



Greenkeepers Training Committee



A message from the Chairman of the GTC, Donald Steel

If experience (better than old age) has one benefit, it is in allowing you to draw comparisons. Where greenkeeping is concerned, the conclusions are invariably that what goes round, comes round.

However, one e-mail last week from America talked of Superintendents looking for ways of trimming costs in the light of a weaker economy.

The suggested method was a drastic reduction in the use of water, fertilisers and chemicals. How are the mighty fallen?

One means of astonishing Golf Course Superintendents in America is to mention the average annual budget for British courses allied to the number of greenkeepers commissioned to look after them.

It prompts open-mouthed disbelief but therein is contained the contrast in philosophies.

British regimes have always been more austere, a formula geared to a different climate and a largely different interpretation of how courses should play.

One of the problems arises over here when Clubs are misguided enough to want to copy the American approach by having everything green and heavily watered but, in spite of consistently higher temperatures, it is surprising in the Southern States how little water Bermuda grasses need.

One of the other spin-offs from experience is saying the same thing in a different way, a subtle exercise in trying to disguise the nature of the contents by means of fresh packaging.

Sustainable golf is the new war cry, "optimising the playing quality of the golf course in harmony with the conservation of its natural environment under economically sound and socially responsible management".

It is a subject that has led to my delving into my old Press cuttings in order to make sure I am not missing anything but,

having worked closely with Jim Arthur over a couple of decades or more, and been the recipient of countless of his oral and written exocet missiles, I don't think I am. At last, I can hear him saying, somebody may be listening.

One item that comes to mind surrounded the time in 1975 when no sooner had the R&A announced that Turnberry would hold its first Open Championship in 1977 than the Ailsa course was reported to be in poor condition.

Alarm bells rang and a magic potion was brewed by Jim consisting of something of a return to nature, a reduction of inorganic feeding, regular aeration and scarification; and a tight hold on water. Does any of that sound familiar?

It also highlighted other lessons. Firstly, that the course is a Club's greatest asset, its sole reason for existence, and that it should receive priority over everything else; and secondly, years of proper management can be swept away in months by heavy-handedness- a clear message that prevention is so much better (and cheaper) than cure.

It was a year or so later that the British Association of Golf Course Architects drew to public attention the need for formalised greenkeeper training of which Jim was also a strong proponent.

The architects were among the first to see the futility of building a host of new courses with only a handful of qualified men to look after them.

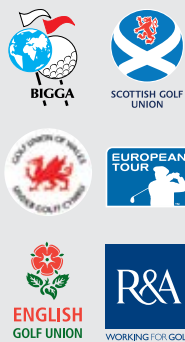
They realised the total dependence of architects on high class maintenance in order to achieve their desired aims.

Today's healthy situation, as far as the excellent standards of greenkeeping are concerned, stem from around that time but so, too, does The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' involvement with golf.

In Brief

Donald Steel praises the work of the UK's greenkeepers, and how Jim Arthur would be delighted at the current move towards sustainable golf.

The GTC is funded by:



They have recently collaborated with the R&A on a book making golfers aware of the value of golf courses in providing safe havens for birds but, as I wrote in the Sunday Telegraph in March 1976, "golf course architects have been trying for years to convince doubters that courses are a natural blend with the countryside and that their aim is to create and maintain natural habitats".

It followed The RSPB's appeal to "Save a place for Birds" launched by its then Director, Ian Prestt.

By way of celebration, they organised a "Save a birdie" competition (how long did it take to think of that title?!) in which every golf Club was invited to take part.

In spreading the word, they were greatly assisted by an entirely unplanned television transmission of an Open when a mother and her young pheasant chicks were spied by an observant cameraman evading the hordes of spectators.

It struck such a chord, in fact, that no programme was allowed to start without a progress report on the birds and their welfare.

In 1987, Sir David Attenborough joined forces with the Royal Society for Nature Conservancy by announcing a new Club tournament, the British Wildlife National Golf Classic, maintaining that "golf courses have always, and will always, provide splendid wildlife habitats for whatever reason they are conserved".

Many golfers play the game as much for its aesthetic delights as its challenge and they and nearly every greenkeeper require no prompting in supporting such a worthy cause.

It has always struck me that sustainability and wildlife preservation go together and that all birds are welcome- except perhaps the Canada goose.



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