

The "Good Old Days"

Do you remember the "good old days?" One of the pleasures of being Chairman is meeting and listening to my peers. Those sometimes retired or coming to the twilight of their time in greenkeeping and soon moving onto pastures new. Or will they? Will they drift off into the sunset and hang up their work boots never to be seen again? Well I can assure you, if my trips during the past months are anything to go by then nothing could be further from the truth.

It seems everywhere I go there is always at least one of those greenkeepers who we have all heard of and to whom we have looked up to for inspiration and guidance. They turn up to golf days and seminars and still enjoy the buzz of mixing it up with us comparatively young whipper snappers.

What I love best is their stories. With a quiet assurance and a passion, they openly share their life spent on courses up and down the country. I asked one what he missed from the good old days. "Young man," he said, "the good old days my arse. You don't know you are born today. Now when I was a lad..." He then drifted back through the drudgery of greenkeeping over the ages and it's only then you realise just how far we have come. They didn't even have the basics that we take for granted today in terms of welfare and working conditions and if we were to compare maintenance complexes, there would be no comparison to the well-heated, ventilated and secure buildings where we all, mostly, enjoy working from today.

One old greenkeeper told me about how he used to sit having his lunch on tubs of mercury fungicides as they always kept those in the driest part of the sheds while, as for ventilation, he said that was never a problem as they had that in abundance.

All materials were moved by hand and in most cases wheelbarrows featured highly in their daily existence - something I can remember from when I was an apprentice greenkeeper.

As I remember, we had been digging some drains - now you have to picture the scene, me and my twin brother down the dirtiest hole in the world, hand digging what seemed to be miles



of lateral drainage. We were in those drains for what seemed to be years. The funny thing was that Bobby seemed to have a knack of bringing more clay out on his clothes than he ever managed on his spade. My mum used to comment on how clean he used to be when he got home. God he did look a picture after a day in the drains.

As always I have gone off the topic of wheelbarrows, I'm turning into one of those Ronnie Corbett sketches where he sat in a big chair and start off telling a story, drift off the point and with complete aplomb return nicely to the subject in hand. Wheelbarrows it was, anyway there we were Bobby and I down this drain on the 6th hole in the middle field at Bushill Park and we noticed my dad stomping over the fairway. So with great presence of mind, we both started digging and looking busy, covered in what could only be described as the dirtiest muck London had to offer.

"A load of rejects (drainage stone) is on its way, so meet the lorry and try and get him as close as you can then you can get backfilled today," he said. We both looked at each other, then at about five miles of open drains up and down this fairway, shrugged our shoulders and said, "Yes. No problem dad."

The lorry duly turned up and we went over to meet the driver, hoping that the persistent rain over the last two months hadn't made the

ground too wet and we could get the required stone near to the job in hand. As I remember the driver wasn't too eager to venture his nice clean lorry onto what could only be described as a wobbly jelly of a golf course. Now we had a vested interest in getting this stone as close to the offending drains as possible. We convinced the driver that he would be fine and there was no chance that he would get stuck. Well, he reversed his lorry, none of your beeping horns in those days, got about 30 feet off the roadway and duly got stuck up to his ankles in the soggy ground. There was nothing left but to tip him where he was and head off for the tractor and chain to pull him out.

Our required stone was now so far from the open drains it to be wheel barrowed halfway across the course. It took us an eternity so long, in fact, that we must have worn out at least two pairs of work boots. What the experience gave us was a dogged determination not to be beaten by anything and in the face of adversity rise to any challenge asked of us.

So to all those that share our passion for greenkeeping from a yonder year, I would say this - You are valued still and we enjoy as much, as I know you do, the exchange of stories. We thank you for the wonderful gift of sharing your life with us and long may it continue. And just reading what I have remembered from a part of my past made me smile. As you know, I'm still very young indeed and not nearly as accomplished as my peers.

As for the "good old days" - As I'm often told by those who have been there and done that, these are "our" good old days and when you have the chance to meet those coming to the twilight of their time in greenkeeping, enjoy their wonderful stories. Knowing where we have come from will make us all the richer and I'm sure we can share our lives with the next generation of whipper snappers.

The thing is, stories always get bigger in the telling and all the more pleasurable for that, so forgive the odd fib about linier lengths on this occasion.

Billy McMillan

Your next issue of GI will be with you by August 2nd
Visit our website for a full archive of BIGGA magazine issues at www.bigga.co.uk