

Winter Green Maintenance

Introduction

Past experience shows that paying attention to the green regularly throughout the winter months pays dividends. Last year (2024-25) by February there were bare spots all over the green where large worm casts had remained on the green long enough to cause these patches. When James came to start spring treatments he was horrified at the state we had let it get into. In the absence of anyone else volunteering to take on the rôle, I have done the liaison work with James Hickmott and his sub-contractors and tried to enthuse others to take on a share of the winter maintenance work so that we can ensure we don't have a repeat of last year's experience.

In order that it is clear what needs doing I have tried to make notes of all the aspects of winter maintenance that people who want are willing to get involved would need to know. I apologise to those to whom I am stating the obvious and to those who know I am wrong. Perhaps the latter could supply corrections. I am probably not the best person to do the explaining, but in the absence of etc. etc....

Swishing

James Hickmott recommends going over the green with the dew switch at least several times a week. There are two reasons for this.

- Removing the dew. Knocking the dew off the blades of grass so that it drains into the ground keeps the grass healthier. Several winter diseases thrive on damp conditions, so the sooner the grass dries off the better. I have a theory that if the dew is left, the warmth of the sun (even if it is behind clouds) spends much time evaporating the water from the grass before it can warm up the grass. Removing the dew allows more time – equivalent to increasing the daylight hours.
- Removing the worm casts. Preventing the worm casts from smothering the grass is only possible if the casts are relatively small. Leaving them even for three days can mean it is much harder work to break up the casts and work them into the grass. This is necessary so that the grass itself is allowed to stand up and enable it to be mown without the mower cutting worm casts. It is easier to break up the casts when they are not sopping wet. If they are very wet, they smear across the grass.

Unfortunately it isn't possible to swish the dew first thing in the morning and at the same time remove dry worm casts. We can minimise the worm casts with whatever treatment is available. We can also make life easier by swishing frequently so that whatever worm casts we have are small. It is also easier to swish if the grass is reasonably short.

We now have two dew switches. They are kept in the equipment shed immediately on the right of the door. The shed padlock has the same combination as the club gate and the clubhouse door keypad and if you log into the [bowls club website](#) the combination is in the private (members) notes on the home page. The switch should be extended so that a few inches of the black sleeve is protruding from the tube but not extended as far as it will go as this makes the fibreglass rod vulnerable. Eventually they do split into fragments. We usually have a spar or two lodged up high in the equipment shed. They have to be fitted by taking off the opposite end and sliding it out through the handle.

Being left-handed I find it easier to work my way round the green anticlockwise round the edge and working inward, so I go down rink 1, across the hall end, up rink 4 and back along the hedge end then doing rinks two and finally three. It usually needs more sweeps near the edges where the worms are most active before moving on a pace and I find this easiest on the right side of my sweep, but right-handers probably find it easier on their left so would prefer to go round clockwise.

It is surprising how easy it is if the grass is reasonably short and there are few worm casts. When the worms were really bad it took me 15 minutes after one day, then – having missed two days – after three days I swished again and it took 45 minutes.

Mowing

Up until winter 2023/4 we were mowing during the winter with an old cylinder mower – a Ransomes Auto Certes Mk VI. It was a robust cylinder machine and survived rough winter treatment for many years but really was too knackered in 2023 and we managed to sell it! Since then, on a suggestion from James Hickmott, we have been using a rotary mower, a Hayter which can be set down to a mowing height of half an inch which is the maximum we should mow at over the winter.

We don't use the Allett because it is expensive to service. If there is debris on the green containing top dressing this is very abrasive and quickly wears out the thin bottom blade. It is designed for mowing fine greens and if the grass is allowed to get long in the winter (which has happened) it is not up to the task. Not using the Allett means we can get it and at least one of the mowing cassettes we have for it serviced over the winter.

Having said we don't use the Allett, I have used it on a day when the green was long but dry. It was long because the Hayter wasn't cutting efficiently. I had just removed what few worm casts there were and I knew that the mowing cassette would have its bottom blade replaced during its imminent service so I might as well get maximum use out of it. I set it to 9mm so it wouldn't be too close to the remains of the worm casts.

During the winter, when we are not bowling on the green we can mow at right angles to the edges rather than diagonally. We should still alternate up-and-down and crossways and always at lowest setting. It can be easier to set higher just to manoeuvre the mower on and off the green. Remember to check that it is not still set to high before mowing.

Please clean the mower afterwards if it is wet and there is debris splattered on it. If the water is on (it will be off when there is a chance of frost) you can use the compressor.

Diseases

During the winter, the damp weather often results in an outbreak of fusarium. I'm no expert at spotting this, but the sooner it is spotted the sooner we can get it treated and the least damage will be caused. If you spot something suspicious, please report it and we'll get James Hickmott to confirm what it is and arrange treatment.