

Housing Associations

As Basil Fawlty might say, satellite television is an avenue of pleasure that has been closed off to me. I have attempted to persuade Mrs McDivot of its necessity by pointing out that amongst other little treats, it would make available to her a channel entirely devoted to shopping, but she immediately makes the assumption that this is a pathetic ploy to spend my evenings in unathletic pose while watching sport with beer can perched on rapidly expanding abdominal region. Her objection to televised sport centres around her argument that there is little point in watching someone kick or hit a ball around when you can enjoy real life drama unfold in the form of soap operas.

That is not to say that I am totally alien to the pleasures of the dish receiver. I have to admit to straying into the habit along with my work colleagues of partaking of the odd beverage or two on a Friday afternoon in the clubhouse. This we do as a team building exercise, a boost to morale and a celebration at the accomplishment of yet another weeks work. While engaged in this highly civilised accoutrement to the working week we often watch golf on Sky Sports. This is of the highest quality and a pleasure to watch but I must state my objection to two frequently shown adverts that are totally derogatory to our noble profession. In fact they put us into the same bracket as estate agents and tax inspectors; a minority group that it is perfectly acceptable to be prejudiced towards. The first advert depicts one of our brethren as an unkempt, drug crazed psychopath, hell bent on holding up poor Freddy Couples while he moves the hole to a small promontory of the green that juts out into a lake. The other shows a greenkeeper spending hours rolling golf balls up to the hole making sure the position he has just chosen is as crowned as

possible. In both cases, the message is given that the manufacturer's equipment can more than cope with our evil intentions. Unfortunately for us, the additional message is that we are all Charles Manson clones whose sole raison d'être is to irritate golfers. This is a viscous and totally unnecessary aspersion to the good name of our profession. Everyone knows that only a small proportion of our time is devoted to irritating golfers and in my experience golf clubs rarely employ more than one drug-crazed psychopath on the greenkeeping team.

But sometimes on Sky Sports, they show those films of old golf matches featuring the likes of Sam Snead, Roberto De-Vincenzo and Peter Alliss in the days when he had a backswing. At other times there is live golf of the latest US tournament and it is fascinating to see the difference in the two. Certainly the golf seemed a great deal less complicated in the old matches. None of your lining up putts from 20 different directions or consulting the yardage manual on chip shots. They just seemed to walk up and whack it in those days. But the thing that stands out most of all between the golf of the past and nowadays is the courses and their associated standard of presentation. Despite visiting some of the Worlds finest layouts, in the old days they all seemed to be presented in uniformly abysmal condition. Large areas of brown or dead turf, bare patches, untidy tufts of coarse grass and that's just the greens. In contrast, the modern day alternative is utterly immaculate. Perfect striped fairways where the sight of a weed would invoke a public inquest, manicured rough -if that's not a contradiction in terms- and bunkers and water hazards so perfectly edged and trimmed that the place seems to look more like some kind of surreal teletubbies set

rather than a golf course. I have to say to me the modern day championship courses can start to look a tad artificial, which is probably due to the fact that they are

designed, built and maintained in a totally artificial manner. In fact in a straight contest between these courses and Mother Nature, even playing from the ladies tees and receiving a shot a hole, Mother Nature would be well and truly thrashed by about the twelfth. Personally as I look out through the clubhouse windows, beyond the incessant downpour called spring and onto the more natural look of Sludgecombe, I opine that these courses are amongst other things, severely lacking in large areas of mud. However that's just a personal opinion and unfortunately one that doesn't always coincide with that of my members.

But what then has been the driving force behind these changes over the years? Golf courses change with vogue just like everything else in life. Take house architecture for instance. There is a surprising similarity between the fashion in house style and that of golf courses. Back in the early part of the last century, the simplicity of the arts and crafts and art deco movements came out of a rejection of the ornate stuffiness of the Victorian age. This was followed up with the 1930's urban sprawl which symbolised a need to return to the more simple life of the country albeit as a more sanitised version. Hence the main roads that reach out from the cities into the tranquillity of the countryside are lined with neat 1930's style housing, often with Tudor style beams and each surrounded by its own piece of countryside in the form of a garden on at least three sides. Golf course architecture was in its infancy at the time but Colt, McKenzie and Ross et

al, all produced courses that would be in similar compatibility with nature as much as was possible. The land on which they were laid out was never altered to any degree and intrinsic features were utilised in the design. Water hazards were rarely employed unless they were naturally present and bunkers were made to look indistinguishable from their links counterparts.

But often it is a rejection of the past that is the inspiration for future fashion. So in the old immediate post war days we had courses that were understandably lacking in colour and definition and though the 70's and 80's we experienced a rejection of such blandness with the resultant bright stripy green hues, brilliant white sand and that revolting blue dye in the lakes. Look at the amount of grass that was seen on the greens in the old film footage of the 50 's and 60's. A 50 foot putt required a backswing that some of Sludgcombe's regular members would struggle to achieve with a driver. Was the crude lushness of these decades a rebellion against the austerity of the pre and post war years. The fact is, in those days average golf clubs were not in the summer at least always able to afford the luxury of dense grass coverage and with just a couple of greenkeepers that had to mow the greens using push mowers, who would want it. Maybe the trend setting courses we observe in those old films had gone out of their way to create grass so as they were set apart from the ordinary golf club. They could afford grass and so they made damn sure they would get it. It would become a measure of wealth. Onlookers would say to themselves "Look at that. They've got real grass on their greens that stops the ball from continually running 30-foot passed the hole. I wish we had that on our course

The need to forget the war years also heavily influenced the building boom of the 50's, 60's and 70's. The housing at that time was cheap and modern and no one seemed to bother too much about visual appeal. If it was old, knock it down and stick up a few million tons of brick and concrete. Hence we had the seemingly

ludicrous building schemes of those times such as the Old Course Hotel on the 17th at St Andrews. Similarly the thankfully few golf courses that were built at this time, were often appallingly bad in both their construction and their design. Bunkering would generally consist of large saucer shaped monstrosities, often shallow and boring which was presumably an attempt to match the design philosophies of the day.

Then in the late 80s, housing developments attempted to reproduce country village like architectural diversity and we were inundated with features such as clock towers that were stuck practically everywhere, even on top of office blocks. At about this time we started to observe an almost mirror image traditional golf course fashion revival in the form of the odd double green a' la St Andrews and Pete Dye's bunker faces lined with railway sleepers. Even we greenkeepers indulged in a bit of ruralisation, as I seem to remember a severe outbreak of revetted bunkers at the time. It did not matter if the course was a hundred or so miles inland we all started to cut out acres of turf ready to pile up the faces of our bunkers.

And so to

today. The key word in house fashion is authenticity. Houses are sold as having original features. The coveing, panelled doors and fireplaces that were ripped out in the 50's are now being replaced with a vengeance. It does not matter whether it is Victorian Gothic, Georgian or even 70's kitsch; it must be reproduced and conserved at all costs. It has even got to the stage where ghastly 60's tower blocks are listed as being architecturally significant. And so it is with golf courses. People are regressing to their roots and reproducing the original design features of old. Bunkers are remodelled with creative shapes and mounds and their edges allowed to grow wild. Large areas of rough grassland are recreated and in some cases even the dreadful lines of

leylandii and poplars are being replaced with the indigenous alternative.

The future? Well could we take things a logical step further and start to appreciate the more subtle shades of green that are to be found on our older more unaffected courses. A need for change and a rejection of the past has inspired us before. So now that the past is the multicoloured world of artificial courses, perhaps the future is to reject these synthetic abhorations and to embrace not only the design concepts of bygone ages but also their colours and textures as well.

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