

SPORT

MP backs bowlers in battle to save greens

By Nigel Morris
DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR

Bowling has been popular since Sir Francis Drake supposedly insisted on finishing his game on Plymouth Hoe before heading off to sink the Spanish Armada.

But bowling greens across the country face a fight for survival in the face of spending cuts by town halls and pressure from developers eyeing sites for houses, supermarkets and car parks.

Doubts have even been raised about the future of Sir Francis's historic seafront lawn.

MPs of all parties are supporting a parliamentary drive to prevent the disappearance of greens, which are a historic feature of many towns.

Despite its low media profile, bowls is among the nation's most popular participant sports, with some 500,000 players across the country.

But some clubs are threatened by the squeeze on local authority budgets.

Rotherham Council plans to reduce the number of greens it maintains from 34 to 18. Greens are also under threat in Birmingham, Manches-

ter, Plymouth and Edinburgh. Struggling pubs and working men's clubs which have greens attached, particularly in the Midlands and the North, are also under pressure to sell them to raise cash.

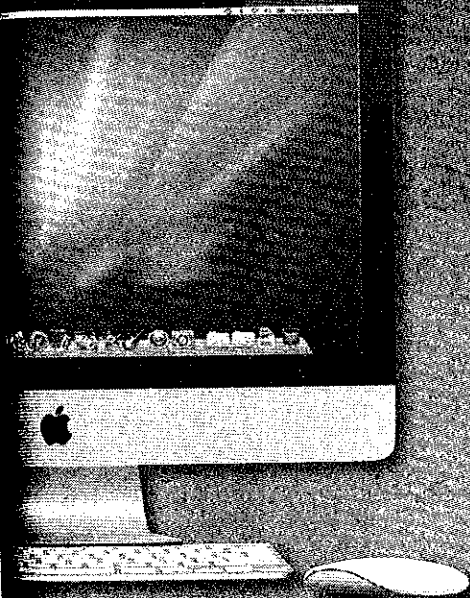
The campaign is being headed by the Labour MP John Woodcock after he discovered seven greens had closed in his Barrow and Furness constituency since 1994.

Next month, he will have a second Commons reading for a Bill - co-sponsored by a Tory and a Liberal Democrat MP - which will give extra protection to bowling clubs whose greens could be put up for sale. They hope its cross-party support will prompt ministers to make relatively small changes to planning regulations to protect greens.

Mr Woodcock said: "Bowling is an important part of community life."

iii Save Our Greens. said: "This sport is the only one where a grandmother can play alongside her granddaughter."

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