lush conditions of Augusta National and other foreign Tour venues, Temple, and all too many other clubs just like it, began, little by little, to use more water and fertiliser than ever before. In turn, this began to encourage infestation of poa annua grass at the expense of indigenous bents and fescues.

Sadly, the process is self-perpetuat-

ing. The more poa annua, the more a club needs to water and fertilise just to maintain a reasonable playing surface. Put simply, the course becomes addicted to regular - and very unnatural - feeding. It is akin to agricultural land whose fertility becomes dependent on intensive farming methods, and which, in the long term, prove unstable and unsustainable.

Soon Temple was caught in a vicious cycle. It needed to spend more and more on maintenance, yet, inexorably, the condition of the course declined.

"It was a very real problem for us and one for which there was no easy cure", Gunn said. "It takes time to turn things round and you have to be prepared to face an awful lot of criticism along the way".

They had found, at the outset in particular, that they had to endure the wrath of their members - particularly when conditions first seemed to deteriorate rather than improve. Gunn

John Ross, Course Manager at Laleham Golf Club, took time to comment on the article

## Concerning the achievements of Temple Golf Club

The journalist rightly is very complimentary about the policies of the Course Manager and the benefits that they are bringing to the golf course. The courage shown by Martin Gunn and those who stood by him is highly commendable and worthy of acknowledgement.

However the article made some generalisations, which were inaccurate and highly offensive to our profession, and these need highlighting. First, Temple did not win the environmental award because of an aeration programme, and cutting down on the use of water and fertiliser - if this were the case the award would be of little merit and many other clubs would also be able to claim the award. But because Temple has adopted a host of policies aimed at improving the natural qualities of their golfing environment. Because of this the award is a prized one and Temple is obviously a worthy winner.

Golf course conditions have not deteriorated over the last 20 years. In my experience

greenkeepers are now more educated than ever before, have available to them more machinery and resources than ever before, and have to cope with far greater volumes of traffic, and year round golf in a way never experienced before. The implication that golf was once a 12 month a year sport, and is no longer, is patently inaccurate.

Wide wheeled trolleys, large lightweight umbrellas, Gore-Tex suits and waterproof shoes (all relatively recent innovations) have led to an increase in the amount of winter golf played. Not to mention milder winters (certainly in the south). A statement like "Where once we would consider ourselves unfortunate to encounter temporary tees and winter greens even in the most inclement conditions, now they are common place for

almost three months of the year" is dangerous and has to be qualified. This statement sounds to me like a romantic vision of one's youth, which we all have from time to time, despite the austerity that may have been suffered. It is not fair on other Course Managers, in different situations to make generalisations like this in a widely read public newspaper. In fact it is irresponsible.

Green is great and the infestation of poa annua is not an advent of the last 20 years as intimated in the article. In fact Jim Arthur in Practical Greenkeeping states that the practice of over fertilising goes back as far as 1892. As for irrigation, yes this has only been around for the last 20 to 30, but only for summer use. And even a bent fescue green has a need of water in the summer. The primary benefit of irrigation has been to make poa manageable, and it has saved many greenkeepers their jobs

that did not have the luxury of the top-level support Martin Gunn has at Temple..

The article did seem to suggest that Temple had discovered a new formula for success, and not the application of fundamental greenkeeping principles as advocated by the vast majority of the industry. It did not mention that distinguished servants of our profession had been advocating these principles for decades. The paper also neglected to mention that the main source of pressure in the chase for over watered, lush surfaces (not just greens, but tees and fairways too) is golfers, often against the advice of qualified professionals like Course Managers and independent consultants. The paper also neglected to mention that when these policies (the golfers ones that is) result in diseased, saturated turf, temporary greens, and often closed courses, the person who pays the price is usually the individ-

# addiction

said, "I know I was fortunate to find someone like Malcolm who was willing to take a few hits for me. I needed individuals support from some senior individuals within the club and that's what I got from Malcolm and Keith".

Gunn knew such backing was necessary because he was well aware it would not be easy to return Temple to its former glory. The only way was to kill off poa annua, a weak, shallow-rooted grass prone to disease, and, in turn, promote the return of native bents and fescues. This would have to be done by first starving the turf of water and fertiliser and then implementing an aeration policy designed to relieve compaction and promote root growth.

Neither is very difficult to achieve but both processes can cause short-term anxiety among members, particularly among those who fail to realise that the indigenous grasses will not return overnight. The greens, in fact, will look even worse before they

start to look better, which is why it is vital that a club talks to its members about what it is trying to do.

"I can't offer other clubs a simple solution, but what I would do is stress that communication is vital if they are to come through unscathed. Communication is king," Gunn said.

"You will never be able to appease the vocal minority, but what you can do is work on the silent majority. They are much more likely to be receptive if they know what you are doing and why you are doing it".

For a while at least even this determination to involve members was not enough to dispel all doubts. However, little by little, as the condition of the course began to improve and - of equal importance - as Gunn's natural maintenance techniques encouraged the return of indigenous species, the critics were silenced.

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ual whose advice was ignored in the first place, the Course Manager. And that point should have been emphasised.

The article also fails to mention that many of the recently built courses are on land once used for agriculture (or anywhere else the developer feels he can squeeze in a few holes) and not on the impoverished free draining soils of years gone by.

The problems faced by Course Managers on these sites have absolutely nothing to do with the situation at Temple. However, you can bet your life that members from these clubs read the article and drew their own conclusions. And the Course Manager will have to deal with the consequences. Again irresponsible.

Finally the article completely fails to mention the chase for speed on putting surfaces, and the intensity of cutting regimes, and the effect that this has on poa infestation. Another

missing fact of significance in the article.

Put simply, the journalist was trying to cover a huge subject, with years of history and research, and a massive diversity of opinions and situations and compare this with the success of Martin Gunn and Temple. The comments within the article about overfeeding and over watering were appropriate and useful (these were relevant to the situation at Temple and could be verified) The comments about the prime time of British golf courses, and the deteriorating state of British courses were dangerous.

At what point do we as an Association tire of these uninformed opinions that are being published in the public domain, and start to fight back? How many Course Managers and greenkeepers have to suffer the consequences of this ignorance before our voice is raised?

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