

Public Golf in England Thrives on Adversity

By VERNE WICKHAM

Public golf is "hanging on" in England—and doing a right good job of it.

Golf, along with everything else, is feeling the effects of the austerity program. Gas rationing, while long since over, had its effect in reducing the number of golfers and with the Persian gasoline jitters facing them petrol is high and they talk of it going higher—to maybe four shillings.

London has probably one of the finest transportation systems in the world, but even this can not make up for the lack of auto transportation.

There are about 70 public golf courses in England. About 14 are in the London area—that is not enough. Birmingham has six and its population is far less than London. Liverpool had three, but two were plowed up for food production. One is being restored to ease the congestion there where during the long summer days more than 500 golfers play on Sundays.

Green fees on the courses around London are more or less standardized—and cheap by American standards. Daily green fees run around two shillings for 18 holes or about twenty-eight cents. The rate for all day is 3 and 6—49 cents. On Saturdays, Sundays and holidays it is at its highest—six shillings for the day—or 85 cents.

Play on the London area courses is not heavy, even at that cheap price. On good holiday or week ends many of the courses consider it a good day when they run 200 golfers through the starter house. On week days if they run 100 players they are content.

Caddy cart rates are the same as green fees in most cases, so for a Sunday round a dollar American will get you your place on a course and give you a caddy cart. Lunch will cost you 4 and 6—or sixty-three cents.

These rates may seem ridiculously cheap by American standards, but in relation to the income of the people they are relatively the same as ours—and course operators do not have the investment tied up in their golf course construction or maintenance as do their American brothers. The irrigation systems and water costs are heavy in America. They do not have them in England.

The real pinch of the present program in England is being felt by the great middle classes. The rich and the poor are always

with us and always seem to be taken care of, but the so-called white collar worker is having his economic hazards to get over. It is from this class that public golfers come, so the going is tough.

Country clubs are feeling the tax squeeze terrifically, and again this year their request for a reduction in taxation on land and improvements was refused by the Labor Government, so there may be more country clubs available for operation as public fee courses—if one is brave enough to try.

County Councils Save Courses

However, there is one comforting aspect of this situation in the manner in which County Councils (municipal government) have been stepping in to save golf courses. Recently an exclusive country club near London, in dire financial state, was purchased by the Council and leased back to the country club—thereby saving the golf course for all time. The same arrangement is under way to save another club in the same area. Both will be leased back to the country club on a rental basis and not thrown open to the public thereby not being in competition with the hard-put public courses.

There is an unknown quantity in these operations. Two in fact. One is the British people's ability to fill these golf clubs and keep them self sustaining. There is a redistribution of wealth now going on in Britain, and the money is being drained away from the rich country-club set and moving down to the laboring man. One question is, will the laboring man, who has never had sufficient money or leisure to play golf, use his new money to play golf.

The other unknown quantity that is worrying golf course operators is a growing tendency on the part of the British male to quit competitive sport and go in for spectator sports. Attendance at sporting events is on the increase. Participation is dropping. The assumption is that the laboring man for the first time has money to buy tickets to sporting events he never has been able to see and is flocking to them rather than taking part in more sports. If this becomes a permanent thing the golf business may get tougher.

Golfing Societies Good for Golf

The one saving grace in the English golf picture right now is the golfing society. These groups have been in existence for

many years. They operate much as our golf clubs at public golf courses—being groups of golfers bound together by a commercial, club or fraternal tie, who play on various golf clubs. They usually have a home course and in that capacity operate as a public links golf club in America—but they travel more.

In groups of from 20 to 200 they charter buses and visit other golf clubs, stage a tournament there, eat lunch and have a gay time. This added business is welcomed with open arms by any public golf course operator and the country clubs really get out the plush red carpet for this added business. It is a grand thing, both for the members of the golfing society, who are getting to play on the famed golf courses, and the cash register of the hard-put course operator and club secretary.

While green fees on public golf courses are low by American standards, so is membership and initiation fees at country clubs. At one of the better clubs near London annual dues run around 15 to 20 pounds a year, roughly \$75.00. Many others around the three guinea figure which is around \$10.00.

Courses Far Out

The golf courses around London range from about 12 miles from downtown London to around 50 or 60 miles to the ones far out which try to get golf trade from metropolitan London. Hill Barn is 58 miles from London—a good 90 minutes by the fast train. Hollingsbury Park, Brighton, Sussex, a famous course built in 1908 and liked by far traveling public golfers, is 53 miles from London, or roughly an hour by fast train. This is about as far out as Londoners go for their public golf. But even a trip to a relatively close in golf course is a problem. First you have to add to the train time the time needed to get around and across London by underground or bus. By the time you do this and reach the golf course you've spent almost a half-day in getting just to and from your golf course.

Typical Trip to Course

A typical trip is one to the Addington Court Public course, Addington, Surrey—one of the best public layouts. You are living near Russell Square which is almost down-town London, so you take the bus to Victoria Station where the trains run about two times an hour, maybe three times during crowded periods. You won't have to wait long for your fast train to East Croydon which is the first main stop after you leave London. This takes about a half hour. Then, you catch Bus 130 marked for New Addington. After you get off at Gravel Hill Garage station you start walking up Featherbed Lane toward the golf course. They will tell you it is a short walk—but there are no short walks in England. This one is about a four-hole walk up hill to the club house—and all five paces!

So, you play your eighteen holes and then repeat the performance and get home. And as the British say "you've 'ad hit."

The Addington golf course is operated, by the way, by the Hawtrees. Fred Hawtree is a well known golf architect who was associated with J. H. Taylor for many years. He is now a member of the Golf Advisory Committee, chairman of the public course organization and president of the greenskeepers group. In a semi-retired capacity he, with the able assistance of his son and daughter, operate the course.

In looking over data on public golf in England you may run onto one of the most interesting statements in existence on the theory of municipal golf green fees. The statement is found in the rules and regulations of Chapham Commons, a golfing society founded in 1873.

The statement reads: "Being on a public commons, it is, of course, open to any member of the public who may choose to use it, but, owing to the expense to which the club is put to provide playing facilities, it will be understood that some annual charge must be made and this is regulated by year according to the number of members subscribing."

With that theory of establishing green fees still on the books the low green fees are understandable.

Yes, things are getting tighter on the "tight little isle" and the hazards are terrifying but, "There will always be golf in England."

COMING TURF EVENTS

- Aug. 7—Turf Field Day. Rutgers Univ., New Brunswick, N.J.
- Aug. 22-23—20th Annual Greenskeepers' Field Days. University of Rhode Island, Kingston.
- Aug. 27-31—American Society of Agronomy Annual Meetings, Pennsylvania State College, State College, Pa.
- Sept. 5-7—Turf Field Days. The Pennsylvania State College and USGA Turf Advisory Committee, State College, Pa.
- Sept. 10-11—Turf Field Days. Purdue University and Midwest Regional Turf Foundation. West Lafayette, Ind.
- Oct. 7-9—National Turf Field Days. Beltsville Turf Gardens, Plant Industry Station, Beltsville, Md.
- Oct. 24-26—Turf Conference. Central Plains Turf Foundation and Kansas State College, Manhattan, Kansas.