

THE GOLF COURSE 1960-1992

LEO CHAMBERLAIN O.S.B.

I have been asked to pen a few thoughts about the golf course after 26 years of involvement. The early history is not well recorded and so the next paragraph concerning the years 1960-66 lacks detail and possibly accuracy. Nevertheless, as I hand on to Fr Simon now is the time to provide a written report on what has become a successful 9-hole golf course.

Fr Jerome Lambert started the golf course at Gilling Castle. Perhaps the pitch and putt course on the hill in front of the school had led to one narrow miss too many; perhaps he was just overcome, as happened in his life sometimes, by a piratical spirit of adventure. Legend has it that the then Headmaster, Fr William Price, gave it his backing; what is certain is that the Procurator, Fr Robert Coverdale, did not. He had to count Ampleforth's pennies, and, as usual, there were not enough of them. As for the proposed site, it was too far away from the school, it was too hilly, it was too small; but it was a piece of land that the farm could spare, and the then Headmaster of Gilling Castle, Fr Hilary Barton, also played golf, and a deal was done. The Professional from Strensall designed a course, trying to ensure that no ball would ever fall near Gilling boys, a work party was brought together, a bulldozer carved out some greens, and the course was in business – roughly speaking.

It was very rough. In fact I do not remember in those early years ever seeing a golfer. I first came on the scene in September 1963, fresh from spending a novitiate's manual labour in sieving earth through an old iron bedstead's sprung base, so anything would have seemed an entertaining diversion. Diversion it certainly proved. Never volunteer was always a useful rule in the armed forces, and much the same is true for a junior hoping to do some serious theology. But smiling was the face of Fr Colin Havard as he suggested that the odd afternoon helping him help Fr Jerome would be a good idea for someone who did not know the rules of rugby; ingratiating was his manner as he let me have the fun of driving the petrol-paraffin engined tractor – and cheerful was his farewell as he departed for our foundation at St Louis a year later.

Fr Jerome was still there. It has to be said that I never actually saw him on the golf course. I went on cutting grass, and in the summer a few boys with an active dislike of anything to do with bat, racquet and ball joined me. We had an old set of gang-mowers, one mowing machine and a cart. At least, I remember Fr Colin once saying, we haven't got much, but we do have a jolly good grease gun. Things often broke down; then Handleys of Helmsley were called in, or we found out what was wrong ourselves and Fr Jerome had to be contacted to get the spare part. That was the theory, but housemasters are busy men, and delays sometimes occurred, and the grass awkwardly went on growing. It was not long before I had found out Handley's telephone number myself and had placed a call or two. We got our spare parts quicker then, and

all went well until the account arrived on Fr Jerome's desk; what might be called a brusque encounter then took place in a dark corner of the monastery, after which I refrained from ordering anything – until the next prolonged breakdown two weeks later. But Fr Jerome's patronage was worth something. At one point, in 1965 I think, an old Morris van appeared, and for a month or two we had a superior form of transport over the valley, so the tractor could live at Gilling Castle. But the Procurator had not known of it, and there was another dark encounter, not involving me this time, after which I was told to leave the van in the yard for disposal.

Things went on in his happy way, and possibly one or two people tried to play golf, until the summer of 1966, when Fr Jerome left St Edward's and went to work on our parishes. He retained a kindly interest in the affairs of the golf course ever after, and I awaited some instructions or a new boss. Nothing happened. The grass grew. I had difficulty in understanding this situation. The question was urgent. It did not occur to me that an all-seeing Abbot and Headmaster had not been deep in consultation over the problem for weeks; after all, they knew about everything, and both of them were known to have swung a golf club, though perhaps not very often at Gilling Castle. Ah yes, they said, when I finally and hesitantly drew the question to their attention, the golf course; yes, yes, you must go on. I know now that the urgencies of life for those in senior positions involve crises of a rather larger kind; I also know that if anyone is doing something constructive, the main requirement is to cheer him on. At the time, it just seemed to be my job, although I was entirely ignorant of both grass and golf, and so a casual outing in September 1963 became a commitment for years to come. I had had a few lessons in golf before coming to the novitiate in 1961, but there was no time to practise now; the unforgiving grass, and the temperamental machines demanded everything.

It came as something of a surprise to discover that what a golfer calls the Rough really means grass not more than an inch or so high. Around this time I also discovered that greens needed to be cut twice a week at least, and that the surrounds of greens needed much attention. But there was still an unfailing supply of boys who seemed to like the work, and who could be repaid with monster binges at the end of term. We learnt, from the turf consultants we then used, a rhythm of maintenance. There were hiccoughs, like the day when I discovered that the farm's topping machine, vital for cutting the rough, was being sold at auction without the golf course's need for it being considered. I hurtled off to York after it, found it had been sold already, and bought a replacement at the same auction. Some money was found and gradually new machines began to appear. We had to have somewhere to keep them, so we built a new shed, which also provided space for clubs. Pouring concrete was a new experience for us all, but most of it went into the right place.

Money was in very short supply, like the golfers, until the day when the much respected publican at the Fairfax Arms, Frank Amies, a former naval

Chief Petty Officer, whispered to me that it might be a good idea to have a few local people allowed to use the course. Frank was the kind of man who ran his pub as a local institution; while he was there, he kept petrol pumps, just for the convenience of the village, because there was not much money in petrol. He also found a reliable helper. Until about the time of my ordination in 1968, there was no other help on the course; after that Tommy Welford, the expert in all maintenance at Gilling Castle and his assistant, Trevor Robinson, did some of the cutting of grass, and so did John Atkinson, the College electrician, who was one of the first enthusiastic golfers on the College staff. But we needed something more regular, and so Frank found Walter Reeves, one of the North Yorkshire County Council's road men, who was mourning a change in system by which people like himself had lost their lengths of road which had been their own responsibility and had to start working in groups. He was happy to earn more money, and rapidly became devoted to the course and its needs, doing it, as he said, for a bit of pride.

Walter's arrival enabled us to produce a slightly steadier standard, and enabled the boys and myself to concentrate on the greens. It was essential too, for other reasons. In the early days, with the long summer games afternoons and work only starting at 6 pm two or three days a week, there was plenty of time for workers and golfers to get to Gilling Castle for a satisfactory period. Now the steady crowding of the curriculum brought those long summer afternoons to an end, and at the same time, insurance problems forced me to stop allowing boys to drive the tractor.

The club was formed with legal advice as a separate institution, allowed to use the course on payment of a fee for a non-renewable licence which was negotiated annually. It was not long before numbers grew, but the arrangement was never satisfactory. It guaranteed opposition between club and management, and the nadir was reached one year when a modest and essential increase in subscription was required, one member of the committee opposing the increase on the grounds that the College should expect to be subsidising local golf! That little difficulty was only finally overcome in the eighties, when the Club entered into a closer relationship with the College.

We were able to buy more machines with an assured subscription income, and the course looked smarter with fresh flags and markers. Better gang-mowers were bought in association with Gilling Castle, and maintenance became better planned. Powered slitters and spikers made work easier. First, another old van replaced the tractor for transport across the valley; it was not reliable, but it was soon replaced by the retired College fire engine, a war-time vehicle, repainted green by the golf course workers (with some difficulty; after it had been rubbed down, others thought it might be fun to paint it as an ambulance, and stole art room paint to achieve their end).

Meanwhile, funny things were happening to the grass. Year after year, leaf mould was collected for the greens, with some difficulty and even danger on the steep slopes of the nearby woods; sharp sand was put down, and the spiking and slitting of the turf on the greens was done. But standards were not

improving much. Then, one year, the turf started wrapping around the barrel of the spiking machine like a rather untidy swiss roll, not at all what was supposed to happen. The view of the turf consultants was that nothing much better could be expected from rank amateurs doing this work, and that insufficient spiking, leaf moulding, etcetera, had been done. That line of argument did not carry much conviction in my ears, and I looked elsewhere for advice. It was found in Dr Victor Stewart, of Aberystwyth University and Turfscience Ltd., who kindly came to inspect (he never accepted a fee). Leaf mould was wrong; sharp sand was wrong; what was needed was even textured sand, with an exceptionally low lime content. He explained all this, so that for the first time I understood the logic of scientific grass maintenance. The greens improved beyond recognition within a season. Of the former consultants he said it was like allowing the nurses to run the NHS; which was not a piece of news that I chose to pass on to them. Most people do not appreciate grass in all its complexity. I had earlier got to know the fescues, the bents, and the dread Yorkshire Fog. A golf green needs quite different and much finer grass than an ordinary lawn. Not more than a third of the length of a piece of grass should be cut off when mowing, and a green needs grass deep-rooted as well as short and closely grown. More difficult, with the soil compacted under feet and mowers, aeration was needed. For ordinary lawns this is happily accomplished by the thousands of worms living in every cubic yard, unless they are killed by chemicals. But worms leave little mounds of earth on the surface at certain times of the year, fatal for accurate putting; so the worms had to go. A golf green is in fact today a completely artificial environment. Ideally, it is made of sand built on gravel and stones, free draining, encouraging deep rooted grass – the modern version of the original courses among the sand dunes. We could not go as far as that (the cost of building a golf green professionally today approaches £15,000) but we made an effort.

We became more ambitious. Another hole was constructed, dozens of trees were planted, and bunkers were made. We even gave the tees some attention, and bought the first set of tee mats for the course. A couple of benches were provided at strategic points for the benefit of less fit members. Golf became popular in the school when Fr Simon was able to take on the organisation of the game and quite soon it became obvious that the coincidence of maintenance and intensive school use of the course was both inconvenient and dangerous.

By this time, 1987, the club was prospering and was eager to help in securing further improvements to the course. My own involvements with aid to Poland had grown and there were other schemes on the horizon in association with Keston College, which came to fruition in 1990 in the Ampleforth Conference; but immediately, 1987 was the year of the Poland Run and the Schola's tour of Poland. The number of boys interested in manual work instead of sport was diminishing, though they remained a faithful group who did an extraordinary job over the years. It was time to

make a change, and in one of the members, Tom Berryman, we found a greenkeeper who was capable of bringing a new professionalism to the course.

Since then, tees have been enlarged, many more trees planted, some greens have been replanned and one completely new green has been built. A way has been found to bring water on to the course. In 1992, Ampleforth has what must be the cheapest built golf course in the country. It is still in the wrong place, and the hills are still too steep, but it has provided for boys, for the academic and maintenance staff, for people both local and not so local, a place where a satisfying game can be had, in surroundings of considerable beauty. The site holds further possibilities, but that is another story.