

Case of the British Revolution

BY BRADLEY S. KLEIN

The classic model of the British greenkeeper is a rough-clad gardener with a rake who fertilizes his golf course with a vile compost of seaweed, cattle blood and iron filings. At many courses in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland, there's a man in overalls who fits this picture. But thanks to the efforts of the recently formed British and International Golf Greenkeepers Association, the image is rapidly changing.

For centuries, the assumption was that British golf was a natural affair, played on linksland soil that

needed little tending. Man could scarcely improve upon it. The sandy soil drained well, rabbits and grazing animals nibbled their modest parcels of turf, and irrigation was assured by nothing more than the vagaries of a wet climate.

This "links style" of greens maintenance held sway over part of the British greenkeeping profession. Yet today, as conditions in the industry have changed so dramatically, the classic image is under scrutiny.

The demand upon golf courses has grown steadily the past 150 years. The advent of the gutta-percha ball around 1850 rendered

obsolete the expensive old "featherie" ball. Suddenly, golf became accessible to the middle classes. The old links became heavily played — indeed, overplayed.

A need arose for someone to tend the playing surfaces and repair damage to the course — someone who could muster all the artifices that agricultural science could devise. The first fulltime greenkeepers came into the picture near the end of the 19th century.

To meet the growing demand, courses were built inland, on sites previously regarded as ill-suited

for the game. Well-draining sand-based courses were one thing. Heathland and parkland soils were quite another. These heavier soils had to be drained or mud would overtake the course in spring and winter. These problems could not be addressed by traditional means.

A new generation of inland architects, including C.H. Alison, H.S. Colt and Alister MacKenzie, began addressing drainage and proper turf.

Largely to meet the demands of inland courses, the Board of Greenkeeping Research, later renamed the Sports Turf Research

Institute, was founded in 1929. However, this research unit was not, until recently, tied to a comprehensive organization encompassing British greenkeepers.

National identities and interests led England, Scotland and Ireland to maintain their own greenkeepers associations.

Funding was scarce, formal educational opportunities were few, and a longstanding tradition of fierce independence among the various keepers of the green assured parochialism in the ranks. This legacy proved so strong that a 1987 discussion document, *The Way Forward*, dealing with British golf course management and issued by the Royal and Ancient Golf Club Greenkeeping Panel, observed "British golf's historical attitude to greenkeeping (in marked contrast to America) has been — and still is, in many cases — astonishingly disorganized, penny-pinching and arrogant.

Still, one could have added, "amazingly successful."

Most British golf courses have fulltime greenkeeping staffs of four or five. Royal Dornoch, one of the world's most highly regarded courses, has nine fulltimers for its 36 holes.

The only fertilizer ever used there is liquified seaweed. To this day, fairways are not watered. A hand-operated watering system reaches only greens and a handful of tees. An on-course well delivering 40 gallons of water per minute suffices for both courses.

Romantic? Yes.

Practical in today's high-pressure world of golf course maintenance? Perhaps not.

But it's this dichotomy — old versus new — that makes greenkeeping in the British Isles so fascinating.

SUNY-Delhi hosts seminar on building

A seminar on golf course construction and renovation, featuring Joseph Hahn, Dr. Norman Hummel and Dr. Michael Hurdzan, was held Aug. 21 at the State University of New York at Delhi, N.Y.

The New York State Turfgrass Association coordinated the seminar, proceeds from which benefitted the student golf course internship at SUNY-Delhi.

Hahn, superintendent at Oak Hill Country Club in Rochester, N.Y., reviewed his road to hosting the 1989 U.S. Open.

Hummel, of Cornell University, presented a session on green construction concepts and sand selection. He demonstrated water movement in different soil mixtures and working models of greens profiles.

Hurdzan, of Hurdzan Design Group in Columbus, Ohio, has designed more than 100 new golf courses and some 200 renovation projects in the North America and Asia.

He discussed an architect's view of design and specifications.



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