

# See Yourself as Others See You

Colin Callander, former Golf Monthly Editor and golfer, takes a personal look at greenkeepers

I wonder if I am alone in believing that a lot of golf club members treat their Head Greenkeeper a bit like the manager of their favourite football team.

All too often, it seems to me, greenkeepers receive little or no praise when things are going well. But, invariably, at the first sign of trouble, they are apportioned the blame, usually by misguided members who, a bit like football pundits, have little or no idea about what they are actually talking about.

Nor is it an isolated problem. It's endemic and will continue to be so until amateur golfers understand better what their greenkeepers are trying to achieve.

## The Ups and Downs of the Scottish Greenkeeper

**S**cottish greenkeepers believe modern-day greenkeeping equipment is making their jobs easier than ever before.

In an exclusive survey carried out by *Scottish Club Golfer*, the greenkeepers highlighted certain pieces of historic equipment that were making every day tasks almost a torment.

Our survey found that 47% of club greenkeepers believed achievement in the manufacture of modern aeration equipment was the single biggest improvement in technology.

In second place, on 30%, was the improved design and workability of lawnmowers. And progress in the development of greens equipment was voted the best improvement in recent years by 17% of greenkeepers.

However, club golfers who believe their greenkeeper knows little about actually playing the game of golf may be surprised to learn that a massive 90% of Scottish greenkeepers play golf regularly, and a significant percentage play off single figures.

Amazingly, a total of 73% said they took up the profession because of their love of golf while 21% said they took the job because they wanted to work outdoors.

On a less positive note, our survey revealed that 50% of club greenkeepers had been on the receiving end of verbal abuse from a club member. A high percentage, though, said this figure would probably drop if clubs realised the importance of good public relations between the two parties.

According to those who took part in our survey, the most common complaint by a golfer is the condition of the course. A massive 80% said just that. Sixty per cent said golfers complained about the state of the greens while the condition of bunkers and rough also figured prominently.

One greenkeeper said: "Where would you like me to start? They golfers complain about the greens being too slow, the rough being too thick, bunker sand too soft, greens too fast it goes on and on."

The strain between club greenkeepers and club green committees was also brought to the fore as 17% of greenkeepers said they wanted to either abolish club green committees altogether or make sure that the position of the greens convenor did not alternate every two years.

One unhappy greenkeeper said: "I would like to have better communication with the green committee and, preferably, have just one person to answer to."

Seventeen per cent of Scottish greenkeepers said they would like to see a change in their salary while, if a little optimistic, a total of 20% suggested a better climate would make their job a whole lot easier.

And, on a topical note, nearly 90% claimed today's golf courses were becoming too easy for top players and that technology needed to be restricted.

"The art of shot making is no longer relevant," said one greenkeeper. "It's a shame some great courses like the Kings Course at Glenalmond and Royal Melbourne are regarded as too short for top-flight competition."

"I think the trend will go for full circles and smaller undulating greens will

become an 'ogre' and handicaps and positioning will be given even more consideration."

Alan Carruthers in 1988 for example. Everyone on the first tee on Thursday has the same chance of winning - the lowest score on Sunday wins. Maybe the scoring doesn't match 20-under-par - but does it have to?"

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I first became aware of the sort of treatment meted out to greenkeepers when, as a youngster, I supplemented my meagre student's grant by working at the local golf club.

Subsequently, I learned a lot more about the difficulties they endured while helping to edit the excellent Nick Park series, entitled *The Management of British Golf Courses*, which appeared in *Golf Monthly* during the early 1980s.

Finally, all my worst fears were confirmed when, a couple of years later, I was persuaded to become the Greens Convenor at the club in Glasgow where I was a member at the time.

My stint as Greens Convenor, which lasted for about two years before I moved south for business reasons, turned out to be even more demanding than I thought it would be.

At the time, much to his credit, the Head Greenkeeper at our club was doing his utmost to rid the course of the poa annua that infested it and made the greens virtually unplayable for most of the winter months. However, he was also facing a mounting backlash from a section of the membership that did not understand his aims.

My role, at least as I saw it, was to deflect that criticism, thereby allowing him the time to complete the job. I was, to all intents and purposes, his buffer. It was a painful task, one that I now know I should have handled better.

Nick Park, in his aforementioned *Golf Monthly* series, made it quite clear that, at golf clubs, most problems are caused by golfers' misconceptions, not greenkeeping ones and he was quite right, of course. The problem was that, at the time, I didn't understand how crucial that distinction was.

### HERE'S WHAT SOME OF THEM HAD TO SAY

Questions	John Gallagher 10 years	Jim Paton 23 years	Simon Freeman The Maitre Golf Club 5 years	Douglas McIntosh Cairn Ross Golf Club 6 years	Brian Hillen Dumfriesshire Golf Club 8 years	John Hillen Hawick Golf Club 14 months
How long have you been at your current club?	10 years	23 years	5 years	6 years	8 years	14 months
What made you become a greenkeeper?	Wanted to work outside in a sporting capacity	Wanted to work in golf environment	I've always loved golf	Outdoor environment and enjoyment of golf	I was looking for an outdoor job	I have a passion for golf
What piece of equipment has improved the most?	Greens-cutting equipment and attachments	Greens mowers and aeration equipment	Aeration equipment	Drainage excavator	Aeration equipment or rolls on mowers	Top-dressing equipment
Have you ever been the subject of verbal abuse from a member?	No	Not to my face	Yes, I don't mind when I'm working - but not on my day off	Not yet!	No. PR is part of the job	Often. It's always the greenkeepers' fault for your play!
What is the most common complaint you receive from members?	Slow greens	Condition of bunkers	Condition of greens	Why is our course not like Augusta?	Bunkers	Pin positions, rough, fairways and greens
Do you feel you waste a lot of time dealing with personality members?	No	No	No	No	No	Yes. Lowest handicap being 2
Are you a golfer?	Yes	Yes	Yes - current handicap 1.7	Yes. Handicap 2	Yes	Better understanding of my job
What single aspect would you like to change in your job?	To be answerable to one man	The weather	The weather	Better communication with members	To work in a better climate	No. Technology has advanced so far but non-golfers can now play for extra
Are courses becoming too easy for top players?	Yes	Yes	Totally	Yes	Yes	Yes. My industry buddies and sales reps are very helpful
Do you feel you receive enough help with your job?	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No



We got so bogged down with our poa problem (and I use that phrase advisably) that we forget to tell the membership why we had to combat it. What's worse, as we began to see progress, many members believed things were getting worse. They had been indoctrinated into believing they should have a "nice green golf course".

Thanks to watching TV, and in particular the annual Masters tournament at Augusta National, many of them equated "green" with "good" so, when the course began to take on a more natural hue, their alarm bells started to ring even louder than before.

Nowadays, a few more amateur golfers understand how the trend towards "Americanisation" has damaged our traditional British courses. Unfortunately, though, they remain a small minority. The rest, still influenced by misguided comments in the media, demand the unattainable.

They want their courses to be lush and verdant in summer but also playable in the winter months. Obviously, of course, that isn't going to happen. Inevitably, too, it is the greenkeeper who bears the brunt.

Frequently, greenkeepers find themselves at odds with their members, often through no fault of their own. The more fortunate will have a supportive Greens Convenor willing to fight his corner.

However, more often than not, the Convenor will have been voted on, not because of his knowledge of agronomy, or his desire to maintain the status quo, but because his mates want him to "sort things out".

When a greenkeeper finds himself in this sort of situation, I can't help but feel the best thing to do is to attempt to take the initiative. Obviously, that is easy for me to say because my livelihood does not depend on it.

But think about it, if you choose to acquiesce to the demands of a Greens Convenor who does not understand sound greenkeeping practises, the chances are that all you are doing is postponing the inevitable difficulties. It is better, surely, to put your case firmly at the outset. Who knows, you might even persuade him to give your way a try.

If I was a greenkeeper, an unlikely scenario I admit, the first thing I would do is purchase a copy of Malcolm Peake's "Confessions of a Chairman of Green" and present it to my Green Convenor. Come to think of it, I would buy several copies and leave them dotted around the clubhouse for members to read.

## What do people think of greenkeepers?

Greenkeeper International also asked some well known golf writers and a few other people besides what they thought of greenkeepers and the greenkeeping profession and got some interesting responses.

While millions of people would love to work out in the open rather than stuck in a factory or office, it takes a real dedication to duty, almost a passion, to be a good and successful greenkeeper.

The hours are long, their work is not always appreciated as much as it should be, but the best greenkeepers don't need a pat on the back. They know when the job is well done.

**Mark Garrod, Golf Writer for the Press Association**

I first hit a golf ball at the age of 11 in 1949 at a public course in Birmingham. Our junior class became reasonably proficient having been given lessons by the professional before being allowed onto the course itself, but this was not good enough for one particular greenkeeper who clearly hated the thought of small children, let alone small children on a golf course.

He terrorised us, haranguing us and making all sorts of unrepeatable remarks. Once, when one of the kids answered back, he charged at him with his hand-held mower.

It could have killed our interest for good and thankfully it did not. Out of that junior class there emerged an Amateur Champion (John Beharrell), a Midland Amateur Champion (Martyn Edwards) and a would-be Open Champion who somehow metamorphosed into the golf correspondent of The Guardian.

It could not happen today for the behaviour of that man would not be tolerated. In fairness, in 1949 it was hard to get workers for any line of work and greenkeepers were regarded more often than not as menial labourers.

Not now, when it is a pleasure to "fall into chat" as my Irish wife would call it, with any of the groundskeeping staff at any golf course. In fact if the Chairman of Green at most courses would fall into chat with the Head Greenkeeper more often it would be beneficial all round.

**David Davies, Golf Correspondent, The Guardian**

I joined a Lurgan Golf Club and my predecessor (Sean) was Head Greenkeeper and a member of the Club. This made him less subtle when addressing members complaints.

On one occasion when spraying a green, one of the jack legs on the sprayer fell and left a lovely furrow from the front of the green to the back. Looking down the fairway a golfer was coming in our direction.

"It's the Doc," Sean muttered

When the 'Doc' came on to the green he made clear his feelings that this really should not have happened if we were professional and had we followed correct procedures. (in not so many words)

"That's the difference between your mistakes and mine, Doctor. Yours are buried where no one sees them," replied Sean.

Priceless.

**Kyle Irwin, Head Greenkeeper, Lurgan Golf Club**



Scottish Club Golfer produced a survey recently which asked greenkeepers from north of the border a series of questions relating to their work. Hats off to the magazine for taking the time to canvas opinion from greenkeepers and passing on the results to club golfers.

Among the results was the sad statistic that 56% of greenkeepers had been on the receiving end of verbal abuse from a club member and that the main reason for complaint was the condition of the course, which accounted for 82% of the total. Sixty percent of golfers complained about the state of the greens while the condition of the bunkers and rough figured prominently.

It was also revealed that 73% took up the profession because of their love of golf with 21% saying they wanted to work outdoors.

According to 47% of the greenkeepers surveyed the single biggest improvement in technology belonged to modern aeration equipment with 30% feeling that the improved design and workability of the fairway mower and 11% believing greens equipment to be the greatest advancement.

Thanks to Martin Dempster and Scottish Club Golfer for making the results available to Greenkeeper International

I always wave to greenkeepers. I think that's because I don't generally feel they get the recognition they deserve. We have a regular column in Golf Weekly now called GUR which is written by Chris Lomas, Course Manager at The Berkshire. It is intended to educate golfers about the work that their green staff get up to.

Peter Masters, Editor, Golf Weekly

Before I got involved in golf I thought a greenkeeper was somebody who just produced highly manicured turf. I didn't even consider the rest of the golf course. Most but not all, televised golf concentrates on the playing area you hardly ever see natural habitat. If you are as ignorant as I was then you think that's all there is green, fairway tee and a bit or rough.

A Course Manager is a person manager; he maintains the golf course, including the non playing surface; he's got to liaise with Joe Public - the golfers; he's got to liaise with the committee. He's got about five different roles and it's a terribly sophisticated job and the amount of training which goes into that is extraordinary.

I've been walking round the golf course with a greenkeeper and people have come up and been really rude. I think that's outrageous they just don't understand what's gone into the production of that green. Not even grateful, they are antagonistic and really horrible, haven't the faintest idea and I think it's dreadful.

Dr Alan Gange, Royal Holloway College

"Confessions", which is published by the STRI, is a marvellous book and one that should be made required reading for all prospective Green Convenors. In it, the author tells how he supported his Course Manager, Martin Gunn, in his quest to return his club, Temple Golf Club, near Maidenhead, to its former glory. It wasn't easy.

After years of over-watering, too much fertiliser and not enough aeration the course was in a sorry state. It took several years to rectify but the transformation is now complete. Put simply, Temple, as it is now, is arguably the best conditioned inland course in the British Isles.

Peake's book teaches the aspiring Greens Convenor a great deal. For starters, the author questions a new Convenor's right to dictate to his head greenkeeper on matters appertaining to agronomy.

He tells that when he started: "I thought I knew about golf courses, but how could I? I only played golf - I didn't have any qualifications. But I, like every other golfer, had an opinion on the golf course. I had a lot to learn - first lesson"

As it turned out, numerous lessons had to be assimilated, another being how important it is to keep members informed about progress, what was to happen next etc, etc.

In the end what Martin, Malcolm, and numerous others have found is that communication is vital if the grumblers are to be silenced and the relationship between the greenstaff and the members is to be improved.

I have no doubt that communication of this sort has improved markedly in recent years but still I believe more can be done.

Take my new club as an example. There, both the Course Manager and the Greens Convenor do an excellent job keeping the members informed about when the greens are to be aerated and when other major projects are to be undertaken.

But seldom, it seems to me, do they go one stage further and tell us why the work is being done. For that reason, they leave themselves open to criticism, however misguided it might be.

Frequently, when I arrive at the club, I hear members moaning about "the greens being dug up again". That criticism comes from golfers who have no idea about how important it is to aerate greens on a regular basis but that is beside the point. Disquiet can be inculcated and problems can brew as a result.

Let's return to the football manager analogy for a second. At the Conference club I support, the Manager and his Chairman have started to stage regular Fans' Forums during which they outline plans for the future and deal with an assortment of questions from supporters.

To date, these sessions have proved hugely successful, to the extent that I cannot help but feel they could be copied in a golf environment.

Nowadays, numerous clubs stage Rules evenings, when a resident, or visiting, expert answers questions on the Rules of Golf.

That being the case, why shouldn't clubs also hold a separate Course Maintenance forum, specifically set up to allow the greenkeeper and the greens committee to explain their policies.

In my experience, the aforementioned Nick Park was quite correct when he suggested that most greenkeepers came under fire, not as a result of their agronomic policies, but because their members failed to understand what it is they are trying to achieve.

Sort that out and I believe greenkeepers would go a long way to reducing the unwelcome, and in most cases, unfair criticism they all too often receive.