

HEATHLAND

Maintaining the balance and balancing the maintenance.

By Kevin Munt, course manager at Hankley Common Golf Club, Surrey.

HOW MANY of you feel that you are balancing on a tightrope in your efforts to maintain the correct environmental conditions in which agrostis and fescue grasses may thrive?

All of you!

Well, that's good news for greenkeeping and golf alike. Of course, you never stop the balancing act, even if you have 100 per cent agrostis/fescue greens, tees, approaches and fairways. Maintaining that Utopian course requires constant vigilance and skill. No matter how skilled the tightrope walker, one lapse in concentration and it's a long way to fall.

If we now widen our view of the golf course and take a look at its whole ecological system and environment, we will find that it is not just our playing surfaces that need close attention. The areas of land we are in charge of, or are working on, are under constant change. This process of change may be very slow in some environments—eg linksland—or very fast in the case of heathland, where, if man does not intervene, nature will take its course and create a forest.

I often feel that we spend a lot of time hunting the demon *Poa annua* and providing firm fast playing surfaces without giving consideration to the surrounding habitat.

In one man's all-too-short lifetime, he can have a major effect on his environment—whether it be just in the back garden or changing the world. Most of us wish to leave our mark on the planet, hence man's love of gardening.

Sunningdale has had four men in charge during its history, each one has left his mark or, in Jack McMillan's case, is leaving his mark. I once read in a Jim Arthur report (a man who has certainly made his mark) that 'preservation is not conservation.'

We must conserve our golfing environments not preserve everything that grows on them, which leads me on to the subject of conserving our precious heathland golf courses for the enjoyment of generations of golfers to play on and greenkeepers to work on.

It is often said that linksland was laid down by the Lord for man to play

golf on. Well, I happen to believe that, on his day of rest, he layed down some heathland and moorland so we wouldn't have to trek down to the coast to find a good test of golf.

This was converted into fine golf courses by men such as H.S. Colt, Willie Park, Herbert Fowler and James Braid. The open rolling aspect of this heather-covered land was a great attraction to them. They found free-draining and sandy soils that supported the bents and fescues found on the links from whence they came.

Many of these courses have changed a great deal since they were first laid out in the latter part of the last century and early part of this one. Many of these changes concern the vegetation now found surrounding playing areas. The planting of trees and shrubs has completely changed the landscape that would have first greeted these course architects.

Heathland

I wonder how many of the courses described in golf course guides as heathland can be found on true heathland? To answer the question we must first define 'heathland.' And to take a leaf from Eddie Park's article in the January/February edition of *Greenkeeper*, what is the 'case history' of heathland?

Heathland is found in lowland areas of Britain on poor dry soils, mainly on land once covered by glacial activity or rivers. These soils are sandy and free-draining. The soils have become podzolised due to the leaching out of the soil's nutrients and minerals. These are often deposited lower in the soil's horizon making an impermeable pan known as iron stone (iron salts). This leached soil is very acidic.

There are exceptions to all rules and Walton Heath could be described as the exception to this one, as it is on a much richer soil. It is a characteristic of heathland that it has a very restricted range of flora and fauna. This is the key point to remember when maintaining the balance on heathland. The soils offer little potential for most plant life.

Just as we do not encourage a

diversity of grasses on our playing surfaces, we should not encourage a diversity of plant life on our heathland. In fact, as soon as we do, we can no longer describe the area as true heathland.

Another important point to remember when dealing with heathland is that it is a man-made environment. It is land that was claimed by man from forests for grazing his livestock. This land was then retained by burning and grazing to keep down trees and scrub.

Today, casual grazing is not widely practised as it is uneconomical. Thus, much of our heathland is lost as natural succession takes over and the heaths revert to woodland, or grazing is improved by encouraging lush pasture with the use of fertilisers and lime. This is where the main paradox of heathland lies. Whereas most other habitats and ecosystems are interesting due to their large diversity and the diversity is often greatly encouraged, the correct management of heathland should seek to avoid diversity and fertility.

From this description and definition, how many courses in Britain could be described as true heathland? If you know of one, let me know, for I would love to see and play it.

Fire is a most important factor in the heathland ecology. On the grouse moors of Scotland, thousands of acres are burnt in managed fires to ensure a succession of new heather growth. The fire will prime the dormant heather seed to induce growth and will destroy the competitive vegetation.

Due to urbanisation and forestation, even the controlled burning of heather on a golf course is not possible. We have to use mechanical and chemical methods to maintain our ling (*calicina vulgaris*). This can create a problem as the build up of cut material can interfere with plant regrowth and provide nutrient to the soil.

The cutting of heather is a highly sensitive subject at most clubs. It is vital if the plant is not to become leggy and very woody. Cut it too low too often and you create open spaces between the plants, which will be



The open heathland across Hankley Common's 10th and 12th is typical of golf course land that is fast disappearing.



The 1st fairway where Kevin Munt aims to maintain a balance between heather and Scots pine.

invaded by grasses. Even agrostis and fescues are not desirable among heather.

The aim should be to provide a succession of dominant heather with more mature plants growing in the deeper rough providing seed and a habitat to support some more interesting wildlife. I would suggest that a cut in the early spring rather than autumn so that the ling has a chance to seed fully.

As most heathland courses try to maintain the almost impossible balance of Scots pine, silver birch and rowan growing alongside heather, we create another problem.

We are encouraging a change in the environment towards woodland. Litter from deciduous trees provides organic material to the soil, thus supplying nutrients that will encourage the whole chain reaction of invasion from undesirable plants.

Scots pine and silver birch saplings are a major problem in themselves and it is a constant fight to prevent them from getting the upper hand. Ling has adapted itself to an open dry

habitat. Trees give shade and their litter retains moisture, thus the heather will recede due to an undesirable environment being created. At this point, natural succession has the upper hand.

Many of the wooded areas around golf courses are neglected due to a lack of money, labour and even care, which is hardly conducive to maintaining the heathland nature of courses.

Encouraged

Some years ago, it was decided that trees should be encouraged on heathland courses—the reasons for which are many and would require an article of their own. The heathland manager now has to cope with the legacy left from these plantations. I am not suggesting that Sunningdale Old Course would be better without its majestic setting provided by Scots pine and silver birch, or that it should fit the true definition of heathland. I would, however, like to be able to

hear Willie Park's view of the present vista.

Golf traffic and the use of trolleys and motorised buggies, plus the use of mechanised greenkeeping equipment, has caused another major threat to heaths. Erosion, due to the sandy nature of the soil with little organic matter to cushion wear, has led to large tracks being worn through lovely swathes of heather. Permanent single routes through heather for golfers and machinery should be encouraged. An appreciation by golfers educated in the complex and unstable environment that exists under their feet would also go a long way to ensuring that the heathland golf course, in its true environ, will be retained for future generations.

In writing this article, I would hope to encourage users and managers of heathland to look at their lovely environment on a broader scale. Four per cent of Britain's heathland is lost to bracken alone each year. We who

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Heathland— Continued...

work in this environment have a duty to conserve as much of this disappearing land as possible.

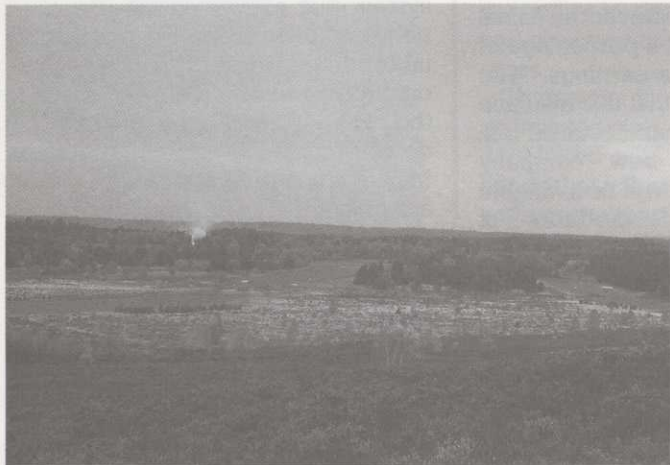
Let us not lose any more of our

heathland golf courses to trees, bracken, gorse, undesirable grasses and mismanagement due to ill-conceived ideas of what a heathland golf course should look and play like.

Next time you are out on a heathland course, whether working or playing, take time out to see how much of the heathland remains

according to the true definition I have described.

If you are carrying out your 'tightrope act' on a heathland course, ensure that you are maintaining your balance. I and many others would hate to see you topple and, thus, lose more of that fine inland golfing terrain laid down on the seventh day.



Open and tree-lined fairways.

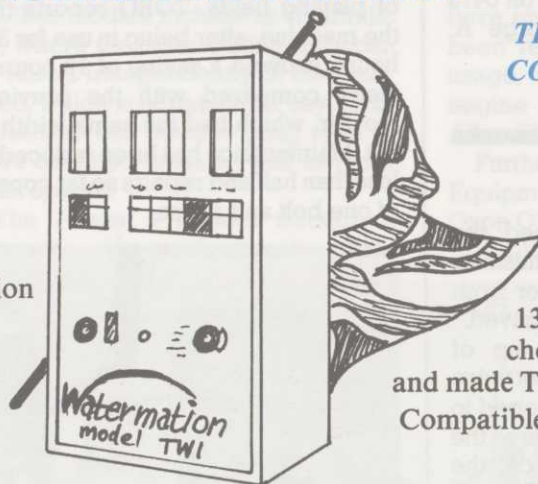


Silver birch invasion of heathland as natural succession takes over.

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