

# Laying down the lawn

SUE CADE meets an octogenarian who has  
been cutting Devon turf for over 50 years

PHOTOS: Matt Austin

It might come as a surprise to learn that there's been a thriving turf industry in Devon for many decades, providing many glorious green spaces for this verdant county.

"It all started in the 1960s as something of a sideline," Vernon Hockley says, wryly. "I was working for hay and straw merchants Abbot Trower and relocated here to open the regional office for Devon and Cornwall. One morning I took a call from the boss, Christopher Trower, who gleefully conveyed to me that he'd bought a turf cutter."

Nonplussed, Vernon thought no more about it until he received a second call from Christopher with the news that the cutter had been a great success. "He told me, 'I'm buying another and I'm sending it to you!'"

Vernon subsequently started selling turf, on a casual basis at first. "In those days we were peddling turf that we cut from old pastures about to be ploughed. I knew all the farmers from working in the hay industry, so I'd chat them up to find out which fields they were about to turn over."

Fate stepped in when Vernon met local farmer George Cann who was looking to diversify. HCT (Hockley, Cann, Trower) Turf was founded, and the real business of turfing began.

"Back then, we walked behind a mechanical cutter, cutting turf a bit like doormats. Everything was done by hand, the turf was folded and stacked onto pallets – it was hard, physical work," Vernon reminisces.



He explains that they don't harvest from permanent pasture land any more, as it's needed for wildflowers, butterflies and bees. Instead, they started renting land from local farmers and growing the grass themselves. "The land has to be the right sort and when we decided to rent we

*'Grass is very resilient – in drought conditions it goes to sleep and as soon as there's a decent amount of rain, it will spring back to life'*

had to check the quality of the individual fields. Much the same as for vegetable growers, well-drained soil is ideal, heavy clay provides ideal growing sites.

The turf is made with a mix of amenity grasses, developed to grow roots - unlike farm grass. "We don't use just one variety of grass but several; rye grass provides strength and other grasses add finesse, giving a nice thick green sward."

Devon's turf industry has changed dramatically over the years, not just because of mechanisation but also the burgeoning of new homes. "Funnily enough, some of our

**LEFT:** Vernon Hockley reflects on his life in turf: 'We all love it when we're asked to provide turf for an immense lawn'

**ABOVE:** After Christopher retired the younger generation stepped in; Vernon's son Richard and George's daughter Stephanie are both full-time in the business



Topsham growing fields are now being turned into housing developments, and we'll probably be turfing those gardens in a year or two," reveals Vernon.

He laments the reduction in the size of lawns on new developments: "We all love it when we're asked to provide turf for an immense lawn, though this is rarer and rarer."

But large expanses of turf are still needed. Anyone who has wandered across Exeter Cathedral Green, visited Ladram Bay or Highbullin Hotel, dined at Lympstone Manor or played a round on Ashbury Golf Course is likely to have walked on Vernon's turf.

HCT has developed into a family business. After Christopher retired the younger generation stepped in; Vernon's son Richard and George's daughter Stephanie are both full-time in the business. They've learnt from the experience of their fathers, and the problems

they have to deal with in the world of turf.

"Problems are generally to do with our unpredictable weather," Vernon explains. "It can be too wet to harvest and, equally, too dry. Once it's cut, turf needs to be laid ideally within 24 hours and, when the weather's hot, within a few hours - otherwise the turf starts 'silaging' as the moisture heats up."

Last summer's heatwave was a challenge for lawns, I say, thinking of my own crispy brown garden. But Vernon tells me not to worry. "Grass is very resilient – in drought conditions it goes to sleep and as soon as there's a decent amount of rain, it will spring back to life."

Vernon, who recently turned 80, has always been a countryman at heart; in his spare time, he loves to fish for salmon and sea trout in Scotland and Ireland. And for 13 years he ran a very successful pheasant shoot at Spreyton, with the Tom Copley pub on hand for refreshments for beaters and shooters. One of the big loves of his life, (besides his wife and two children) are his spaniels.

I ask what it is that makes him continue being hands-on in the turf business, when he could so easily retire and do more fishing. It's all about the people, he says. "I'm close to my customers, and I don't want to walk away."

Age does bring limitations, however. Vernon laughs. "I'm not allowed to drive a tractor these days. Everything is computerised - and the family think it will confuse me!" ♦

## Vernon's top five tips to a healthy lawn

Lay turf in spring or autumn on prepared ground.

Make sure your mower (rotary or cylinder) has sharp blades.

Don't mow too short; keep a nice sward of grass.

To keep a good lawn mow at least once a week and twice if necessary - bear in mind a greenkeeper on a golf course cuts the greens every day!

Weed and feed in the spring. Small amounts of compound fertiliser are available from garden centres.